

■ Research Paper

Uncovering System Teleology: A Case for Reading Unconscious Patterns of Purposive Intent in Organizations

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Contemporary organizations are teleological—purposive—structures, designed to fulfil myriad societal needs. The purposive efforts of any organization are shaped by knowledge. Organizational knowledge includes both conscious and unconscious dimensions. This paper argues that a similar duality applies to organizational teleology. Organizational behaviour unfolds in service to consciously understood teleological aims (such as corporate strategies and business plans) *and also* unconscious teleological aims (that are undesigned or emergent), which are subtler to detect. Said differently, organizational behaviour is always purposive. Many of the intentions driving organizational behaviour are publicly understood and sanctioned; others are less well understood and unsanctioned. To the degree that some purposive behaviour in organizations remains unconscious, it may detract resources from managerial objectives and confound organizational change efforts. Drawing from facets of systems theory, this paper briefly discusses collective, purposive, and patterned characteristics of unconscious behaviour that may help practitioners to detect and respond to it. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations are purposive knowledge structures. Each exists for a purpose, and their leaders seek to direct and organize workers' behaviour to serve that purpose. Leaders and managers also

gather and organize knowledge to guide in their objective-seeking endeavours. Increasingly, organizational knowledge seems an important ingredient to possess and harness in service to our objective-seeking goals. Said differently, organizations are teleological—they are purposive, intentional, goal-seeking human systems that rely on knowledge to inform their work.

Conventional wisdom suggests that we can better direct human behaviour toward organizational objectives by increasing our understanding

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of what workers know. However, framing our understanding of organizations as *structures of knowledge*, this conceptualization of organizational systems challenges such reasoning. To support this challenge, this paper argues that the dual structure of organizational knowledge—conscious and unconscious—informs both conscious and unconscious teleological behavioural patterns. I indicate some implications of the presence of unconscious behavioural patterns in organizational settings. Then, drawing from various systems theory concepts, I outline some characteristics of such patterns that may make them more readily identifiable. I discuss some of the difficulties involved in reading organizational patterns and conclude with some brief comments on the consequences of failing to develop this capacity.

ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND ORGANIZATIONAL TELEOLOGY: CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS PURPOSIVE BEHAVIOUR

A contemporary organization is typically comprised of a diverse array of individuals, assembled for their various 'knowledge worker' attributes. As such, the knowledge contained within an organizational system at any moment in time is considerable. We prize organizational knowledge as one of a firm's most valuable resources (Conner and Prahalad, 1996; Eisenhardt and Santos, 2001), because it enables us to develop and achieve organizational objectives. According to Reed and DeFillippi (1990), knowledge is key to an organization's competence, regardless of the nature of its products and services. In large part, then, business success is driven by what employees know, and how an organization mobilizes this knowledge. In fact, some scholars have argued that organizational knowledge is integral to the very definition of a firm (Foss, 1996a,b).

However, attempts to harness an organization's knowledge resources are fraught with difficulty. Organizational knowledge is notorious for its causal ambiguity and inimitability (Reed and DeFillippi, 1990). While a corporation

may possess considerable knowledge resources, the nature of much organizational knowledge makes this asset 'invisible' (Jacobson, 1992) even to the firm itself. Although the individuals who staff contemporary workplaces are increasingly hired for the complex skills they can bring in service to corporate objectives, organizational theorists increasingly recognize that the inherent attributes of such skills make it difficult to predict and control the behaviour of knowledge workers (Nelson and Winter, 1982; Reed and DeFillippi, 1990).

These difficulties in harnessing organizational knowledge have much to do with the dual structure of knowledge itself. Both individuals and organizations possess a dimension of conscious knowledge that is generally recognized and reportable. Such knowledge is explicit (Nonaka, 1994). Such knowledge also takes shape as espoused theories (Argyris and Schon, 1976)—those theories used by individuals to describe and justify their behaviour in organizational settings. The conscious dimension of knowledge represents its most tangible, recognizable dimension.

A more challenging dimension involves the tacit or implicit body of knowledge that often eludes the awareness and understanding of its carriers. Implicit knowledge is highly personal and deeply rooted in a person's commitment and involvement in specific contexts (Nonaka, 1994). While explicit knowledge finds expression in espoused theories, tacit knowledge is reflected in operational theories of action coined theories-in-use by Argyris and Schon (1976). These operational theories, or inner strategies for processing information and taking action, generally differ from individuals' espoused theories. Theories-in-use generally are unknown to their owners: they exist at the pre-rational, unconscious stage of cognition. The tantalizing challenge of identifying and mobilizing knowledge as a vitally important organizational resource is that much of what an organization knows is unrecognizable and inarticulable. As Polanyi (1966) has poetically said, 'We know more than we can tell'.

Knowledge is far more than a topic of abstract speculation. Knowledge informs outward

behaviour. The purposive activity of an organization is driven both by the articulable, explicit knowledge it possesses, and the deeply felt knowledge of specific circumstances that inform its participants' understanding of the world and their organization's place in it. As the name implies, theories-in-use are critically important determinants of purposive activity for both individuals and groups of individuals in governing behaviour: they exert normative pressure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and always take precedence over espoused theories. Theories-in-use and espoused theories lend important insight into the purposive behaviour of organizations, suggesting that the unrecognized or dimly understood private knowledge of participants may well have far greater impacts on a company's goal-oriented activity than the knowledge that is public both within and beyond the boundaries of the firm.

In short, individuals' reports of the goals driving corporate activity and the goals that actually do may be quite different. In Western economies, cultural pressure to rationalize behaviour tends to result—at both individual and organizational levels of analysis—in explanations of behaviour that understate or omit non-rational or personally held emotional influence (Astley and Van de Ven, 1983; Morgan, 1997). While scholars have long attributed this phenomenon to the guile felt to be inherent in human nature (Williamson, 1973), other views suggest that 'knowing more than we can tell' is another important factor.

What we understand of knowledge, then, paints a highly complex picture of the forces influencing goal-seeking behaviour in organizations. Organizational knowledge informs organizational goals. Purposiveness, intentionality, or teleology is considered to be the rationale or 'motor' (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995); and, using knowledge as a central tool, organizations are considered to be the settings in which directed activity causes the achievement of desired ends. The view that organizations are mechanisms through which deliberate goals are set and achieved has long driven our understanding that such goals are the explanation or cause of organizational behaviour (Wright, 1976).

Available knowledge, that is, knowledge consciously held by organizational participants, drives corporate goals, plans, and strategies. Goals, plans, and strategies are outward artifacts of a particular organization's teleology. However, Van de Ven and others who frame organizations as purposive goal-seeking human systems generally fail to note that human systems also display goal-directed *unconscious* behaviour. Knowledge of which we are unaware is also highly goal-directed. Organizations display teleological behaviour that is conscious—consensually understood—and unconscious (tacit, unrecognized, but purposive nonetheless).

Some examples may be useful here. Morgan (1997) has written about the scientific management contributions of Frederick Taylor to organizational scholarship and practice. Taylor is known for his controversial but influential system of 'scientific management' principles. His detailed analyses of work tasks through exhaustive time-and-motion studies resulted in highly regulated segmentation of work tasks, divisions of labour, and control over worker activities. Taylor vociferously defended his scientific management principles in the name of increased organizational efficiency. However, Morgan suggests that it was Frederick Taylor's relationship with his harsh, disciplinarian, and authoritative father that drove Taylor's obsession to develop meticulously controlled organizational environments in his adult life. According to Morgan, the organizational achievement of scientific management is the result of an individual's sustained, unconscious goal to redeem a childhood relationship with a difficult parent.

Unconscious goal-seeking in the organizational domain can operate at collective levels as well. Senge (1990) has written about collective dynamics that can entrain an entire organization into their rhythms. For example, he outlines the familiar story of an organization that develops a substantially improved technology for specific, advanced applications. The company discovers that this new technology can also be sold to vendors who care little about the unique potential of the invention. Because such vendors are plentiful and the organization's quarterly sales targets are pressing, sales staff focus their efforts

on selling to the readily available customers. Over time serving this easy market, the promising new technology becomes a commodity. It fails to develop loyal customers in the market segment that could have fully developed and exploited its potential, and the product falls prey to the price and margin pressures typical of commodity products. No organization in this familiar situation purposely intends to prevent itself from realizing fundamental long-term organizational gains. But, collectively, such organizations can develop proclivities to 'shift the burden' of their efforts from uncertain, longer-term efforts to short-term easy wins, reducing the potency and potential profitability of their products or services in so doing. Shifting the burden can become an unacknowledged objective that engages an entire corporation.

To reiterate, organizations are purposive knowledge systems. Knowledge has both conscious and unconscious elements. Similarly, organizational behaviour pursues both consciously recognized and unconsciously recognized goals. Certainly not all unconscious purposive behaviours in organizational contexts are counter-productive. However, awareness of unconscious patterns is an important facet of understanding and managing organizations effectively.

CHARACTERISTICS OF UNCONSCIOUS BEHAVIOUR IN ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

However, by definition, unconscious knowledge and behaviours are those of which we are unaware. What, then, can help us to discern unconscious teleologies in organizational settings? Drawing from systems literatures, this section briefly outlines three characteristics of such dynamics that may make them more readily identifiable. First, unconscious behaviour is patterned. Second, it operates in collective, coordinated ways. Third, it is organized around a purposive logic.

Unconscious behaviour is patterned. It operates in configurations that are persistent and enduring. In the scholarly realm, Mandelbrot (1983) coined the term fractal to describe the dynamic of self-similarity and scale-invariance found in the

behaviours of social systems ranging from commodity markets to the distribution of cities (Gleick, 1987). In organizational life, practitioners readily note the continual presence of apparently irrational and pernicious behaviours. Scott Adams humorously chronicles such patterns in his popular 'Dilbert' cartoons. In complex, contemporary workplaces facing almost constant states of turbulence and change, the presence of stable, repeating patterns operating beneath apparent chaos provides a view of coherence despite considerable flux.

Unconscious behaviour operates in collective, coordinated ways. Contemporary organizations are human systems. Maturana and Varela (1980) have theorized that such systems coalesce around a governing order. Chaos scholars suggest that evidence of this governing order exists in the self-organizing dynamics that act like a magnet to entrain the behaviour of system participants. Such dynamics are variously called *strange attractors* (Gleick, 1987), *archetypes* (Greenwood and Hinings, 1993), *systems archetypes* (Kim, 1992; Senge, 1990), *order parameters* (Greene, 1997), or *archetypal patterns* (Conforti, 1999), and are generally understood to be a dynamic intrinsic to complex systems. Further, such dynamics are unplanned. As such, in organizations they frequently remain undetected, although the coordinated patterns or behavioural themes revolving around a given archetype may be widespread (Senge, 1990).

Unconscious behaviour is purposive. It is oriented toward an internally coherent logic. The archetypes or order parameters that theoretically shape organizational behaviours possess an autonomy, an emergent, self-organizing life of their own, that has captured the interest of organizational theorists under labels such as *memes* (Dawkins, 1999), *deep structures* (Bowles, 1990), *group think* (Janis, 1983), or manifestations of a *collective unconscious* (Jung, 1959). Each of these phenomena presupposes connectedness between the psychological and physical worlds that are typically viewed as separate by Western thinkers.

To summarize, several theoretical perspectives suggest that unconscious behaviours operate in patterned, coordinated ways. They appear oriented toward expression of logics that operate

autonomously to the consciously designed objectives that are more easily visible and understood in organizational life. We might consider that organizations symbolically express unconscious logics in repeated daily behaviours that cannot be explained by an organization's publicly understood objectives. A call to reading unconscious organizational patterns is, in effect, a call to learn the unconscious behavioural 'language' that organizational systems 'speak'.

IMPLICATIONS OF UNCONSCIOUS BEHAVIOUR IN ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

Two notable theoretical implications flow from framing unconscious behavioural dynamics as patterned, collectively coordinated, and internally coherent. First, the persistently coordinated facet of such dynamics suggests a reframing of our understanding of 'organizational behaviour'. It suggests that not only human thoughts, affect, and interactions, *but also* non-human synchronistic events be considered grist for the mill when we attempt to interpret the organizational behaviour of a workplace (Peat, 1987). It suggests we draw on elements beyond those on official organization charts, drawing data from both human and non-human organizational occurrences that show evidence of the system behaving with a coherence—an *organized behaviour*—that hints at a governing logic at work within an organizational field. Second, the coherence or logic said to underlie such behaviour suggests an alternative explanation for unexpected corporate behaviour to the guile (Williamson, 1973), errors (Perrow, 1986), or simple irrationality that theorists have previously suggested. It suggests that organizational systems may inherently operate under the governance of myriad rationalities or logics that are autonomous to the intentions or normative expectations of individual system participants, but intrinsic to the organizational systems themselves.

At least three practical implications also flow from the coordinated, patterned unfolding of unacknowledged organizational goals. First, unconscious patterns can compete with a leader's

vision for an organization's future. Second, they might diffuse organizational resources that could be focused and directed toward consciously designed organizational objectives. Third, organizations entrained in an unconscious pattern may well be refractory to change: new change initiatives that do not take into consideration the unconscious teleologies presently driving organizational behaviours may well fail to take root.

DIFFICULTIES WITH READING UNCONSCIOUS ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS

The notion of 'systems thinking' arises from scholarly research and the work of interested systems practitioners. An innocuous term, this phrase, nonetheless, has many meanings within the management community (Jackson, 2000). The interdisciplinary heritage of systems theory influences one interpretation of systems thinking: the examination of ever-more comprehensive lists of variables influencing the behaviour of an entire system (Senge, 1996; Umbach, 2001) and the need to examine a diversity of perspectives within a system to gain more accurate insight into its workings (Glynn *et al.*, 2000). This approach focuses primarily on a system's *parts*. A second and rarer use of the term seeks to conceive of a system as a 'collective being' (Minati, 2001), examining the essential qualities of the entire system's interdependencies (Meen and Keough, 1992) at a given point in time. This intellectual strategy focuses primarily on a system's *whole*. Both forms of systems thinking attempt to engage directly with the complexity of the systems under study. And both approaches contribute significantly to the community of systems scholarship: to focus solely on parts of a system while overlooking what emerges at the level of the whole is as much a form of reductionism as focusing solely on the whole while overlooking the significance of particular parts (Troncale, 2001). Unconscious dynamics tend to envelop and entrain entire organizations. A focus on reading such patterns, therefore, is a form of systems thinking focusing on a system's whole.

Bateson (1987) has reflected that purpose determines what will come under inspection in any human system. As such, purposive consciousness acts as a filter, leading would-be pattern readers to avoid information that appears inconsistent with the destination or path an organization envisages. Teleology, or goal-seeking behaviour, is tightly bound to theorists' and practitioners' concepts of what organizations are and should be. While we have come to accept the autonomous purposeful activity of larger human systems (i.e. the economy or financial markets), we appear less willing to accept that corporations are similar collective entities that express intentionality to grow, contract, shift, or destabilize regardless of the conscious desires of any one manager.

At present, individuals interested in organizational pattern reading are organizational managers and scholars—people whose sense of competency as organizational actors derives from their practical experience and theoretical knowledge of how organizations should perform. Normative assumptions of how effective organizational behaviour *should* look are a pernicious impediment to discerning what logic *is* driving organizational behaviour. Accustomed to the stance of acting *on* organizational reality to reach or consciously understood objectives, it takes tremendous skill to identify and engage *with* persistent organizational behaviours that, to us, may appear patently irrational. When our purpose is to impose rational order on an organization, it can be a tremendous challenge even to detect ordering processes so foreign to those we intend, and to understand them in their own right.

Organizations are, fundamentally, human-made tools to achieve specific societal objectives. It is difficult enough to acknowledge at an abstract level that much of what occurs in organizations is oriented toward unrecognized objectives. It seems an even greater affront to acknowledge that, as managers of organizations, we ourselves can become personally entrained in self-organizing processes—processes we are part of but do not control. Western minds prefer to claim authorship for activity and behaviour in the mind of each individual.

The theories and empirical data substantiating the existence of archetypal patterns or strange attractors offer a differing perspective. As humans, we experience ourselves as the agents or originators of our thoughts, emotions, and decisions. The new sciences ask us to consider the provocative notion that many of our cognitive, emotive, and behavioural activities may originate from a collective agency possessed by each human system in which we live and work. Our organizations may be collective beings (Minati, 2001) with teleological intents that supercede our own.

Given our well-entrenched desires to exert rational control over organizations, and our common presumption that serious leadership or scholarly inquiry should furnish improvements to our ability to manage organizations (Knights, 1992; Mathews *et al.*, 1999), we are not well equipped to take a position of unwitting complicity in organizational patterns. It is humbling (and frequently unpopular) to consider that one's own ideas and behaviours may express a 'mind' (Jantsch, 1980) or influence other than my own (Pauli, 1955). The model of reality drawing the attention of organizational pattern readers sees human individuals as only one element of the systems in which they participate—an element only slightly able to comprehend (Banathy, 2001) or control (Conforti, 1999) the dynamics to which they contribute.

CAVEATS AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: ORGANIZATIONS IN SOCIETAL CONTEXT

Certain approaches to organizational study suggest that reality is structured in profoundly systemic ways (Lilienfeld, 1978), evidenced by human behaviour and organizational events, and supported by philosophical arguments that transpersonal patterns can orchestrate the activity of an entire human system. This view paints an intriguing picture of reality for those of us who work within organizations and carry responsibility for influencing organizational behaviour to fulfil corporate missions and mandates. If knowledge is increasingly viewed as a competitive advantage, we need to better

understand the knowledge embedded in our organizational systems. Indeed, contemporary theorists and management practitioners work diligently to unlock the intelligence that resides in individual human minds. While mounting evidence suggests that complex, largely unconscious, and collective intelligences may also drive organizational behaviour, these very characteristics present a considerable challenge to our ability to detect this system intelligence.

Many scholars hold that knowledge resides in individual employees, as a property of single humans (Walsh, 1995). Some members of the systems theory discipline have attracted sharp criticism for their contrasting view, that systems—collection of disparate, semi-autonomous individuals—are capable of unconsciously functioning with more or less unified intentionality. Scholars discuss this matter as the ‘problem of anthropomorphism’ (Laszlo, 1972a; Lipshitz, 2000). Systems scholar Ervin Laszlo (1972b, p. 980) has remarked, ‘One’s ordinary common sense balks at treating what appear to be merely associations between individual human beings as entities in themselves’. Psychologist William Sulis (1997) concurs: ‘We find it difficult to believe that a number of quasi independent interacting individuals can exhibit collective intelligence beyond hierarchical governance, but both human and nonhuman work exhibits [such] intelligence’. The organizational pattern reading proposed in this article builds upon this contentious cognitivist¹ view: ‘that knowledge is embedded everywhere in human systems’ (Lind and Lind, 2001), and that organizations themselves are ‘representations of knowledge that is embedded in their structure, hardware, technology, procedures, and culture’ (Lipshitz, 2000).

It seems plausible, then, that the entity of an organization could ‘know’ information about itself that differs from the knowledge consciously carried by individual participants in that system. Patterning behaviour, we can presume, reflects the system’s knowledge about the circumstances unfolding within and around it.

¹Cognitivism is a school of thought, originating in the latter half of the twentieth century, that ‘considers mind independent of the material form of the organism expressing it’ (Sulis, 1997, p. 35).

We can view the behaviour patterns that unfold in human systems as a means to discern the underlying logic or mind immanent in that system as a whole. Presumably, the ability to perceive unconscious organizational patterns could reveal previously unnoticed intelligence to inform management decision making or consultative interventions.

Why should unconscious behavioural patterns warrant our attention? Put differently, what are the consequences of not detecting unconscious behavioural patterns? At the 2001 conference of the International Society for the Systems Sciences, the assembled scholars and practitioners identified ‘managing complexity’ as the most significant challenge facing the systems theory community and humanity at large. Management theorists have long struggled with the complexity of organizational systems (Jackson, 2000; Richardson and Cilliers, 2001), and have in recent years turned to the emerging systems sciences of chaos and complexity to help them better understand organizational behaviour (Bausch, 2001; Lewin, 1999; Mitroff and Kilmann, 1978; Stacey, 1992, 1993, 1995). This author argues that managing complexity in organizational settings might fruitfully begin with the development of the capacity to see patterned, purposive logics in play. What we know of self-organization, strange attractors, and other discoveries of systems science does us little good unless we—organizational practitioners and theorists—begin to discern the subtle purposive order that operates unbidden amidst the apparent chaos of daily organizational life (Stacey, 1992).

Management scholars David Cooperrider and Jane Dutton have contended:

More than anywhere else, the world’s direction and future are being created in the context of human institutions and organizations... The significance, in many respects, of the relatively small number of decisions made by our nation-state leaders is pale in comparison to the billions of decisions made every day by members and leaders of such organizations (cited in Raufflet and Torre, 2001).

Given the historically unprecedented proliferation of organizations in contemporary society

(Pfeffer, 1998; Scott, 1998), it is imperative that we manage them as consciously as we can. If billions of daily conscious decisions influence the future of our world, many more billions of unrecognized decisions to collude with unexamined organizational objectives also influence that future. There are tremendous corporate and societal implications for leading organizations without considering the teleological drives or 'mind' evidenced in unconscious, collective organizational behaviour.

Given the increasingly urgent global challenges we face, it seems imperative for our future on this planet that we learn to operate more collaboratively with the complex systems in which we are embedded and engaged. Developing the capacity to read unconscious organizational behaviour patterns is a step in this direction. At our current evolutionary stage as a species, 'we have reached a stage of devolution which can wreak irrevocable damage both to humanity as well as the planet' (Banathy, 2001). Scholars, such as those assembled within the General Evolution Research Group and others, are keenly interested in how the human species can evolve to more effectively handle the complexities of the modern world. A key focus of much writing in this area involves a call to increased reflexivity. Instead of directing human agency toward the increasing ability to dominate natural and human systems, we need to develop our capacity to reflexively examine and consciously direct the organizational systems in which we are embedded.

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