

FORMAL AND RATIONAL AUTHORITY
SOME NOTES, HYPOTHESES AND APPLICATIONS

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Talcott Parsons questioned the analytic precision of Max Weber's legal-rational type of authority in bureaucratic organizations. It is proposed that two separate types should be distinguished: rational and legal (or formal) authority. The basis of legitimation for the first is the effective utility of the person in authority, i.e. his technical competence to perform. On the other hand, legal authority is invested in an individual on the basis of a normative or legal structure. Another difference between the two rests on the premise that formal authority derives from the organization, whereas rational authority may find its source of legitimation outside the organization. In the case of formal authority, the organization defines the boundaries within which domination is exercised. For rational authority, the power utilized depends on the capability of the individual to accomplish effective action.

Utilizing these two types of authority as dimensions, Dahrendorf's conflict model may be employed to predict the nature of the relationships between two authority figures. A typology of authority types may be derived.

Introduction

Max Weber's formulation of the three pure types of authority is probably the most well developed and widely accepted framework for conceptualizing the phenomenon of authority in the social sciences. His legal-rational, or bureaucratic, type is so widely used that it lies in the background of even popular conceptions of organizational structures. Even so, the analytical "purity" or the legal-rational type of authority has, for the most part, remained an un-asked (or tabu) question.

The first notable exception was Talcott Parsons in his introduction to Weber's The Theory of Social and Economic Organization (1942) where Parsons makes a very important observation concerning Weber's conception of bureaucratic authority. He notes:

Weber's formulation of the characteristics of bureaucratic organization, which has become a classic, raises some serious analytical difficulties in the treatment of social structure. It is the present writer's opinion that he [Weber] has thrown together two essentially different types which, though often shading into each other, are analytically separate.

The problem may be approached by noting the importance Weber attaches to technical competence (p. 335) as a basis of bureaucratic efficiency, and his statements that bureaucratic administration is 'essentially control by means of knowledge' (p. 337).

Weber, however, started from the organization of authority within a corporate group. The fundamental model he had in mind was that of legal 'powers,' particularly powers of coercion in case of recalcitrance.

The position of the exerciser of authority of this sort is legitimized by his incumbency of a legally defined office. It is not logically essential to it that its exerciser should have either superior knowledge or superior skill as compared to those subject to his orders... (1947:58-9, fn. 4).

The apparent mixture of two types of authority in Weber's formulation of the bureaucratic form of organization (based on what Weber seems to consider one pure type of authority) has, in recent years, begun to receive somewhat more attention. Victor Thompson (1961), for example, although not mentioning Parsons' observation, implicitly uses the idea as the underlying thesis of his entire book on organization. Much recent thinking in organizational theory has focused on attempts to formulate ideal types, many based on the separation of authority types, within the broader bureaucratic type.

Yet, little work seems to have been done toward explicitly developing ideas about the two types of authority themselves, separate from the forms of organization in which they are found, or to which they might give rise. An attempt to separate the two types of bureaucratic authority along the lines of Weber's original formulation and to begin to explore their consequences in authority relationships will be the focus of the following discussion.

Two Authority Types from One

Weber's original typology of authority ultimately rests on differences in the bases of the legitimation for the authority in each type. Thus, the legal-rational type of authority found in the bureaucratic form of organization is thought of as being legitimized on what Weber terms "rational grounds--resting on a belief in the 'legality' of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority)" (1947:328).

Even though Weber calls them "rational grounds," the type of legitimation-base he describes might more accurately be termed "legal," or "formal," leaving the term "rational" free to be applied to the type we wish to distinguish from it.

"Rational" authority (as contrasted to the "formal" authority which Weber describes) may be thought of as being based on rational grounds, that is, resting on the belief in the effective utility of the actions and commands of the person in the authority position for the area of organizational activity over which he has authority. Rational authority, in other words, is based on a belief in the usable technical competence of the authority holder, for entirely pragmatic reasons.

Now, by "technical competence" I do not mean to imply only professional training of some sort. I do not mean to limit the role of rational authority to the sphere of "staff vs. line" or highly trained specialists vs. officials. The technical competence involved in rational authority may be the result of on-the-job learning or experience with an area of tasks, problems and solutions over time, as well as the result of some special, directed training.

Neither should the idea of "technical competence" be limited to "technological" as opposed to "administrative" types of tasks. Technical competence makes just as much difference in the direction and coordination of the efforts of other people as in the carrying out of some concrete technological task.

Finally, the application of the concept of technical competence should not be limited to any particular range of either breadth or depth of effective knowledge or skills.

The important point in the idea of technical competence is that it must be something in which individuals can vary by virtue of learning and experience, and that it is believed to make some significant difference in the effectiveness and/or efficiency with which the individual carries out the tasks in his area of competence.

Although rational authority has been initially differentiated from formal authority in terms of the bases of legitimation, there is another crucial difference between them in the way in which they are legitimated, a difference which offers a second means of separating them.

In the case of formal authority, the legitimation for an authority position comes from the rules, the legal structure, governing the articulation and operation of the organization. The source of the legitimation, then, is the organization itself, as a whole. On the other hand, the source of the legitimation for rational authority, because of its very nature, can be relatively independent of the legal structure of the organization, and, hence, independent of the organization in which it is found, at least when considered as a whole.

The reason for this can best be understood if we go back to Weber's derivation of the concept of authority. Authority is thought of as legitimated domination, and domination is defined as power exercised through commands. But what is the nature of the power involved in each of the two types of authority?

If we think of power as a resource, for the case of formal authority, the power on which it is based derives from the legal structure of the organization and is thus controllable and alienable by the organization. It cannot, strictly speaking, exist apart from the organizational, legal structure from which it stems.

However, the power available as a resource in the case of rational authority lies in technical competence, the ability to accomplish something--recognizing problems, categorizing problems, arriving at possible effective solutions, et cetera--by applying some knowledge, experience or skill. Opportunities to gain and develop technical competence exist relatively independent of the organization and its legal structure. This means that the power available to one in a position of rational authority, while possibly gained through activity in an organization, can be, so to speak, personally appropriated, and becomes, in the form of effective knowledge, immune from withdrawal by the organization (although it can be rendered unusable through dismissal).

In addition, and perhaps even more important, is the fact that the pragmatic test of competence which forms the basis upon which the legitimacy for rational authority is ascribed can operate unaffected by the legal-formal aspects of the organization's structure, i.e., legitimacy can be granted to candidates for rational authority because what they know or do is believed to work, almost entirely without regard for the rule structure of the organization. This tends to further contribute to the autonomy of the legitimacy for rational authority from legal-formal considerations.

Finally, completely unlike the legitimacy involved in formal authority, the legitimacy for rational authority, being relatively independent of the organizational legal structure, can be granted by some social unit(s) other than the entire organization. For example, the source of the legitimacy for rational authority may be only the individual's immediate superior (in the formal sense), one or more of his subordinates, only the ultimate superior of the organization, only his fellow workers, some entirely separate segment of the organization, some personal or group completely outside the organization, or even, an idea which with some reservations can be said to be part of the phenomenon of authority, the individual's own self-definition as

supported by some organizationally-extraneous social influences.

In summary, the differences between formal and rational authority can be charted as follows:

	Formal	Rational
Basis of legitimacy	Belief in "right" of person to hold authority	Belief in effective utility of person's actions and commands
Grounds for legitimacy	Legal structure	Pragmatic test (or outside qualification)
Source of legitimacy	Organization	Social units not necessarily identical with whole organization
Nature of power	Use of organizational constraints granted to person	Technical competence resulting in effective action, acquired by person
Source of power	Legal structure of organization	Opportunities for acquiring knowledge and skills

Authority Types as Dimensions

The potential theoretical independence between formal and rational authority, independence in the nature and source of the power involved and in the nature and source of the legitimacy for each type of authority, leads this writer to think that here we are dealing with two independent dimensions of authority in bureaucratic organizations. In the idea of dimensions of authority lies the potential importance for theoretically separating formal and rational authority types.

As an example of the utility of thinking of authority types as dimensions, we could apply the idea to Dahrendorf's model of conflict (1959). If we were to take the liberty of limiting the area of application of his model to an organizational context, instead of societies, and also limiting the units to individuals in authority-relationships, instead of social categories of persons in similar positions, we could recast Dahrendorf's model very roughly as follows: conflict arises (over questions of legitimacy) between persons in differential positions of authority in authority-relationships. But, in this form, the statement is only a general model. It lacks necessary statements of the conditions under which it has a high probability of being true. Such a specification of conditions would contribute to testable theoretical hypotheses. Thinking of authority as a dimension would allow one such statement of conditions to be made. But, still the model seems to lack power.

However, consider the possibility of plugging in two dimensions of authority in an authority-relationship. If we think of the dimensions as independent, i.e., graphically orthogonal, a cross-classification or typology is possible. Such a typology offers a more precise specification of conditions under which the general model may be expected to obtain.

A Typological Application of Authority Types as Dimensions

Graphically, the possible theoretical conditions of authority for one person on the two dimensions may be represented as:

	Formal	
	Hi	Lo
Hi	1	2
	Rational	
Lo	3	4

This indicates that a person may be high in both formal and rational authority (condition 1), or high in rational but low in formal authority (condition 2), or low in rational but high in formal authority (condition 3), or, finally, low in both rational and formal authority (condition 4).

Now, let us suppose a hypothetical social relationship between two persons, A and B. Since each of them can have four possible conditions of authority on the two dimensions, between them there are sixteen possible combinations of authority conditions in their relationship. Each combination could be considered a condition for their relationship.

What can now be hypothesized about the effects of these various possible combinations, or conditions for their relationship, in terms of the above general model of conflict?

The combinations A1-B1, A2-B2, A3-B3, and A4-B4 result in cases of equality, i.e., no authority differential on either dimension is involved. These cases would be expected to exhibit no conflict at all (of the type relevant to the model), and hence comprise the lower limiting cases for the model.

Case 1. If we found A1 coupled with B2, a case where both individuals have roughly equally high rational authority (assuming the rational authority to be based on a similar degree of technical competence in the same area), but different amounts of formal authority, such as in a hierarchically arranged team of specialists, we might expect a middle-to-low degree of conflict to stem from their differential authority positions, because there is only one rather than two dimensions of authority on which to differ in this case.

Case 2. If A1 is paired with B3, we have a case where two persons are formally equals, but one has more rational authority than the other, such as an old hand and a new man on the same hierarchical level. As in the above case, middle-to-low levels of conflict would be expected.

Case 3. If we examine A1 and B4 as a condition where A has both high formal and high rational authority while B has neither, such as a specialist placed over a functionary, we have two dimensions on which the persons differ. Here is a case where the idea of dimensions of authority becomes most important in predicting the level of conflict. If we were to accept Dahrendorf's model at face value, we would have to

say that, since the persons' positions differ on two dimensions of authority, the level of conflict would be very high. But, if we remember that the dimensions can vary independently, we can think of them as working either with or against each other. For this reason, it is suggested that, in this case, the two dimensions are working together and that little or no conflict would arise from these differential authority positions.

Case 4. If, however, we consider A2 and B3, as a condition where A has high rational authority but low formal authority, while B is just the opposite with low rational and high formal authority, such as in a hierarchy of official over specialist, we have a case which, in terms of Dahrendorf's general model, is exactly like that of case 3 above in that here again there are two dimensions on which the persons differ. But, in terms of our evolving idea of the directions of the dimensions, this case is the theoretical opposite of case 3, in that, instead of the values of the dimensions varying together, they vary inversely. Therefore, we would not only expect that the level of conflict would be high, in concordance with the expectation derived from Dahrendorf's model, but also that it would be the condition under which we would find the highest possible level of conflict to be expected within the range of this model. This case, then, forms the upper limiting case for the model.

Case 5. The combination A2-B4 is much like case 2 except that both parties are low in formal authority instead of being high, and like case 1 except that the differences are in terms of rational instead of formal authority. Since only one-dimensional differences are involved, a middle-to-low level of conflict would be expected.

Case 6. A3 and B4, as a condition where A has high formal but low rational authority and B has low values on both dimensions, such as in a case of an official over a functionary, since only one dimensional difference exists, should give rise to only a middle-to-low incidence of conflict.

The remaining six possible combinations are merely the reversed conditions discussed in the first six cases. They would be the same, and result in the same levels of conflict as their counterparts already discussed.

This example of the use of the notion of dimensions of authority as a way of stating conditions and developing hypotheses allows us to raise (or even begs) some important questions which can only be answered by empirical investigation. Is conflict in authority relations the result of merely differential authority positions, as Dahrendorf's model implies, regardless of the number of dimensions of authority involved? Or, are different authority dimensions, possibly working together or at cross-purposes between different authority positions, the more precise conditions for this type of conflict? Or both?

If the technique of cross-classifying authority types as dimensions proves promising, further insights could be gained by including Weber's two other authority types, charismatic and traditional, and the "missing" type, "ideological," proposed by Willer (1967). The presentation of such a convoluted typology cannot be attempted here, but its form and potential can easily be imagined.

Utility

As possible uses for such an elaborated typology, there is, of course, a more detailed investigation into the association between the various authority-type combinations and the incidence of conflict, as has been stated in the above restructuring of the Dahrendorf model. But, such a typology need not be limited to the study of conflict. It seems possible, for instance, to meaningfully classify organizations

or sub-parts of them by means of the combinations found, or by the priorities given to the several dimensions in the structuring of authority relationships. This classification, then, could be used as either an independent or dependent variable in any number of theoretical models and empirical studies.

Conclusion

This highly abbreviated discussion has hopefully made progress toward three ends: to suggest the possibility of not one but two separable types of authority intertwined in bureaucratically structured organizations; to demonstrate the fruitfulness of conceiving of authority as having independent dimensions; and, to suggest areas of profitable investigation which could be tapped by using typologies based on cross-classifications of such dimensions or authority.

Footnotes

¹A lucid summary of, and important contribution to, these efforts is contained in David Willer, "A Theory of Two Bureaucratic Types" (Unpublished manuscript, University of Kansas). The present paper is partially based on some suggestions made by Professor Willer.

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