Professor Heather A. Haveman: Soc 280D (Sociology of Organizations)

Lecture Note Class 1

What are Organizations? Why Do Sociologists Study Them?

All organizations – corporations, professional partnerships, government agencies, social clubs, civic and service associations, sports teams, social-movement organizations, and religious congregations – are collections of people, material assets, financial resources, and information. The members of any organization have common goals, which they co-operate to pursue. In corporations, the goals are typically financial performance, stable operations, and firm survival; in government agencies, the goals usually include public service and oversight of the private sector; in non-profit organizations, the goals might involve social improvement, culture, politics, socializing, or professional development; in sports teams, the goals are simple – to have fun and win; in religious denominations, the goals might focus on preaching to and teaching congregants, missionary work, or charity.

People create and join organizations when they cannot achieve their goals by working alone, in small informal groups, in families, or in dispersed social movements. People create formal organizations when the actions they must undertake to achieve their goals require the joint, sustained, and co-ordinated efforts of many people. Organizations wield tremendous power and distribute innumerable benefits. All interests – economic, political, and cultural – are pursued through formal organizations. It is only through organizational devices that large-scale planning and co-ordination – for the modern state, the modern (capitalist) economy, and modern civil society – become possible. Because of their tremendous power, organizations have been described as the basic building blocks of modern societies (Boulding 1953; Coleman 1974, 1982; Perrow 1991). If sociology operates at the intersection of biography and history (Mills 1959) in social structure, then the sociological study of organizations is the key to unlocking social structure.

Organizations in Context: The Transition from Traditional to Modern Societies

To fully appreciate the role that organizations play in modern societies, we need to compare modern societies with traditional ones. In **traditional societies**, people belonged to various communal institutions – groups that you belonged to by right or custom. The first and most obvious communal institution was **the family** – a set of people who descended from the same ancestors, mostly male (in matrilineal societies) and rarely female (in matrilineal societies). Families often included extended kinship networks, such as clans. And families sometimes included kithship networks (kith refers to people living in the same household), such as esquires – the young sons of the European nobility who were farmed out to other noble families for training, which created strong bonds between kinship groups.

The second important communal institution in traditional societies was **the feudal or liege system**, which consisted of a lord and everyone who swore fealty to him (alas, seldom her). These liege systems were based on the military defense of a particular geographic area: in return for protection of their land and lives, peasants and craftspeople swore to provide their liege lord with labour in the lord's fields, goods such as foodstuffs and house-manufactured objects like cloth, or (more rarely) cash payments. Liege systems were often nested, with small fiefdoms under the control of local vassals (knights) who swore allegiance to regional nobles like princes or barons, who in turn may have been under the authority of a king. In addition to serfs (peasants and craftpeople), many feudal systems included large numbers of slaves who were owned outright and whose services to their lords had no limitation in the law. Historians have studied Western and Central European feudal systems most

extensively (*e.g.*, Bloch 1961, 1964), but these systems also existed, at different points in time, in Eastern Europe, Northern Africa (Egypt and Ethiopia), Asia, South America, and Central America.

Three other communal institutions characterized traditional societies: towns, the Church, and craft guilds. **Towns** and cities were urban areas that were often under the supervision and protection of a nobleman. But the inhabitants of towns and cities – citizens (which had as its origin the Latin word for city) and burghers (which had as its origin the Germanic word for incorporated area, burgh) – had a very different status than rural vassals, peasants, and slaves because towns and cities, and their inhabitants, were free from feudal obligations. **The Church**, for traditional societies in Europe, meant the Catholic (or Orthodox) Church; traditional societies in many parts of Africa and Asia had other monopolistic religious institutions. Although all men and women were members of the monopolistic church in their region – or else branded as heretics and subject to mortal punishment – the primary church members were priests and monks. Priests led prayers and other holy rituals, while monks (and nuns or female monks in some faiths) either devoted themselves to doing good works or to scholarship.[1] For these men (and women), the church was a total institution: their entire lives were circumscribed by their roles in the church. Finally, **guilds** included three orders of members: masters at the top, journeymen in the middle, and apprentices at the bottom. An individual moved from apprenticeship to journeyman status to master in on a time table that depended on time in station and demonstration of skill. Like the church, guilds were total institutions, in two regards. First, they included the whole person of the member, and his immediate family. Second, membership was a lifetime affair: men usually became members of a guild through inheritance (their fathers were members) and left guilds only when they died or (very rarely) were ostracized. Guilds were religious brotherhoods: Guild members swore to protect and support each other, to support each other in times of emergency or when under attack, and to defend each other's inheritance to the next generation of guild members. (Kieser [1989] provides an organizational analysis of the transition from craft guilds to factories.)

In sharp contrast to traditional societies, people in **modern societies** belong to associative rather than communal institutions. Associative institutions bring together individuals who may have no communal connection (no connection by birth or custom), but who seek to achieve some common goal. Formal organizations are the most common and most important kind of associative institution. There are other kinds of associative institutions, such as social movements (like the militantly un-organized Critical Mass, which despite not being organized, miraculously manifests itself in large crowds of bicyclists swarming over large cities all over the world on the last Friday of every month) and clubs (such as bridge clubs and agriculture associations like the Grange). But many – if not most – social movements and clubs take the form of organizations; for example the NAACP, savedarfur.org, recreational softball teams, and local Rotary Clubs.

Contemporary Research on Organizations

For four decades, the sociological study of organizations has been dominated by three perspectives: positional/demographic, relational/power, and cultural/cognitive. These correspond, very roughly, to three prominent research traditions on organizations. *Position and demography* are the central concern of organizational ecology and internal organizational demography (Hannan and Freeman 1989; Carroll and Hannan 2000), which proposes that individuals' and organizations' positions in social and physical space determine opportunities for and constraints on their actions. A focus on *webs of relationships*, and therefore on *power*, is most noticeable in resource-dependence theory (which includes most social-network analyses of organizations); this theory holds that relationships

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[1] The modern university has its roots in the urban cathedral schools that trained clerics.

between individuals and organizations are what create opportunities for and constraints on action (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978 [2003]; Burt 1983, 1992). An emphasis on *culture and cognition* is reflected in all variants of institutional analysis of organizations, which share the conviction that action is determined by shared and patterned understandings of reality and possibility – in other words, expectations of what is and is not possible, acceptable, or valued (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 2001).

Notwithstanding the clear differences between these three perspectives and research traditions, contemporary research generally mixes two or all three perspectives. Ecologists now attend to cultural issues, by treating organizational forms as identities that observers use to understand and judge organizations, social codes that involve both recognition and imperative understanding (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000; Hannan, Pólos, and Carroll 2007). For their part, resource-dependence theorists are concerned with demography when they analyze crowding in ecologies of interorganizational relations (*e.g.*, Podolny, Stuart, and Hannan 1996). Finally, institutionalists now attend to the interplay between culture and power (*e.g.*, Fligstein 1996), as well as culture and demography (*e.g.,* Dobbin and Dowd 2000). We will spend the bulk of the course reading and discussing contemporary research that cleaves to or mixes these three perspectives.

These three perspectives have been applied to the study of both formal and informal organizational structures/aspects. Formal structure encompasses the configuration of offices and positions, and the formal linkages between them (the "organization chart"), as well as formal rules, programs, and procedures. Informal structure includes the actual communication channels between offices and positions (who actually talks to whom), the actual behaviors of individuals who occupy positions (what people actually do every day), and informal norms and practices (what is expected and valued). As Meyer and Rowan (1977) pointed out in their cognitive/cultural paper, formal and informal structures are often only loosely coupled, as informal practices and norms often deviate from formal procedures and rules.

Position/Demography: Organizational Ecology. Organizational ecologists famously wonder "why are there so many kinds of organizations?" (Hannan and Freeman 1977). To answer that question, ecologists have adapted Darwinian models of biological evolution (*e.g.*, May 1973) and applied them to explain the evolution of organizational systems – that is, to explain rates of organizational founding, failure, growth, and change in terms of the material and cultural features of organizational environments. A second, more purely sociological, progenitor of organizational ecology is human ecology (Park 1936; Hawley 1950). For reviews of organizational ecology see Carroll and Hannan (2000) or Baum and Shipilov (2006).

A central tenet of organizational ecology is that the core features of organizations change slowly, if at all, because of strong inertial pressures (Hannan and Freeman 1989:66-90). Eight constraints on adaptation are proposed, four internal and four external. The internal constraints are investment in plant, equipment, and specialized personnel; limits on the internal information received by decision-makers; internal political constraints supportive of vested interests; and organizational history, which justifies past action and prevents consideration of alternative strategies. The external pressures for stability are legal and economic barriers to entry into and out of various areas of activity; constraints on the external information gathered by decision-makers; legitimacy considerations; and the problem of collective rationality and the general equilibrium. These pressures favour organizations that offer reliable performance and that can account rationally for their actions, which in turn require that organizational structures be highly reproducible – that is, unchanging (Hannan and Freeman 1989:70-77).

If inert organizations are favoured over changeable ones, inert organizations will be less likely to fail. Note that this structural inertia thesis does not imply that organizations never change; rather, it implies that organizations change *less rapidly* than do external conditions. It also implies that when organizations do change, resources are diverted from operating to reorganizing, reducing the effectiveness of operations and increasing the likelihood of failure. Ecologists distinguish between two consequences of organizational change: process effects, which stem from the inevitable frictions generated by undertaking change and which are inherently deleterious, and content effects, which derive from the altered fit between the changed organization and its task and institutional environments, and which may be good, if fit to the environment is improved or bad if fit worsened (Barnett and Carroll 1995). Notwithstanding the generally grim prognosis for organizational change, some of the more optimistic ecologists have investigated the possibility that in some circumstances, such as following large-scale shifts in environmental conditions, organizations can adapt; they have shown that some kinds of change, such as related diversification, can be beneficial (*e.g.*, Haveman 1992). But by and large, ecological theory predicts, and most empirical analysis shows, that change in the demography of organizations occurs in response to shifting environmental conditions, and comes about primarily through the differential selection and replacement of inert organizations, rather than through the adaptation of existing organizations.

In addition to highlighting inertia, all ecological analysis subscribes to two other core assumptions: we should study change in social structures rather than stability and we should study populations of organizations – collections of organizations that produce similar goods or services, depend on similar resources, and have similar identities – rather than the individual members of those populations. To that end, ecological studies analyze competitive and mutualistic interactions between organizations in a single population (*e.g.*, Hannan and Freeman 1987) or, increasingly, between multiple sub-populations defined by characteristics such as size, market niche, technology, and location (*e.g.*, Baum and Singh 1994). Ecological analyses also assess how the attributes of any single organization – especially size, age, technology, and level of specialism or generalism – affect its behavior, performance, and life chances (*e.g.*, Carroll 1985; Barron, West, and Hannan 1994). As mentioned in the introduction, the newest strand of ecological theory involves analyzing organizational forms as identities that internal and external observers use to understand and judge organizations; this line of thinking conceives of forms as social codes that involve both recognition and imperative understanding (Hannan, Pólos, and Carroll 2007).

A great strength of this research tradition is its high level of paradigmatic consensus (Pfeffer 1993). Organizational ecologists know what outcomes to study (founding, failure, growth, economic performance, and change), what explanatory factors to consider (the number of organizations of various types, as well as their size, age, location, technology, and identity), and what analytical strategies to employ (quantitative analysis of longitudinal data covering entire industries). Because scholars in this tradition have always built on and refined each other's work, they have produced solidly cumulative knowledge about organizational dynamics. But this strength reveals a weakness: precisely because organizational ecology is such a "normal-science" activity, some find it too narrow to interest anyone except ecologists themselves (*e.g.*, Hedström 1992). Narrowness may overtake this paradigm because much work clarifies and refines the basic theory without extending it in truly novel directions.

There is a second, more microscopic, strand of demographic analysis of organizations, is focused on the distribution of individuals within organizations (generally employees, but sometimes also customers/clients) along salient dimensions of social difference, such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, and tenure (e.g., Ryder 1964; Pfeffer 1983). Much of this work studies topics that are central to sociology, namely stratification and inequality. It builds on the pioneering theoretical work of Pfeffer (1983) and

on earlier sociological theories of group interaction (Simmel 1955; Blau 1977) and demography (Ryder 1964, 1965; McNeil and Thompson 1971). The central tenet is that the distribution of individuals within an organization along salient dimensions of social position exerts fundamental influences on their social interactions and thus on their ability to work together. Early work in this tradition focused on one dimension of social position – length of service, meaning how long people had worked in the focal organization. Later research expanded the focus to many other dimensions: time in job as well as in organization, age, sex, race, educational background (level and field), and function in the organization.

Internal demography is important because it affects what gets done in organizations – and how well it gets done, and who does well. Differences between organizational members affect their interactions (in dyads and small groups). In turn, these interactions affect organizational functioning and performance in many ways. The greater the variation among members of an organization along some dimension, the lower the level of trust and cohesion, the higher the level of conflict and the worse the communication, the lower the level of member commitment to the organization, and the higher the turnover rate. In turn, these things affect organizations' ability to innovate and adapt to changing environments, and thus to perform.

Power – Resource Dependence[2]. All organizational sociologists taking the relational/power perspective hold that organizations' attributes and behaviors can be understood in terms of patterns of relationships among individuals and organizations: social relations are primary, while atomistic attributes are secondary. Thus, resource-dependence theorists study how relationships within and between organizations generate opportunities for and constraints on action (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Burt 1983). Briefly, this line of thinking holds that organizations rely heavily on suppliers of critical resources (including financial and human capital), customers, the organizations that control distribution channels, and governmental and professional oversight agencies. Extending ideas from exchange theory (Emerson 1962) leads to the basic proposition that dependence on exchange partners makes organizations vulnerable and generates uncertainty for decision-makers. To reduce this vulnerability and uncertainty and thereby improve stability and performance, organizations tend to integrate vertically, taking over suppliers or distribution channels; expand horizontally, diversifying and therefore reducing reliance on any set of exchange partners; and enter into partnerships, creating strategic alliances, joint ventures, and director interlocks.

Relational analyses of organizations come in two stripes, "macro" and "micro." Macro relational analyses examine how links to other organizations – state agencies, competitors, customers, and suppliers – affect organizational structures, actions, performance, and ultimately survival (*e.g.*, Burt 1983; Uzzi 1996). Some macro studies investigate ties between individuals that span organizational boundaries, notably the long tradition of research on interlocking directorates (see Mizruchi [1996] for a review). Other macro studies examine ties that are not centered in individuals but rather are truly organizational, such as strategic alliances and joint ventures, supplier/buyer ties, and knowledge flows through patents (*e.g.*, Baker 1990). Both kinds of macro-level power analysis assess this paradox: relationships create opportunities for action and, at the same time, impose constraints on action.

In contrast, micro relational research focuses on the social capital of individuals within organization – the resources that people derive from their connections to others, such as ties to kin and school mates, to current and former coworkers, or to counterparts in exchange-partner organizations (Bourdieu 1980; Coleman 1992:300-321). Social capital improves access to information and material

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[2] Much power/resource-dependence research is labelled "social-network analysis." Social-network analysis is basically a set of empirical techniques, not a research/theoretical perspective. The theory underpinning most network analysis is resource dependence; theories of information exchange and status are also common.

resources, which in turn enhances social status, reduces uncertainty, and improves many individual outcomes. But social capital also creates mutual obligations, which channel action in some predictable directions and foreclose others. (For reviews, see Portes [1998] and Lin [1999].)

Such relational analysis has the great benefit of highlighting power and inequality, which are central concerns of sociology. Thus it returns the study of organizations to the centre of sociological inquiry. This research tradition also makes explicit the fact that economic action is intrinsically social. Thus it avoids both an under-socialized logic that treats individuals and organizations as akin to self-interested billiard balls, caroming off each other but never penetrating each other's surfaces, and an over-socialized logic that treats relationships between individuals and organizations as fully penetrating their identities and thus wholly determining their actions (Granovetter 1985). But relational research has a downside: until recently, it ignored dynamics, so it could seldom explain change and stability in social life. This neglect of time took two forms. First, power/relational analyses seldom noted when relations within and between organizations did or did not exist; instead, they tended to lump together all past states of a system into a single, atemporal measure. Second, and related to the first, the vast majority of power-based studies did not follow relationships within or between organizations over time. That this work was largely static is ironic: one theorist whose work stimulated a raft of research argued forcibly that this line of work would improve our understanding of organizations and markets precisely because it explicitly takes into account the dynamic, continuously constructed nature of social life (Granovetter 1985: 481, 486).

Culture/Cognition – Institutionalism. Scholars taking the cultural/cognitive perspective on organizations have a long tradition in sociology. Much early work was done at Columbia under the guidance of Robert Merton. This line of work descends from Weberian analysis of bureaucracies, but moves in directions that Weber might not have expected, in that it studies the impact of cultural and political factors on organizational goals, structures, and operations. Let me give two prominent examples. Philip Selznick's (1949) pioneering work on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) demonstrated that organizations are constrained by external actors' agendas, and that when organizations co-opt those actors, organizations' own goals are fundamentally altered. In the case of the TVA, the key external actors were the farmers opposed to government electricity generation. Selznick's analysis also showed that organizations are recalcitrant tools because their members arrive with different demographic characteristics, histories, social positions, and external commitments; all of these things constrain and deflect goal-directed action. Moreover, when organizations strike bargains with actors in their environments, they compromise their initial goals and limit possibilities for action in the future. Finally, in the vein of Weber's student Michels (1958 [1915]), Selznick's study showed that organizational procedures become valued as ends in themselves: they took on value far beyond the technical requirements of the financial-intermediation task at hand (Selznick 1957: 17).

Gouldner (1954), whom we will read, shared Selznick's skepticism of rationality in organizations and his focus on conflict. Gouldner examined the aftermath of managerial succession in one plant in an industrial firm: a wildcat strike. Before the succession event, the culture was an "indulgency pattern," a coherent set of judgements and values that disposed workers to react favorably to each other and to trust their supervisors. The core value was the "criterion of leniency": management behavior that gives something it does not have to, and that workers do not perceive as already rightfully theirs. The new plant manager instituted many changes that restricted workers' freedom and destroyed the indulgency culture. Gouldner concluded that because the new manager ignored the "informal" organization – most notably, the culture and the close social ties among workers – workers resented the changes he made and mounted a strike.

More recently, "new institutionalists" (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983) have shifted the focus to cognition. These scholars investigate how organizations respond to diverse external expectations; their research reveals how those responses confer legitimacy in the form of taken-for-grantedness, which allows organizational structures and activities to stabilize. Scott (1995 [2001]) surveys both "new" and "old" institutionalism in organizational analysis.[3]

One of the most important ideas in cultural/cognitive analysis is that of isomorphism (literally, "same shape"). As communities of organizations evolve, a variety of forces (interorganizational power relations, the state and professions, and competition) promote isomorphism within sets of organizations that either are tied directly to each other or play similar roles. (Note the connection between the cultural/cognitive and relational/power perspectives on organizations – something that is often overlooked.) Three processes through which organizations become similar to related others in their environment have been proposed: mimetic, coercive, and normative isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Mimetic isomorphism is, quite simply, the achievement of conformity through imitation. It can result from efficient responses to uncertainty ("when in doubt, do what other organizations facing the same environment do") or from bandwagon effects ("if many organizations adopt a structure or course of action, then follow their lead"). Coercive isomorphism stems from the pressure imposed by governmental regulation and administrative guidelines that authorize particular organizational structures and strategies. Finally, normative isomorphism involves pressures imposed by collective actors such as professional and trade associations, bodies that create informal expectations (if not formal rules) about what organizations ought to look like and how they ought to behave.

The cultural/cognitive analysis of organizations conducted by institutionalists has produced a wealth of studies of the diffusion of organizational structures, practices, and outputs. For instance, Tolbert and Zucker (1987) and Fligstein (1985) showed when an innovative structure or practice meets some technical need, it diffuses rapidly and through direct contact between former and potential adopters of the innovation. In contrast, when the structure or practice does not meet some technical need, it diffuses more slowly. In general, early-stage diffusion is "rational," while later-stage diffusion is not. In a similar vein, a raft of studies of the diffusion of human-resources policies and practices in response to state requirements (*e.g.*, Edelman 1992; Dobbin, Sutton, Meyer, and Scott 1993; Kelly and Dobbin 1998; Guthrie and Roth 1999) have shown that such laws are only partial codes, so actors inside and outside organizations must socially construct the meaning of vague and uncertain legal mandates.

The strength of the institutionalist perspective is its sweeping reach. Consider the core concepts, *institution* and *institutionalization*. Scholars working in this tradition have claimed that institutionalization is both an outcome, which suggests attention to stability, and an ongoing activity, which suggests attention to change. They have identified structures in which institutions are embedded (the "carriers" of institutions) at multiple levels of analysis: the routines, rules, scripts, and schemas that guide the perceptions and actions of individuals and small groups; local regional or demographic-group identities and regimes; meso-level organizations, occupations, and fields; and society-wide norms and codified patterns of meaning and interpretation. They have identified a wide array of mechanisms through which institutionalization operates: taken for grantedness, blind or limitedly-rational imitation, appropriateness, accreditation, social obligation, and coercion. Finally, they have employed a wide array

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[3] Borrowing from economics and rational-choice theory in political science, a third set of scholars (*e.g.*, Brinton and Nee 1998) has begun to attend to how institutions – including single organizations and supra-organizational structures – facilitate exchange relations. These scholars emphasize bounded but intentional rationality, uncertainty, and risk. Ingram and Clay (2000) review the work of this third group of institutionalists. Because I am concerned with the sociological roots of organizational analysis, I will not touch on this third strain of institutionalism.

of research designs, ranging from ethnographies and qualitative historical studies to laboratory experiments to statistical analyses of survey and archival data.

But the strength provided by this broad reach also generates a critical weakness for cultural/cognitive analysis of organizations. If the terms "institution" and "institutionalization" mean everything and explain everything – change and stability; individual routines, organizational structures, and societal cultures; cognitive, regulatory, and normative processes – then they mean nothing and explain nothing. Institutional analysis of organizations currently encompasses a loose collection of propositions, some seemingly incompatible and others only tenuously connected. For example, it is unclear what really drives the diffusion of organizational structures and practices – cognitive, normative, or coercive pressures. Moreover, it is unclear when any one of these predominates, and whether these are even conceptually or empirically distinct (Mizruchi and Fein 1999). Given these fundamental uncertainties, debates in this tradition tend to be unproductive feuds about definitions and concepts rather than substantive arguments about logic or evidence (*e.g.*, Scott 1995 [2001] *versus* Hirsch 1997).

Summary. These three contemporary traditions in organizational analysis vary widely. Cultural/cognitive approaches to organizations are, arguably, the most macroscopic, as they pay most attention to things that pervade whole societies, such as state regulations. Positional/demographic and relational/power research generally operate on a lower level of analysis, as they are mostly concerned with collections of organizations, or with the inner workings of individual organizations. Scholars working in these three traditions have divergent understandings of social structure and identity. Relational/power analysts view social structure as inherently relational and social identity as being constituted by the ties between organizations and individuals. Demographers view social structure as inhering in cross-cutting distributions and social identity as deriving from position, absolute or relative, along one or more dimensions of social life, such as organizational age, technology, or strategy. Finally, and most complexly, for cultural/cognitive scholars, social structure inheres in the nesting of large organizational communities, individual organizations, small groups, and individuals; it encompasses logics, meanings, and recipes for action. Identity, according to those who take the cultural/cognitive perspective, is a social construction – it arises from both relationships (dependencies and networks) and distributional locations.

My rapid review of the field should make you aware of the limitations of each line of research. Demographic/positional (ecological) research is the most tightly paradigmatic; therefore, it has made the most cumulative progress. However, it is also the most "closed" to outsiders – the least interesting to scholars working within other traditions. Relational/ power analysis has tended to be static in orientation, to ignore both origins and evolution of networks. Finally, cultural/cognitive (institutional) research, which is both the broadest (a "perspective" rather than a "theory" as Merton (1968) would define it) has tended to be somewhat diffuse and non-cumulative, letting "a thousand flowers" bloom. The readings we do over the course of the semester should reveal the solution that all organizational theorists have found: explaining most phenomena requires combining insights from two or all three lines of work.

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