

# ORGANIZATIONAL ADAPTATION TO CRISES: MECHANISMS OF COORDINATION AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE

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## INTRODUCTION

Much of social life is so structured that behaviour occurs rather routinely. Most of the time, established and standardized procedures are followed, manifesting themselves in the habitual behaviour of individuals and/or the traditional actions of groups. At times however internal and/or external factors generate enough stress to make it possible to think of responding entities as being in a state of crisis. Crises require the reworking of established and standardized procedures or the creation of new means as well as of organizations for carrying them out. In a large part, the direction of response of groups and organizations is for certain aspects of emergent behaviour to be combined with elements of routinized organizational behavior.<sup>1-3</sup>

This paper seeks to extend the explanation of these types of adaptation by using existing organizational theory. In particular it looks at the mechanisms whereby organizations are co-ordinated and shows how crises produce certain structural modifications which have implications for co-ordination. The intent is to provide sociological explanations for what is traditionally described as emergent phenomena. It argues that much of what has been called emergent can be explained by: (1) the heightened necessity for organizational co-ordination during crises; (2) the conditions which make for changes in the communication patterns within emergency organizations, and (3) the consequences the changes in communication patterns have for organizational co-ordination. These changes can be explained using standard organizational variables which are applicable to a wide range of types of organizations, not just organizations in emergencies. After establishing that theoretical orientation, we will come back to its application in crises.

## THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The theoretical orientation used here was derived from Hage *et al.*<sup>7</sup>, in which organizational co-ordination is related to the internal structure of an organization. It argues that the predominant type of co-ordination in an organization is determined by its diversity and its internal distribution of power and status. While the theory was originally tested in a non-disaster context, the types of variables specified are particularly significant in changes which occur in the crises context.

One central concern in organizations is co-ordination. Co-ordination can be seen as the degree to which there are adequate linkages among organizational parts, i.e. among specific task performances as well as among sub-units of the organization, so that -- organizational objectives can be accomplished.<sup>7</sup> Organizations can be co-ordinated by plan and by feedback. The former is based on pre-established schedules and programmes directing and standardizing the functioning of organizations, while the latter is centred on the transmission of new information so as to facilitate the mutual adjustment of parts.

The two types of co-ordination are based on different assumptions about the nature of conformity to organizational objectives. In co-ordination by plan the activities of organizational members are seen as regulated externally by a system of rewards ensuring social control. If there is a clear blueprint for action, departures are obvious and sanctions can be applied with little ambiguity. In co-ordination by feedback errors detected in task performance are corrected by the provision of new information. Social control is seen as the result of internalized standards of professional excellence among the personnel brought about by occupational peer group pressures.