Think Piece

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Organizational Theory and Behaviour

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Introduction

What is the organization of organizational theory? Ironically, the framework behind the approach to organizational behaviour has gone through many iterations. Organizational theory is not just a new fad focus for online universities, but has a long history filled with various scholars that helped move the framework through the political ideologies of their day (Argyle 2010, 8). From early voices to contemporary scholars, this paper will examine the way organizational theory fits into the single lens of one organizational framework.

Organizational Framework

In the organizational framework for the context of this paper, there are two views of humanity: Dominated by reason or dominated by desire (Kellner 2010, 2). There are also two views of society: Individualistic or communal. Accordingly, there are four resulting categories of the framework. If the views are that humanity is dominated by reason and society is individualistic, the resulting organization is a marketplace. If humanity is dominated by reason but society is communal, there will be a responsive commonwealth. If humanity is dominated by desire and society is individualistic, a protectorate will result. If humanity is dominated by desire but society is communal, a directed commonwealth will result.

We’ll begin by taking a look at the nature of man, then society as a whole. The organizational framework will then be applied to specific examples of thinkers that have been key to the development of organizational theory. With those applications, the implications
for formal work organizations will be made clear. Finally, I hope to discover how my own thoughts fit within the framework, as a contemporary scholar in public administration.

The Nature of Man

Philosophers were certain and yet divided about whether mankind was essentially good or essentially bad. Were humans bound by reason, as Plato believed, having the ability to learn and advance? Or were people controlled by their baser instincts and in desperate need of an authority, such as early Christians and John Locke believed? Even at this later date, the division can be seen in how people approach the size of government. Those who believe that people are essentially bad might want a greater degree of control by the government, while those who think that humans are essentially good and reasonable argue for less power given to the government. But what is humankind once it forms these communities?

The Nature of the Larger Community

To evaluate the nature of our community in America, one must look at our core values. The United States is a nation that was founded on the idea of the separation of church and state (Argyle 1994, 2). That idea of independence for each individual to be able to follow his or her religion leads our government and our communities to value individuality. However, we are inextricably bound in a community within our nation and in communities within communities. Much like the dichotomy of the nature of man that still drives the underlying feelings of ideologies, beliefs about the nature of community inform how we think about organizations. If organizations are a mosaic of individuals, then one individual might
not be able to affect the organization unless he or she takes a position of leadership. If, however, the community as a whole is an organic creature itself, even the tiniest influence may change the nature of the formal work organization.

**Implications for Formal Work Organizations**

I will now proceed to provide examples from writers on the topic of formal work organizations in order to demonstrate concrete implications. For each author and article, I will ascribe a category in the organizational framework along with my reasoning for such categorization. Thus, the framework can be seen to apply to real formal work organizations in many contexts. I have taken care to find examples of each of the four categories within the organizational framework for proper illustration.

When Frederick J. Roethlisberger wrote about “The Hawthorne Experiments,” I believe that he placed himself firmly within the directed commonwealth category of the organizational framework (Ott, Parkes & Simpson 2008, 140-147). Writing that, “the behaviour of workers could not be understood apart from their feelings and sentiments,” example sentiments were given as: loyalty, integrity and solidarity. The Hawthorne Experiment clearly concluded that humanity is dominated by desire. Furthermore, the conclusion was that the nature of society is communal, because it was written that “output is a form of social behaviour.” Without the context of those feelings and sentiments as expressed within a community, they cannot be expressed and formal work organizations cannot occur.
Roethlisberger’s implications for formal work organizations are that one cannot simply bait humans through their individual desires because they are social creatures. Any effect that one introduces to an individual in the system affects the group and thus the entire system. As a result, a person who takes Roethlisberger’s writings at face value should favour the direct commonwealth approach to organizations. After all, the people will need a skilled director in order to lead the group that may still be driven by desires that are not necessarily in line with those of the organization. However, playing to the desires of individuals may not be the most effective. Instead, paying attention to the group as a whole will reap benefits.

Abraham H. Maslow, however, I would place in the protectorate category in the organizational framework (Ott, Parkes & Simpson 2008, 148-156). He too thought humanity was dominated by desire. In “A Theory of Human Motivation, he wrote of the esteem needs, “these are, first, the desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for confidence in the face of the world and for independence and freedom.” These needs are actually just desires in disguise.

Those last words are especially meaningful, because they betray his feelings about society as individualistic. Indeed, at the base levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is the fierce and independent drive to survive at all costs, before any sort of communal overtures could be made. Maslow’s theories have in fact been criticized as making the human seem too much like an animal in a group context. Each person seeming to fend for himself or herself even if it means the organization suffers.
Maslow’s implications for formal work organizations give the leadership even more control. After all, the people involved are still driven by desires, but this time everyone is out for himself or herself. The only way to manage formal work organizations is to keep a tight grip on the human entropy that threatens to unravel the entire group. Individuals must be evaluated according to their needs and certain needs satisfied before they can rise to higher expectations.

I place Douglas Murray McGregor’s writing in “The Human Side of Enterprise” in the responsive commonwealth category (Ott, Parkes & Simpson 2008, 158-162). Of the nature of humanity, he emphasizes that, “a satisfied need is not a motivator of behaviour!” Thus, humanity cannot be dominated by desire since desire itself cannot be a motivator. Rather, humanity must be motivated by reason.

On the subject of the nature of society, he writes, “People are not by nature passive or resistant to organizational needs… The motivation, the potential for development, the capacity for assuming responsibility, the readiness to direct behaviour toward organizational goals are all present in people.” By our human nature, McGregor insists, we are a communal society, and it is only mismanagement that makes us ineffective in our organizational goals.

McGregor’s implications for formal work organizations hold people in a more positive light than the former two thinkers. If all goes well, McGregor implies that the leadership will need only a light touch that is informed by its rational community. By nature every work organization has a chance at success because it is powered by capable and
thoughtful people. If the leadership becomes too domineering or unresponsive, however, that is when the more maladaptive sides of individuals may be revealed. The trick then, is to keep a group of good people happy.

Finally, I place Leon Festinger in the marketplace category, for his writing in “The Motivating Effect of Cognitive Dissonance (Ott, Parkes & Simpson 2008, 163-167).” It is obvious from Festinger’s writings that he believes humanity to be dominated by reason. So much so, in fact, that cognitive dissonance, a problem with reasoning, is a major motivator for behaviour in order to make the world back into a reasonable understanding. It is somewhat more difficult to see how Festinger believes that society is an individualistic one.

He writes that during his investigations into doomsday cults, “there were almost no lengths to which these people would not go to attract publicity and potential believers in the validity of the messages. If, indeed, more and more converts could be found, more and more people who believed in the messages and the things that the messages said, then the dissonance between their belief and the knowledge that the messages had not been correct could be reduced.” Society is so individualistic, he believes, that individuals are willing to resort to pathological behaviour within societies in order to eliminate the personal discomfort of cognitive dissonance. Luckily for society, other rational individuals are exceedingly difficult to convince.

Festinger’s implications for formal work organizations are an entirely laissez-faire attitude towards organizational behaviour within the system. Since the people in the work
organization are all rational and independent folks, it will be difficult to throw them all off the goals of the group as a whole. Festinger’s manipulations of behaviour through cognitive dissonance indicate that each individual will feel compelled to modify his or her behaviour or the behaviour of the group in order to find a sort of equilibrium. The implications are that if a formal work organization is largely composed of people with attitudes, beliefs and habits that are desirable, the rest may go along.

Conclusion

The position in which I would place myself in the organizational framework is as a communal person dominated by reason, and thus preferring a responsive commonwealth. I identify strongly with Aristotle’s beliefs that people are generally reasonable people who can think for themselves. Correspondingly, my idea of how governments and non-profits should be run include a large degree of discourse between the leadership and the public.

I also believe that we exist in a community context and that our behaviour within organizations cannot be adequately understood or predicted on the level of the individual in a way that is authentic. As a group, people become more than the sum of their individual parts or roles played. The fact that we worry about an organization as a whole moving in the wrong direction is evidence of the living, breathing nature of communities as an entity.

Bibliography
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