

CONSULTATION PATTERNS: THEIR RELATION TO SOCIAL COHESION
AMONG PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Several contemporary sociological theorists¹ have focused upon the inadequacies of Weber's model of bureaucracy² and have suggested that greater attention be paid to the role of horizontal communication in formal organizations. This is an era when the collegial collaboration of experts is being merged with the classical bureaucratic hierarchical structure. More needs to be known about collegial functioning especially, since it contradicts bureaucratic premises of hierarchical control and limited autonomy. In this paper the relationship of social cohesion to one form of horizontal communication, collegial consultation, is examined.

By consultation we mean a request for technical information which an actor in a social system needs in order to properly perform his obligations in that system. Technical information refers to the information that contributes to the achievement of organizational goals in a fairly direct manner. It is not necessary that the consulting person receive a solution to his problem in order for a consultation to have occurred.

Two further distinctions should be elaborated, namely, the distinction between consultation in a dyadic context as opposed to consultation in a group context and the distinction between technical consultation and supportive consultation. Blau³ called the group interaction pattern "consultation in disguise." This pattern consisted of one individual throwing out an interesting case or problem to a group for discussion and comment. In the course of the discussion, the problem was usually solved and a certain amount of technical information was gained by members of the group, without much cost to anyone. It is the dyadic case which this paper will focus attention upon.

Blau did not separate the information-seeking and support functions of consultation behavior, although he was aware that both types of consultation were being measured without discrimination. This lack of differentiation is reflected in his question: "Who do you usually confer with when you have difficulty?"⁴

In this paper, an effort was made to isolate only the information seeking types of consultation behavior. This was done by asking teachers to indicate whom they consulted when they wanted technical information concerning five specific problem areas having direct relevance to their work in the school. No attempt was made to isolate supportive types of consultation.

The Relation of Consultation Patterns to Social Cohesion Among Non-Administrative Professionals

The use of the concept, social cohesion, in this article follows Blau's definition quite closely: "The strength of the network of social bonds that unite the members of a group."⁵ The indices used in this study were arrived at by asking teachers (and non-teaching specialists) how often they get together with other teachers at school for purely social occasions, called cohesion - index 1; how often they get together with other teachers outside of school and school hours for purely social occasions, referred to as cohesion - index 2; and also asking them to indicate the number of teachers with whom they are willing to discuss personal matters, cohesion - index 3. Cohesion with the principal was measured by asking how often the teacher met informally with the principal at school in the past year, referred to as cohesive ties with principal index.

Cohesion has often been treated as a consequence of communication rather than a determinant. Homans⁶, in reviewing a number of studies done in this area, comes to the conclusion that frequency of interaction leads to high friendliness among peers, although Festinger and Kelly point out that if interaction is unpleasant, just the opposite effect may occur. In a more recent statement, Homans⁷ explains this discrepancy by introducing the variable of "freedom to leave unpleasant interaction." That is, if members of a group are free to leave unpleasant interactions there will be a positive relationship between frequency of interaction and social cohesion. Otherwise, a negative relationship may be exhibited with respect to the two variables. Newcomb,⁸ likewise is impressed by the evidence in the literature for this positive relationship between frequency of interaction and social cohesion. A positive relationship between "cooperative relationships within a group" and "increased social cohesion among the members" was similarly found by Deutsch⁹ and Blau.¹⁰

There is a situation, however, in which increased consultation among peers may reduce social cohesion within the group. Blau¹¹ has indicated that differences in contributions that persons make in consultative relationships may create informal status distinctions which have been shown to be negatively related to social cohesion. This dysfunction, according to Blau, may be reduced by playing down the participants' technical contribution and stressing non-functional personal qualities of the participants. Gross¹² has investigated similar efforts of informal groups to reduce invidious comparisons among members.

However, other researchers have suggested that the causal sequence may be reversed, that is, the degree of social cohesion affects the amount¹³ of interaction and communication within a group. March and Simon,¹³ suggest that this may be the case and Erbe¹⁴ has demonstrated that the diffusion of information (indicating density of interaction) is greater in more cohesive groups. It seems quite probable that there

is a reciprocal effect between the two variables up to a certain point. No researcher has yet demonstrated where this point might lie. That is, if for any reason consultation as a form of interaction and communication among peers increases there will be an increase in social cohesion among them. Likewise, if there is for any reason an increase in social cohesion among peers, there will be an increase in the consultation among them. The simple principle of channel efficiency would seem to explain this tendency. Any increase in social cohesion among peers would tend to establish efficient communication links making the transfer of technical information easier and therefore more frequent. Likewise, the cooperative exchanges of information, if increased, would create a more efficient network of communication links by which to build up cohesive bonds among the participants.

Although the survey design utilized in this study prevents a final determination of the time order and causal sequence, it is assumed that social cohesion is the independent variable and consultation patterns the dependant variable.

This review of the empirical and theoretical literature leads to the first substantive hypothesis. Substantive Hypothesis 1, the more numerous the cohesive ties among non-administrative professionals, the more numerous the consultations among them.

The Effect of Social Cohesion between Administrators and Non-Administrative Professionals upon Consultation Patterns

The literature suggest that people who have strong cohesive ties are more likely to communicate with one another about matters of common interest. It follows logically that people who do not have cohesive ties with a given set of people will not communicate frequently with them and will tend to direct their communications to other persons. Extending the basic argument, communications tend to flow along paths of least resistance, and one of these paths is the set of cohesive ties that may exist within a group. In this case, absence of cohesive ties between the administrative and non-administrative groups would tend to reinforce horizontal communication within each peer group.

A lack of social cohesion, social distance, does not necessarily imply alienation between subordinates and their superiors. Blau,¹⁵ for example, found that leaders who perceive themselves to be more distant from their subordinates tend to be considered most "helpful" by their subordinates. Blau¹⁶ also suggests that certain types of supervisors who encourage a certain amount of social distance between themselves and their subordinates tend to allow self direction among subordinates. This is, of course, a slightly different argument linking the variables of social cohesion between authority levels and consultation among peers. But Blau's correlation of administrative personality characteristics and peer consultation would tend to support our prediction

(the personality correlation showing that socially distant administrators tend to be less authoritarian).

The second hypothesis then can be stated as follows: Substantive Hypothesis 2, the fewer the cohesive ties between non-administrative professionals and administrators, the more numerous the consultations among non-administrative professionals.

Research Design

The Population

The organizations from which our sample of respondents were drawn were the 33 public schools in a medium sized school district. This school system served an urban area of about 100,000 people. Most of these were elementary schools with the exception of four junior high schools and two senior high schools. The size of the schools varied though most of the grade schools were small, having less than 750 pupils. On the other hand, all the secondary schools (with the exception of one junior high) had more than 1,000 pupils. There were 889 full-time teachers, guidance counselors, and librarians who had single-school attachments. Also, there were psychologists, reading specialists, and supervisors who were not attached to any particular school, but whose base of operations was the Board of Education building located in the center of the city. These specialists and supervisors were not included in the population of professional employees from which our sample was drawn. However, these central office administrators and specialists were taken into consideration when constructing the teachers and administrators' schedules. The only non-teaching specialists attached to particular schools in this school district were guidance counselors and librarians. Because their roles in the schools closely resembles that of teachers, we have referred to them as teachers throughout this report.

Each grade school had only one administrator, which was a full-time principal (with no teaching responsibilities). Each junior high school had a full-time principal and an assistant principal. In addition to these administrators, a new role designated as "activities coordinator" had emerged in the junior high schools. Although there was some variation, activities coordinators generally spent most of their time directing efforts of the teachers in what was called the "activity period," although some coaching activity or other work with students was often involved. Because of the large amount of time that the activities coordinators spent in coordinating and supervising the efforts of teachers, it was decided that they should be classified as administrators, yet understanding that they spent some time working with students.

Each of the senior high schools had a full-time principal and two full-time assistant principals.

The Sample

A simple random sample of 158 teachers (including guidance counselors and librarians) in the school district was drawn. The completion rate was 100%. The sample included approximately 18 percent of the population. Teachers from 28 of the 33 schools were involved.

Indices of Consultation Patterns. For the purpose of identifying persons with whom teachers consult, we listed five situations that most teachers confront from time to time, and asked each teacher to identify the person or persons from whom she seeks advise in each case. The five situations included what the teacher should do about (1) a slow learner in class, (2) lateness or lack of attention on the part of one or more students, (3) problems involving the course outline, (4) aspects of her contract or salary, and (5) information about the student's history or background. The teacher was allowed to indicate as many different categories of people as she wished (i.e., other teachers, the principal, psychologists, etc.) with respect to each situation. The degree of consultation with a particular group was measured by summing the number of situations which the teacher would consult a member of that group.

Four separate indices of consultation were used: (1) consulting other teachers, (2) consulting non-administrative specialists, (3) consulting the principal and his assistant (s), and (4) consulting central office administrators. Table 1, which presents the correlation between the indices, indicates that the indices are not completely independent, although only one association approached statistical significance at the .05 level.

Table 1. Inter-Association of Indices of Consultation Patterns
(Gamma values)

	Consulting Specialists	Consulting Principal or Assistant	Consulting Central Office Administrators
Consulting Teachers	.02	.25	-.09
Consulting Specialist		-.14	.01
Consulting Principal or Assistant			.16

Statistical Tools Used in the Analysis

Only two statistical tests were made use of in this study. The first test used was the chi square test of independence.¹⁷ In all cases the significance level was set at .05; associations significant at this level are starred (*).

The measure of the degree of association between two variables used was Goodman's gamma.¹⁸ This test is a measure of order association. The numbers given within the tables are gamma values, which indicate the degree to which the independent variables predicts the value of the dependent variable. A gamma value of +1.00 indicates that there is 100% predictive power of a positive relationship. A gamma value of "0" indicates no predictive power in a negative direction. The chi square test indicates whether or not the association was significant. Since we were interested in whether or not the association reached the .05 level of significance, we starred (*) the gamma value if the association was significant.

Results

We find strong support for Hypothesis 1, the association between consulting peers and number of peer friends. The two measures of "cohesive ties among teachers" are related in the expected direction to consulting with other teacher." (See Table 2.) Index 1, in fact, reaches a level of association of .20. With a slightly increased sample size (e.g., 200) this would be a significant association. It is possible that this index did not produce better results because of the organizational constraints at work in the school system. To be more specific, the opportunities for coffee breaks and lunch with other teachers are limited by a rigid schedule. Teachers whose break schedules coincide are confined to each others company.

Table 2. Inter-Association Among Indices of Consultation Patterns and Patterns and Cohesive Ties among Teachers

Consultation Patterns	Cohesive Ties Among Teachers		
	Frequency Teachers Meet Informally at School	Frequency Teachers Meet Informally Out- side of School	Number of Close Friends (Among Teachers)
Consulting Teachers	.20	.08	.35*
Consulting Specialists	-.07	.00	.12
Consulting Principal or Assistant	.09	-.09	-.19
Consulting Central Office Administrators	-.05*	-.14	-.16

The pattern of results in the remaining portion of Table 2 lend some additional support to our hypothesis. We find that "consulting administrators," in almost all cases (five out of six associations), is negatively related to high cohesion with teachers. If it is true that teachers who maintain close relationships with other teachers will rely on them for advice, we would expect that consultation with administrators would be low. This is indeed the case. The findings, therefore, indicate quite strongly that hypothesis 1 should be accepted.

Table 3 shows that there is no support for Hypothesis 2, that is, teachers who have weak cohesive ties with administrators do not consult more with other teachers. Again our index of cohesion may be weak in that principals tended to take coffee breaks or lunch with teachers without the teachers necessarily desiring his presence. What we were measuring was the attraction of the principal for the teachers rather than vice versa. Also the assumption that there is a static interaction that must flow somewhere may be inaccurate. Apparently if communication is cut off at one point, it may not be redirected.

Table 3. Inter-Association among Indices of Consultation Patterns and Cohesive Ties between Teachers and Principal

Consultation Patterns	Cohesive Ties with Principal Index
Consulting Teachers	.02
Consulting Specialists	.07
Consulting Principal or Assistant	.20
Consulting Central Office Administration	-.25

In Table 3 we find that teachers who have stronger cohesive ties with the principal are more likely to consult him. Although this association (.30) does not reach statistical significance, it is, nevertheless, of interest. Similarly, this study shows that close relations with the principal has a negative effect on communications with higher administrative officials. There is a negative association of -.25 between "cohesive ties with principal" and "consulting central office administrator." Again this is not a statistically significant association.

This research thus indicates that the degree of cohesion with collegial consultation among peers and between administrative levels are directly related in the school situation.

FOOTNOTES

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