

The Concept of Structure: A Useful Tool in Action Anthropology

Sarah Anne Robinson, Ph.D.
Retired, no affiliation
sarahar2@sbcglobal.net

ABSTRACT

A grasp of structure and function are essential in building mechanical models of social institutions. An example of model building is an idealized university that meets the social needs resulting from anomie, alienation and loneliness.

Keywords: Social structure, status, role, anomie, anomia, mechanical models of social institutions, university planning.

1. INTRODUCTION

One should have no illusions about setting to rights a whole society that is chronically anomic, but an understanding of social structure can offer guidance in dealing with cultural *anomie* that, in turn, can lead to widespread psychological *anomia* within a population, a serious problem in the world today.

2. DISCUSSION

Status is an abstract term designating the social place of one type of person in relation to another. Place in a network of social relationships is one of several ways to reckon status. When these are regularized, we refer to the network as a social structure.

The image of social structure as a multi-dimensional Tinker Toy is helpful. The rods are conduits along which prescribed rights and obligations run. The knob that joins certain rods can be labeled as a status. If time is considered as a dimension, one can see a very complex structure that shifts according to which rods, plugged into a node, are activated at any given moment.

Society develops an ascribed *role* for anyone in a given status. The role is an outline of how rights and obligations should be handled. Therefore roles are an aspect of culture. As in the theater, the cultural prescription may give a certain amount of leeway in playing the role. A discussion of character and organization is relevant; but, staying with the subject of status and role, these can be maintained indefinitely in a stable society where little change in circumstance takes place. If only a few circumstances change and they do not require complex, cultural shifts. They can be adapted to accommodate new requirements. But, if circumstances change quickly and drastically, the structure probably can't readjust to meet the new demands. One sees in contact situations, the first generation may make adaptations and accommodations, for they have known order. Subsequent generations may be faced with greater cultural conflict and be victimized by it. Ultimately, assimilation into the dominant culture perhaps takes place, but not necessarily. Rarely, a prophet emerges who leads by advocating a set of coherent guidelines. The success of these guidelines depends on their acceptability to all concerned.

The 20th Century has seen huge changes. America has been impacted by new technologies from the automobile and airplanes to television and the computer. We have lived through two World Wars plus a variety of undeclared wars. There have been profound changes in attitudes about mores and roles. Women received the right to vote. Civil rights became an issue. Not only has radical change taken place over the century; it is still occurring. It is little wonder that a nostalgic, even a reactionary movement like the Tea Party, has emerged. On a national level, America is currently anomic, and a remedy is needed. Building mechanical models using concepts of structure and function can provide one.

Eliminating prescribed rights and obligations or making them selective or introducing rival ones can hollow out a structural conduit. Labels for roles can linger in a culture, but they will become ambiguous if there is not a common understanding of the rights and obligations that hold two statuses in relation to each other. It is this breakdown, I think, that leads to the social state of anomie where predictability based on commonality is lost. It is stressful to live under such circumstances, and the resulting stress produces psychological symptoms referred to as anomia.

Sorting out a complex situation on a society-wide scale is difficult, if not impossible; but what is conceptually possible, and subject to experimentation, is the designing of institutions within the larger whole. We already create models. Think of the by-laws of a club or the flow chart of a corporation. These state the purpose or "mission" of the organization. The prescribed structure usually takes a hierarchical form with a president or chairman, a board of directors, then departments or committees with their own hierarchies. By-laws go on to assign and describe responsibilities. In other words, they stipulate roles. These models, however, are not the only arrangements possible. They can be too rigid and may not serve the needs of the participants or even the purpose of the organization. When the model doesn't work, people improvise, ignoring the by-laws and forging pathways of their own.

It is possible to look at even a complex organization and see it as a productive engine. Structure is the blueprint for a mechanical model. People are the fuel that makes the model operate. A planner must anticipate participants' behavior in given circumstances by looking at the self-interests of the probable occupants of each status. Thus, one can project how a mechanical model will operate as an actual organization. One also can see how to facilitate desired behavior and how to inhibit deviation from it.

In order to design an organization, a process can be used that requires simultaneous consideration of multiple factors. The process, nevertheless, has steps.

1) The first step is to determine an overarching purpose for the organization to be designed. Even a complex institution, if it is healthy, has such. For example, a university, which is a large scale and complicated organization, ideally, has an overarching purpose that can be stated as "learning". When purposes are numerous and in potential conflict, the institution cannot operate efficiently unless the conflicting operations are compartmentalized. The contemporary university presents an example of competing interests, but how to handle these is more a political question than one for the organizational planner.

2) The next step is to figure out the kinds of people that are going to have a stake in the operation of the organization. That should include those affected by its products as well as the operators within the organization. There may be many ways to reach desired ends, but the ones chosen should be consistent with the values of participants and take into consideration the consequences of the operation. Understanding the wants and needs of stakeholders determines what kind of character the organization should have. There are usually a number of possibilities. The choice among them helps to determine how the organization ought to be structured and, particularly, the roles that should be prescribed.

3) Now, determine operational objectives, considering both the functions to be performed and the desired character of the organization. At this point, one can use the Tinker Toy analogy and start building a structure, being careful that the parts do not interfere with each other.

Universities can be considered as an example for model building. Even though many have multiple missions that have become confusing, it is possible to build a "utopian" model based on the overarching purpose of learning. The model should be utopian only in the sense that it is experimental. It should be based in reality, on an analysis of stakeholders' needs.

During the 1960's, in the midst of the Viet Nam war and the Civil Rights movement, the effects of anomie became a notable force in America. Social symptoms included distrust and alienation as well as conformity, but the decade is noted for rebellion against authority. Some university administrations were literally under siege. This all came to an abrupt end after the "massacre" on Kent State's campus in the spring of 1970. Restlessness and confrontation gave way to anomia's flip-side, sullen resentfulness and a go-along-to-get-along attitude.

In the summer of 1969, I was hired as a consultant in planning a new senior college and university. After I left the staff a few months later, I put together my ideas in a master plan for a "utopian university" with an introductory analysis of the wants and needs I had gleaned from the literature and from conversations with students and fellow faculty. Many of the problems I addressed persist to the present because cultural confusion still exists. Therefore, the plan is both an historical artifact and an example in model building that is worth considering in present-day circumstances.

One of the reasons why the alma mater has lost loyalty and support on campus is that so many students -- and faculty -- feel themselves alienated from once-common goals and

organizations. *Alienation* can arise from an anomic situation, but it is not always linked with anomia. It is possible to have a perfectly clear and accurate grasp of the orderly manner in which one's universe operates and still not relate fully to it. For the alienated, personal freedom is vital. A college and even a graduate school must allow choice in both the curriculum and in career planning. Flexibility, therefore, is important, but so is informative guidance. This can be built into the system in both personal and impersonal ways, as we shall see later in laying out the plan for a utopian university.

Contrary to feelings of alienation, an issue identified by both graduate and undergraduate students, was isolation. They usually described this as *loneliness*. They wanted to identify with a group and to establish meaningful relationships with faculty and others from whom they could learn but with whom their relations were customarily superficial and tenuous.

The causes of anomia, alienation and loneliness are all interrelated and the effects similar in so many ways that the solutions to these problems should not be considered separately. Cultural fragmentation and confusion, the pace of one's happenstance world, and social detachment are all issues that must be dealt with together.

The university must satisfy the needs of its faculty at the same time it meets the needs of its students. Meeting student needs necessitates concessions from faculty members that can hamper their careers. There seems to be no way to avoid this impasse unless the rewards for dedicated teaching are made truly attractive and some sort of differential staffing system allows latitude in negotiating the kind, as well as the hours of teaching a faculty member contracts to do.

To the extent that the university cultivates inventiveness, curiosity, adaptability, and judgment in its personnel, it must accommodate individualism. At the same time, it must maintain some degree of operational integrity. The issue is: can individual accommodation and institutional cohesion both be obtained, or are they mutually incompatible? The answer is that cohesion can be produced around an institutional theme or "character" of *accommodation* if the operational process is designed to be flexible while facilitating the coordination of all the active parts. For anything as complex as a university, it is vital to coordinate all the sub-organizations developed to perform specific tasks. If it matters what the overall results of the institutional operation are, then it will matter how the component parts are coordinated. The way components are coordinated is basic in establishing the character of an organization. Character may be considered a byproduct of structuring to perform certain functions.

Adopting accommodation as the primary goal in characterizing the university does not change the rules of institutional planning. It simply narrows the structural possibilities that can produce the desired effect. The longer the list of objectives; the fewer the alternative means to achieve them. Complying with the chosen character of the organization limits possibilities still further.

One of the greatest concerns is providing mechanisms for constantly adjusting and readjusting the actions of personnel in order to keep the total operation coordinated. Cohesiveness is to a certain extent a matter of attitude. Cultivating a common concern among the university's personnel for maintaining accommodativeness can produce cohesion. An organization planned in this way offers enormous flexibility and adaptability.

It can accommodate a variety of programs and people. It can also be made to maximize the effectiveness of leadership while minimizing the threat that tyrannical powers might be exercised.

The first step in designing a model for a utopian university that accommodates all the conditions and needs the planner has identified is to list operational objectives. By the end of the 1960's, a consensus was developing concerning what a university should be like and how it should operate. Eight *operational objectives* were listed in the proposal for a utopian university:

- (1) reduce student stress;
- (2) integrate the university with the surrounding community;
- (3) protect academic freedom;
- (4) cultivate close and rewarding working relationships between faculty and students;
- (5) make and meet academic standards;
- (6) permit flexibility in the curriculum;
- (7) allow organizational individual initiative while avoiding the conflict and competition which usually result from overlapping spheres of influence; and, finally,
- (8) reassess periodically the objectives of the university and its personnel and the performance of its systems in order to keep them in adjustment with each other.

These were not ranked and all had subheadings. The next step was to fit the mechanisms for meeting the list in such a way that the various operations did not interfere with each other.

A flexible curriculum can be achieved by setting aside blocks of time during the day, the week, and the terms when certain types of activities can occur. The greatest flexibility can be gained by establishing basic components of short duration that then can be strung together in a variety of combinations.

In the 1969 proposal it was suggested that a computer lab be set up that could be used both by students and the administration. The recommended academic and governance systems would otherwise be too complex to work.

The first suggestion was a place where students could prepare for an advanced course with background material supplied by the instructor. If a one-hour module is adopted, credit for supplementary learning can easily be determined whether it is incorporated into a regular course or is treated as a separate component of a student's educational program. The same curricular flexibility that serves students also can serve faculty.

Computers could be used in the nomination process for an elaborate system of committees involving academic programs, personnel and governance. Both students and faculty could periodically stipulate their interests, qualifications and available time to serve in a particular capacity. Students who take on extracurricular responsibilities should get non-academic credit on their transcript. Faculty also should be rewarded in some way.

Interdisciplinary programs were becoming popular in the 1960's, so the proposal called for *program committees* to partially replace traditional departments. Faculty could be associated with one or more program committees. Each faculty member should also be involved in a *professional committee* with others in his or her particular field. This committee would

have much to say in hiring and tenure but also in staffing the academic programs.

In the 1960's, interdisciplinary courses were becoming popular, and faculty members from different departments were team teaching. The university, therefore, could be arranged both physically and organizationally into *clusters* based on a large program or several smaller, related ones. These would exist in lieu of traditional departments. Since clusters were to be academic centers, each one ought to be supplied with a secretary. The position should be only clerical, with limited administrative duties.

Student lockers and study space should be provided in each cluster, plus vending machines, lounge chairs and a conference room. The clusters should intentionally be designed to serve as a home base for both faculty and students and to be conducive to casual contact. This addresses both the problem of student feelings of isolation but also of their physical needs for a place to work and store their belongings when they are navigating classes.

The clusters could also serve as organizing units and as *forums*. A small committee could run each of these or the functions of both forum and academic operations could be combined under the direction of a single set of coordinators. The managerial group, or groups, should include students and foster collaboration.

Forums could be used as a direct link to various offices in the administration and as a general advisement source for students. Individual counseling also should be provided; but the forum, as here conceived, could provide a direct pipeline for information between cluster personnel and the registrar or other university administrators. Lectures and discussions on various topics of interest should be arranged in the forum. Anyone, at least in theory, should be allowed to attend these meetings if the event is of interest.

The forums ought not to be recognized as part of the university governance system, neither sending a representative to a general assembly nor voting as a body on an issue. In other words, they should not become political entities. However, forums could develop consensus through discussion about certain issues and then could make suggestions to appropriate bodies in the university.

The 1960 proposal called for at least two *convocations* in an academic year. Ideally, this would be a coming together of all categories of university personnel. The proposed convocation was considered as a corporate body. It was given power to set up special task forces for specific purposes and to appoint advisors on particular matters. Convocations were also allowed to assign new duties to already established university committees. However, besides acting as a clearinghouse for information and advice, the convocation's chief function was to prepare a ballot for a *referendum*. The referendum should be central to the utopian university's governance system. Eligibility to vote should be decided on the basis of the issues involved. Policy guidelines, rules, and the delegation of authority, should be decided by those directly affected. A computer would be essential in organizing such a referendum.

University committees are the only major part of the decision making structure to which the university community should

delegate powers to actually make policy choices. The proposal lists offices normally held in a university administration and then lists stakeholders that should be appointed to an advisory committee for each office. These committees would give advice only, but an administrator who did not heed that advice might feel public pressure. One drawback in implementing this proposal is that the administrative staff would often have to use the power of persuasion and could not rely solely on the authority of office.

It may seem as though university personnel would spend all their time in committee meetings, but in practice this should not be the case. Once the systems are instituted, they should operate without requiring a lot of time on the part of participants. Unless, that is, issues arise. If they do, then stakeholders should have a say in their resolution.

There is a growing demand in some quarters of contemporary American society for more participation in decision-making. The utopian university is a useful model; therefore, whether one

is considering a remedy for anomie or a solution to current popularly perceived problems in other types of institutions.

Unfortunately, the incident at Kent State University in 1970 had an impact on every campus in the United States. Only parts of the experimental model for a utopian university were chosen for implementation at the start-up senior college for which it was designed. The scheme was never tried as an integrated whole.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The original proposal was spelled out in much greater detail, but this example gives an idea of structural/functional model building. Such models can be put to the test. They can be treated as projections of what will happen under given circumstances. This is a valid scientific method. It is also enlightening for those who would help a muddled people find their way to a less stressful and more ordered existence.