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This book presents a unified deductive model of organizations based on the social systems paradigm presented in the senior author's The Logic of Social Systems (Kuhn, 1974). The manuscript was close to completion before Alfred Kuhn's death. Robert Beam finished it, writing the final chapter on applications. The authors address the long-standing complaint that organization theory is fragmented and disorganized because attempts to build a coordinated structure for it have used the social systems approach. In the preface Kuhn states that this book's contribution will not come from new organization theory but "from a substantial rearrangement that displays greater connectedness among the pieces" (p. xv). The authors have succeeded in producing a coherent, genuinely unified set of principles to explain such organizational features as decision making, power, formal structure, authority, and the role of informal groupings in organizations. That this formidable task was accomplished with a clear, concise, and level-headed presentation of social systems theory is a truly important contribution. Yet, I suspect that this unified perspective probably will have only limited appeal to students of organization; although it organizes several theoretical approaches, it makes only a modest substantive contribution.

The authors themselves acknowledge that many scholars simply do not value formal deductive modeling. Kuhn distinguishes between those who believe that solid social science can come only from a concentration on what is "knowable," with its emphasis on logical deduction and formal models, and those who love the loose, many variable complexity of particular situations. He symbolizes these contrasts as the differences between the interests of students of physics and of the Romance languages. Those of us who abhor the sloppiness of our so-called theories and are embarrassed by the state of our "science" will welcome this book as a genuinely important contribution to hard thinking. However, most of us probably were attracted to this very applied branch of the social sciences precisely because we are endlessly fascinated by the messiness of real organizations. Kuhn notes that these really are differences in faith, and so the large number of nonbelievers are not likely to become enthusiastic about this formal model.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I the unified social science concepts developed in The Logic of Social Systems (Kuhn, 1974) are presented. The formal exhaustive deduction in the former volume is shortened here. The model rests on three basics—characteristics that all goal-oriented systems must contain. Such systems must acquire information about their environments, accomplished by the detector function. They must have a preference or inner tendency, which is the selector function. Finally, they must have the capacity to respond or act—the effector function. Based on this elegant trichotomy, an elaborate formal model of social life is developed. This material is concisely and clearly presented, with the welcome relief of concrete examples to illustrate the concepts. To cite a demonstration of how the three basics can be applied to practical problems:

Why does Sally Lopez behave the way she does? Try to learn her detector, selector, and effector states—especially the first two. That is, how does she perceive the situations she faces, and what goals or values does she have regarding them? (1974, p. 16)

As clear as this presentation is, it nonetheless is lengthy and detailed. As in other presentations of systems theory—the reader is introduced to so many terms and definitions that it is a bit like reading a
dictionary. It is difficult to understand how social systems theory can be characterized as elegant and simple when readers must traverse 300 pages of terms and definitions. This particular application of systems theory to organizations is clear and precise, but then so are most dictionaries.

Part 2 (Chapters 7 to 12) develops the model’s implications for organizations. The development is tight, clearly presented, and logically coherent. Chapters 7 through 9 contain the unifying contribution of the book, integrating the work of Barnard, Simon, Blau and Scott, and many others into the formal model.

In the final three chapters the model is applied to the management of large-scale complex organizations (Chapter 10), informal groupings in organizations (Chapter 11), and the United States’ lagging productivity (Chapter 12).

In Chapter 10 the model, which was developed using sample structures, is applied to more complex, dynamic large-scale organizations. Unfortunately, the careful deductive logic that characterized the previous chapters is dropped. Based on a simple assertion of bounded rationality, decentralization is recommended to managers of such organizations. Top management is assumed to be unable to obtain sufficient information for actual management, and so it engages in the “metamanagement” tasks of managing the process of managing. This chapter fails because it deviates from the formal modeling of previous chapters, and it does not compensate with empirical grounding. The generalizations to large organizations are not derived from the model, and the careful definitions that characterized earlier chapters are abandoned. What is metamanagement supposed to mean? Observations of what managers actually do would have indicated that one of the ways top managements of large organizations cope is to rely on more efficient symbols to convey information—symbols such as financial statements. This chapter concludes with suggestions that the management of large organizations is “evolving” from the “centrally controlled organism-form” to a “biological ecology-form.” Such assertions demonstrate a greater attachment to scientistic analogies than to realism.

Chapter 11 is an original treatment of the role of informal groupings in organizations. In this chapter treatments of such concepts as leadership, socialization, and conformity are refreshing. Using the basic model, informal organizational relationships are seen to be more relaxed versions of formal relationships, as a necessity for the accomplishment of the details that the formal system can never fully accommodate. This chapter provides an interesting perspective and thought-provoking derivation from the formal model.

In the final chapter, the model is applied to the now well-known differences between employer-employee relationships in this country and Japan. Unfortunately, it is merely an exercise. This application is not used to provide any insights, hypotheses, or prescriptions that were not already well understood.

In conclusion, the authors succeed in presenting a deductive set of principles that unify much of the current organization theory. That this approach to organization studies will in fact result in a more solid science remains to be seen. Hints of its promise are apparent in the refreshing perspective on informal organizational relationships in Chapter 11. Furthermore, it is the superior application of systems theory to organizations. Therefore, despite its limitations, I recommend The Logic of Organization to all with an interest in organization theory and behavior.

References


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In recent years the importance of innovation as a source of economic development, job creation, and international competitiveness has been widely recognized. Such recognition has spawned a growing literature on factors that affect innovative developments in all sectors of society. However, many of the early studies in this area focused either on the innovation process in industrial firms or on