Pearson New International Edition

Sociology: A Down-To-Earth Approach
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"Ideal" Versus "Real" Bureaucracy

Just as people often act differently from the way the norms say they should, so it is with bureaucracies. The characteristics of bureaucracies that Weber identified are *ideal types*; that is, they are a composite of characteristics based on many specific examples. Think of the judges at a dog show. They have a mental image of how each particular breed of dog should look and behave, and they judge each individual dog according to that mental image. Each dog will rank high on some of these characteristics and lower on others. In the same way, a particular organization will rank higher or lower on the traits of a bureaucracy, yet still qualify as a bureaucracy. Instead of labeling a particular organization as a "bureaucracy" or "not a bureaucracy," it probably makes more sense to consider the *extent* to which it is bureaucratized (Udy 1959; Hall 1963).

Bureaucracies often differ from their organizational charts. The real lines of authority ("going through channels"), for example, may be different from those portrayed on Figure 1. For example, suppose that before being promoted, the university president taught in the history department. As a result, friends from that department may have direct access to him or her. If they wish to provide "input" (ranging from opinions about how to solve problems to personal grievances or even gossip), these individuals might be able to skip their chairperson or even the dean of their college and go directly to the president.

Dysfunctions of Bureaucracies

Although in the long run no other form of social organization is more efficient, as Weber recognized, bureaucracies also have a dark side. Let's look at some of their dysfunctions.

Red Tape: A Rule Is a Rule.   Bureaucracies can be so bound by red tape that when officials apply their rules, the results can defy all logic. I came across an example so ridiculous that it can make your head swim—if you don't burst from laughing first.

In Spain, the Civil Registry of Barcelona recorded the death of a woman named Maria Antonieta Calvo in 1992. Apparently, Maria's evil brother had reported her dead so he could collect the family inheritance.

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When Maria learned that she was supposedly dead, she told the Registry that she was very much alive. The bureaucrats at this agency looked at their records, shook their heads, and insisted that she was dead. Maria then asked lawyers to represent her in court. They all refused—because no dead person can bring a case before a judge.

When Maria's boyfriend asked her to marry him, the couple ran into a slight obstacle: No man in Spain (or most other places) can marry a dead woman—so these bureaucrats said, "So sorry, but no license."

After years of continuing to insist that she was alive, Maria finally got a hearing in court. When the judges looked at Maria, they believed that she really was a living person, and they ordered the Civil Registry to declare her alive.

The ending of this story gets even happier, for now that Maria was alive, she was able to marry her boyfriend. I don't know if the two lived happily ever after, but, after overcoming the bureaucrats, they at least had that chance ("Mujer 'resucita'" 2006).

Technology has changed our lives fundamentally. The connection to *each* telephone call used to have to be made by hand. As in this 1940s photo, these connections were made by women. Long-distance calls, with their numerous hand-made connections, not only were slower, but also expensive. In 1927, a call from New York to London cost $25 a minute. In today's money this comes to $300 a minute!

If you contrast "ideal" and "real" bureaucracy, how does "more or less" apply?

Bureaucracies have their dysfunctions and can be slow and even stifling. Most, however, are highly functional in uniting people's efforts toward reaching goals.

Lack of Communication Between Units.   Each unit within a bureaucracy performs specialized tasks, which are designed to contribute to the organization's goals. At times, units fail to communicate with one another and end up working at cross-purposes. In Granada, Spain, for example, the local government was concerned about the run-down appearance of buildings along one of its main streets. Consequently, one unit of the government fixed the fronts of these buildings, repairing concrete and restoring decorations of iron and stone. The results were impressive, and the unit was proud of what it had accomplished. The only problem was that another unit of the government had slated these same buildings for demolition (Arías 1993). Because neither unit of this bureaucracy knew what the other was doing, one beautified the buildings while the other planned to turn them into a heap of rubble.

Bureaucratic Alienation.   Perceived in terms of roles, rules, and functions rather than as individuals, many workers begin to feel more like objects than people. Marx termed these reactions **alienation,** a result, he said, of workers being cut off from the finished product of their labor. He pointed out that before industrialization, workers used their own tools to produce an entire product, such as a chair or table. Now the capitalists own the tools (machinery, desks, computers) and assign each worker only a single step or two in the entire production process. Relegated to performing repetitive tasks that seem remote from the final product, workers no longer identify with what they produce. They come to feel estranged not only from the results of their labor but also from their work environment.

Resisting Alienation.   Because workers want to feel valued and to have a sense of control over their work, they resist alienation. A major form of that resistance is forming primary groups at work. Workers band together in informal settings—at lunch, around desks, or for a drink after work. There, they give one another approval for jobs well done and express sympathy for the shared need to put up with cantankerous bosses, meaningless routines, and endless rules. In these contexts, they relate to one another not just as workers, but also as people who value one another. They flirt, laugh and tell jokes, and talk about their families and goals. Adding this multidimensionality to their work relationships maintains their sense of being individuals rather than mere cogs in a machine.

   As in the photo on the next page, workers often decorate their work areas with personal items. The sociological implication is that of workers who are trying to resist alienation. By staking a claim to individuality, the workers are rejecting an identity as machines that exist to perform functions.

The Alienated Bureaucrat.   Not all workers succeed in resisting alienation. Some become alienated and quit. Others became alienated but remain in the organization

alienation Marx's term for workers' lack of connection to the product of their labor; caused by workers being assigned repetitive tasks on a small part of a product—this leads to a sense of powerlessness and normlessness; others use the term in the general sense of not feeling a part of something

What are some dysfunctions of bureaucracies?
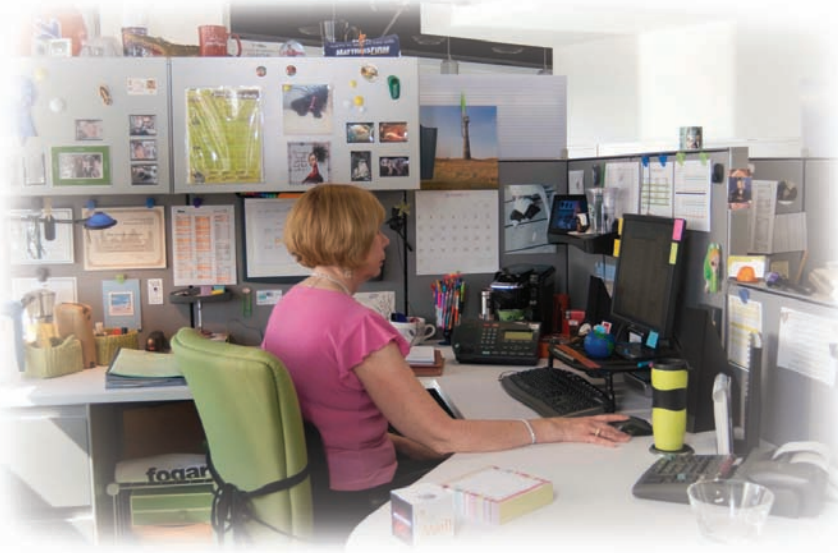
How is this worker in Houston trying to avoid becoming a depersonalized unit in a bureaucratic-economic machine?

C. M. Holmgren/Lightbox

Peter principle a tongue-in-cheek observation that the members of an organization are promoted for their accomplishments until they reach their level of incompetence; there they cease to be promoted, remaining at the level at which they can no longer do good work

goal displacement an organization replacing old goals with new ones; also known as *goal replacement*

because they see no viable alternative, or they wait it out because they have "only so many years until retirement." They hate every minute of work, and it shows—in their attitudes toward clients, toward fellow workers, and toward bosses. The alienated bureaucrat does not take initiative, will not do anything for the organization beyond what is absolutely required, and uses company rules to justify doing as little as possible.

Despite poor attitude and performance, alienated workers often retain their jobs. Some keep their jobs because of seniority, while others threaten costly, time-consuming, and embarrassing legal action if anyone tries to fire them. Some alienated workers are shunted off into small bureaucratic corners, where they spend the day doing trivial tasks and have little chance of coming in contact with the public. This treatment, of course, only alienates them further.

Bureaucratic Incompetence. In a tongue-in-cheek analysis of bureaucracies, Laurence Peter proposed what has become known as the **Peter principle:** Each employee of a bureaucracy is promoted to his or her *level of incompetence* (Peter and Hull 1969). People who perform well in a bureaucracy come to the attention of those higher up the chain of command and are promoted. If they continue to perform well, they are promoted again. This process continues *until* they are promoted to a level at which they can no longer handle the responsibilities well—their level of incompetence. There they hide behind the work of others, taking credit for the accomplishments of employees under their direction. In our opening vignette, the employee who sent the wrong mail has already reached his or her level of incompetence.

Although the Peter principle contains a grain of truth, if it were generally true, bureaucracies would be staffed by incompetents, and these organizations would fail. In reality, bureaucracies are so successful that they have come to dominate our society.

Goal Displacement and the Perpetuation of Bureaucracies

An interesting characteristic of bureaucracies is that they tend to take on a life of their own. In a process called **goal displacement,** even after an organization achieves its goal and no longer has a reason to continue, continue it does.

A classic example is the March of Dimes, organized in the 1930s with the goal of fighting polio (Sills 1957). At that time, the origin of polio was a mystery. The public was alarmed and fearful, for overnight a healthy child could be stricken with this crippling disease. To raise money to find a cure, the March of Dimes placed posters of children on crutches near cash registers in almost every store in the United States. The organization raised money beyond its wildest dreams. When Dr. Jonas Salk developed a vaccine for polio in the 1950s, the threat of polio was wiped out almost overnight.

Did the staff that ran the March of Dimes hold a wild celebration and then quietly fold up their tents and slip away? Of course not. They had jobs to protect, so they targeted a new enemy—birth defects. But then in 2001 another ominous threat of success reared its ugly head. Researchers finished mapping the human genome system, a breakthrough that held the possibility of eliminating birth defects—and their jobs. Officials of the March of Dimes had to come up with something new—and this time, they hoped, something that would last. Their new slogan, "Stronger, healthier babies," is so vague that it should ensure the organization's existence forever: We are not likely to ever run out of the need for "stronger, healthier babies." This goal displacement is illustrated in the photos on the next page.

The Peter principle sounds as though it would be true. Why isn't it?

March of Dimes

March of Dimes

The March of Dimes was founded by President Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s to fight polio. When a vaccine for polio was discovered in the 1950s, the organization did not declare victory and disband. Instead, its leaders kept the organization intact by creating new goals—first "fighting birth defects," and now "stronger, healthier babies." Sociologists use the term *goal displacement* to refer to this process of adopting new goals.

Then there is NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), formed during the Cold War to prevent Russia from invading western Europe. When the Cold War ended, removing the organization's purpose, the Western powers tried to find a reason to continue their organization. As with the March of Dimes, why waste a perfectly good bureaucracy? They found a new goal: to create "rapid response forces" to combat terrorism and "rogue nations" (Tyler 2002). To keep this bureaucracy going, they even allowed Russia to become a junior partner. Russia was pleased—until it felt threatened by NATO's expansion.

Voluntary Associations

Although bureaucracies have become the dominant form of organization for large, task-oriented groups, even more common are voluntary associations. Let's examine their characteristics.

Back in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman, traveled across the United States, observing the customs of this new nation. His report, Democracy in America (1835/1966), was popular both in Europe and in the United States. It is still quoted for its insights into the American character. One of de Tocqueville's observations was that Americans joined a lot of **voluntary associations,** groups made up of volunteers who organize on the basis of some mutual interest.

Americans have continued this pattern. A visitor entering one of the thousands of small towns that dot the U.S. landscape is often greeted by a sign proclaiming some of the town's voluntary associations: Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Kiwanis, Lions, Elks, Eagles, Knights of Columbus, Chamber of Commerce, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and perhaps a host of others. One type of voluntary association is so prevalent that a separate sign sometimes indicates which varieties the town offers: Roman Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, and so on. Not listed on these signs are many other voluntary associations, such as political parties, unions, health clubs, National Right to Life, National Organization for Women, Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Association of Pinto Racers, and Citizens United For or Against This and That.

Americans love voluntary associations and use them to express a wide variety of interests. Some groups are local, consisting of only a few volunteers; others are national, with a paid professional staff. Some are temporary, organized to accomplish some specific task, such as arranging the Fourth of July fireworks. Others, such as the Scouts and political parties, are permanent—large, secondary organizations with clear lines of command—and they are also bureaucracies.

voluntary associations groups made up of people who voluntarily organize on the basis of some mutual interest; also known as *voluntary memberships* and *voluntary organizations*

How does goal displacement help bureaucracies perpetuate themselves?

Functions of Voluntary Associations

Whatever their form, voluntary associations are numerous because they meet people's needs. People do not *have* to belong to these organizations. They join because they believe in "the cause" and obtain benefits from their participation. Functionalists have identified seven functions of voluntary associations.

1. They advance particular interests. For example, adults who are concerned about children's welfare volunteer for the Scouts because they think kids are better off joining this group than hanging out on the street. In short, voluntary associations get things done, whether this means organizing a neighborhood crime watch or informing people about the latest laws on abortion.
2. They offer people an identity. They give their members a feeling of belonging, and for many, a sense of doing something worthwhile. This function is so important for some individuals that the voluntary association even provides a sense of purpose in life.
3. They help maintain social order. This is easy to see in the case of organizations that focus on political action, such as those that "get out the vote" or those that promote patriotism. But to the extent that any organization helps to incorporate individuals into society, it helps to maintain social order.

Sociologist David Sills (1968) identified four other functions, which apply only to some voluntary associations.

4. Some voluntary groups mediate between the government and the individual. For example, some groups provide a way for people to put pressure on lawmakers or to promote candidates for political office.
5. By providing training in organizational skills, some groups help people climb the occupational ladder.
6. Other groups help bring people into the political mainstream. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is an example of such a group.
7. Finally, some voluntary associations pave the way for social change. As they challenge established ways of doing things, boundaries start to give way. The confrontations of Greenpeace and Sea Shepherds, for example, are reshaping taken-for-granted definitions of "normal" when it comes to the environment.

Motivations for Joining

People have many motivations for joining voluntary associations. Some join because they hold strong convictions about the purpose of the organization, and they want to help fulfill the group's goals. Others join because membership helps them politically or professionally—or looks good on a college or job application. Some may even join because they have romantic interests in a group member. With so many motivations for joining, and because their commitment is fleeting, some people move in and out of voluntary associations almost as fast as they change clothes.

Within each organization, however, is an *inner circle*—individuals who stand firmly behind the group's goals, who actively promote the group, and who are committed to maintaining the organization. If this inner circle loses its commitment, the group is likely to fold.

Let's look more closely at this inner circle.

The "Iron Law" of Oligarchy

A significant aspect of a voluntary association is that its key members, its inner circle, often grow distant from the regular members. They become convinced that only they can be trusted to make the group's important decisions. To see this principle at work, let's look at the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW).

What are some functions of voluntary associations?

Sociologists Elaine Fox and George Arquitt (1985) studied three local posts of the VFW, a national organization of former U.S. soldiers who have served in foreign wars. They found that although the leaders concealed their attitudes from the other members, the inner circle viewed the rank and file as a bunch of ignorant boozers. Because the leaders couldn't stand the thought that such people might represent them in the community and at national meetings, a curious situation arose. Although the VFW constitution made rank-and-file members eligible for top leadership positions, they never became leaders. In fact, the inner circle was so effective in controlling these top positions that even before an election they could tell you who was going to win. "You need to meet Jim," the sociologists were told. "He's the next post commander after Sam does his time."

At first, the researchers found this puzzling. The election hadn't been held yet. As they investigated further, they found that leadership was actually determined behind the scenes. The current leaders appointed their favored people to chair the key committees. This spotlighted their names and accomplishments, propelling the members to elect them. By appointing its own members to highly visible positions, then, the inner circle maintained control over the entire organization.

Like the VFW, most organizations are run by only a few of their members. Building on the term *oligarchy,* a system in which many are ruled by a few, sociologist Robert Michels (1876–1936) coined the term the **iron law of oligarchy** to refer to how organizations come to be dominated by a small, self-perpetuating elite (Michels 1911/1949). Most members of voluntary associations are passive, and an elite inner circle keeps itself in power by passing the leadership positions among its members.

What many find disturbing about the iron law of oligarchy is that people are excluded from leadership because they don't represent the inner circle's values—or, in some instances, their background. This is true even of organizations that are committed to democratic principles. For example, U.S. political parties—supposedly the backbone of the nation's representative government—are run by an inner circle that passes leadership positions from one elite member to another. This principle also shows up in the U.S. Congress. With their control of political machinery and access to free mailing, 90 to 95 percent of U.S. senators and representatives who choose to run are reelected (*Statistical Abstract* 2006:Table 394; Friedman and Holden 2009).

The iron law of oligarchy is not without its limitations, of course. Members of the inner circle must remain attuned to the opinions of the rank-and-file members, regardless of their personal feelings. If the oligarchy gets too far out of line, it runs the risk of a grassroots rebellion that would throw the elite out of office. This threat often softens the iron law of oligarchy by making the leadership responsive to the membership. The iron law of oligarchy, then, is more like a copper law of oligarchy. In addition, because not all organizations become captive to an elite, it is a strong tendency, not an inevitability.

The Star-Ledger/John Munson/The Image Works

In a process called the *iron law of oligarchy,* a small, self-perpetuating elite tends to take control of formal organizations. The text explains that the leaders of the local VFW posts separate themselves from the rank-and-file members, such as those shown here in Sacramento, California.

Working for the Corporation

Since you are likely to be working for a bureaucracy after college, let's examine some of its characteristics and how these might affect your career.

iron law of oligarchy Robert Michels' term for the tendency of formal organizations to be dominated by a small, self-perpetuating elite

What is the "iron law" of oligarchy? Does it apply to democratic organizations?