

Hickson D J, Hinings C R, Lee C A, Schneck R E & Pennings J M.

A strategic contingencies' theory of intraorganizational power. *Admin. Sci. Quart.* 16:216-29, 1971.

[Organizational Analysis Res. Unit, Univ. Bradford Management Ctr., England; Industrial Admin. Res. Unit, Univ. Aston-in-Birmingham, England; Fac. Business Admin. and Commerce, Univ. Alberta, Canada; and Inst. Social Res., Univ. Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI]

Why do some internal sections or subunits (departments, divisions, and so on) of organizations have more say than others? A theory is presented that argues that such power results from a combination of capacity to cope with uncertainty, of nonsubstitutability, and of centrality, which provides control of contingencies that are strategic for other dependent activities. [The *SSCI*[®] indicates that this paper has been cited in over 260 publications.]

Power and Uncertainty in Organizations

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The research that resulted in the often-cited paper was the outcome of oil and tar sands in the plains and tundra of Western Canada, of thoughts in a basement in England, and of a footnote in an American textbook. The first gave natural wealth to the province of Alberta in Canada, from which a fine university was being continuously expanded in the modern city of Edmonton. Second, the thoughts in a basement of a semierelict, condemned office building in Birmingham in England had produced a program of research, primarily on the structures of organizations, by what became known as the Aston Group (named after the University of Aston), of which I was a member. This had begun to be published in several papers in the *Administrative Science Quarterly* in the 1960s. These papers drew attention at Alberta, prompting Charles Lee of the organizational behavior section in the Faculty of Business to write inviting me there.

His letter came out of the blue, a complete surprise. However, we agreed on a minimum of two years, 1968-1970, for me to attempt to set up a research team. It is a fitting coincidence that the main ensuing journal paper should become a *Citation Classic* just as I am returning to Alberta in a Visiting Chair, 20 years later.

At Alberta I joined Lee, a Texan; Rod Schneck, a true Albertan (both have continued at Alberta); Bob Hinings, from England (he, too, has returned to Alberta); and Hans Pennings, from Holland—a team of five. The footnote I mentioned determined what we did. It appeared on p. 175 of *Formal Organizations*¹ by Peter Blau and Dick Scott, the first textbook in organization theory/organizational sociology, which confirmed the coming of this then-new subject. It said that Michel Crozier in France was to publish a book (which became *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*)² suggesting that power accrues to those who can control areas of uncertainty. I proposed to Alberta that this idea be developed and tested.

The five of us evolved a textbook example of positivist research design. We examined published work and extracted ideas from David Mechanic and from Joan Woodward to add to that of Crozier. When we had a reasonably defined theory to explain power, we selected a sample of small breweries, and then packaging factories, whose departments would be an ideal testing ground—each had the same easily understood departmental structure. We designed multimethod data collection specifically directed to our purpose.³

It worked. In 22 months' actual working time, it produced clear results that were easy to explain and justify. This does not necessarily mean that positivism is the only workable methodology, or even the most reliable one, but it demonstrates that positivism is a good one.

The project succeeded also because resources were munificent. Indeed, it makes a provoking contrast with what happens under relative scarcity, a contrast that I have drawn by comparison with subsequent scarcity at Bradford.⁴ There were enough people and enough money. Yet there was a firm target finishing date at the end of two years. The project succeeded, too, because we seemed an optimal mix: Canadian, American, Dutch, and English, with academic origins in sociology, business policy, and organization theory, near enough to one another for sufficient agreement but far enough not to accept things without argument.

Why our lead theory paper has become a *Citation Classic* and is used in so many textbooks is hard to say, especially for me as an author. But I do have a personal opinion. It is that the paper draws together the intuitively obvious in a usable, readily comprehensible way. In social science there do not seem to be "discoveries." Rather the achievement is the expression of ideas that have been around anyway in a form that enables others to recognize and remember them better than before. This paper has something of that quality.

1. Blau P M & Scott W R. *Formal organizations: a comparative approach*. San Francisco, CA: Chandler, 1962. 312 p. (Cited 200 times.)
2. Crozier M. *The bureaucratic phenomenon*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964. 320 p. (Cited 800 times.)
3. Hinings C R, Hickson D J, Pennings J M & Schneck R E. Structural conditions of intraorganizational power. *Admin. Sci. Quart.* 19:22-44, 1974. (Cited 95 times.)
4. Hickson D J. Ruminations on munificence and scarcity in research. (Bryman A. ed.) *Doing research in organizations*. London: Routledge, 1988. p. 136-50.