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Individual, Group and Inter-Group Processes*

This paper is an attempt to apply to individual and group behavior a system theory of organization normally used for the analysis of enterprise processes. The use of such a theory will inevitably concentrate on the more mechanistic aspects of human relationships, but I hope that the approach will help to clarify some of the differences and similarities among individual, group and inter-group behavior and throw some light on the nature of authority.

The Individual

The theories of human behavior and of human relationships are in many ways analogous to those of system theory as applied to institutions. Like an institution, an individual may be seen as an open system, existing and capable of existing only through processes of exchange with the environment. Individuals, however, have the capacity to mobilize themselves at different times and simultaneously into many different kinds of activity system, and only some of their activities are relevant to the performance of any particular task.

The personality of the individual is made up of biological inheritance, learned skills and the experiences through which he or she passes, particularly those of early infancy and childhood. A baby is dependent on one person—and gradually assimilates father and any brothers and sisters into his or her patterns of relationships. The growing child includes other members of the extended family and of the family network. The first break with this pattern is usually made when the child goes to school and encounters for the first time an institution to which he or she has to contribute as a member of a wider society. It is the preliminary experience of what, in later years, will be a working environment.

The hopes and fears that govern the individual's expectations of treatment by others, and the beliefs and attitudes on which to base a code of conduct

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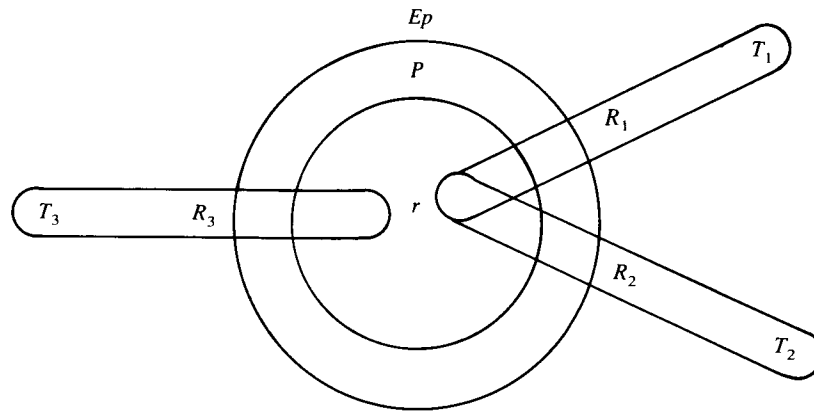
derive from these relationships and are built into the pattern that becomes one's personality. They form part of the internal world. It contains, besides the skills and capabilities as developed, the primitive inborn impulses and primitive controls over them that derive from the child's earliest relations with authority, together with the modifications and adaptations incorporated in growing up.

In the mature individual, the ego-function mediates the relationships between the external and the internal worlds and thus takes in relation to the individual a "leadership" role and exercises a "management" control function. The mature ego is one that can differentiate between what is real in the outside world and what is projected on to it from "inside," between what should be accepted and incorporated into experience and what should be rejected. In short the mature ego is one that can define the boundary between what is inside and what is outside and can control the transactions between the one and the other. Diagrammatically the individual can be represented at any one time, therefore, as a system of activity. The ego-function is located in the boundary control region, checking and measuring intakes, controlling conversion activities and inspecting outputs. It uses the senses as instruments of the import system; thinking, feeling and other processes to convert the intakes; then action, speech or other means of expression to export the outputs.

The individual is not just a single activity system with an easily defined primary task, but a multi-task system capable of multiple activities. The activities become bounded and controlled task systems when they are directed to the performance of a specific task, to the fulfilling of some specific purpose. The difficulty then is the control of internal boundaries and dealing with activities that are not relevant to task performance. And these controls are the result of the built-in attitudes and beliefs, born of previous experience, which may or may not be relevant to the specific task or system of activities required for its performance.

To take a role requires the carrying out of specific activities and the export of particular outputs. To take a role an individual could be said to set up a task system; and the task system to require the formation of a project team composed of the relevant skill, experience, feelings and attitudes. Different roles demand the exercise of different skills and different outputs. The task of the ego-function is then to ensure that adequate resources are available to form the project team for role performance, to control transactions with the environment so that intakes and outputs are appropriate, and to suppress or otherwise control irrelevant activities. When the role changes the project team has to be disbanded and reformed.

The individual as a multiple task enterprise is shown in simplified form in Figure 1. Task systems $I (T_1)$ and $II (T_2)$ require the individual to take roles 1 and 2 (R_1 and R_2). R_1 and R_2 overlap to the extent that they use some, but not all, of the capabilities of the individual. The task systems are related to



Ep = external environment of individual
 P = ego function
 r = internal world of individual
 T_1 , etc. = tasks
 R_1 , etc. = roles

Figure 1. The role system of the individual

different but neighboring parts of the environment. The management controls required will also therefore be similar, but not necessarily the same. In contrast, task system III (T_3) requires the individual to take role 3 (R_3). This requires quite different capabilities, is related to a quite different part of the environment and hence requires a different kind of managerial control. In practice, such complete splits are not usual (except in the schizophrenic), but it is possible to recognize, on the one hand, those individuals who are always the same no matter what the situation is or with whom they are in contact; and, on the other, those who appear to be quite different people in different situations.

More generally we can say the ego-function has to exercise different kinds of authority and different kinds of leadership in different roles and in different situations. Dislike of the role and of the activities or behavior required in it, and the demonstration of the dislike by attempts to change the role or modify the behavior, or the intrusion of feelings or judgments that contradict role requirements, inevitably distort intakes, modify conversion processes and can only result in inappropriate outputs. It is as though the management of a multiple task enterprise were to set up a project team for the solution of a particular problem but not only could not be sure whether the team was working on the right problem but could not even control membership of the team or the resources they used or squandered.