

Weick K E. Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems.
Admin. Sci. Quart. 21:1-19, 1976.
[Cornell University, Ithaca, NY]

In place of the image that organizations are coupled through tight, dense linkages, it is proposed that elements are often tied together infrequently and loosely in the interest of self-determination, localized adaptation, sensing, and innovation. Implications for research are identified, using the educational organization as a case in point. [The *SSCI*® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 360 publications.]

Loose Coupling: Beyond the Metaphor

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This article actually started in 1974 when I published a paper¹ that criticized systems theorists for their tendency to treat interdependence as a constant rather than a variable. That observation happened to coincide with similar restlessness on the part of others (e.g., James G. March) that organization theory was beginning to portray the elements in organizations as tied together more determinantly than in fact they were. This distortion was crucial because it reified organizations and portrayed them as more unified, stable, and responsive than in fact they were. March persuaded the National Institute of Education (NIE) that this discrepancy between espoused theory and actual practice was serious enough that a workshop should be convened to think through alternative formulations. Thus, a diverse set of people gathered in La Jolla, California, on February 2, 1975, to explore the phrase "loosely coupled system" as a possible description of organizations they knew. As chairman of the workshop, it was my job to distill what we talked about into a report that could be used internally by NIE to decide what research funding, if any, they should initiate.

I was at Cornell at the time and my office happened to be directly across from Tom Lodahl, who was then editing *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Tom saw a copy of my report and asked if he could

publish it, and, since NIE had no objection, he printed it immediately as the lead article in the March 1976 issue. Thus, the true originators of this piece are March, who advised NIE to conduct a conference on the concept of loose coupling; Fritz Mulhauser of NIE, who asked me to chair that conference; the 10 people present, who worked hard to figure out what the idea meant; and Tom, who thought that other organizational scholars should come to grips with our version of the object of their studies.

This paper has had a strange pattern of use and citation since it was first published. It appeared in the organizational literature at roughly the same time as the ideas of population ecology, transaction costs, and resource dependence, yet it has generated more discussion and less research than any of those other three ideas. There are several possible explanations for this. The concept of loose coupling was grounded almost from the beginning in educational organizations, which are simultaneously unique, neglected, plentiful, and puzzling. The concept gave these organizations some distinctiveness and it did so by means of a deceptively simple bipolar notion that preserves, in one image, the opposition between autonomy (loose) and interdependence (coupling). This opposition lies at the heart of organizational theory, but its two halves are usually kept separate, either spatially (some organizations are mechanistic [coupled] while others are organic [loose]) or temporally (organizations are loose in the beginning but become coupled as they grow larger and older). Seldom considered was the possibility that organizations in fact were both loose and tight all the time. People apparently liked to consider this possibility but weren't sure what to do with it empirically.

Doug Orton and I² have just reviewed the diverse literature on loose coupling, and we conclude that, in their efforts to develop the concept, people have pushed harder to articulate cohesion mechanisms that hold loosely coupled systems together,³ moved away from equating looseness with ineffectiveness,⁴ and moved toward the idea that organizations are simultaneously loose and tight because they are coupled and decoupled on multiple dimensions.⁵ The image of loose coupling, however, needs to be reorganized around a central driving hypothesis if it is to attract research efforts similar to those that were marshaled around the other three organizational ideas that appeared around the same time.

1. Weick K E. Middle range theories of social systems. *Behav. Sci.* 19:357-67, 1974. (Cited 50 times.)
2. Orton J D & Weick K E. *Toward a theory of the loosely coupled system*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Division of Research, Graduate School of Administration, October 1988. 46 p. Working Paper #586.
3. Gamoran A & Dreeben R. Coupling and control in educational organizations. *Admin. Sci. Quart.* 31:612-32, 1986.
4. Perrow C. *Normal accidents: living with high-risk technologies*. New York: Basic, 1984. 386 p. (Cited 85 times.)
5. Firestone W A. The study of loose coupling: problems, progress, and prospects. *Res. Sociol. Educ. Socialization* 5:3-30, 1985.

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