

CHAPTER 2

WHEN STRUCTURE IS THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Sociologists spend a great deal of time talking about structure. Contemporary life is full of businesses, schools, hospitals, and any number of social organizations that claim to be "restructuring." If you think social structure is something that sociologists mention often but do not clarify, you are with us! This is another good example of how a little bit of sociology can be a powerful tool. Let us spend some time considering just what structure is and how it comes about.

We often say that a building is a structure, and that may be a good place to start our definition when we start thinking about applying the concept to social life. If a building is a structure, it has a number of characteristics. It is "something," it exists in reality. It has form or a shape to it. Furthermore, it is an organized set of building materials that, taken together, produce a thing. Once the building is complete, it sets the broad domain for what is to occur within it. For example, the size and shape of an airplane hangar built to house a 747 could accommodate a variety of activities. Some of these activities are relative to the purpose for which the building was intended (housing and repairing airplanes). Other activities seem to have little to do with the intended purpose (having a baseball game inside). The structure works well when it fits the need or the purpose for which it was created.

Social structure may be seen in a similar way. For example, a family with two parents (often married) and some children, let us say two for now, constitutes a structure. The family is

a group, but right now we want to know how it is put together. Let us use some of the elements of structure that we mentioned in our building example. First, let us think of the family as a real-world thing. Social structures are reifications. (We do not want to bog you down with Latin, but here it makes some sense: *reus* [thing] and the verb *faceo* [to make] = to make thinglike!) When we talk about "our family," we may talk about it as if it were a thing. In fact, for all practical purposes, families *are* bigger than the individuals in them, and they become entities unto themselves. When a family member does something for the good of the family, that human action is in response to something bigger than the individuals in the group. In some respects, this may be a response to the way this family is organized (its structure). Like a building, it may set the broad limits for things that you can do. In other words, the values, norms, roles, and systems of sanctions that support them actually seem to act as iron bars that can imprison or at least restrict the freedom of people. That is pretty "real" sounding! We do not want to ignore the people in the structure, but for now, we are trying to emphasize the importance of seeing structure as something real and separate from "individuals added up."

Second, social structures emerge as shapes or forms. We all know the problem of fitting a square peg into a round hole. Generally, it does not fit! When we expect social structures that were constructed to perform a certain set of tasks to respond to an entirely different set of tasks, we run into the same situation. Sometimes, in our circle/square example, we can get the square to fit by rounding off the edges of the square or by making the circle bigger. Regardless, we get a mismatch. A comparable example can be made if we were to expect our nuclear family to support itself by clearing with an axe and farming hundreds of acres of land with 18th-century equipment. We run into similar structural problems when we expect modern women to stay home with their children. Structural relationships between the family and other social

structures (form and shape) may be at odds with one another. Notice that we are not talking about personal choice here; rather, we are emphasizing the way in which social forms have emerged.

George Ritzer (1996) presents the other side of this fit. The nuclear family is well adapted to the "McDonaldized" social forms that Ritzer describes in First World societies. Fast food, served rapidly in drive-through express lanes, is a formed complement to small structures (i.e., nuclear family). Small groups are able to move more rapidly and adapt rapidly to micro changes. On the other hand, they do not necessarily have the continuity and complexity to deal with large-scale change without higher levels of reliance on other structures in the system.

Third, and related to our previous comment, structure is organized. A structure's parts exist in some ordered arrangement. By this we mean that people progress through the structure along paths defined by the interlocking set of norms, values, and roles within. This system is often laid out and arranged in time and space (even when "space" means cyberspace). Furthermore, the external limits of the structure produce boundaries. Those inside and outside our family, those inside and outside our company, our church, and our country, for example, all demonstrate the limits of structural boundaries. Some structures have an input at one end and an output at the other end. In this way, they are "linear," or "nonrecursive." Sometimes, one can get in the structure simply by being born (ascribed roles and status). Other times, you can enter by choosing a place in the structure and then fulfilling the social requirements to maintain that place (achieved status and roles). For example, you can get "into" your family simply by being born. In contrast, a company will have a structured path for hiring new employees. People seeking employment are interested in taking on the roles of

those inside the company. To become an insider, one must move through the structured path of entrance. One progresses through the structure from new hire to retiree on an organized, socially determined path. This is not to suggest the image of the mindless robot. People have choices and varying levels of freedom, but the socially determined limits of choice and freedom are a function of collectively determined structure. The creativity of a research and development department in an organization, for example, demonstrates this point. People in the department may be wildly creative. New ideas abound, new worlds are created. Why? Because that is the function of the department: to find new information and develop it. Organizations that build in structures to foster creativity and employee imagination are likely to get it! A simple statement, but it is demonstrative of structure's role.

- **How Does Structure Come About?**

As we mentioned earlier in this book, there are primarily three sociological theoretical tools that explain how human social life unfolds. If we look at each of these, we get an explanation for just how social structure unfolds. We will look at these one at a time and then together, because we are better off if we can apply the tools in combination. But before we do, we will need to answer two questions. First, how does structure emerge? Once structure is in place, how does it act on the people who created it? Before long, you realize that we envision a continuous process.

Let us take our conflict tools out for a minute. Who benefits from this structural change? Well, we know we must deal with the structure, but who controls the structure? The ordered, routine way that we do things builds in inconsistencies in power, that is, how much control one person or group has over its destiny and choices. Elements of the system are constructed to keep operation of the system "just the way it's always been," which, loosely translated, means that "someone is getting exploited."

With all of our theoretical tools on the table, we can finally launch into an example. Let us take a central human social need: caring for children. The socialization of children has long been a need in human societies. The way a society does this is important, not only because of the type of people with whom we end up in a society, but also because of the effective transfer of culture across generations. This becomes an applied problem when a sociologist is asked to get involved in constructing a system for socialization of the young. Traditionally, and certainly over the past 200 years in the United States, child care has been largely a family affair. Social structure, roles, norms, and even the function of the family itself were geared for socialization. Extended family systems met these needs with cross-generational systems, that is, more than one generation living in the same area or even in the same household. Of course, this type of structure not only cares for the young but is arranged to care for the aging and the old as well. It is a structure, a set of rules for living that works well when people do not need to move around very much. Farming and agricultural lifestyles lend themselves to this fixed-location living.

Of course, over the past two centuries, some demographic and technological factors have had an impact. Infant mortality rates were high, and life expectancy was relatively short. This, coupled with the need for laborers to work in an agricultural technology, produced a con-

stellation of needs that set the stage for an extended family structure: Two or more nuclear (mom, dad, and the kids) families living together in proximity. Family roles reflected this need: Mothers provided child care and cognitive and socioemotional maintenance and fathers were engaged in roles that were external to this role, instrumental in the field, and later in the community. The transition that followed throughout industrial and postindustrial societies leads us to the present. How do we structure child care now?

How does structure emerge? If we use the interactionist tools, we know that we will need to get people together to create structure. Although this can be face to face, it does not need to be because virtual (Internet, even telephone) structures are as real as face-to-face structures. Through interaction (verbal and nonverbal), a two-person group will produce three realities: The reality for Person A, the reality for Person B, and, finally and importantly, a shared reality of A and B. In general, they will produce some definition couched in time and space (even if this is cyberspace). The outcome will be some norms (rules) for acting.

Remember, this is not Day 1 for humankind, so when people interact, there is already some structural baggage around. That is, some preexisting shared reality where norms are still maintained collectively. So, we rarely act in a social vacuum. There is always an atmosphere of structure, rules, and, hence, expectations for action. When humans interact, they often rely on the structure that is already present. They will bring their definitions of the structure into the situation, interact, and walk away with a new, slightly modified notion of the structure. If this is at a micro level (person to person), this may appear as an adjustment to the shared reality. It probably will not have an immediate major impact on the next level up (meso or macro). At least two things happen. First, we realize that this is a dynamic situation. The organized, ordered way that action occurs has changed a little bit, so some social change has occurred.

This chapter was formerly Chapter Two in *Solution-Centered Sociology: Addressing Problems through Applied Sociology* by Steele, Scarisbrick-Hauser and Hauser, Sage, 1999. The copyright has been relinquished to Steele, Scarisbrick-Hauser and Hauser and we post this chapter (written by AnneMarie Scarisbrick-Hauser) for general enlightenment as well as academic use. A copy may be made free of charge for this use.

Second, these changes are cumulative. We may see a long-term change in the meso and macro cultures as people collectively redefine the structure.

Now let us take a functionalist tool out of our toolkit. The structures we create are not going to survive very long if they do not perform functions or serve purposes: for us, for others, and for the *social system* itself! Now we have gone and done it! We have created something bigger than we are that needs care and feeding. This produces a system (another structure) of interacting worlds upon worlds. The people in the system need maintenance, and the system itself needs upkeep. Meso and macro structures are set up in such a way as to generally handle meso and macro problems. Microlevel systems adapt individuals for personal maintenance. Structure needs to "plug in" to human energy in order to make the system go. This occurs through the roles that humans take. Remember, roles are structures; hence, they are systems of norms that channel human potential into the structure, and sets of expectations for human action.

Research Tools

You probably saw it coming! We are not content to just talk about social structure—we want you to work with it! An effective applied sociologist should be able to build or engineer a social structure. You know that you literally can make a structure into a social thing. It sounds like art, and to some degree, it is. But let us look at a step-by-step process. In this case, we will apply the role of a sociologist as a strategic planner to a problem determining the structure of child care.

Strategic planning is a great example of how to use a variety of basic sociological skills. First, let us define a plan. Barry (1986) defines a plan as "the process of determining what [something] intends to be in the future and how it will get there" (p. 10). Here, we are

constructing an organized, formed thing to perform the function of getting from some place in social space and time to a future condition in place and time. You will be laying the superstructure for people to follow. In our example, you would be recommending a routine

way that children would be cared for such that the outcome would be an effective system. This is an awesome responsibility and no small task. But as an applied sociologist, you already have many of the tools you need to create a plan.

Let us take planning from the top. First, we need to determine just what we are planning for. We already know that we want to create a system for caring for children. It is a start, but we can move forward from there. If we use our theoretical tools, we will get a jump on the process. From a structural functionalist view, we will do two things. Taking the social system in which our plan will exist as a whole, we need to look around us and determine just what is going on in the social environment. We will do an environmental scan. By doing this, we will take a reading of the social factors that surround us and determine just how they relate to the plan we are about to write. Included in this scan will be direct and indirect assessments of the current status of social institutions and demographic factors. Because we are dealing with child care, we need to assess the child care capability in the existing social system. As a secondary approach, we will need to look at each of the other institutions: economics, government, other family forces, religion, and education. Next, we will also need to track down the demographics: the number of children in each age group and the fertility rates by social grouping.

From here, we need to do a second thing: determine need. Is there a need for the structure we are about to plan? This is critical. Structures will fail to work if they do not serve or fulfill a need. A need is a "discrepancy between a present state (what is) and a desired end state, future state. . . . It is the gap between them" (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 9). In terms of structure, a need reflects a shortfall between what an existing social structure provides and what it practically or ideally should provide. We rarely expect any social system to run at peak performance or equilibrium where structures and need are in a one-to-one match, but we need to figure how much of a discrepancy exists before we launch into planning.

The place of imagination in all of this is obvious. We may have all of the tools, all of the skills, and perhaps a large share of the necessary knowledge. But unless we are capable of thinking creatively, often to the point of creating worlds that never before existed, the tools will do us little good. It should not surprise anyone that a *vision* is necessary to direct just where it is we are planning to go. Maybe a better way to look at this is through the process we use to create a vision. "Envisioning is a process by which individuals or groups develop a vision or dream of a future state for themselves or their organizations that is . . . clear and powerful to sustain . . . action" (Goodstein, Nolan, & Pfeiffer, 1993, p. 38). This requires communication skill on your part. You need to develop a process by which you can derive this outcome, this vision. One of the exercises in this book will give you the tools to build a vision in a group, but you may rely on a variety of tools that include brainstorming to Delphi techniques.

You may run into resistance when you mention creating a vision. There will be many people who will accuse you of being in "la-la land" or Disney World! Get ready, because you will be reminded that the "future is based on the past," and that no one can predict the future. Or people will say, "Even if we get a vision, it will just change!" We have heard this so many

times that it makes our heads hurt thinking about it! Do not give up on the vision, because the problem is clear: If we do not have any idea of where we are going, we will never get there! A vision is a magnet that draws us to the future. It does change, it is not static, and, in fact, it may need to be adjusted from time to time. As a sociologist, you know that human interaction is positioned in time and space. The time dimension is comprehensive. It is not just the past, nor is it just the future. It is not even the present *only*. Rather, human interaction is couched in the past, present, and future. We may act in the present, but we need to look both backward and forward. In terms of our example of developing a structure in which we can adequately care for children, we might envision the following: *a vision that may include happy kids who are learning and are free of anxiety and fear; well-fed kids who feel loved and appreciated with high self-esteem and who are surrounded by competent, caring, and consistent adults*. Well, it is a start, and it needs to be honed, tailored a bit by interaction in the group that is creating it. This should become a collective picture in the mind's eye of those creating it,

Now we are ready to focus our structure-creating operation a bit. We need to begin to get more specific: Just what is our purpose for creating this structure? What is our mission? Here, we need to return to our needs assessment, take a look at the gaps between current structure and perceived need, and then factor in our vision. This is an important task, because the vision must reflect reality. Your group then needs to collectively state the purpose of the structure for which we are planning by means of a mission statement. Clear statements of purpose define more directly our planned actions.

This is the point at which planning uses the tools we all have in sociology: the scientific method! We all received basic training in the process of stating a problem, constructing a research design, collecting data, analyzing what we had found, and then stating conclusions.

Planning is not wildly different! Mission statements are statements of purpose that reflect the needs, that is, the problems we have uncovered. Our next step is to create a research design. This is the development of the actual structure itself. We need a blueprint for the structure we intend to build. We need to construct some goals and objectives. Rossi and Freeman (1989) define a goal as "a statement, usually general and abstract, of a desired state" (p. 114), whereas they describe objectives as "specific, [concrete] operational zed statements detailing the desired accomplishments of a program" (p. 114). This really works! Why? Because you have been trained to think this way- Defining goals and then creating objectives is not far from defining a concept, reducing it to its identifiable parts, and then measuring the parts. When we do research, we often transform concepts into variables. Following this, we measure the variables through operational definitions. The process in planning is similar, so you have had more practice at it than you probably thought you had.

Mission, goals, objectives, and operational definitions are simply successive levels of concreteness. A mission is abstract. It gets broken into some more manageable parts that are made up of a variety of other parts. In general, it is a reductionist's model (something reduced to its parts); the parts will add up to the whole. As applied sociologists, we need to know that any model will have some shortcomings, and that we will need to fill in the blanks with some other tools. A little qualitative "plaster" would probably help. We are creating structure where there was none. Hence, every plan will have a conceptual part and an operational part. Let us take a look at this.

The vision, mission, and goals will be successively more specific sets of ideas. They are dynamic (i.e., they change), so planning is an ongoing, undulating series of events. You must resist the notion that a plan is rigid. To be effective, planning needs to be ongoing and

dynamic. In this sense, there is a "culture-society"-type interaction. The planning concepts form the cultural pieces—the "perceived way we should go" or the "way we should act." This is followed by a structure for action, more of a societal way of handling the plan. The plan makes the transition from idea to action through the planning objectives. That is why objectives need to be measurable. They need to be expressed in terms of actions that can be appraised as to their completeness and depth. The plan's ideas link to the action through the objectives. This is important because when we plan, we are addressing at least three things: knowledge, action, and feelings. Remember that if a plan is effective, it will end up changing the way people know, behave, and feel about the situation in which they find themselves. We would never contend that all of these are successfully delivered, but we need to take them all into account when addressing a plan. Thus, writing a measurable objective is extremely important. So, let us clarify some guidelines for handling them. In this case, we will borrow from Kirschner and Associates (see Rossi & Freeman, 1993). An objective should have the following characteristics:

- *Action or direction of action.* It should use strong verbs. A strong verb is an action-oriented verb that describes an observable or measurable **behavior**. We often state objectives as **infinitives**: "to increase," "to decrease"; less strong, but possible: "to improve."
- *What?* An objective **should** state **only one** purpose **or** aim. What **do** you plan to do?
- *Outcome?* A single end product or result should be included. Clearly state the expected change, effect, success, or outcome that you expect to get. The more precise you are the better.
- *When?* Finally, indicate the specific time for achievement. When should this action occur?

If you summarize a good objective, it should connect planning concepts to action by stating WOW: What action and what Outcome (and what will be the direction of that outcome) will occur by When? Using our child care example (and assuming that a mission and set of goals are in place), we might say that one of our objectives is the following:

To increase the number of hours **of a child's contact** with an adult trained in child **care** by **the end of the first quarter of 1998.**

What action and what Outcome (and what will be the direction of that outcome):

To increase the number **of hours of** a child's **contact** with an **adult trained** in child **care.**

Will occur by When?

By the end of the **first quarter of 1998.**

There need to be linkages at two ends. The objective must be linked to a goal on one end (which, of course, may be linked to a mission and then to a vision). On the other end, the objective must be tied to a measurement. In our example, the objective must be related to a goal, something like, "to enrich the child-adult relationship environment." Notice that a goal may be a little "goeey"! It is more abstract. On the other end, we will need to count the number of hours of contact and measure the credentials of the adult providing contact. This objective suggests measurements over time, so we will need to measure at least quarterly, but we would probably be better off measuring more frequently, say, daily, and then roll up these measurements into weekly, monthly, and quarterly statistics. In this way, an objective provides a bridge between idea and action/measurement.

It is important to note here the relationship between this thinking and *quality improvement*. Many organizations are designing their plans to use this bridge between concept and outcome to enhance the quality of their social structure. Whether it is called "total quality management" or "continuous improvement" or a variety of other names, the measurability of objectives is extremely important. We create a plan (*plan*); we enact the plan (*we do it*); we *check* it (this is an evaluation step); and then we make changes by *acting* on the plan (Hunt, 1992). Notice the interplay between ideas, the measurability of objectives in the implementation and checking phase, and the restructuring of the plan in the Act phase. If you write a good set of measurable objectives, evaluating them and checking them for quality will be accomplished more readily.

All along, we have been creating and measuring structure. We need to point out that all structures need not be built from scratch. You will find some prefabricated buildings available in which the blueprints are in existence, so some structures may already have templates. Let us look at some commonly designed structures. In addition to plans, there are at least two other forms of structure that you are likely to encounter: programs and projects. We will be the first to admit that professionals often use these interchangeably, but because you are bound to encounter these sooner or later, let us discuss them. First, definitions. A program is "[an] effort that marshals staff and projects toward some . . . defined . . . goals" (Scriven, 1991, p. 285). Similarly, a project is a set of "time-bounded efforts within a program" (Scriven, 1991, p. 286). Once again, this is pretty direct and follows the same principles we have discussed in the planning procedures outlined previously: A program roughly equals the sum of its projects. Programs and projects are expressed in the form of goals and measurable objectives. A plan is the general structural frame of reference and may

embody several programs and even more projects.

This is highly creative and productive work! Knowing which structures to create, when and how, takes us back to our systems tools once again. These ideas fit or nest within one another and hence are interdependent. Plans provide a blueprint for programs, and programs provide the context for projects. As an applied sociologist, you may find yourself building any of these structures. Furthermore, as we demonstrated in our brief discussion of quality improvement, you may also find yourself evaluating these structures. Regardless, we hope you will readily see the connections between our **field of** study and some very practical skills.

- **Presentation Tools**

The concept of structure is elusive. It is difficult to envision. Therefore, presenting information on structure requires a technique that will allow your audience to truly "see it with pictures." You might want to "say it with pictures"! Any mechanism for converting these abstractions into a more concrete form is important. Here are some ideas that may help you to enlighten your clients while increasing both their understanding and involvement.

Sketching a Structure

You need to see what you are thinking and talking about. You will need at least two pictures: the structure as it is and the structure as you want it to be. Freehand drawing for this purpose is a great first step. Honestly, some great ideas started out on the back of a paper napkin! Over coffee or lunch, some ideas start to flow, and before you know it, someone has a pen out and is scrawling a diagram. You may soon find that others are converting their thoughts

to pictures; finally, you have a great graphic presentation of the structure you are describing. The idea then becomes "something." The value, of course, is that now you can manipulate the "things," move them around, and write on them. After all, we have made a case for treating structure as a thing.

Of course, you are not restricted to napkins for your diagrams! You might want to carry some 3x5 cards in your pocket at all times just for this purpose (and other forms of brainstorming as well). A pen or pencil and paper are powerful tools for this type of work. You might want to buy a plastic template (the kind used for flowcharting can be useful here) to help you convert your ideas to "prettier" diagrams. Computer software for drawing organization charts is plentiful, and this can be valuable both for the earlier conceptualization of structure and for the formal report that you will present to your client.

Now research the structure as it is. This will require interviewing the clients in the work environment, reviewing existing organizational structures, and understanding from key informants (those people- who are most likely to know) just what they interpret the structure to be. Here, sociology is once again valuable. Remember that there will likely be a formal and an informal structure for conducting business. The formal structure exists "on paper" as part of formal organizational policy. The informal structure is the one that people really use to get work done. So, it is likely that you will end up with two or more diagrams of how things work.

- ***Comparing the Pictures***

Now that you have drawn the formal and informal diagrams of the structure, you can construct a structural alternative. This picture is the result of at least three factors:

1. The discrepancy between the formal and informal pictures that you have already drawn
2. The input from clients and key informants about how the structure should look
3. Creative professional input from you

The outcome is a proposed structure. It is "proposed" because you will need to make some adjustments based on feedback from the clients. You will need to make a series of presentations. Let us take these in turn.

- ***Presenting the Structures***

Now you can engage in an innovative next step that combines brainstorming and your sociological understanding of structure. Your proposed structure is not the end-all but a model for discussion. You will need to get feedback from clients before you ever recommend it. This will be an iterative process. In other words, you will go back and forth between groups of people, key informants, and stakeholders. For each group, you will need input on the perceptions of all of the pictures: formal, informal, and proposed. You are looking for consensus—agreement on what the structure should look like. For this presentation, you will want the pictures to look nicer, that is, cleaned up. Here, some computer-generated graphics would be valuable. These can be presented in several ways.

1. Through electronic presentations using Powerpoint®, CorelDraw®, or a similar graphics package with supporting computer and electronic projection equipment.
2. On transparencies and an overhead projector. These may be in color or black and white. They are portable and easy to do (many transparencies may be made by copying your picture onto the transparency by using a photocopier).
3. On paper. Of course, this can be in color or black and white.

For the preliminary presentations for feedback purposes, you will probably want to keep it simple. Use black-and-white transparencies and copies on paper to discuss the proposed structure. Feedback from these sessions will lead you to a final picture of the structure that is most relevant for the client. When you reach the final presentation, you will want to provide a pictorial presentation that shows the evolution of the structure: from a formal/informal first set to an intermediate design to the final design. Of course, your final presentation should be polished. You may want to provide more color, such as an electronic presentation and color handouts. Of course, black-and-white copies and overhead transparencies will still get the job done effectively.

- **Sociologist as Expert**

Understanding structure is central to sociology. The organizational "reengineering," so common in postindustrial societies, is a perfect target for applying sociology. The downsizing and right-sizing movements ask several clearly sociological questions. We will take these questions in turn, showing the sociologist's place in each.

Let us look at three basic questions that would be relevant to organization redesign:

1. What functions should the organization perform? "What should it do?"
2. How should the organization be structured to perform these functions?
3. What impact will this structure produce?

What functions? Virtually all sociologists are taught to measure and interpret social needs. The structural functionalist tools that we have mentioned in this book are particularly valuable here. Our sociology will help us determine the intended and unintended functions that need to be performed by the organization. Elements of the organization that are dysfunctional or eufunctional may cease to exist. A needs assessment, followed by recommendations for organizational function, is part of an applied sociologist's repertoire.

Let us turn to the second question, "How should the organization be structured?" Architects tell us, "Form (often) follows function." Applied sociologists know this well when it comes to social forms. The internal beliefs, values, and norms of a structure need to be aligned with the functions and, therefore, the needs of the social environment in which it is located. Applied sociologists will be sensitive to look in two other directions from their view in a contemporary needs assessment: the past and the future. An applied sociologist will be particularly sensitive to looking toward the past to uncover the cultural roots of the social organization to be restructured. This is critical in making sure that key formal and informal structures are not removed in error. In addition, an eye toward the future is essential. How viable is this organization likely to be in the future? Other chapters in this book address future issues, including the impact of change, leadership, and

the value of studying the future. For now, suffice it to say that a sociologist will need to look at future trends and help gauge the impact of future social forces on this organization.

Finally, what impact will this change in structure have? Again, applying sociology can have immense value. Although we could take many views on this specific situation, let us examine it from the three levels of social organization: meso, macro, and micro. The changes to the organization are being made at the meso (middle) level of social organization. In essence, that is where we are assuming that this organization resides. Clearly, there will be changes at this level, but what will happen above and below the organization? Let us look above, toward the macro level. The sociological perspective makes us aware that we will need to examine the societal level forces that impinge on this organization and the reaction that society will have to the internal structural change. In addition, we will need to continuously update our "environmental scan" of social and demographic trends and the interaction of restructuring with these trends.

Importantly, we must question the impact our restructuring will have on individual employees: the micro level. Sociologists recognize that each social self is embedded in social structure. Changing social structure not only changes the external organization of life, but it also challenges the understanding and definition of the people in the group. Changing the structure changes the definition of self. This varies from the anomie ("normlessness") that occurs when one loses his or her job through downsizing, to the redefinition of self that comes from taking on a new role because of restructuring. Regardless of the level of analysis or the assessment of impact, sociological perspectives and problems of structure are complementary.

- **Case Study**

A local high technology company plans to restructure the way its employees work on a daily basis. The chief executive officer (CEO) has decided that all 40 employees in the company will be telecommuting from their homes in the next 5 to 6 weeks. He informs his employees that they will soon be making the change. Reflecting on this decision, he has hired you to evaluate the impact on his employees that this change in the work structure will have. The company's CEO is very sensitive to his employees' needs. He is very concerned that the fit between the new organization of work and his employees' needs is a good one. Naturally, he is concerned that his clients may suffer in this change, so he needs feedback on the impact of this restructuring.

Your task is to evaluate this restructuring project. Sociologists and other professionals are often hired to conduct evaluation research. Evaluation requires the rigorous use of research procedures in applied settings to determine the success of projects, programs, or processes (summative evaluation) and/or to provide recommendations for project, program, or process improvement (formative evaluation; Scriven, 1967). Evaluations may be internal and/or external to the project. In short, we may think of the types of evaluations in this manner: you have been hired as an external evaluator, this does not rule out the possibility that the company has already attempted an internal evaluation.

The company has given you a limited budget and has indicated that although you may do some primary data collection (go out in the field and collect some new data), the CEO has asked you to make every effort to use data resources already available in the company. The company has an extensive management information system (MIS). They keep track of (monitor)

employee work rates, hours on their computer systems, and other productivity measures. The company is small, and you will find that company leaders are very sensitive to employee needs. How would you handle this project?

Possible Solutions

Here are some ways to think of a solution to this problem. When you engage a client for an evaluation, you need to examine "Five D's" (Steele, 1996). For each evaluation, you need to *define it, design it, decode and encode it, do it, and deliver it*. Let us take these in turn.

Define It

You cannot evaluate something unless you know what it is. That sounds simple, but this can be the most difficult part. Earlier in this chapter, we looked at some structures that may be evaluated: plans, programs, processes, and projects, to name a few. First, through a client interview, you need to determine which of the following this case is. In short, you need to check all that apply below:

In this case, moving to a telecommuting structure may have multiple definitions. It is at least a project and a process. For both, you need to determine all of the following:

The mission: What is the purpose?

The goals: What are the general valued conditions that the client wishes

to achieve? The objectives: Specifically, what is supposed to happen to achieve the goals? What outcomes are expected from the project?

The objectives must be stated as clearly as possible, and they must be measurable. Two

important issues emerge here. First, these objectives may be "stated" and "unstated." The stated objectives may be written down in company documents; the unstated objectives may not. Rather, unstated objectives may just be common knowledge—what everybody knows. Both types of objectives are extremely important; that is, one type is as real as the other for creating outcomes.

Second, objectives must be measurable. In short, we must be able to put a number on them (quantitative) or record that they happened (qualitative). If the objectives are not measurable, they didn't happen! The measured outcomes are the project success measures, and in an evaluation, these measures are very important.

You no doubt recognize that we have already discussed these items earlier in the chapter. So, a few minutes rereading the discussion of mission, goals, and objectives, as well as understanding their relationship to one another, may be very helpful. Processes have missions, goals, and objectives also, but they are a little different in their nature. (You may need to skip ahead to Chapter 3 to better understand the concept of process.)

Design It

Now you need to determine a strategy for researching this evaluation. *Design it* means that you will create a blueprint for it. The "it" we are addressing here is the procedure for doing the evaluation. This is a point at which you will need to reach into your sociological bag of tools. Select a design that works in this setting and employ it. In general, designs fall into two categories: experimental and quasi-experimental.

Experimental designs are central to science. In short, they are structured as follows:

Before the Introduction of the Project or Treatment	Introduction of the Project or Treatment "X"	After the Introduction of the Project or Treatment
Experimental (or "treatment" group) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measure the outcome measures, success measures, measurable objectives (Y) 	Experimental (or "treatment" group) does get the project, program, or training; in short, "the treatment"	Experimental (or "treatment" group) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measure the outcome measures, success measures, measurable objectives (Y)
The control or comparison group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measure the outcome measures, success measures, measurable objectives (Y) 	The control or comparison group does <i>not</i> get the project, program, or training; in short, "the treatment"	The control or comparison group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measure the outcome measures, success measures, measurable objectives (Y)

Randomly assign cases to one of the three sections: before the project/ treatment, introduction of the project/treatment, or after the project/treatment.

Experimental/Treatment Group

1. Measure the outcome measures, success measures, and measurable objectives in the group that will be involved in the project.
2. Enact the project or treatment for this group.
3. Measure the outcome measures, success measures, and measurable objectives in the group that has been involved in the project.

Control Group (It becomes a comparison group if people were not randomly assigned to it!)

1. Measure the outcome measures, success measures, and measurable objectives in the group

that will *not* be involved in the project.

2. Do not enact the project or treatment for this group.
3. Measure the outcome measures, success measures, and measurable objectives in the group that has not been involved in the project.

Simply stated, quasi-experimental designs are designs that do not conform to this structure. You immediately see that it is rare that you will be able to use an experimental design in an applied setting. Unfortunately, quasi-experimental designs do not have the same strength as their experimental counterparts. Nevertheless, as an applied sociologist, you are challenged to create the most rigorous design that you can for the problem that you have.

One final note: Designs are not techniques. A design is the general plan for doing this evaluation. A technique is a specific procedure for actually gathering the data you need. For example, you may decide to employ a survey or a focus group (or both!) to gather the information needed to evaluate this project. These tools need to be crafted before you leave this step.

Decode and Encode It

This step is really done simultaneously with Defining and Designing. Here, you are making sure that you know what will be measured and how you will measure it. For this case, objectives related to the strengths and weaknesses of the restructuring effort in our case study must be measured. Measurement is critical to all research, and it is really done simultaneously with all of the other steps in the evaluation process. Basically, you are determining just how you will know that the ideas, concepts, even the program or project itself,

are really happening. For example, if worker satisfaction was supposed to improve because of a series of team-building workshops, we would need to measure worker satisfaction. We could create a satisfaction instrument employing some satisfaction measures that ask workers to self-report on whether they "strongly agree, agree, are undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree" with a list of job-related statements. We might also consider measuring, or encoding, their satisfaction by reviewing absenteeism: how often they miss work. Notice that both ways attempt to measure something: one way asks people directly; the other makes note of their behavior. In either case, we are attempting to encode what they are doing or saying to determine if our workshops were successful.

Dolt

Now that you know what you are evaluating, you have created a design with appropriate techniques for gathering data, and you have determined appropriate measures, you are ready to go into the field and implement your evaluation plan. Be prepared, and be flexible. Collecting data is a time-consuming and dynamic process. By dynamic, we mean that things happen that you might not expect! Respondents refuse to participate, or they get sick. Information you never anticipated emerges—you need to be ready!

When you are delivering an evaluation project to a client, be guided by at least two rules:

1. Write clearly and simply.
2. Construct your report to conform to the client's world—his or her corporate culture. The worst report is one that is not *read and understood* by the audience or audiences for whom

it was intended.

This overview simply lays the groundwork for dealing with this case. As we have indicated in this and upcoming chapters, each case reflects *a number of different audiences, and the techniques must be tailored to each of these groups. Above all, remember to be creative and to make it an enjoyable learning exercise.*

Exercises

Here are a few exercises that will help you identify structure and the impact of change within structure. These exercises require a combination of life experiences and your understanding of structure.

1. Pick a social situation at the micro (self or person) level, the meso (the group/organizational) level, and the macro (societal) level. Identify the social situation at each level. Describe the situation; that is, indicate what is going on. For each situation, describe its structure. In other words, describe the nature of this socially constructed, organized social form that guides human action.

2. Select a structure in which you currently participate. This could be an interpersonal relationship, a group, an organization, or another structure. From your position on the inside of this structure, indicate the set of norms, values, and beliefs that seem to guide human action. What passes for common knowledge? In other words, what is viewed as common sense? Does the structure have any impact on the culture, the way of life going on around you?

3. Locate two groups that, in essence, do the same thing, such as two supermarkets, two

families, two restaurants, two churches . . . it is your choice. Visit each of these groups. Describe the structure for each. Now compare them. How are the structures different? How are they similar? Explain why they are similar and why they are different.

4. Watch the television news or read the newspaper at the local, regional, or national/international level. List the organizations that in some way have reported a change in structure in the past week. For each structure, indicate the level of organization and which aspects of the structure have changed. Then, assess the impact that this change may have had on the people inside and outside of the structure.

5. Select any group or organization. Produce a plan for reengineering it. Diagram the new structure. Outline the differences between the old structure and the new one. What will be the differences in the input, output, and internal processes? What impact would your change have on the people in the structure and on the functions that the structure performs?