

The Informal in the Formal of Organizations: The Organizational Structure in Sociological Analysis*

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Based on a sociological stance, this paper seeks to reflect on the formal and informal dimensions in the analysis of organizations. It focuses specifically on the organizational structure and its relationship with the social processes that shape the organizational dynamics. To fulfill this aim, this reflection discusses the concept of organizational structure as a pivotal element of the formal dimension of organizations, as well as its relevance as a key element of organizations. These elements make it unavoidable in any sociological analysis of organizations, whatever their nature, even in studies whose object is more directed to social dynamics and interactions. The results of this article allow concluding that there is heuristicity and, even, an indispensability to establish and analyze the relationship between the formal structure as a framework for the practices that take place in the organization and the existing concrete practices, which is often not simple to operationalize.

Keywords: Organizational Structure; Organization; Formal; Informal; Social Processes; Sociology of Organizations

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SOCIOLOGY is a pluriparadigmatic science (1). Also specifically about organizations, the sociological stance (2, 3) varies considerably according to the theoretical contributions mobilized for the construction of the object of study (4-7), which can be embodied, for example, in perspectives that favor bureaucratic, political and/or cultural elements.

In the analysis of any organization, as a coordinated collective unit, it is a challenge for the sociologist to recognize that

they are simultaneously structure and action. This creates specific dynamics that can always change over time. As Filleau and Marques-Ripoull (8) (pp.5) underline, “[...] the term ‘organization’ refers both to a state (a given entity) and to an action (the fact that a structure is organized to improve its effectiveness)”.

In this questioning, it is possible to find, within the context in which any organization operates, two critical axes: the inside and the outside of the organization, on the one hand; and the

formal and the informal in the organization, on the other hand (4). This paper seeks to discuss the concept of organizational structure and its importance in organizational operational analysis and even in the apprehension and understanding of social processes that take place within organizations.

In sum, based on a sociological stance, this paper aims to reflect on the formal and informal dimensions in the analysis of organizations, focusing specifically on the organizational structure and its relationship with the social processes that shape the organizational dynamics. To fulfill this aim, this reflection discusses the concept of organizational structure as a constituent element of the formal dimension of organizations, as well as its relevance as a central element of organizations, which makes it unavoidable in any sociological analysis of organizations, whatever their nature, even in studies whose object is more directed to social dynamics and interactions.

Organizational Structure The Formal Dimension

The definition of organizational structure goes far beyond the simple idea of the composition that characterizes any organization, albeit this element must be invoked, from the outset, as one of the characteristics of the organizational structure. Thus, the organizational structure regards, first and foremost, the composition and predicted and predefined relationships within an organization that are usually expressed through its organization chart. From this point of view, the organization chart, as a schematic representation of the organizational structure, provides valuable information for the sociologist by elucidating the network of hierarchical relationships between the different positions or functions performed in the whole organization.

Thus, when addressing the formal structure of organizations, the emphasis is placed on the set of means that the organization has to define different tasks and guarantee their necessary functional coordination (9). For Bernoux (10) (pp.121), “With more or less rigor, a company [or any other organization] should define each one’s functions, their relationships, the role of the authority, etc.: who does what, who commands whom, who conveys orders or communications to whom [...]”.

We can, therefore, ascertain that the main functions of the formal organizational structure are divided into three vectors: the definition of task assignment; the clarification of the authority relationships; and the definition of the mechanisms for activity coordination (11). This expected formal structure varies from one organization to another depending on several factors, such as, for example, its complexity, as well as the horizontal, vertical and diagonal levels of expected relationships that are established when the actors carry out their functions.

However, this formal dimension, while being necessary to apprehend, does not seem to be sufficient to account for the organization (12).

The informal dimension

Concurrently with the formal dimension, an informal dimension emerges, to a greater or lesser extent, which tends to establish itself over the duration of the organization and which concerns a set of relationships and communication channels. They shape a kind of real organization, in which, for example, the organiza-

tion chart is a framing element of the practices that actually exist in the organization, and which may escape, to a greater or lesser degree, from what has been previously planned and established. Thus, it becomes possible and necessary to distinguish, in analytical terms, “the formal, visible and official structure of the organization” from the “informal and hidden structure” (13) (pp.117), inasmuch that not even a high degree of structuring and formalization within an organization prevents the emergence of a “shadow” structure (13) (pp.117) (for further development, see the already classic work by Lapassade and Lourau (13)).

This informal component of the organizational structure is linked to the existence of unique forms of interaction between individuals who hold different positions or functions and groups within an organization, which may differ, to a greater or lesser extent, from the previously defined predictability of practices that are sought to establish and consolidate with, for example, the organization chart. Personal affinities and values, converging or diverging interests, aspirations and goals are some of the factors that tend to enable the emergence and consolidation of these informal channels of relationships and communication.

Bureaucracy, the organizational approach originally put forth by Max Weber, as an attempt to rationalize the structure through a high formalism of procedures, materialized in the definition, interpretation and application of written laws, is a good example of the impossibility, ultimately, to totally predict the functioning of any organization (2, 14-18). One of the main criticisms made to the bureaucratic model has to do with the central and exacerbated importance of rules and regulations – internal to the organization – that was ascribed to the rigidity of internal rules and regulations but that could tend to embody, contrary to the predicted, several “dysfunctions” of bureaucracy (19-20). As an example, as bureaucracy is based on the principle of impersonality in the relationship between employees – which derives from the position held rather than the specific person who performs it –, informal mechanisms of relationship and communication tend to emerge, with consequences that are neither anticipated nor possible to be anticipated.

From the previous argument, it may be affirmed that informality in structures is a major factor to consider in the sociological analysis of organizations, inserted in a social and economic context of high complexity (for a challenging perspective of Digital Economy, see Lyu, Chen, Ko, Kong and Irina (21)).

Organizational Structure and Sociological Analysis of Organizations

The concept of the formal structure has taken on, from the outset, a position of theoretical centrality within the classic approaches to organizations. A point that connects them and that stands out is the fact that each one of them advocates and seeks to attain the rationalization of this formal structure. In the case of Taylorism, the objective was to achieve the best way to perform each task; concerning the management theory, it involved making the organization’s members hierarchically accountable; and, regarding Weber’s proposal, the rationalization of the structure was made possible through the imposition of the bureaucratic model of organization (15). While the formal structure gains a conceptual emphasis on classical approaches, it is in no way abandoned in other theories that followed, although it underwent

changes in the emphasis ascribed to its role in organizational functioning (Cf. 15).

Concerning the informal dimension that emerges from the organizational structure, and without being exhaustive and remaining within the scope of this reflection, some of its theoretical roots lie with the School of Human Relations. Mayo and Lewin highlighted the importance of informal groups within organizations, as agents of human socialization and cooperation, demonstrating that the members of an organization often combine predictable actions in and by the organizational structure with actions that detach (to a greater or lesser degree) from officially predefined expectations (15).

Later, the organizations' political approach strongly reinforced the importance of the informal component by emphasizing the relevance of the (individual and collective) actors' strategies in the search to maintain, if possible, their power in the organization. It is in this sense that authors like Crozier and Friedberg emphasize that power, too, has a formal dimension, but also an informal dimension, which may lead to the fact that the power that comes from the hierarchical structure defined for the organization's functioning may not correspond to the real or informal power that is based on the relationships actually established during the functioning of the organization. The development of these "games of power" is conditioned by the official and formal rules of the organization and tend to develop in "zones of uncertainty", which correspond to informal fields in which each actor has higher room for maneuver to develop their strategies to increase their power (15) (pp.119).

Mintzberg (9) proposed a classification system for various types of formal structures (20), which he called "structural configurations", through a synthesis of parameters – such as the type of coordination, the key-component, the dominant strength, the element(s) holding power, and the types of tasks to perform (15) (pp.496-497). This system had essentially explanatory goals, to better understand the changes that took place in certain organizations and that resulted from elements such as the number of employees, the level of task specialization and complexity in terms of activity coordination (8). In summary, it is possible to find, in each of these different "organizational configurations", different degrees of structuring and formalization.

Bernoux (10) introduces another explanatory element: the representations of those responsible for how relationships between the members of the organization should work. In this sense, such representations end up contributing to the design of the organizations' structures, that is, their formal dimension, which allows the author in question to ascertain that "the organization is an ideology" (10) (pp.121). This idea may seem excessive, but it refers to the exercise of power within the organization, insofar that the configuration of the structure always points to a certain form of exercise of power and its legitimacy. And where can this legitimacy come from? In most modern organizations, such legitimacy has a rational-legal origin, in the Weberian sense, that is, it is based on the acknowledgement of the legality of the exercise of power associated with a higher hierarchical position in the organizational structure (10).

Following Cunha, Rego, Cunha and Cabral-Cardoso (11), we can condense in four the assumptions that justify the existence of formal structure in organizations. Firstly, the need for

the organization to attain goals; secondly, the fact that each organization has specific features; thirdly, the need to control uncertainty and ambiguity, using standards for this purpose; and fourthly, the understanding that specialization improves performance and, at the same time, the permanent need to coordinate activities and tasks (11). Considering the functions of the organizational structure in the sense of meeting these four principles, this formal structure may be considered, using an interesting image, as nothing more than the "skeleton" of the organization, from which the practices of the organization members develop.

However, and as Cunha, Rego, Cunha and Cabral-Cardoso (11) (pp.604) emphasize in a very proficient way, "[...] the structure can be considered the stage where the actions take place, but also the target of these actions". This logic of meaning inversion, which highlights this double role of the organizational structure (framing the actions but also capable of being reformulated by the members of the organization), brings out the informal dimension in the organization that results from strategies and practices that the social actors often adopt, for example, to change the formal design of the organization, the expected relationship between different positions, the division of functions and tasks, certain predefined rules of action, and defined forms of communication, among many others.

Thus, resuming the idea of organization as an ideology, it is safe to affirm that the different configurations of the organizational structure reveal specific forms of articulation and coordination of rational actions within organizations. However, it is insufficient to account, per se, for the richness and complexity of human relationships, which are substantiated in coordinated collective units that sociological analysis seeks to account for.

Conclusion

In a summary of the ideas highlighted in this reflection, to what extent, then, are organizational structures a significant element to take into account in the sociological research carried out on organizations of any nature and/or dimension?

The centrality of the organizational structure is justified by its own intrinsic importance. The analytical potential that makes the organizational structure fundamental in the study of any organization is related to the necessary link to be found between what can be called the formal organization (which provides predictability, among other elements, to the coordination of positions and activities to carry out, task assignments, and authority relationships) and the informal organization (how things and relationships between members of the organization actually materialize, and which can be very different from the predictability that the formal dimension tries to ascribe).

This potential is materialized by answering questions such as the exemplary illustrations suggested by Lapassade and Lourau as early as 1975: "Do informal divisions cover formal divisions? Do informal groups develop in the same way at all levels of the organization? Are there cases where 'leadership' is distributed among formal 'leaders', and others among informal ones?" (13) (pp.117). The answers to these and other questions are part of the complexity inherent in the organization (16, 22) and are paramount in the scientific analysis of the organizational phenomenon.

The results of this piece of research allow concluding that

there is heuristicity and, even, the need to establish and analyze the relationship between the formal structure as a framework for the practices that happen in the organization and the respective existing concrete practices, in order to apprehend the relationship of the organizational structures with the social processes that shape the dynamics in organizations, which is often not simple to operationalize.

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