
INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES IN GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Sara Kiesler

Organizational Behavior Series

Interpersonal Processes in Groups and Organizations

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Foreword

The growing awareness of the importance of organizations in our lives has created interest in understanding them. We are interested in individual and interpersonal behavior in organizations. We are aware that organizations influence us and that through our participation we can change organizations. We realize that organizations have subgroups, structures, and task and administrative processes. We understand that organizations are affected by technology, other organizations, and by general social and economic conditions. We also perceive that organizations can be used by their members in order to achieve personal goals.

Given the wide range of problems and issues, there are many theoretical approaches, schools of thought, and very different methods for studying organizational phenomena. This diversity has resulted in a growing, vigorous,

and exciting field of study. It has also given rise to a wide variety of academic courses and research interests.

The books in this series are more than a collection of separate surveys. They have been integrated to provide a clear picture of the scope of organizational behavior, to insure consistency in approach, and to portray coherently the relationships existing across sub-problem areas. Each book cross references the others, and together they provide an up-to-date working library for any person seeking to understand the field of organizational behavior.

To achieve these goals of integration and completeness, six outstanding scholars and teachers with experience teaching in business schools were assembled to write the first six books in this project. Two are social psychologists, three are specialists in organizational behavior, and one is a sociologist. The wide range of topics was first drawn up and then divided into six groups. Each of the authors then worked with the series editor to draw up a detailed outline of his or her portion of the whole book. Care was taken to insure that each author understood how he or she related to the whole series, that each author had a theme for each chapter, and that these themes were consistent within individual books and across the series as a whole. When the independent writing of each book was completed, the author and the series editor went over each manuscript painstakingly to create a solid part that was consistent with the whole series. One of the features of this series is that each book examines its topics in terms of behavioral processes. Behavior is seen in terms of complex interrelated sequences of contingent events.

Each book is written so that it can stand alone and so that it connects across the others in the series. Thus, any single book or any combination of books can be used in the classroom. In addition to the coherence of an integrated series, the integration itself helped to reduce the length of each book and hence

reduce the direct costs to the student. The author of each book had the primary responsibility of writing on his or her assigned topics. But when a topic from another book was needed, the author could count on its being adequately covered. Thus, each author could stick to specific topics and refer to the other books for more detailed explanations for other topics. Together these books provide adequate coverage of the main topics, a compendium of ideas about organizational behavior, and a source of new ideas and critical references.

The books in the series were written primarily for beginning M.B.A. students at a respectable college or university. Some of these schools require two semesters or three quarters of classes in organizational behavior. For these, we recommend that all six books be used. Some require a semester of classes. For these we recommend any three of the books. Those requiring one or two quarters should use two or four of these books.

Kenneth D. Mackenzie
Lawrence, 1977

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A Social Psychological Approach to Interpersonal Behavior

I have searched in vain during the last year for any unusual organizational structures, procedures, or programs which prevent corruption I can find no magical solutions for bringing about an anti-corruption climate.—Joseph D. McNamara, Chief of the Kansas City, Mo., Police Department (1974)

Chief McNamara's words point out what anyone knows who has ever closely observed an organization or group. No bureaucratic arrangement of people, jobs, or rules can solve a group's problems. No technical innovation or reorganization plan can by itself improve an organization. No path heads straight to institutional success.

The reason is that groups and organizations are comprised of human beings whose relationships are complex—more complex than the finest machines humans have ever created. Human

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relationships are affected by individual conceptions of reality, expectations and aspirations, needs and commitments. Perceptions and motives affect the impact of bureaucratic and technical facets of the environment on relationships. Moreover, relationships affect other relationships. People do not act alone, though they often think of themselves as independent. There is a human, a social, environment, as well as a physical one. Groups learn values and derive beliefs from each other and cause changes in each other's behavior. These phenomena are complex, dynamic, interpersonal processes.

The purpose of this book is to bring to your attention what we now know about interpersonal processes. The theoretical approach taken (that is, the assumptions, hypotheses, and concepts) is that of social psychology, a discipline in the social sciences that studies human behavior in its social context. This discipline stands among (and has strong ties to) the study of individual psychology, the sociological study of groups and social institutions, and the study of organizational behavior.

WHY INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES ARE IMPORTANT: THE CASE OF POLICE CORRUPTION

The quotation heading this chapter was taken from a paper presented at the 1974 American Psychological Association meetings in New Orleans. In this paper, Chief (and Dr.) McNamara traced the history of police corruption and various attempts to correct it. He noted that, almost from the time police forces were organized (only about 130 years ago), corruption was a problem. In the eastern cities, politicians interfered with police work; in the old West, sheriffs were commonly bought. Corruption functioned not only to line individual pockets, but to smooth the way for the

new industrialist entrepreneurs and provide social mobility for immigrant groups.

Since political machines were actively involved in the encouragement of organized, pervasive corruption, reform effects naturally centered upon the independence and professionalism of the police. Reformers believed that structural changes in the organization would be sufficient to achieve police integrity. So did classical organizational theorists. Max Weber (1947), the German scholar, described the efficient ideal organization as having these characteristics: (1) clear division of labor, (2) definite responsibility for job performance, (3) specialists, (4) a hierarchical structure, (5) formal rules, (6) unbiased treatment of workers and clients, (7) recruitment of managers on the basis of ability, and (8) job protection.

Reforms introducing civil service, tenured jobs, and political independence made most police organizations superficially fit the Weber model. Still, corruption continued. So another bureaucratic solution was proposed: the internal affairs unit that would identify and control corrupt practices. Yet even an internal watchdog was no panacea, and to this day attention still focuses on police corruption.

A lack of understanding about human social behavior and how humans organize themselves was one reason why bureaucratic innovations, such as the internal affairs unit, were often implemented in a manner and form that were ineffective in minimizing police corruption. Hit or miss attempts to change the work environment, without any empirically defensible theory about why individuals behave as they do, had hit or miss effects. For example, internal affairs units were usually not established in a way that would destroy a climate of opinion tolerant of corruption, or its social rewards, and, in fact, often had the opposite effect. The presence of a watchdog committee implied that all police officers had to be watched. As a

result, honest officers were encouraged to have closer ties with the dishonest ones; the reporting of dishonesty was left exclusively to those who had that "role"; and resentment toward the internal affairs unit—other police officers—was increased. At the same time, officers assigned to the internal affairs unit were freer to collect graft than before.

There have been some successes in reducing police corruption. For example, in Kansas City, Clarence Kelley (who at one time was head of the FBI) increased pride in integrity by rewarding and publicizing it, maximized peer group pressure against corruption, and promoted police cohesiveness. Periodic transfers from sensitive positions to minimize temptation were made a matter of policy, rather than an arbitrary punishment for a few. These administrative actions were largely consistent with what social psychologists and other social scientists have learned about interpersonal processes. The actions took advantage of positive interpersonal forces and reflected the fact that corruption is not simply a selfish, unethical act, but is one component of interpersonal behavior within the context of an organization.

APPLYING KNOWLEDGE OF INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES

Many people believe today that the successes and problems of most groups and organizations have a significant social and interpersonal cast to them. Successes and problems are not simply technical or economic in nature. Few people realize, however, that knowledge of social and interpersonal processes is rarely applied in a simple, direct manner as one might apply knowledge of how a lock works. Having just argued that interpersonal processes are important, it must be said, too, that knowing about them does not guarantee improvements in practice.