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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1w7616hv

Journal
Academy of Management Review, 10(2)

ISSN
0363-7425

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Publication Date
1985-04-01

DOI
10.2307/257967

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

The Concept of "Coalition" in Organization Theory and Research[1]

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This paper provides an historical review of coalitions in organizations and presents key issues that must be confronted if research on coalitions is to contribute to an understanding of intraorganizational dynamics. Included are: an explicit definition of a coalition within an organization, consideration of how the organizational context differs from the contexts of previous coalition research, a specification of the process that leads to coalitions, and a discussion of the impact of coalitions.

The concept of "coalition" has been invoked in the organizational literature for at least the past 25 years (March & Simon, 1958; Thompson & McEwen, 1958). Indeed, the term has been used increasingly in recent articles and texts, and many probably regard it as a central concept in state-of-the-art thinking about organization theory/behavior. Although the seemingly greater frequency of use of the term coalition in the past five or so years probably is due to a number of factors, certainly one of the major reasons is the recent interest in viewing organizations from a political perspective. For this and other reasons, the concept of coalition appears to have wide intuitive and scientific appeal for use in analyzing internal organizational processes.

If one examines the empirical research literature on behavior within organizations, however, one is hard pressed to locate more than a handful (in fact, less than a handful) of studies — carefully designed or otherwise — on coalitions in organizations. It is remarkable, therefore, that a concept that has been established in the organizational literature for over two decades, and that enjoys current popularity as an analytical term, has not been the object of any substantial amount

of organizational research (excluding, of course, social psychological research on small groups). Furthermore, though the term has appeared rather often in recent articles and books, the literature reveals no *systematic* approach to how the term is used or should be used or how the concept can be empirically studied in organizational settings. No doubt this is due in part to the rather broad disparities that exist in the literature in the definition of the concept, resulting in great confusion as to whether it applies to collections of individuals, to collections of subgroups, or even to the entire organization. In addition, it is likely that research also has been hampered by the subtle, hidden, and sometimes even illicit nature of coalitions, which often makes them difficult to "find" in organizational settings. Regardless of the reasons, the multitude of research studies carried out in organizations on such concepts as motivation and leadership contrasts strikingly with the virtually complete absence of such studies on coalitions.

Given this situation, the present paper focuses on two main objectives: first, to provide an historical overview and critique of the use of the concept "coalition" in the organizational literature. This review is confined to the term as it applies to coalitions existing *inside* of organizations (in relation to the distribution of resources within organizations), and not to organizations

as partners in joint ventures or coalitions with other organizations. The second objective is to elucidate some of the key issues raised by this review pertaining to the use of the concept in the organizational context. The overall aim, then, is to highlight how the concept of coalition has been used to date in the literature and to stimulate a more concerted and empirically-based use in the future.

Historical Development of the Concept

The use of the concept of coalition has a brief, but diverse, history within organization theory. Early use of the concept focused on the conflicts inherent in pursuing individual, subgroup, and organizational goals with the consequent possibility of coalition formation. Later authors discussed the constraints that the organizational context might place on coalition formation. Most recently, coalitions have been used to explain how individual attempts at influence might be transformed into collective action within organizations. The perspectives taken by various authors attempting to address somewhat different problems have led to dissimilar uses of the term coalition in the organizational literature.

Coalitions and Multiple Goals

The idea that individuals may band together within organizations to form coalitions was first proposed in reaction to the assumption that organizations have simple well-defined goals. Early management theorists tended to ignore the existence of multiple, possibly conflicting, and ambiguous goals in organizations with the resulting potential for coalitional behavior. They assumed that the goals of the organization were clearly established (Gulick & Urwick, 1937; Weber, 1946). The work of Herbert Simon and his colleagues brought this assumption into question. It was March and Simon (1958), building upon Simon's work, who introduced the notion of possible conflict within the organization over purposes. However, although March and Simon in their 1958 book *Organizations* raised the issue of conflict within organizations and briefly discussed coalitions between organizations, they never mentioned coalitions *within* the organization.

Cyert and March—summarized in Cyert and March (1963) and March (1962)—were the first to focus specifically on coalitions within organizations. According to Cyert and March, coalitions composed of employees, managers, stockholders, and so on are shifting and unstable, but "over a specified (relatively brief) period of time we can identify the major coalition members; or, for a particular decision we can identify the major coalition members" (1963, p. 27). Thus, if shifting coalitions influence decisions, goal setting and problem solving processes are less stable, predictable, and well-defined than assumed by early management theorists. In addition, Cyert and March argue that different coalitions may pursue conflicting goals, and organizations may encompass a variety of possibly conflicting and inconsistent goals by sequentially pursuing them.

The outcomes of coalitional bargaining and conflict in Cyert and March's view are budgets, the allocation of functions, and organizational precedents. These coalitional outcomes stabilize the organization by providing payments to coalition members and are not subject to drastic revision after the formation of the organization, unless the organization undergoes a crisis (Cyert & March, 1963). When the economy is booming, excess resources can be secured and allocated to those who adjust their demands upward most rapidly; when environmental resources decline, then "slack" represents a reserve to be allocated by renewed bargaining among coalitional members. Thus, the slack created by imperfections in internal resource allocation provides a cushion that allows the organization to adjust coalitional payments to individual aspirations.

This view of organizational goal setting neatly avoids the twin problems of reifying the organization as an entity pursuing goals or treating it simply as an aggregation of individual preferences. On the other hand, this decision making model of organizations seems to abandon Simon's earlier insight that organizational position largely determines the information and resources available to members and thus, by implication, formal position gives some actors a great deal more leverage in bargaining situations than others. In Cyert and March's book, Williamson (1963) suggests that, under normal noncrisis conditions, management is the chief member of what later authors refer to as the "dominant coalition" in the organization. However, the larger implica-

tion — if management is dominant, then top management must be the most dominant and goals must then be set from the top — is not drawn out because it would conflict with the assumption that everyone is involved in the internal market for goals. Thus, Cyert and March imply that hierarchical position and vertical authority relationships are deemphasized in the goal setting process, and conflict is resolved by sequentially adapting to goals and distributing slack resources.

It is important to note that Cyert and March do not distinguish between the organization as *the* coalition and the organization as composed of multiple coalitions vying for dominance. They casually equate the firm and the coalition, yet do not abandon the idea of a number of coalitions within the firm: "We assume a set of coalition members, actual or potential. Whether these members are individuals or groups is unimportant. Some of the possible subsets drawn from this set are viable coalitions" (Cyert & March, 1963, p. 39). It may be argued that Cyert and March, who were attempting to develop a theory of goal formation, were not primarily interested in coalitional dynamics. Yet the use of the term, on the one hand, to mean subsets vying for control of the organization and to mean, on the other hand, the organization itself persists to this day and has hindered the theoretical development of the concept.

The use of the term as a surrogate for the organization is particularly troublesome. To say that a coalition exists would imply that there are some who are not members of this coalition. Coalitions, as they have been studied by political scientists and social psychologists, are temporary alliances among some subset of the involved parties. Yet Cyert and March (1963) and their followers use the term to include all who have a stake, all who gain some benefit from their participation in the organization. If the coalition includes all suppliers, customers, employees, and stockholders, the term becomes simply a label for the collection of all stakeholders, and it is robbed of its meaning. Readers are left with a vague notion of the organization as a negotiated order, which probably is preferable to the classic assumptions of a mandated order. For these reasons it is proposed here that the use of the term to label the collection of all organizational stakeholders be abandoned, and that its use be confined to a particular type of subset of organizational members to be defined below.

Constraints on Coalitions

James Thompson adopted Cyert and March's coalition concept, coining the term "dominant coalition" (1967, p. 130), and hypothesized that coalitions are constrained by the characteristics of the organization's technology and environment. Thus, the more sources of uncertainty or contingency generated by the organization's technology or environment, the more power bases that exist. As the sources of uncertainty or contingency grow, so does the number of coalition members.

Thompson provides some insight into the relationship between the organization's technology and environment as sources of power leading to coalitions. However, he fails to draw the connection between his discussion of coalitions and his propositions about technology and environment as sources of contingencies. Technology, for instance, poses coordination problems that require interdependence among units. It might be expected, then, although not hypothesized by Thompson, that interdependent units are more likely to interact and see the advantages of forming coalitions to divert resources to themselves. In other words, the specific variables that might lead to the process of coalition formation are lacking in Thompson's formulation. This may be because Thompson cast the first half of his book at the organizational level and the second half at the individual level, leaving the problem of theoretically integrating the two levels to other authors.

Coalitions and Influence Processes

After Thompson (1967), the concept of organizational coalition virtually disappears from the literature until the interest in political processes in organizations began to emerge about a decade later. This interest in political processes resulted in a focus on the integration of the organizational and individual levels, drawing on theoretical models of coalition building from social psychology and political science as well as from the works of Cyert and March (1963) and Thompson (1967). However, despite renewed interest in the concept, it continued to be used inconsistently.

Divergent Use of the Term. Many of those theorists interested in a political analysis of the processes by which individual preferences are translated into organizational policy and action mention coalitions, but they do not undertake a systematic exploration of the roles of coalitions in organizations (Bucher, 1970; Duncan, 1976; Farrell & Petersen, 1982; Hickson, Butler, Axelsson, & Wilson, 1978). For example, those with an interest in organizational effectiveness have borrowed Thompson's notion of the dominant coalition to characterize strategic decisionmaking in organizations. Goodman and Pennings suggest that:

> The dominant coalition comprises a direct and indirect "representation" or cross-section of horizontal constituencies (that is, subunits) and vertical constituencies (such as employees, management, owners, or stockholders) with different and possibly competing expectations. Consensus about the importance of various criteria of effectiveness is hypothesized to be a function of the weight that the various constituencies carry in the negotiated order we call organization (1977, p. 152).

There are two problems with this approach to defining dominant coalitions in organizations. First, it fails to address, as did Cyert and March (1963), the issue of whether the organization itself is a single coalition, or instead is composed of multiple coalitions of which one is dominant. Second, in practice it is difficult for researchers to measure the relative influence of the components of such an ill-defined group. So many researchers continue to define the dominant coalition as a cross-section of constituencies but, in fact, only measure the effectiveness expectations of top management (Cameron, 1978) or influential governing board directors (Pearce & DeNisi, 1983). Such a collection of individuals may well dominate policy making in the organization, but to call them a coalition is misleading. It lends an aura of conspiracy to the fulfillment of formal responsibilities.

Frequently the term coalition is used as a shorthand way to indicate assumptions that people are self-interested and that influence is not confined solely to hierarchical commands (Hickson et al., 1978; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1977). For example, Mintzberg (1983) recently used the term prominently in his analysis of power and organizations. He carefully defines the term coalition as he uses it, but his usage, following Cyert and March

(1963), is so broad that it can include any individuals or groups that may have an interest in organizational activity. For instance, he calls the owners, suppliers, clients, competitors, employee associations, the public, and government the "external coalition." This use of the term coalition as a label to evoke images of political brokering, rather than to refer to an empirically verifiable organizational feature, leaves the reader with an implicit assumption that coalitions are important without providing any explicit testable conceptualization.

Extension of Theories from Social Psychology and Political Science. In several organizational analyses, coalitional theory has been borrowed from the fields of social psychology and political science. (See Murnighan, 1978, for an extensive review of the social psychology and political science literature on coalitions.) In contrast to the organizational research, social psychological research on coalitions typically takes place in a controlled laboratory environment, usually with three-person groups. Social psychologists have tended to focus on the differing amounts of resources that members bring to the coalition. By creating experimental conditions in which members have been allocated varying amounts of resources, social psychologists have attempted to predict which members would form coalitions and how coalitions would divide the payoffs. The theories of coalition formation on which such research is based (Caplow, 1956; Gamson, 1961; Komorita & Chertkoff, 1973; Riker, 1962) assume that a given coalition has either a perfect or zero probability of winning and that the winnings are known and divisible.

Political science models of coalitions have focused on policies to be implemented by a legislative coalition, in contrast to the emphasis on immediate payoffs of the social psychology laboratory. Riker (1962) hypothesized that coalitional members will form the minimum size winning coalition in order to maximize policy outcomes for members. Others (Axelrod, 1970; Rosenthal, 1970) have suggested that members or parties with similar ideologies are most likely to form coalitions.

Within the literature on coalitions there is considerable debate about the validity and applicability of many of these propositions from social

psychology and political science. For example, Murnighan (1978) notes that social psychological research has focused primarily on triads. Because the number of possible outcomes of interaction is severely limited in the triad, the results of triad experiments lack a great deal of generalizability. Furthermore, Murnighan's (1978) review of empirical research found little support for Riker's (1962) prediction of minimum winning size coalitions, and only some limited support for the formation of coalitions among actors with similar ideologies in the legislative context.

Recently, Pfeffer (1981), and Bacharach and Lawler (1980), studying political processes in organizations, also have noted that propositions about coalitions from social psychology and political science may have only limited applicability in organizations. This may be true because organizational participants have both a history and a future together, are likely to be more interdependent, and are under a more extensive control system than either laboratory subjects or legislators.

Pfeffer's (1981) discussion of organizational coalitions builds on his earlier work (Pfeffer, 1977; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1977; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). He considers coalitions to consist of individuals building and mobilizing support among those who already agree on a certain outcome and suggests several important characteristics of such coalitions. For example, he hypothesizes that organizational coalitions, in contrast to legislative groups, usually will be larger than the minimum size necessary because consensus is important in organizations; organizational decisions are more often increasing sum, rather than zero sum, allowing the losers to get symbolic assurances and other side payments; and the greater the interdependence and the more scarce the resources, the greater the coalition activity. However, as he himself notes, his discussion is not intended to be comprehensive and suggests:

> What this means is that although the analysis of coalition formation and coalition behavior in organizations can start with ideas from political science, it will have to develop its own theory and empirical base because of the differences between organizational contexts and legislative and small-group contexts (1981, p. 157).

Bacharach and Lawler (1980) develop a detailed set of hypotheses concerning coalition formation in organizations. They differ from Pfeffer (1981) in their more abstract discussion and reliance on social psychological and political science theories. For example, much of their discussion centers on idealized "upper, middle, and lower hierarchical levels" bargaining as individual actors in a triad. However, these authors have not simply relied on previous models from social psychology and political science; they have adapted them to the organizational context by their focus on the process of bargaining, the activities of non-winning coalitions, and the effects of vertical authority on coalitions.

To summarize, this review of the development of the concept of coalitions in organizations indicates that it has been most often used by theorists and researchers focusing on *other* organizational topics. Cyert and March (1963) address the problem of organizational goal formation; Thompson (1967) is concerned with the ways in which organizations are constrained by choices of domain and technology; organizational effectiveness researchers (Goodman & Pennings, 1977) focus on methods to evaluate organizational performance; even Bacharach and Lawler (1980) and Pfeffer (1981), who have contributed much to the development of the concept, are concerned primarily with power and political processes in organizations. Hence, it is not surprising that the concept often has been treated in a superficial manner, used in several different ways, and applied without building on predecessors' works. These limitations are exacerbated by the virtual absence of empirical research on the concept. In fact, a search of the literature uncovered no studies designed to investigate the actual behavior or activities of coalitions as distinct entities in organizations.

Issues in the Study of Coalitions

As this review indicates, an analysis of coalitions will require theorists and researchers to confront several key issues. First, a more precise, operational definition of a coalition should guide research. Second, consideration of the unique features of the organizational context that distinguishes organizations from other social settings, such as laboratories and legislatures, is required. Third, in order to distinguish coalitions from

other types of organizational activity, it is necessary to explicate the process of coalition formation and maintenance. Finally, the impact of coalitional activity on individuals and the organization needs to be addressed.

Defining the Term Coalition

One of the most striking features of the literature on organizational coalitions is the variety of meanings this term has come to assume. These differences concern such fundamental issues as whether or not the participants are interest groups or individuals, whether participants must interact, and whether or not they must have the same goal for the coalition. The use of the term to mean "engineered agreements and alliances" (Astley, Axelsson, Butler, Hickson, & Wilson, 1980, quoted in Mintzberg, 1983, p. 27), as used by Bucher (1970), Bacharach and Lawler (1980), and Pfeffer (1981), can be distinguished from its use to refer to a collectivity with an interest or stake in some organizational action (Cyert & March, 1963; Goodman & Pennings, 1977; March, 1962; Mintzberg, 1983; Thompson, 1967). As noted above, the latter use is more a label than an empirically verifiable concept. The definition of coalition offered here is consistent with the former approach. A coalition can be characterized as: an interacting group of individuals, deliberately constructed, independent of the formal structure, lacking its own internal formal structure, consisting of mutually perceived membership, issue oriented, focused on a goal or goals external to the coalition, and requiring concerted member action. All eight of these defining characteristics must be present for a group to be considered a coalition.

Interacting Group. Coalitions are considered to consist of members who communicate with one another about coalition issue(s) and potential coalition action. This does not mean that all participants are required to be organizational members or to be present during coalition-related communications. However, this definition excludes individuals independently seeking to influence events; just because two actors want the same outcome does not mean that they have formed an alliance to orchestrate their actions.

Deliberately Constructed. Coalitions are explicitly created by their members for a specific pur-

pose. They can be distinguished from other informal groups by their self-conscious formation and design. This is consistent with the engineered alliance approach.

Independent of Formal Organization's Structure. A coalition is independent of formally designated groups such as departments, committees, or task forces. This does not mean that membership in coalitions and formally designated groups is necessarily mutually exclusive. In practice, it may sometimes be difficult to separate formally mandated responsibilities from coalitional objectives. In some organizations the distinction between the pursuit of assigned responsibilities and the pursuit of goals initiated by coalitions may be blurred; in other organizational situations, the distinction between coalitions and the formal structure may be more easily discerned. Furthermore, some coalitions subsequently may be formalized by upper levels of management by the nomination of their members to a committee to address the issues initially raised by the coalition. Once a group has been formally designated, it has a mandate to work toward the goals of the appointing authority; however, the group also may still function as a coalition in pursuit of its interests. It is clear that the formally designated structure of the organization may—but usually will not—coincide with a mapping of the network of coalitions within the organization.

Lack of Formal Internal Structure. Not only are coalitions independent of the formal structure of the organizations within which they are embedded, but they also lack their own formal structure. This has consequences for coalitional processes. Coalitions lack a major source of stability and permanency, that is, a role structure not dependent on the particular individuals involved. This leads to a typical characteristic of coalitions, namely, their temporary quality. Of course coalitions, like other informal groups, are likely to develop an informal role structure over time. Further, coalitions lack a hierarchy of formal, legitimate authority. Coalitional decision making and conflict resolution thus is much more dependent on attempts at informal influence among members.

Mutual Perception of Membership. Even though individual members may not have communicated directly with all other members, they should have

knowledge about who is, and who is not, a member of this alliance. This does not mean that membership must be completely unambiguous; the support of particular coalition partners may not be certain. In fact, it is probable that the structure of the coalition will involve a set of "core" members who are perceived as clearly "in," and a set of other individuals whose membership is in doubt to some degree (Boissevain, 1974). In effect, coalitions, as with other nonformal groups, are likely to have fuzzy boundaries. Nevertheless, some reasonable consensus about who is a member and whose commitment is questionable would be expected. This serves further to distinguish coalitions from individuals acting independently but toward the same goals.

Issue Oriented. Coalitions are formed to advance the purposes of their members. When their members cease to interact around these issues, the group no longer exists as a coalition, although the group may persist for purely social purposes. Individual members perceive common objectives for the *coalition*, but they may have quite divergent motives for coalition participation (Gamson, 1961). Although it is possible conceptually to distinguish between homogeneous and heterogeneous coalitions (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980), in practice the distinction may be less important as differences are reconciled sufficiently in order to take action as a coalition.

External Focus. By implication, the issue that the coalition addresses must be external to the coalition. It is assumed that coalitions form because they allow their members to exert more influence than they could as independent individuals. Therefore, the coalition forms to influence some external agent. Further, coalitions can be both proactive and reactive in their focus; they can originate proposals or actions, or they may organize in reaction to the proposals or actions of others.

Concerted Member Action. An integral part of the definition of coalitions is that they must act as a group, either through a group action—for example, a jointly signed memorandum—or through orchestrated member action—for example, dividing tasks and allocating them to individual members. The effect of coalitional membership can be as subtle as having one partner refrain from an action because another partner has done it. Group action is a fundamental defining characteristic of coalitions that distinguishes them from purely social or reference groups that might commiserate together about common problems. If members never take joint or orchestrated actions they cannot be considered a coalition.

Coalitions, according to the above set of defining characteristics, share some features with other types of groups but can be identified as separate entities by their particular constellation of features. Some characteristics are shared by informal groups, that is, the informal group has interacting members independent of formal organizational structure, lacks an internal formal structure, and has mutual perception of membership. However, by this definition, an informal group that becomes issue oriented, develops an external focus, becomes more self-reflective about membership thus deliberately constructed, and takes concerted action would become a coalition. Similarly, some characteristics are shared by interest groups within the organization. Such groups are independent of the organization's formal structure and lack any internal formal structure. Further, organizational members may have a mutual perception of membership, be issue oriented, and have an external focus—for example, women managers in the corporation. However, if the members with common interests fail to interact around issues, do not deliberately construct a group, and forego concerted member action, the members have not become a coalition. Finally, a labor union within an organization is similar to a coalition, but differs in important respects. A labor union is a deliberately constructed interacting group, independent of the host organization's formal structure. Furthermore, the union members have a mutual perception of membership, an issue orientation, and an external focus that leads to concerted member action. Nevertheless, the role of a labor union is formally recognized by the organization; also, the union possesses its own formal internal structure.

The important, implicit characteristic of coalitions that make them interesting, but at the same time illusive, is their attempts to operate in a concerted manner outside of the formally constructed, legitimated structure. Because coalitions rely more on emergent social interaction rather than formally prescribed rules to define member-

ship, the boundaries may be fuzzy and ill-defined. Further, lacking formal rules and structures, and engaging in processes that may be considered illegitimate by other organizational members, the existence of coalitions is likely to be temporary. Thus, the proposed definition is an attempt to develop understanding of a temporary group phenomenon with often ill-defined membership boundaries. This definition, by offering a set of characteristics that assist in the identification of the phenomenon, represents an attempt to make coalitions more visible to researchers.

The proposed definition focuses on the ongoing interactions of collectivities and thus it is necessary to consider the activity in which the group is engaged over time. An emphasis on interaction over time suggests that the antecedents and the processes of coalition formation within the organizational context are important in identifying coalitions and determining their impacts on the organization.

An Organization as the Context for Coalitions

An organization differs in significant ways from other social settings. For this reason, generalizations about coalition formation derived from observations in these settings may not be highly applicable to organizational behavior. The organizational context is dissimilar in several ways. First, knowledge often is imperfect in the organization. As previously discussed, membership may be somewhat ambiguous. In addition, knowledge of whether payoffs clearly lead to winners and losers, as in laboratory zero-sum games, is not always available in organizations. Furthermore, information on whether the coalition is achieving its goals may be ambiguous, leading coalition members to continue pursuing unsuccessful courses of action.

Second, in contrast to the laboratory, organization members have a past and future together. Knowledge of past actions of other members may allow more accurate prediction of behavior in a given situation. In addition, knowing that other participants will continue to be potential allies or adversaries for the foreseeable future may encourage compromise, dampening of conflict, and trading off of resources. Thus, compared to the laboratory, coalitional participants in organizations may have less precise information about the situation, particularly in terms of the consequences of their actions, but more knowledge of other organizational participants. This makes it more difficult to predict the "minimum winning coalition" or the optimum arrangement of coalition partners.

In contrast to the laboratory or the legislative arena, the organization provides a particular framework for interaction, resource distribution, and decision making through the formal, hierarchical assignment of tasks, authority, and responsibility. This hierarchical framework usually is given rather than created by the participants, suggesting that a certain somewhat arbitrary set of interactions will be imposed on the participants. These essentially nonvoluntary interactions may affect the likelihood of forming coalitions. The hierarchical arrangement of positions also implies that the organization bestows more power, information, resources, control of sanctions, and authority on the more highly placed members. Attempts to enhance or subvert this formal allocation of power through coalition formation may be perceived as illegitimate and threatening to formal arrangements of positions. This is in marked contrast to the legislative arena or laboratory in which participants are encouraged and rewarded for coalition formation and power brokering.

Coalitional Processes

Consideration of the organizational context helps to distinguish coalitions from other forms of political processes. Specific aspects of the context can become antecedent conditions that facilitate the formation of coalitions. These antecedent conditions do not directly result in the immediate formation of coalitions. Instead, individual activity can be expected to develop into collective action through a series of stages. Once formed, coalitions may continue, disband, or be transformed into a formally recognized committee, task force, or organizational unit.

The Antecedents of Coalition Formation. Before potential coalition participants can form a coalition they need to perceive or to become aware of two things: they must perceive an issue or issues that require attention, and they have to believe that they can form a successful coalition. Therefore, an understanding of the antecedent

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conditions to coalition formation needs to address both how issues are recognized by potential participants and the kinds of circumstances under which coalition formation is facilitated.

The distribution of resources is an issue likely to generate coalitional activity (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974; White, 1974). If resources are scarce, individuals are likely to form coalitions to divert resources to themselves. On the other hand, it may be that the tightness or slackness of resources is not, by itself, a strong determinant of coalition formation. It seems more likely, however, that drastic *changes* in resources may cause the creation of coalitions and the rearrangement of coalitional allies. As Cyert and March (1963) suggested, organizational structures and policies reflect the previous outcomes of coalitional bargaining. Therefore, changing resources can create opportunities for renewed coalitional activity:

> Hypothesis 1: A major change — an increase, decrease, or reallocation in resources — increases the likelihood of coalition formation.

Similarly, issues may be made salient to potential coalition participants when they perceive a relatively unfavorable or inequitable contrast between their own resources and those of others. Equity theorists have long asserted that perceived inequity produces uncomfortable dissonance, which individuals are motivated to reduce. Clearly, one way to reduce experienced inequity is to form a coalition to obtain a larger resource allocation. For example, Van Velzen (1973) has suggested that "leveling coalitions" often form to counter the actions of another powerful group or individual. Thus:

> Hypothesis 2: Unfavorable contrasts between one's own position relative to comparable others will increase the likelihood of coalition formation.

Opportunities for coalition formation depend on the possibility of member interaction, which in turn is facilitated by the freedom of movement of potential participants. Bacharach and Lawler (1980) have argued that coalition mobilization is more difficult when communication among potential participants is infrequent. Certainly, there must be sufficient opportunity for interaction in order for shared perception of issues and tactics to emerge:

> Hypothesis 3: The greater the opportunities for member interaction, the greater the likelihood of coalition formation.

Those who have more discretion in carrying out their job responsibilities would be expected to have more opportunity to participate in coalitional activity. Those whose work activities are rigidly monitored or controlled would be less likely to interact with those outside their immediate work group and thus would be less able to devote working time to the pursuit of group activities independent of formal responsibilities. For instance, Bacharach and Lawler (1980) and others have suggested that the amount of centralized control or discretion delegated to subordinates is likely to affect the probability of coalition formation. Individuals with less discretion would have difficulty forming such alliances except through after-hours activities in more formal groups such as labor unions. Therefore, more extensive coalition activity would be expected among those with broad job discretion:

> Hypothesis 4: The more discretion members have in carrying out their job responsibilities, the greater the likelihood that they will participate in coalitions.

The Development of Coalitions. There are several distinct steps between the perception of common issues and joint action. Many authors have speculated on how groups form in general, usually concentrating on the details of the interactions within groups that lead to the development and maintenance of norms, roles, and so on, within the group (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). It seems safe to assume that coalitions exhibit these same internal group processes. However, an emphasis on the coalition as embedded in the organizational context leads to consideration of the external as well as internal pressure that promote coalition formation, maintenance, and demise.

An hypothesized series of steps that may lead to different categories of coalitional behavior in organizations is given in Figure 1. Antecedent conditions produce "latent coalitions." These are not true coalitions but combinations of organizational participants with common interests who may interact around work-related issues and provide a potential pool of coalition members. Empirically, it should be possible to identify areas of the organization prone to latent coalitions on the basis of hierarchical position, work flow, and environmental conditions. As suggested by the previous hypotheses, opportunities for interac-

Figure 1
The Process of Coalition Development
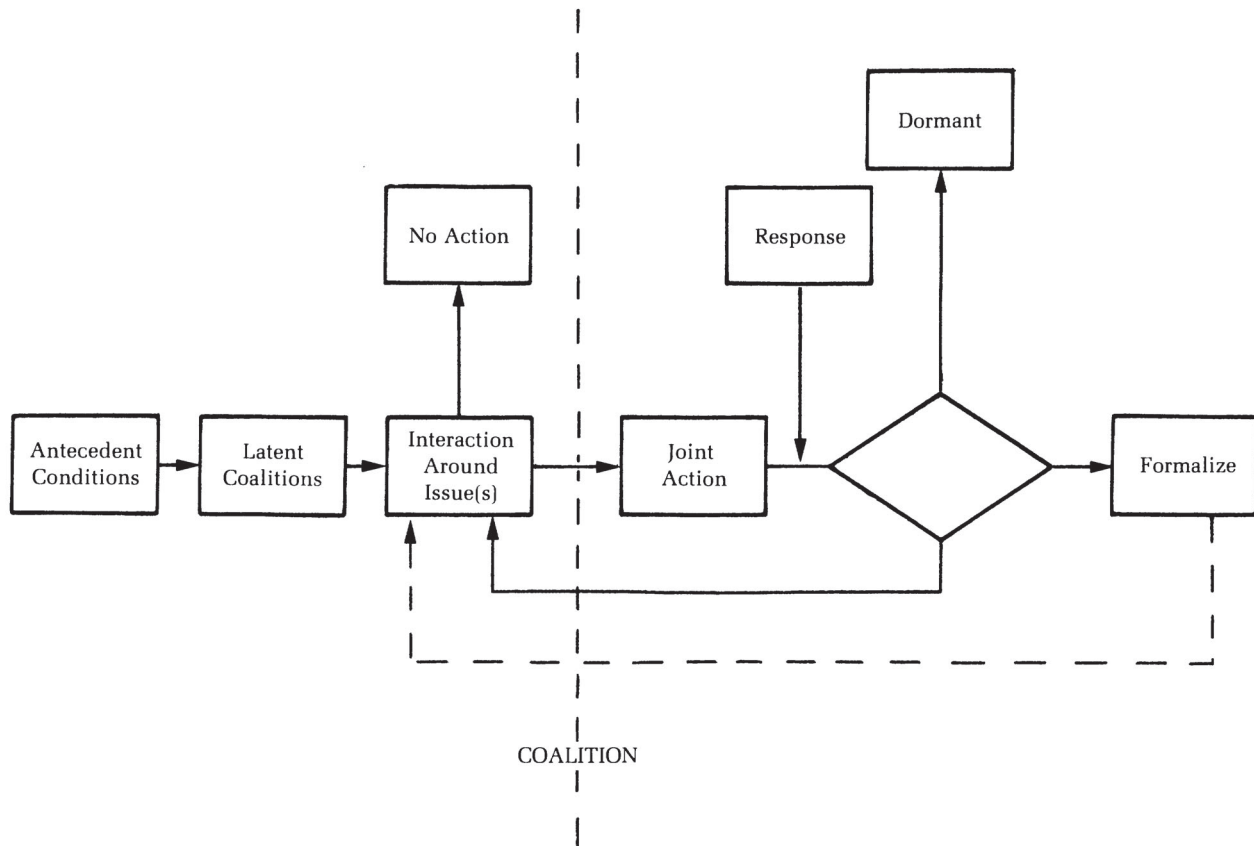
tion may lead to coalition formation. Some research has been done using sociometric techniques to identify networks of interaction within the organization (Fombrun, 1982; Tichy, Tushman, & Fombrun 1979), but these studies have not emphasized how the organizational context may lead to joint actions.

Once organizational members perceive their common interests and begin to discuss issues, they have taken a first step towards coalition formation. At this stage, however, they may fail to take joint action. On the other hand, they may take the important step of joint action and thereby meet the definition of a coalition. This collective action invokes a response. At this point, several outcomes are possible. First, the coalition may be encouraged by its successes or made more determined by its failures and persist in acting

over time. As a second alternative, whether or not the action was successful, the coalition may disband, and thus would be considered a "dormant coalition." That is, the former members, now experienced in interaction, could probably mobilize to take joint action again with less effort than members of latent coalitions who have never taken concerted action. These dormant coalitions illustrate the fact that participants have a past as well as a future together, and any predictions of coalition activity will have to consider past interactions. Accordingly:

Hypothesis 5: Individuals with previous experience in a specific coalition are more likely to form a new coalition (i.e., revive a former coalition) than individuals not previously in a coalition.

Impacts of Coalitions. If a coalition does not disband and go into a dormant state it will per-

sist in actions over time, which can produce a variety of possible outcomes or impacts. However, several basic features of coalitions make the task of assessing their impacts inherently difficult. That coalitions are independent of the formal hierarchical structure and thus are of questionable legitimacy provides a considerable challenge for researchers investigating the effects of coalitions on organizations and their members. Ambiguity surrounding their goals and their side payments is an additional complication. Despite these basic obstacles, it is possible nevertheless to outline briefly some of the major types of coalition impacts.

First, coalitions can have an impact on the attitudes and behavior of individual organization members. The existence of coalitions should sharpen the salience of certain issues for both members and nonmembers. Coalitions, especially when they are visible, are likely to make both their own members and nonmembers more aware of the degree and extent of coalescence of opinion for and against a particular issue or issues. This suggests:

Hypothesis 6: The greater the visibility of a coalition, the more salient its issue(s) becomes for both members and nonmembers.

Consistent with the above, to the extent that coalitions become more visible and obvious to noncoalitional members there are likely to be impacts on these latter individuals. Sharpening of issues raised by a coalition increases the probability that *others* will examine their own positions as being either for or against the position of the coalition. This in turn could lead some of the noncoalition members to form new informal groups or coalitions in reaction to the focal coalition. Thus:

Hypothesis 7A: The greater the visibility of a focal coalition, the greater the probability that one or more other coalitions will develop in response.

The tendency for other coalitions to form in response to the activities of a visible coalition is enhanced by other variables. One such variable is the salience or importance of the issue raised by the focal coalition to those organizational members outside of that coalition. In effect, high issue salience would "multiply" the effects of coalitional visibility. Hence:

Hypothesis 7B: The more salient an issue raised

by a visible focal coalition is to noncoalition members, the greater the probability that one or more coalitions will develop in response.

It also would be expected that the greater the extent to which a salient issue is forced or pursued by a visible coalition, the less others can avoid addressing that issue. Therefore, we would predict:

Hypothesis 7C: The more a salient issue is pursued or forced by a visible focal coalition, the greater the probability that one or more coalitions will develop in response.

In addition to their effects on individuals and interest groups, coalitions also can affect the formal organization. First, coalition activity may alter resource allocations (Cyert & March, 1963). This result is often presumed to be one of the major goals of a coalition and is one of the most important potential effects of coalitional activity in terms of the magnitude of impact. A second category of organizational effects would be those on the formal structure and prescribed functions. Potentially, coalitions can bring about such organizational reactions as the imposition of formal controls on coalitional behavior (i.e., attempts to eliminate coalitions), the cooptation of coalitional activities into the mainstream of organizational activities, or even the legitimization of formerly informal (unrecognized by the formal hierarchy) coalitions into the formal structure of the organization. This suggests:

Hypothesis 8: The more visible the coalition becomes (i.e., the more obvious that an issue-oriented group exists independent of the formal structure), the more likely the organization will take action regarding the coalition — either to counteract it or to formalize it.

The potential impacts of coalitions can be thought of as a continuum ranging from reactions of the organization that in some way counter or conquer the coalitions to reactions by the organization (e.g., reorganizing or restructuring the organization) in which the coalition itself prevails and it is the organization that changes. Potentially, the most serious of all coalition impacts on organizations would be the alteration of fundamental organizational goals (Cyert & March, 1963). Present research evidence is inadequate to gauge how frequently this latter type of impact occurs or the conditions under which it is most likely to take place.

Conclusions

Despite the widespread use of the term coalition, it is not clear how the concept has yet contributed anything new to an understanding of organizational processes. The present discussion is intended to begin the conceptual development necessary to conduct empirical research on coalitions. For example, research might profitably focus on how the two forms of influence, the formal hierarchy and coalitions, interact: under what circumstances are the forms mutually supportive or adversarial, or do they function in some other combination? Research on coalitions also must build on the distinction between them and other forms of political activity in organizations. Coalitions differ from other forms of informal political influence by their greater "organization." They are alliances of members uniting to achieve a common objective. It is precisely this organized quality — albeit emergent — that makes coalitions so powerful and so potentially threatening to noncoalitional members and to the formal authority system. Thus, research that ignores this quality of coalitions and instead simply labels as a coalition those who regularly exert influence, whether or not they purposefully interact or are pursuing mutually agreed upon objectives, offers little information about the problems of building and maintaining successful alliances within organizations. It would be naive to assume that research on these fluid, suspect groupings will ever be simple. Yet it is clear that systematic research aimed at coalitions is necessary if the field is to move beyond its present muddled but frequent use of the term.

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