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Comment: The Concept of Ideology in Organizational Analysis

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In the January, 1987, issue of the *Academy of Management Review*, Weiss and Miller advocated one specific approach for the study of ideology within organizations. They propose a narrow interest-theory definition of ideology and then criticize researchers adopting broader definitions for "a lack of data to support their conclusions, unexplored alternative interpretations, and a reliance on post hoc theorizing" (p. 108). To illustrate the advantages of their definition of ideology, they cited Bendix's seminal work (1956) and Weiss' (1986) study of job-based alcoholism programs.

Weiss and Miller's (1987) general thesis—that ideologies based on social class merit study—is valid and important. Indeed, this position is supported by a respected line of managerial research and scholarship (cf. Bendix, 1956; Clegg & Dunkerley, 1979; Markle, 1981; Trice & Beyer, 1984b). But in advancing their thesis, Weiss and Miller characterized the concept of ideology within the social sciences inaccurately, and they ignored important methodological implications of adopting the interest theory definition that they espouse. It appears that they also misconstrued research on organizational ideologies and did not accurately represent programs designed to help alcoholics.

In responding to Weiss and Miller (1987), our intention is to reaffirm the nature of ideologies as

broadly defined ways of understanding that are based on shared values and beliefs. Ideologies are sets of ideas that evolve out of specific social contexts; they cannot be understood unless one understands those contexts. Ideologies influence the interpretations made within organizations, and they facilitate some actions while inhibiting others. Ideologies can be used to support and justify political interests, but this does not make them necessarily or inherently political.

Competing Definitions

Weiss and Miller advocated a narrow interest-theory conception of ideology as "sets of ideas originating in social structurally-based interests and conflicts" (1987, p. 107). They see ideologies as existing *only* within groups created along social class lines. According to them, a belief system espoused by any other group should not be regarded as an ideology. They claim that broader definitions used by a number of organizational scholars depart from "the distinctive meaning that this term has had throughout the mainstream of Western philosophy" (p. 112).

However, our reading of mainstream social science supports a more liberal interpretation: Ideologies can crystallize within virtually *any* long-lasting human group, including national cultures, social classes, professional groups, formal organizations, and organizational subunits. Social scientists who have investigated ideologies in such groups include Bryan (1966), Geertz (1964), Rogers and Berg (1961), Starbuck (1982), and Swidler (1986). Management and organizational scientists are especially interested in ideologies that form at the organizational level. Studying them may help us better understand and predict the behavior of individual organizations and better explain differences between organizations' competing, collaborating, and colluding within industries or other relevant contexts.

In any case, the interest theory conception of ideology can be subsumed under broader definitions. For example, Beyer's (1981, p. 166) defini-

tion of ideology as "relatively coherent sets of beliefs that bind some people together and that explain their worlds to them in terms of cause and effect relations" does not preclude ideas that originate in structurally based interests, but it does allow for the possibility that ideological beliefs can derive from other sources.

Related Social Psychological Concepts

Weiss and Miller argue that well-established social psychological concepts are operationally equivalent to the conceptions of ideology proposed recently by organizational scholars. But the definitions of attitudes, values, and beliefs offered in authoritative social psychological treatments (Bem, 1971; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) differ in crucial ways from the definitions of ideology advanced by organizational scholars.

Social psychologists, on the one hand, typically treat their constructs as attributes of individual people, which can be measured and interpreted independent of context. Organizational scientists, on the other hand, regard ideologies as bundles of ideas that are shared by many people, that are interrelated in relatively coherent ways, and that cannot be elicited or understood without taking their social and organizational contexts into account (Beyer, 1981; Starbuck, 1982). For these and other reasons, an organizational ideology is relatively stable and persistent, and it can have more potent organization-level effects than individually held beliefs, values, or attitudes. Consequently, Weiss and Miller's contention (1987, p. 112) that organizational ideology constitutes a "terminological pseudoinnovation" occupying the same intellectual space as social psychologists' concepts of beliefs, attitudes, values, and norms should be questioned.

Methodological Issues

When they define ideologies conceptually, scholars also circumscribe the methods appropriate for studying them. Bendix (1970, p. 443) stated: "By ideologies I do not refer to attitudes of the type that can be elicited in a questionnaire

study, but to the constant processes of formulation and reformulation by which spokesmen identified with a social group seek to articulate what they sense to be its shared understandings."

Because ideologies form at multiple levels, the determination of the appropriate level(s) for conceptualizing and measuring particular ideologies is itself an *empirical question*. Also, multiple longitudinal methods coupled with extensive knowledge of the context are needed in order to apprehend the ways in which ideologies are expressed (Trice & Beyer, 1984c). In short, studying ideologies calls for idiographic approaches. Bendix (1956), for example, used extensive historical analysis to ground his conclusions about the interests that are served by particular ideologies about work and authority. The organization scholars that Weiss and Miller criticized had extensive, long-term, and direct contact with the organizations whose ideologies they studied. Dunbar, Dutton, and Torbert (1982) were participant-observers of the change attempt that they described, and their data reflected their attempts to understand events from multiple perspectives. Meyer (1978, 1982a, 1982b) spent two years doing field work before assessing the ideologies of the hospitals he studied by triangulating between multiple measures, methods, and informants, who included physicians, nurses, administrators, and hospital board members. Extensive contact plus their use of multiple methods allowed these researchers to have confidence in the validity of the ideologies they identified as both explanations and predictors of organizational behaviors. For example, Meyer was able to show how the different ideologies he identified were reflected in hospitals' subsequent responses to a doctors' strike. Similarly, the ideologies surfaced by Dunbar et al. (1982) are consistent with analyses of the recent football scandal at Southern Methodist University, to be discussed below.

Contrasting Examples in Research on Alcohol Problems

To illustrate the advantages of the interest-based approach to studying ideologies in organ-

izations, Weiss and Miller (1987) proposed Weiss' (1986) study as an exemplar. But were the methods used by Weiss consistent with this approach? He began by taking the managerial class as his unit of analysis and using what he termed a "qualitative" style of research. From a literature review, he identified four ideologies offering competing explanations of alcoholism. Weiss then personally deduced the extent to which each ideology legitimized managers' needs for controlling and dominating subordinates—motives he assumed are intrinsic to membership in the managerial class. He also interviewed an unspecified number of experts on corporate alcoholism programs. On the basis of these activities, he concluded that managers use these programs to exercise social control, invoking the "medical disease ideology" of alcoholism to justify themselves.

At this point, Weiss shifted to the individual manager as his unit of analysis, and switched to a "quantitative" style of research. He mailed 3,586 corporate personnel executives a questionnaire. Ninety percent either failed to respond or indicated that their firms had no alcoholism program for employees. Among the remaining 10 percent, the questionnaire assessed "each ideology on the basis of one Likert-type item" (Weiss, 1986, p. 166). Means and bivariate correlations of such items with similar measures of structure were interpreted as evidence that "specific structural conditions (increasing size and bureaucratization) cause control problems and are thus the source of managerial ideologies" (Weiss & Miller, 1987, p. 112).

Weiss' study is offered as an exploration of a particular ideology associated with a particular social class. By offering it as an exemplar, Weiss and Miller imply that, once identified by analyzing class motives, ideologies can be measured via nomothetic research techniques such as mailed questionnaires. In our view, self-report data from isolated informants in response to mailed questionnaires embodying a researcher's preconceptions of ideology cannot take the place of field studies that observe ideologies on members' own turf and in their own terms.

This does not mean, however, that managerial ideologies have played a trivial role in determining how alcoholism is treated in workplaces. In a study Weiss and Miller ignored, Trice and Beyer (1984b) traced the historical origins of managerial ideologies that have been used to legitimate job-based alcoholism programs and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Going back to the early 1900s they identified two central concerns in popular managerial ideologies: a concern with productivity and a concern with people. They then show how these concerns have been assimilated into current managerial ideologies, including those that support EAP and alcoholism programs. Policy statements often state explicitly that helping employees with personal problems will improve productivity by alleviating personal distress that interferes with job performance. Thus, in addition to offering assistance in dealing with personal problems, EAP programs incorporate the customary social controls exercised by managers (Trice & Beyer, 1982). Trice and Beyer's data also suggest that many top managers who support these programs are more concerned about helping lower level managers deal with the strains of managing disturbed employees, than—contrary to Weiss and Miller's claims—they are about the programs' impact on productivity. Trice and Beyer's analysis of the ideologies surrounding these EAP programs is consistent with Bendix's admonition (1970, p. 67) that ideologies "can be explained only in part as rationalizations of self-interest; they also result from the legacy of institutions and ideas which is adopted by each generation."

Other research indicates that ideologies played an important role in determining how society in general has responded to alcoholism. In another study, Trice and Beyer (1986) analyzed the establishment of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and the National Council of Alcoholism (NCA) by two charismatic leaders. Trice and Beyer's analysis identifies important differences in the ideologies of AA and NCA. Their data included nearly 20 years of observation of the founders; interviews with staff members and volunteers in one of the

organizations; and analysis of organizational documents, biographies, and one founder's personal papers. The study describes how the visions of the two charismatic leaders, based on different, albeit complementary ideologies, led to the institutionalization of different structures and processes for dealing with alcoholism. The ideological differences still permeate the two organizations, influencing their current missions and actions.

These two studies (a) reveal the complex mixture of scientific, humanistic, and political concerns that underlie and surround ideological rhetoric and actions about alcoholism; (b) place ideologies concerning alcoholism within the context of more general ideologies prevalent among managers and other segments of society; and (c) show that as ideologies differ, so also do organizational responses to alcoholism.

Weiss and Miller (1987, p. 113) contended that "the idea that alcoholism is a medical disease carries with it a number of corollaries that make it highly congenial to the interests of management." Why this should be so is far from clear. If managers believe, as many did before the advent of job-based alcoholism programs, that alcoholics are self-indulgent and weak rather than sick, it is surely easier to justify firing them. Viewing alcoholism as a disease actually reduces managers' options because social values dictate that sick people deserve help and consideration. The founders of AA and NCA and their dedicated followers did not promulgate the conception of alcoholism as a disease in order to serve managers. Rather, their aim was to reduce the stigma associated with alcoholism and to foster the belief that alcoholism could be treated. Since then, this conception has been supported by the findings of a large body of social (Heyman, 1978) and medical (Park, 1973) research. Medical experts routinely characterize alcoholism as a disease because alcohol is an addictive substance, and its continuing and excessive use progressively destroys bodily organs (Kissin, 1977). The idea that alcoholism is a disease has graduated from ideology to established fact among informed people.

How Ideological Concepts Enhance Organizational Understanding

Weiss and Miller (1987) presented what they argued were better and simpler ways to account for events reported in the studies they criticized. For example, with respect to the Dunbar et al. (1982) study, they argued that

strains with the external environment were not attributable to conservative opposition to the dean's "new ideologies," but merely to the presence of one deviate. Nor do the data support the notion that ideological clashes were the basis for internal resistance. The senior faculty members may have resisted the Managerial Grid program because they felt their autonomy (rather than their ideologies) threatened (see Brehm, 1966), and saw the program as a disguised attempt to increase their productivity without, as they noted, increasing their salaries. (p. 109)

In this reinterpretation, Weiss and Miller are proposing psychological explanations of individual behavior as parsimonious equivalents of ideological explanations of organizational behavior. Are these explanations adequate? The Dunbar et al. (1982) study described events at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in 1970 when a new dean attempted to bring about changes in SMU's business school. Much later, in 1987, after repeated attempts to persuade SMU to refrain from making illegal payments to football players, the NCAA withdrew recognition from its football program. A focus on ideological explanations suggests there may be parallels between these two events, whereas an explanation based on social psychological concepts does not. A. C. Greene, a Dallas historian and long-time observer of SMU, said: "The school [SMU] is run by people in Dallas who are very ambitious and for them, being ambitious reaches toward athletic success, and in Texas athletic success means football success" ("Texas Football," 1987). Bradley Carter, a long-time SMU faculty member, said: "They wanted a great university without building a great university. They knew a lot about football but not a lot about academia. It's a colonial mentality. You alternate between being belligerently Texan and then aggressively

imitative of the advanced institutions like the Ivy League or California" ("Ineligible Receivers," 1987).

The conservative ideology at SMU has included a deference to wealth, a desire to be recognized as best, and a belief that by investing money, a reputation for excellence can be bought. Dunbar et al. (1982) described how in 1970 this ideology helped persuade local benefactors to donate generously to SMU and how it also frustrated junior and newly hired faculty members' attempts to improve the quality of SMU's academic programs. In 1987, this conservative ideology also was consistent with the aim of buying a winning football team by making illegal payments to good football players. However, throughout this period and opposed to this conservative ideology, there was a more academically oriented ideology at SMU. As Professor Serge Kappler said: "In the mid-1970s, the university made a major effort to improve itself, and . . . life became academically tougher . . . yet there's this side operation that keeps sabotaging things" ("Ineligible Receivers," 1987).

Psychological and social psychological concepts, alone, are not sufficient to describe the richness of the unfolding events at SMU and their consequences. The events in 1970 and the events in 1987 reflect a long-standing ideological conflict that becomes visible when events recognized as unacceptable according to one or another ideology are made the target of public scrutiny. The focus of Dunbar et al. (1982) was on how organization members react to and deal with behaviors which, given their adherence to different ideologies, they would perceive to be either clearly acceptable or clearly unacceptable. Consistent with this focus, the study described a series of control behaviors that eventually culminated in a newly hired faculty member being brought under critical public scrutiny and then fired, which effectively stalled the 1970 change attempt. In 1987, when the weight of ideological support within SMU shifted, it was the Governor of Texas, a strong supporter of SMU, who came under close public scrutiny for the role which he

had played in the football scandal, and the following disclosures led to significant changes in the membership of SMU's governing bodies.

Conclusion and Implications

The issue that Weiss and Miller (1987) raise—how the ideology concept should be used in organizational analysis—is an important one. However, in studying the concept of ideology in organizations, researchers need to invest the time and effort necessary to become familiar with the particular organizational context, the people who are within it, and the different sets of ideas which gradually crystallize to form alternative ideologies. Extensive familiarity is necessary because those who adhere to an ideology often are unaware of the impact it has on what is seen and said and done (Schafer, 1974). Organizational ideology should be conceptualized broadly in order to enable an appreciation of the different perspectives which can affect all aspects of organizational functioning.

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