What is an Organization? Who are the Members?

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An implicit assumption embedded in essentially all writing about organizations is that there exists something that can be called 'an organization.' By implication, the assumption is that this organization has members, who can be distinguished from non-members. This assumption is evident, for example when a distinction is drawn between an organization and it's environment . To illustrate, Lawrence & Lorsch's (1967) classic analysis of the interplay between organizations and their environments posited that organizations are open systems, with a free flow of various resources across organizational boundaries. The implication is that a clear distinction exists between what is inside and outside an organization. In this vein, Jones, Moore & Snyder (1988), use the label "Inside Organizations" for a collection of essays that talk about symbolic behavior in organizations.

In other words, an implicit assumption in organizational studies is of some kind of a boundary between an organization and it's environment, so that individuals can either be within this boundary, in which case they are assumed to be members of the organization, or outside of the boundary, which makes them non-members. Working on the boundary itself are individuals who, as Tushman (1977:587) explains, perform 'boundary spanning roles" (see also Adams 1976; Friedman & Podolny, 1992):

> Special boundary roles evolve in the organization's communication network
> to fulfill the essential function of linking the organization's internal network
> to external sources of information.

But when we talk about an organization, or about organizational members, who are we really talking about? How can we define, or identify organizational membership? Can we easily distinguish members from non-members? These are the questions that this essay raises, and begins to address. I begin by outlining and illustrating the complexity of the question. Next I review some provisional answers, which I believe are apparent in the organizational studies literature. What will become obvious from this review is that the question is complex, with multiple, sometimes overlapping, but at other times competing answers. Building on this complexity, in the final part of the essay I suggest some implications for research of organizational behavior.

The Question

A dictionary's entry of the term 'organization' provides three different definitions: (1) The act or process of organizing or being organized; (2) The condition or manner of being organized; (3) An administrative and functional structure, or the personnel of such a structure (Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1971: 594). These multiple definitions begin to capture the wealth of ways in which the construct can be defined and interpreted. At least the first two definitions do not connote that the concept has an inherent beginning and end, or distinct boundaries. The idea of 'a structure' embedded in the third definition, is the only one that connotes inherent boundaries.

From a scholastic, research perspective these three definitions only begin to scrape the surface of the question addressed here: "What is an organization," and more specifically "who are it's members." That organizations hold an administrative and functional structure is not new to organizational scholars. But how can one identify "the members of this structure?" Are these only the people physically in the structure? But then what about customers, vendors, or patients? And what about sales representatives, recruiters, labor negotiators, or telecommuters who are not physically in a plant? An alternative definition of membership may be people paid by the organization. But then what about suppliers or vendors? And what about volunteers: Are they really not members?

In the study of organizational behavior the term 'organization' is typically defined as 'a structured social system consisting of groups and individuals working together to meet some agreed on objectives' (cf. Greenberg & Baron, 1995:11). This definition is helpful in that it highlights the fact that organizations comprise multiple parts and people, which need to be integrated into larger, interconnected wholes. Still unspecified, however, is how the whole is divided into parts, or how the (human) elements are identified as belonging to the whole. In an attempt to address this question, we may turn to the concept of 'a member,' which is defined in Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (p. 528) as either (1) 'one of the individuals composing a group', or (2) a constituent part of a whole[1].

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[1] The Webster's definition includes other possibilities such as 'a body part or organ' or 'one of the elements of a mathematical set' but these were not thought to be relevant to this essay.

Interestingly, these definitions view membership as defined by the collective with which the individual is associated. Obviously, this does not help solve the current dilemma since it creates a tautology -- membership is defined by the group in which one is a member. Moreover, as role theory showed, individuals belong to multiple groups and collectives, allowing for multiple memberships of the same individual (Katz & Kahn, 1973). When does individual membership move from one group to another? How is the salience of membership navigated by individuals and organizations? In other words, the notion of a 'boundary' between one group and another, is challenged by the fact that the same individual can be a member of the two groups.

What does this mean to organizational life or organizational theory? Consider your local grocery store. Cashiers, and other employees working in the store, are obviously members of the store. But what happens when they physically leave the store, either to go home, or on store business. Do they remain members in both cases? To a similar extent? What if they take a leave of absence or if they are on sick leave? What if they retire or take a different job? What if they go on strike, and walk a picket line outside the store? Are they still members? Are they ever relieved of this membership? And what if they are retained by a temporary employment agency, as opposed to being retained by the store itself: At some level such temporary employees are assumed to be members of the temporary agency, but does that make them non-members of the store? If we transfer this example from a grocery store to a software development firm, a law firm, or a bio-technology new venture, these questions become even more complex.

As noted by Pfeffer & Baron (1988) variations in the temporal and administrative relationships between employers and employees are increasingly popular. Yet, at some level, a temporary employee working full time in a store may be more strongly associated with the store than a permanent employee working only two days a week. Of some conceptual help here is the literature on group membership. Arrow & McGrath (1995), for example, distinguish between "standing" and "acting" group membership, suggesting that group membership may comprise people who are not physically active on a particular component of the group task, yet are viewed by themselves, or by others as members of the group. Similarly, organizational membership may comprise various shades, depending on particular aspects of the relationship between the member and other members.

The dilemma regarding membership is even more complicated when organizational constituents who are not employees are considered. To illustrate, consider the customers of the store. They may not be paid by the store, but they do pay money to the store, and they are physically present and active in the store. From a contractual perspective, they may also be viewed as members, in that they are active contributors to the store's production process. In many cases customers perform physical work essential for store performance by taking items off shelves, putting them into carts, or pushing the carts around. Without these activities, the store would not survive.

Even without physical activity, only their (customers') behavior drives store operations. It is a customer call to L. L. Bean that sets the phone order operation going, and only a patient's coming to the hospital justifies the existence of the hospital. If the assumption is that members are defined by the production of a common goal, obviously both employees and clients or customers need to be included as members. Popular slogans, such as Burger King's 'We Do It YOUR Way' or Mary Kay's 'The Customer is Our Inspiration' suggest not only that customers are members, but that they are valued and important members. In this vein, Bowen (1986: 371) wrote about "Managing Customers as Human Resources," and Mills and Morris (1986: 726) refer to 'Clients as Partial Employees of Service Organizations.' These scholars suggest that management of members should not be limited to salaried employees, but should include customers.

What about the suppliers to this store? Suppliers are paid by the store to bring products into the store facility. Employees hired by suppliers often work within the aisles of the store, unpacking merchandise, pricing, or shelving; others interact directly with customers, while serving product samples or promoting sales. Are these individuals 'members' of the organization? Are they more or less 'members' than a customer or a former employee? Similarly, what about employees of an advertising agency retained to develop a promotion campaign for, or to monitor the service delivery of the store. These people are likely to spend some time in the store, observing customers and learning about the object they need to promote, acting as 'mystery shoppers', or running focus groups. Are these individuals not at all 'members' of the said organization?

In short, a random person strolling into this grocery store will have a difficult time discerning the different types of 'members' suggested above. While instinctively many random observers, and perhaps even organizational scholars, might refer only to employees as 'members,' the complexity of the issue of membership should not be

overlooked. Most modern organizations comprise diverse types of relationships with different individuals. The concept of 'membership' is not as easily or clearly articulated as may appear at first, and may be defined or construed in different ways. Various theories in organizational behavior may embrace assumptions about particular membership relations. These assumptions should be both stated and examined.

The goal of this chapter is to take a closer look at the construct of organizational membership. The initial assertion is that this construct should be conceptualized as a variable, which means that membership is a matter of degree. Individuals can be members to a greater or a lesser degree depending on the particular perspective or the particular framework one adopts. A second assertion, therefore, is that there are different ways in which memberships can be defined. Moving between definitions may change the extent of membership of the same individual. The assumption embedded in much of the organizational literature -- that membership is a dichotomy typified by 'all or none' qualities -- is therefore simplistic. because it overlooks the variety of ways in which membership can be defined, and the range of values that each definition can comprise.

In the following pages I offer a summary of various ways in which membership has been implied or assumed by organizational students and scholars. What will become obvious from this review is both that there are multiple ways of construing membership, and that each of these constructions implies a range of values rather than a dichotomy.

Some Possible Answers:

A scanning of research in and of organizational behaviors reveals that different studies adopt different implicit assumptions about organizational membership. Scholars don't state the perspective they take, because they consider it to be obvious; yet different perspectives are conceptually and operationally distinct. The only common assumption to all perspectives is that organizations and memberships are patterns of relationships. Perspectives differ in how these relationships are defined: According to physical or temporal interactions, legal or psychological contracts, participation in a common production process, or sharing cultural norms and values.

1. Organizations and Membership as Physical or Temporal Relationships

To most people the concept of 'organization' and the question 'what is an organization' connotes some physical and geographical boundaries. Students probed

about 'what is IBM' refer to the company headquarters or the various company offices around the world, and the people who work either in headquarters or in the one of the other offices. The underlying (and typically unstated) idea here is that membership in an organization is defined by physically being together, seeing and interacting with each other. Thus, Oldham, Cummings, & Zhou (1995:1) write about "The Spatial Configuration of Organizations," and Gagliardi (1990) discusses corporate architecture as a representation of the corporate culture. Pfeffer (1982: 260) explicitly notes

Organizations are, in many instances, physical entities. They have offices, buildings, factories, furniture, and some degree of physical dispersion or concentration.

By implication, if organizations are physical structures, then organizational members are the people operating within these structures. Interestingly, however, research in marketing has also examined the implications of open space and other variants of physical arrangements on customer behavior (cf. Bitner, 1992; Everett, Pieters, & Titus, 1994). Since customers spend time inside organizational structures, they should also be viewed 'members.' Furthermore, as noted above, a large and growing number of formal employees do not operate within the physical organizational structure: Sales people, recruiters, labor negotiators, service technicians, or public relations officers. As noted by Pfeffer & Baron (1988:257) "workers may be only weakly connected to the organization in terms of physical location." With the advent of information technology, membership can be established and maintained through various electronic media: Organizational duties can be performed from a home, a remote cottage, or a self maintained office (cf. Rheingold, 1994; Shamir & Solomon, 1985).

According to the simple physical definition of membership, such production arrangements would not be considered organizations, and participants may not be considered members. A variety of scholars echo Rheingold's (1994:34) assertion that computerized technologies build a new kind of place, generating 'virtual' rather than physical communities. One implication is that the extensive organizational literature on traditional concepts such as job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment, or even job enrichment needs to be reexamined under the non-physical definition of membership (Simons, 1994).

In a similar vein, it appears difficult if not impossible to define membership in organizations that operate in nature. Arnould & Price (1993), for example, studied river rafters as service providers, and Cohen (1989) studied trekkers in Thailand, and argued

that there are distinct organizational patterns to their behavior. Similarly, Marks & Mirvis (1981) describe environmental influences on the performance of members of a baseball team that within one season traveled to 60 different locations, in addition to playing 49 home games. These people operate in a physical context that is either variant (in the case of baseball teams) or non-existent (in the case of trakkers and river rafters). Yet there appears to be consensus that they are organizational members. Is it the case that the individuals employed in these settings do not belong to an organization? How should their membership be defined?

A related issue is the distance between an organization's physical location and an employee's residence. Formally, employees may be members no matter where they live. But employees living further away from the organization's physical core will by necessity be more constrained in their relationship to the organization. They are less likely to come to work at odd hours (evening or weekends), they may be more constrained to formal working hours due to commuting or carpool arrangements, and they may be less committed to the organization because of these constraints (cf. Koslowsky, Kluger, & Reich, 1995). One plausible implication is that long commutes decrease the degree of membership in the organization.

A focus on physical interaction, rather than physical location of employment, as the core issue of membership does not alleviate the dilemma. Studies of service employees reveal, for example, that most physical interactions are with customers rather than with managers or co-workers (cf. Rafaeli, 1989a; Mars & Nicod, 1984). A typical service person spends most of his or her time in interaction with clients rather than with managers or co-workers. Similarly, teachers and doctors spend far more of their time with students and patients, respectively.

Another group whose membership remains unclear are volunteers. Volunteers often operate within the physical boundary of the organization but are somehow assumed to be different from employees. Some authors automatically assume them to be non-members. Perhaps a more appropriate conception is that they are members 'to a lesser degree?' Cheng (1996), for example, describes how volunteers in a civilian auxiliary Civil Air Patrol unit view themselves as members of the United States Air Force.

In short, a physical definition of membership leaves a lot of open questions. Some alternative conceptions, that may help resolve these questions are considered next.

2. Organizations and Membership as Contractual Relationships

A second conception that can be labeled 'classic' assumes that financial obligations and responsibilities define organizational membership. From a financial perspective, a firm is a "nexus of a set of contracting relationships among individuals" (Jensen & Meckling, 1976: 311). In this perspective, members are individuals paid by the organization for their participation in organizational activities. Hence, in addition to employees, vendors, suppliers, and contractors can also be argued to be members.

It has also been argued that the psychological contract between employers and employees is a more apt (or at least an alternative) explanatory mechanism of membership than the financial or legal contract (Rousseau & Parks, 1993). However, psychological contracts are based on psychological attachment, which can exist among many parties not just employees and employers, and can range in strength suggesting varying degrees of membership. Both sets of contractual relations therefore leave open questions about the relative membership status of various groups.

First, employees who have retired, taken a sabbatical, maternity leave or other form of paid leave of absence, should also be considered members of the firm, since there typically is some form of contractual relationship between them. Both financial obligations and psychological attachment connect these people to their organization. Similarly, customers, who have obvious though highly variant contracts with the firm, should also be considered organizational members. At some level the contracts with customers are as important, if not more important than the contracts with employees. Similarly, employees of vendors, suppliers, and contractors are also financially and psychologically committed to the firm. Are they not members?

On the other hand, individuals interviewing for employment who have not yet established formal contractual relations, are contractually non-members. Yet, there are report that individuals feel an affinity to a firm in which they applied for employment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Rafaeli, 1996). Furthermore, Shanteau & Harrison (1991) eloquently illustrated that individuals tend to remain committed to an employment course of action even if they are not constrained by a formal contract, and have more lucrative offers elsewhere. In this study, subjects viewed an initial interaction with an organization as a more important source of bonding than either a formal contract or financial incentives.

Similarly, alumni of many colleges and universities typically view themselves as continuing to be a part of the institution long after they graduate. To some extent this construction of partial membership of alumni is reinforced by fund raising offices seeking to encourage financial support. Notwithstanding, there are no contractual relationships that bond alumni to the college and university. The interesting question that emerges is therefore: Are alumni not members? Alternatively, perhaps alumni are merely members in a different degree than current students or faculty.

In a similar vein, volunteers who are not paid and hold no financial or other commitment to an organization, should not be construed as members. Yet it is obvious that they feel some level of commitment, and descriptions exist of how the level of loyalty of volunteers exceeds that of formal employees (cf. Deci, 1980). Available analyses of psychological contracts do not take such relations into account. In short, the definition of membership according to contractual relationships embodies an inherent assumption of a dichotomy, according to which a contract either exists or it doesn't. Yet obviously, psychological contracts, and the various forms of attachment described above cannot be viewed as dichotomous.

3. Organization and Membership as Hierarchical Relationships

A third perspective on membership is based on the traditional bureaucratic model which views the hierarchy as the key to building and governing organizations and to designating relationships among members. Building on Weber's (1947) work, Schein (1980:11), for example, notes that "organizations coordinate their various functions through some kind of hierarchy or authority, " and Leflaive (1996:17) explicitly defines and discusses organizations as "Structures of Domination." In this perspective, organizations are enacted by hierarchical authority relations mandated by senior managers. Membership is established by accepting employment in a firm., and is defined by appearance on the same, hierarchical, organizational chart. Individuals without a designated place on the organizational chart, should therefore not be viewed as members.

Several problems emerge with this conceptualization. First, as noted by Pfeffer & Baron (1988:257) "employers are increasingly externalizing a buffer against a core or permanent work force." Externalization involves relying on various alternatives to the traditional employee-employer arrangements. A typical version of externalizing, is relying on other firms that will do a part of the organization's tasks. Special firms can act

as a mediator between the organization and the task by performing various functions such as recruiting, selection, or training. Thus, individuals performing tasks in one organization, may be hired, selected, trained, and retained by another organization. To illustrate, data entry tasks for many insurance companies is done by individuals recruited, screened, and trained by data entry contractors.

This process of externalization yields a confusion regarding hierarchically controlled members. The work performed by ‘externalized’ employees is often for one master, who is not hierarchically superior to the employee. Performance can be monitored by technology, or by people who are not members of the hierarchy (e.g., customers, vendors, consultants). The formal notion of organizational hierarchy is peripheral. Varying status of membership may alternatively be defined according to decision jurisdiction regarding salary, bonuses, promotion, or retention. But, different combinations of these functions are plausible: An individual may be retained by one firm, paid by another, and evaluated by a third. In which firm is he or she a member?

In this vein, large corporations, with various companies (such as Johnson & Johnson, cf. Annonymous, 1993) have recently introduced a concept of “Shared Services Recruiting” according to which service functions such as payroll, recruiting, or selection are performed by one central operation for various otherwise distinct production facilities. From an administrative and hierarchical perspective, members of the shared service operation are not subordinate to the same hierarchy as members of the other parts of the company. In a sense, they may be viewed as members in a totally different organization. Alternately, their membership in the production facility could be argued to be ‘of a lesser degree’ than that of core employees of the facility.

A second problem regarding a hierarchical definition of membership emerges with respect to members of professional or occupational groups employed in organizations. One defining attribute of a profession is a formally accepted code, which acts as a superior standard and governs behavior (cf. Abbott (1988; Trice, 1993). When professionals are employed by organizations not headed by others of their own profession, however, they may be hierarchically subordinate to members of the organization but professionally subordinate to the professional code of conduct. This is clearly the case with doctors, lawyers, psychologists, and accountants employed by a wide range of organizations. These people are likely to sense membership with their professional association just as much, if not more than with the organization that pays

their salary. As Gouldner (1957) noted, the membership of such professionals may be more ‘cosmopolitan’ (or loyal to the profession) than ‘local’ (or loyal to the organization). Again, the implication is that membership varies in extent among different organizational members.

A third problem is that similar hierarchical relations may imply different psychological attachment among members of the same organization. Rousseau & Parks (1993) argue that employees can perceive their employment relationship to be more or less transactional or relational. Transactional relationships are argued to be more economic, extrinsic, static, and narrow, than relational relationships. By extension, transactional employment contracts appear to imply a more limited form of membership than relational contracts. Hence, defining membership as a function of hierarchical relations overlooks the psychological dynamics that can strengthen or weaken membership.

The situation is even more complicated if the distinction between different types of relations that organizational leaders can form with their followers is considered. In an extensive and impressive research stream on transformational leadership (cf. Avolio & Bass, 1988; Bass & Avolio, 1995) leadership has been argued to be an influence process that goes beyond transactions based on hierarchical relations. What is material here is that transformational leaders are asserted to change the nature of the relations between individuals and organizations. Administrative, hierarchical definitions of the organization are therefore only a point of departure for member definition: Some people are likely to become *members to greater degree* by virtue of leader behavior.

In short, observing membership as a product of administrative, hierarchical relations reveals complications in that people who appear to be equal (because they are formally employed by the same organization) may be very different in terms of their degree of membership in the organization.

4. Organization and Membership as a Production Relationship

A fourth, manufacturing or production perspective views organizations as entities that produce particular goods. Defining membership as participation in the process of producing the goods is, however, deceivingly simplistic. A first problem with this perspective is again posed by the growing segment of service delivery, and the role of customers in this industry. This is because two unique aspects of service production

are that "services are produced while they are consumed," and that "customers participate in the production process." (cf. Bowen & Schneider, 1988; Chase & Erickson, 1988).

In manufacturing settings, customer considerations are also increasingly considered fundamental to organizational design and process. To illustrate, Lele (1986) talked about the influence of service on product strategy, bringing to bear the idea that the separation between production and customer contact hampers production processes. Hence, customers are participants in a production process as well.

Furthermore, modern production processes are based on a composition of several components (which are typically produced by sub-contractors); the composite is the organization's final product. In this production strategy, who are the individual members? Why are employees of a sub-contractor not 'members' of the organization that puts its name on the final product?

5. Organization and Membership as a Cultural Relationship

The extensive research on organizational socialization and organizational culture might suggest that membership can best be defined according to common experiences shared by organizational members, and the norms of behavior that emerge from these experiences. Building on Morgan (1986) it may be that from an organizational behavior perspective, organizations should be construed as cultures, that serve to shape the social reality of their members. This would be consistent with assertions that leaders in and of organizations can be viewed as the management of meaning (Smirchich & Morgan, 1982), or the management of ambiguity (Pfeffer, 1977). In part, membership is so abstract, may be an explanation for the intriguing assertion made by Meindel, Ehrlich, & Dukerich (1985) that organizational leadership is only a romantic attribution, rather than an objective reality.

This is a very attractive perspective for organizational behavior scholars who believe in the importance of a healthy and stimulating organizational culture. However such a definition does not alleviate the problem. Many of the problems mentioned above apply here as well. More importantly, this perspective is limited in that the core defining concept of culture is itself unclear: there is no consensus about what culture means (cf. Gordon, 1991; Smirchich, 1983). Hence, the perspective that a shared culture defines

organizations and their members provides an ambiguous and ill defined term for the definition of another ambiguous and ill defined term.

Furthermore, as Gordon (1991) states, organizations in a similar industry tend to share cultural forms and attributes. Individuals employed in similar industries are therefore suggested by this perspective to be members of the same organization. The broad foundations of institutional theory (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983) would suggest that individuals employed in the same industry or institution are likely to share socialization practices and cultural norms, yielding shared membership. Hence, the distinction between employees or individual members of different organizations in the same organizational field are not obtained by this perspective. To illustrate, the values of a car sales person or a nurse typically do not reveal the particular agency or hospital in which he or she respectively works. But does that mean that the distinction between membership in the two agencies or hospitals is immaterial? Individuals are likely to feel, and to be perceived as a 'member' of the organization in which they work, even though they may share cultural norms and standards with other organizations (see also Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Such membership distinctions are overlooked by this perspective.

In short, none of the perspectives suggested offer a simple resolution to the definition of membership. In some cases too many people are included within a definition. In other cases, the definition excludes important individuals.

Summary and Implications

The self evident implication of this essay is that organizations, organizational boundaries, and organizational members are abstract rather than concrete notions. These notions can be defined in different ways; the definition adopted will selectively include or exclude different groups of people. However, it is first important to clarify that no one perspective is either right or wrong. There is no one best or accurate definition of an organization or of membership. Rather, each perspective bears different implications for the people viewed as members, and for the managerial practices that will promote organizational goals.

The various definitions of membership are not mutually exclusive: Most relations can be typified according to most, if not all the proposed membership perspectives. Different perspectives, however, may yield different degrees of

membership with respect to the same set of relations. The concept of membership, therefore, is a prism with many facets. To illustrate, a college professor may be more of a member according to the physical definition of membership, but less of a member according to the hierarchical definition. Within the physical perspective, college professors may not be homogeneous in the degree of their membership. Some professors stay at home to read and write rather than coming into their campus university office. Such behavior limits their endorsement of a physical definition of membership. Thus, some professors are members to a greater extent than others, if one judges by their physical endorsement of membership. Such symbolic messages about membership may predict other important aspects of individual behavior in organization. It could be, for example, that deciding not to come in (or reducing the extent of physical membership) is associated with a lower commitment to organizational citizenship (cf. Organ, 1990).

The boundaries of, and membership in, some organizations may be more clearly defined than others, due to cultural crystallization (cf. Martin, 1992) or identity formulation (cf. Albert & Whetten, 1985). A distilled, non-fragmented organizational culture and identity may serve to clarify the social identity of the organizational members, enhancing the sense of membership. To illustrate, when Hewlett-Packard employees are socialized to operate in the 'HP way' the organization helps define both the identity of the organization and the boundaries of its membership. The great effort Disney places on training and socializing members to dress and act is an attempt to highly distinguish the organization, through the rites, rituals, and symbols, from other organizations. When there is shared agreement among organizational members about core values and norms that distinguish an organization from similar organizations, the concept of membership may be more distilled.

The detailed analysis of membership also suggests that organizational theorists should examine the notions of "core" versus "peripheral" members. Different perspectives appear to make different groups of people closer to, or further from the core of organizational performance. To illustrate, secretaries sitting at the desk in the corporate headquarters, or employees working the production line, appear to be 'core' according to the physical and hierarchical perspectives. However, with a poor quality work ethic, such employees may maintain a very limited membership from a contractual or production perspective. Ethnographic evidence, such as Hamper's (1991) description of the GM production line vividly illustrate this tension between the various

perspectives. In contrast, customers may be core according to the physical perspective but peripheral according to the hierarchical perspective, while share holders may be core according to the contractual perspective, but peripheral according to the physical or hierarchical perspective.

This complexity suggests that it may be most accurate to define and describe membership as a profile rather than dichotomy, or a matter of degree. Descriptions of relationships between individuals and organizations may be best described according to the pattern of relations in the different perspectives. For example, an individual may be high on physical membership, medium on hierarchical membership, and low on production membership. In this case, additional research is essential on the implications of different patterns for various dependent variables such as job satisfaction, job and organizational involvement and commitment, or turnover.

Such profiles, however, may themselves be dynamic, because membership relations may be a matter of salience, similar to the concept of social identity. At different points in time, different perspectives may be more or less appropriate for the same set of organization-member relations. Students of social identity have argued that individuals navigate among multiple identities, with particular identities being more or less salient at different times according to various contextual constraints or demands (cf. Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). The present analysis contributes to the stream of research on social identity by highlighting various mechanisms that may define and articulate individuals' organizational identity. Organizational identity is suggested here to be a matter of degree or saliency, rather than a dichotomy. To illustrate, a production worker's contractual construction of membership may be high as long as the employment contract is intact. Once a labor dispute emerges, however, this form of membership is severely weakened.

By implication, the multiple perspectives on membership suggest that the construct of "boundary spanning" is more complex than previously recognized. As summarized by Tushman (1977), there are likely to be many boundaries in organizations, and consequently many boundary role positions. What this analysis challenges, however, is Tushman's (1977:589) assertion that organizations have one distinct "external boundary." The different perspectives reviewed here imply multiple plausible external boundaries. Each of these boundaries leaves different sets of people closer to, or further

away from the core of the organization, and a different set of people sitting on the boundary.

Consistently, a review of research on boundary spanning positions finds a wide set of roles to be represented, including sales clerks (Rafaeli, 1989b; Singh, Goolsby, & Rhoads, 1994; Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988), police interrogators and bill collectors (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991), departmental spokesmen (sic, Organ, 1971), college professors (Schneider, Hanges, Goldstein, & Braverman, 1994), professional employees (Keller & Holland, 1975), physicians (Freidson, 1960), purchasing agents, (Spekman, 1979), gatekeepers and opinion leaders (Tushman, 1977), industrial products managers (Lysonski & Woodside, 1989), and management negotiators (Perry & Angle, 1979).

The alternative perspectives researchers can adopt about organizations and their members helps explain how such diversity of organizational roles can be included in one construct of boundary spanning roles. A question this essay raises, however, is to what extent studies of roles that assume one set of boundaries can be generalized to roles defined by other boundaries. Are the dynamics of a physical definition of membership similar to those of a hierarchical or contractual definition? Most likely not. Future research needs to consider these differences, and their implications both for research on boundary spanning, and on others elements of organizational theory and research.

An additional implication of the multiple perspectives raised here is that researchers and managers should pay attention to the implicit definition of membership that they engage. Morgan (1986) notes that the images and metaphors individuals hold of organizations are likely to influence the research questions they explore, and the theories and explanations of organizational life that they develop. The analysis offered here builds on Morgan's argument, in that it asks not 'what is' (an organization) but 'where does it begin and who does it comprise.' In this vein, it is essential to examine whether different definitions of membership attenuate theoretical or empirical findings. Assumptions about membership may be embedded into existing theories, in which case the theory may require changes in order to apply to alternative definitions of membership.

Finally, the complexity of defining organizational membership implies the importance of creating a shared language, or collective, cohesive, and distinctive mind sets among constituents. One helpful suggestion to resolve the membership issue may be that the focus should shift from rational, verbal, definitions to tacit, emergent largely

symbolic, and typically socially constructed definitions of organization and membership. Weick & Roberts' (1993) analysis suggests that organizations may be tacitly defined by their members according to the collective and heedful interrelating that emerges in the course of operation.

This is corroborated by Sutton & Rafaeli's (1991) findings that employees and customers tacitly and quickly agree about norms of behavior according to contextual elements such as busyness of the context. In this study, the formal organizational members according to the physical and production definition (i.e., both employees and customers), challenged prescriptions attempted by a hierarchical conception of membership (i.e., rules of behavior designed by management). The emergent standards of behavior are argued by Sutton & Rafaeli, (1988) to contribute to the accomplishment of organizational goals more than the hierarchically prescribed standards.

Similarly, Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail & Lewis (1996) suggest that employees use organizational dress to facilitate navigation through multiple forms of defining organizational membership. The secretaries in this study were cognizant of competing demands from members of the different environments with which they interacted (e.g., students, faculty, corporate representatives, and executives in a university business school setting). Employees assumed these multiple constituents should determine their own (the secretaries') behaviors. That only some of these constituents were formal employees of the organization is not an important distinction in this study. Dress, it appears, was the symbolic vehicle engaged by the secretaries for attending to the multiple constituents. Hence, when confused about their membership, employees turn to a socially constructed, but tacitly espoused form of symbolic behavior.

Summary

Weick's (1976:1) analysis of organizations are 'loosely coupled systems' argued that 'organizational elements are often tied together frequently and loosely.' Weick's focus was on the inter-dependence and interrelationships among the elements that together comprise 'an organization.' The analysis presented in this chapter extends Weick's argument, to suggest that the concept of organization is, in itself, loosely coupled and laxly defined. Membership in organizations is both a matter of degree and a matter of perspective or definition. Future organizational behavior theory and research

should be cautious to consider the implicitly embraced definition of membership, and its implications.

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