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The Comparative Description of Organizations: A Research Note and Invitation

Charles K. Warriner, Richard H. Hall, Bill McKelvey

Introduction

A major bar to the cumulation of knowledge about organizations, to effective theory construction, and to the accumulation of data collected by different research teams lies in the fact that each investigator uses a different set of variables, and, thus, organizations of the same type and even the same organizations are described in quite different ways (cf. Kostecki and Mreta 1979). While this is an especially acute problem for those interested in comparative analyses, it is also a fundamental difficulty for all organizational research and theory. In this note we describe an attempt to overcome this problem and invite organizational scholars with various interests to participate in the effort.

Background

A conference on the 'Problems in Developing Empirical Taxonomies of Organizations' was held at the University of Kansas, 3–6 June 1980, with scholars from several countries and disciplines (sociology, management science, education, and political science). It became clear to the conferees that the most fundamental of the several problems (cf. Warriner 1979) was that of agreement on a standard list of operationalized, observable variables ('characters' in taxonomic parlance) for describing organizations. We do not have a standard protocol such as was developed in anthropology for ethnographic work and in medicine for describing patient conditions.

We recognized (1) that different theories (technological, dialectic, structural, contingency, ecological, etc.) lead to (2) a concern with different abstract or general dimensions (formalization, centralization, form of core technology, environmental uncertainty, mechanization, etc.). Furthermore, (3) any given dimension may be indexed, represented, or measured by a variety of concrete variables or characters. What is a good measure of formalization, for example, for one research team may be considered an inadequate or inappropriate measure by another. There are often a number of alternative measures for any given dimension and these stem from both theoretical and methodological considerations.

Thus, it would appear that until we have theoretical agreement we are unlikely...
to have any agreement on a list of characters for describing organizations. However, it is also true that different theories often have at least some common dimensions (for example, the 'hierarchy of authority' is a dimension in several quite different approaches) although their functions in the theory (as defining independent, dependent, or mediating variables) may differ. Furthermore, any given character may be used to represent different dimensions in different formulations. For these reasons the situation is not as hopeless as it first appears. The immediate problem is to identify those characters which, regardless of theory or of dimensional justification, may have utility for many approaches and interests.

The participants in the taxonomy conference agreed to initiate a modified Delphi technique as a way of identifying those characters or variables that have the highest common relevance to diverse theories and dimensions and for ranking those characters in terms of their general relevance and utility. Such a list, if it represents a variety of theoretical positions and dimensional concerns, should be useful to scholars with various research interests and theoretical orientations. It is for this reason that we invite others to join us in this effort.

Procedure

Stage I

Each participating scholar will prepare a document that (a) describes the theory on which the list of dimensions and characters is based, (b) identifies and conceptually specifies the several dimensions required by the theory, and (c) list, if it represents a variety of theoretical positions and dimensional concerns, those dimensions will be measured.

Stage II

These ordered and justified lists of characters will be circulated to the other participants for a 'mirroring' response in which (a) those characters that the responders believe are important for their use would be identified and additional alternates or variations relevant to the initiator's dimensions added, (b) the dimensions to which the respondent thinks the characters are relevant are indicated (whether the same as the initiator's or not), and (c) the theoretical background for the dimensions is indicated (whether the same or different from the initiator's).

Stage III

These responses will be collated and compiled to produce a list of characters arranged in terms of frequency of choice and the variety of dimensions and theories to which relevant. This list of characters (along with the identification
of dimensions and theories) will then be circulated to participants for further comments and for their priority ordering (‘would use in any study’, ‘would include if possible’, ‘would not include under any conditions’).

Stage IV

The responses to Stage III will be compiled and a report to the profession prepared listing the high priority items (along with the procedures by which identified and the central outcomes of each stage) in the hope that all investigators will be encouraged to use the high priority items in data collection regardless of their immediate relevance to the particular problems of the research. The common use of even a few items by all organizational researchers would make the cumulation of data and the generalization of findings from different studies much more possible than at present.

Invitation

We invite all organizational scholars to join in this effort in order that the results will reflect the variety of interests and orientations in organizational studies. Others may join in this activity at any stage. If you are interested write to Charles K. Warriner, Department of Sociology, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045 and indicate whether you wish to begin participating with Stage I, Stage II, or Stage III.

Our hope for the future is that pooled data will yield an empirical taxonomy of organizations as well as an improved theory of organizations. We recognize that the proposed plan is ambitious and that our initial pool of characters may have to be modified as our knowledge grows; at the same time we believe our approach has the potential of yielding a major advance in organizational studies.

Note

1. The conference was supported by a grant from the Committee on Problems of the Discipline of the American Sociology Association, by grants from the Department of Sociology and Office of Academic Affairs of the University of Kansas, and by grant NIE-G-80-0053 from the National Institute of Education. Participants in the conference were Melvin Blumberg (University of Wisconsin), Marion Blute (Erindale College, University of Toronto), Preston F. Driggers, Richard H. Hall (SUNY-Albany), Marian J. Kostecki (Polish Academy of Sciences), Bill McKelvey (UCLA), Krzysztof Mrela (Polish Academy of Sciences), Odessa Pierce (University of Kansas), Craig Pinder (University of British Columbia), Gail Sarginson (University of Toronto), Prudy Sieg (University of Kansas), Thomas Thomas (University of Kansas), and Charles K. Warriner (University of Kansas).

References
