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Typology for Understanding the Sociological Study of Organizations: 3 Perspectives on Organizations Applied to 5 (Nested) Levels of Analysis

Perspective	Position/demography	Relationships/power	Culture/cognition/information
Basic principle	<u>Position in social and physical space</u> determines patterns of action by defining opportunities for action and constraints on action.	<u>Relationships</u> determine patterns of action by defining opportunities for action and constraints on action.	<u>Understandings/mental models</u> determine patterns of action by defining opportunities for action and constraints on action.
Social structure inheres in...	... the distribution of individuals and collectives along salient dimensions of social and physical position.	... the relationships between individuals and collectives (organizations, families, etc.) involving exchanges of valued items (material, informational, symbolic, ...)	... the system of understandings of reality and possibility – culture – norms, values, expectations of what is and what is not done/possible/good.
Individual: your social, psychological, and economic experiences as an organizational member depend on....	... <u>internal organizational demography</u> : (a) demographic characteristics (gender, race, age, etc.) and (b) your demographic characteristics relative to other people in the organization (and in the labor force/population).	... <u>egocentric and dyadic relations</u> : (a) your relationships with other people – both affective and instrumental; both voluntary and involuntary, both current and past; and (b) the structure of relationships among people within your organization, and between organizations.	... <u>individual sense-making and learning</u> ; <u>symbolic interactions</u> : cognitive representations of what is and should be (schemas), which can be tinged with strong emotions, and which develop over time, through real and superstitious learning.
Group/subunit behavior and effectiveness (conflict, innovativeness, creativity, ability to make good or timely decisions, turnover, ...) depend on...	... <u>internal organizational demography</u> : the composition of the group, in terms of demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, age, time in the organization/group, education area and level)	... <u>aggregated networks of interpersonal relations</u> : the structure of relationships among people and groups within and between organizations – egocentric and dyadic relations aggregated to whole organizations or communities. Note that the “nodes” in these networks can be individuals or groups (e.g., due to the ways work flows through organizations).	... <u>social cognition and symbolic interaction</u> : the meanings people have toward other people and things, which are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation.
Organization: an organization’s functioning, behavior, and performance (structural change, growth/shrinkage, economic performance) depend on...	... <u>organizational ecology</u> : their characteristics (age, size, and technology), the characteristic of other organizations in the environment (density [<i>i.e.</i> , legitimacy] of their own and other populations, relative size, <i>etc.</i>)	... <u>interorganizational networks</u> : (a) relationships between a focal organization and other organizations – both affective and instrumental; both voluntary and involuntary, both current and past.; and (b) the aggregate structure of relationships among organizations in their population/industry and field. Note that “nodes” in these networks can be individuals (as in interlocking directorates) or organizations (as in market ties).	... <u>the social construction of reality</u> : what the founders/leaders/members of organizations have learned about what works and doesn’t, what is right and wrong, what is good and bad – not merely dry fact, but rather also what they have learned about rules, laws, and resource dependencies (coercive/ regulatory forces); norms, values, and expectations (cultural forces); and relative frequency/rareness of role models (mimetic targets).

Perspective	Position/demography	Relationships	Culture/cognition
Population/Industry: the structure and vital rates of populations/ industries depend on...	... <u>population ecology</u> : the number of organizations in the population (density); their aggregate size (mass); their distribution along salient dimensions of organizational characteristics (age, size, technology, <i>etc.</i>); and their identity (form as social code, both recognition and imperative standing).	... <u>interorganizational networks</u> : the structure of relationships among organizations within the focal population/ industry. Note that the nodes in these networks can be individuals or organizations.	... <u>the social construction of reality</u> : what people in the organizations in a population or industry have learned about what works and doesn't, what is right and wrong, what is good and bad – not merely dry fact, but rather also what they have learned about rules, laws, and resource dependencies (coercive/ regulatory forces); norms, values, and expectations (cultural forces); and relative frequency/rareness of role models (mimetic targets).
Field/Sector: the emergence and structure of fields/sectors depend on...	... <u>community ecology</u> : the number of organizations in various populations in the field/sector (density); their aggregate size (mass); their distribution along salient dimensions of organizational characteristics (age, size, technology, <i>etc.</i>); and their identity (form as social code, both recognition and imperative standing).	... <u>interorganizational networks</u> : the structure of relationships among organizations in a sector or field of social life. Note that the nodes in these networks can be individuals or organizations.	... <u>the social construction of reality</u> : what people in a sector or field of social life have learned about what works and doesn't, what is right and wrong, what is good and bad – not merely dry fact, but rather also what they have learned about rules, laws, and resource dependencies (coercive/ regulatory forces); norms, values, and expectations (cultural forces); and relative frequency/rareness of role models (mimetic targets).

In this typology, each successively higher level of analysis is the most proximate “environment” for the preceding (lower) level. Groups/subunits are the environment within which individuals live and work, formal organizations are the environment for groups/subunits, industries/populations are the environment for organizations, and fields/sectors are the environments of populations/industries. Thus there is a nesting of levels of analysis. In the table above, I’ve explained the nature and behavior of each level of analysis as depending on itself and the most proximate environment. This is obviously a simplification; for instance, it is quite easy to argue that the structure of fields/sectors affects the behavior of individuals. But it is an empirical question as to whether these more distant/higher-order effects are direct or indirect – whether they are mediated by lower, more proximate levels of analysis/aggregation.

Caveats for Students: This is a work in progress, so suggestions are welcome. (1) I haven’t “fit” several prominent contemporary streams of research in the sociology of organizations into the typology. (2) I haven’t explicitly recognized, much less explained, the relative prominence or neglect that each perspective pays to value-rationality in organizations (*wertrational*), which reflects beliefs in substantive principles rather than efficiency or profitability (emotions come into play when things are understood as good or bad) *versus* to instrumentally-rationality in organizations (*zweckrational*), which views organizations as tools achieve to value-neutral ends such as financial gain (Weber 1947, *Theory of Social & Economic Organization*; 1978 [1968], *Economy & Society*; DiMaggio and Anheier 1990 *Annual Review of Sociology*, “The sociology of nonprofit organizations and sectors”).