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The Principles of Organizational Inaction

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Literature Search

Nearly 30 years ago, C. Northcote Parkinson shook the intellectual foundations of organizational science with his revolutionary principle on the nature of the relationship between time and work (Henceforth referred to as "Parkinson's First Law," or PL1.) Following extensive longitudinal investigation of the British Navy, Parkinson extended the Einsteinian concept of the relativity of time, in completely new and unexpected directions. The central hypothesis was that in bureaucratic settings, work expands to fill the time available (W = *f*T[k]). Further depth of insight in this rapidly developing new subfield of organizational science (sometimes labeled "bureaucratic humor") came with the anonymous Murphy's law. A mode of parsimony, Murphy's Law posits that whatever can go wrong, will. (Note: There is a strong likelihood that the law may be mislabeled; an early (1866) version worded somewhat differently being attributable to the mathematician Augustus de Morgan and not anyone named Murphy.) Irregardless, this bemused postulate has since come to be recognized as a biographical summary of the careers of dozens of public and private corporation officials.

In the most recent major addition to this glacially growing literature Lawrence J. ("Larry") Peter propounded his prominent principle that officials are, in the normal course of event, promoted to their level of incompetence. Theoreticians active in this area have begun suspecting in recent years that the operation of Peter's Principle provides the much-sought after link between the Parkinson and Murphy formulations.

For the benefit of those unable to see this self-evident connection: incompetents are first promoted beyond their competence, then deprived of meaningful work by colleagues and superiors who cease to trust them. In ceaseless quests to fill their available work time, they continually enter new and unexpected arenas thereby supplying a causal explanation not offered by Murphy/de Morgan. It should be noted however that this formulation is, necessarily, stochastic, since the essentially erratic habits and new interests of incompetent officials cannot otherwise be satisfactorily predicted.

Like many other pioneers in science, Parkinson, Murphy/de Morgan, Peter and their protégés have attracted their share of criticism and scorn. Indeed, so severe has the heckling been at times that a student of Murphy's working at the Beckley Urban Language Laboratory (B.U.L.L.) recently proposed reformulation of the

philosophy of science on this basis: If scorn and derision are associated (as history suggests they must be) with true genius, verbally abusing one's colleagues should be a necessary requirement of professional conduct. Professor (Emeritus) Burton Armbruster and his young collaborator, Dr. Angela Spurious, are presently seeking federal funding from the National Institutes of Safety for a study to test this premise on human subjects. The prospect for approval are dim, however, since according to sources within the blind peer review process no valid and reliable test of the risk of genius for human subjects is currently available.

Another interesting derivation of the work of Parkinson, Murphy/de Morgan, Peter, Armbruster and Spurious, however, is found in the area of organizational change and stability. It is this latter topic that this paper will address.

Theory

Inaction theory is a relatively recent, growing product of a longstanding concern in organization research with the relationship between action and change. This theory dates to the epigrammatic observation of the anonymous nineteenth century station chief of the weather Bureau assigned to the Death Valley station. In an Entry in his log for April 1, 1879, the unnamed bureaucrat wrote:

> Ain't nothin' ever gonna change round here,
> cause ain't nothin ever happens.

This meager insight was seized upon (relatively speaking) and developed into the still nearly stagnant field of Inaction Theory (also known as entropomography) by the late B. Cuthbert Swallowtail, who devoted the last years of his life to the Institute for Creative Inaction at the Social Indicators Division of the Peruvian Livestock and Crop Reporting Service. Following Swallowtail's death f, reportedly from lethargy, in 1953, the institute and its archive was taken over by B.U.L.L.

Shortly after Swallowtail's unheralded demise, several officials at B.U.L.L. were asked by the executor of his estate to begin putting his papers in order, but they have only recently attempted to comply for obvious reasons. (To wit, they would have gotten to it sooner, but they've been very busy!)

A large portion of Swallowtail's notes involved participant observation studies in a surprisingly large number of Bureaucratically Organized Work Settings (BOWS) on the phenomenon of null entropy in systems change. The guiding hypothesis of the entire project was Swallowtail's formula for the square root of integer-valued input functions is equal to the sum of the squares of the output, less the eigenvalues of selected process variables divided by their standard deviations. Some cynics have argued that this boils down to, crudely put, that "nothin in, nothin out."

Hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to set forth in the form of a general paradigm of four theorems which, taken together, account for 112.7 percent of the observed

invariance in congruent sets of dependent variables chosen at random. As a matter of scientific convention, these lawful statements will be stated initially as hypotheses, although the witty reader (and even one or two of the slower ones) will immediately recognize their transcendent truth, not to mention higher than usual degrees of tautology. After about the third paragraph of the Data Analysis section, and following standard research presentation practices, the article will quietly shift moods and thereafter deal with them as established truths.

The four theorems (and their inverse, null hypothetical forms) are:

1. *The Time Theorem:* The present is too soon to discuss any important issue. (Oh, oh. It's too late.)
2. *The Subject Matter Theorem:* This topic is too narrow to deal with. (Whoa! This is way too broad a matter for us to tackle.)
3. *The Group Size Theorem:* This group is too small to tackle such an enormous issue. (What? They expect us to tackle this triviality?)
4. *The Controversy Theorem:* This topic is too controversial to deal with. (Who cares? This has to be the most boring topic ever.)

A team of biochemical researchers at B.U.L.L., working with the entire class of four-year olds at the Valley Day Nursery, is presently having a grand time employing finger paint analysis techniques to investigate a possible fifth hypothesis, involving the possibility of a link between organizational inaction and cancer of the gluteus maximus. If confirmed, this "serum theorem" will be added to establish a new biological dimension of inaction theory (over the loud protests of several blind peer reviewers over such a tacky case of onomatopoeia!)

Methodology

A key step in analysis of the data on organizational inaction involves the identification and operational definition of an appropriate set of invariables. In order to properly analyze these indicators of organizational inaction, it is necessary to look beyond standard statistical models and practices. In fact, were it not so damned much work, we would have already invented an entirely new subfield of statistics – to be called Invariant Statistical Analysis (ISA). (Note: to the methodologically naïve, dependent invariables may appear to be indistinguishable from constants. More's the pity for them!) Since, however, this statistical subfield is likely to be without mathematical or social significance, we have decided to postpone this aspect of our research program until unreviewable federal funding becomes available.

Some interesting collateral work on invariant statistics has already been done by developmental geologists at our institute, concerned with articulation and growth processes in rocks. Researchers interested in this fascinating avenue of cutting-edge work should consult the most recent publication of Millicent Clooney and Symone Barnes (1977f).

Sample

Sampling is one of the most controversial aspects of organizational research. Not only is there massive controversy among researchers on issue of sample size, there ae also massive questions of the appropriate sampling frame: Random? Random, stratified by organization? Purposive? Large enough to establish statistical significance? Small enough to be convenient?

In this environment, the research committee controlling this study decided to use an innovative new technique termed The Mystery Sample. The essence of the mystery sample is this: The researchers decide when we've sampled enough cases to confirm our hypotheses, but don't reveal any details of when, where, how or how many cases were studied. We believe this to be the strongest possible form of protection of human subjects.

In a very instructive, ironic and reflexive situation, individual members of at least one institutional Human Subjects Review committee sought to block our use of this sample, but they encountered a "perfect storm" of objections: The chair of the committee objected that the sampling approach was innovative, and it was too soon to tell whether any of the suspected negative consequences would come to fruition. The vice chair of the committee objected that this was the first recorded instance of use of this approach to sampling, and it was impossible to generalize on a sample of one. Another senior member of the committee said the approach was simply too controversial for Human Subjects to intervene. "Who are we to say?" he asked. Finally, a fourth member of the HSR committee who wished to remain anonymous wrote in an unsigned note to the committee: "Whoa! This is way too broad a matter for this committee to tackle! We can't act until we know a great deal more about the subject."

Data Analysis

Testing of the above hypotheses readily confirmed the phenomena previously observed by Pendergast (1929) and Jorgenson (781) and are essentially consistent with the findings of Washington (1799), Adams (1856), Jefferson (1901), and every subsequent U.S. President on bureaucratic inaction. Our own data analysis is largely from local public bureaucracies and universities and tends to fall into several major categories: student faculty committees, meetings of faculty senators, where in one instance it was necessary to devise a special logarithmic scale in order to accommodate the data on the excitement theorem and "reports to the faculty" by administrative officers of the university, wherein measurement of the subject matter theorem was observed to be curvilinear in some instances and parabolic in others.

Discussion

Swallowtail's rather miniscule research notes (written entirely on the back of a single postage stamp) suggest absolutely nothing about his derivation of the four

propositions noted above. Independent investigation however, has established that at the time he formulated the time theorem, he was investigating the use of interagency committees for forestall decisions. One of his collaborators noted, for example, the following exchange between members of the interagency committee on Spanish-American relations in 1897:

> Speaker #1: "I think we've got to nip this war fever of Mr. Hearst's in the bud."
>
> Speaker #2: "Gentlemen, gentlemen. Let us not be precipitous. If we merely wait a few months, this whole war scare will blow over.

It is equally interesting that the following newspaper clipping, found in Swallowtail's desk drawer was related to the first hypothesis:

> Chicago - *December 1 1860*. Councilman Peter O-Brien moved today that the council table action on a resolution to require that cows kept within the city be hobbled for milking.
>
> "Boys," O'Brien is quoted as saying, "that fire at O'Herlehey's Saloon was a million to one shot. Now what's the use of shutting the barn door after the cow is gone, so to speak."

Analysis and Implications

It has been clear from the outset that, in all probability, Swallowtail's findings will be of interest to absolutely no one anywhere. Research on this topic has been done, however, and findings presented merely as a dodge by the authors to escape additional classroom or committee work, and that's it. Consequently, readers who wish to pursue similar strategies should do so on their own initiative. By all means do not contact the authors, since they have much more interesting things to do. Once this paper is published, we have no further interest in this topic, whatsoever.

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