

HOW INFLUENCE BEGINS: TRACKING THE LEGACY OF *FUNCTIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE* FROM EARLIEST CITATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Chester Barnard's *Functions of the Executive* is deemed a classic in management scholarship (Bedeian & Wren, 2001; cf. also Sibbet, 1997). The book was recognized as significant essentially from its 1938 publication—a 1940 book review in the *Harvard Business Review* termed *Functions of the Executive* “a noteworthy attempt to deal with the subject of administration in an analytical and scholarly manner” (1940: 148). Diverse schools of thought in the emergent field of organizational theory were touched by Barnard's work. Among the book's early admirers was budding scholar Herbert Simon, who credits in part his careful reading of Barnard's book for why, just a few years later and with little managerial experience himself, he could develop his own highly-influential work, *Administrative Behavior* (Wolf, 1995a). Another seminal author in organizational theory, Philip Selznick, cited Barnard several times in his 1957 work, *Leadership in Administration*, and referred to *Functions of the Executive* as a “major contribution” in the understanding of “the social psychology of obedience, perception, and cooperation” (Selznick, 1957: 31). Kenneth Andrews, author of one of the earliest strategy texts, wrote the foreword to the 30th-anniversary edition of *Functions of the Executive* and, in it, emphasized Barnard's legacy in the field of business policy (since largely evolved into that of strategy or strategic management) (Andrews, 1968). Scholars continue to highlight Barnard's work for contributions to numerous topics (cf. McMahon & Carr, 1999; Novicevic, Davis, Dorn, Buckley, & Brown, 2005; Novicevic, Heames, Paolillo, & Buckley, 2009).

At the same time, there are suggestions that the potential contribution of *Functions of the Executive* has yet to be fully recognized. On the book's fiftieth anniversary, Oliver Williamson affirmed the book's “timeless character” and a belief that “its current research significance was undervalued” (Williamson, 1990: v). In this same book of scholarly essays, Scott acknowledged key ideas in Barnard's book about the interdependence of rational and natural forces in organizations that were “far ahead of his time” and still not fully reflected in contemporary scholarship—as he added, “perhaps he remains ahead of our own time” (1990: 41). In a less positive tone, others have deemed Barnard little more than a propagandist for contemporary Harvard academics seeking to promote the thought of Vilfredo Pareto (Keller, 1984; cf. also Perrow, 1979). A biography presenting Barnard as an apologist for managerial power (Scott, 1992) was bitterly contested by another Barnard scholar for its reading of *Functions of the Executive* and assertions about Barnard's views and influences (Wolf, 1995b). Indeed, subsequent decades have confirmed the prediction made by an early reviewer that the book is one “about which opinions are likely to differ widely” (Copeland, 1940: 148).

Considering the questions and multiple readings of Barnard's work—assertions of influence, whether positively or negatively viewed, and yet of possibilities unpursued—raises the issue of how such a diversity of impressions may be formed about a single author, or even a single book. As recently highlighted regarding the work of Max Weber (Lounsbury & Carberry,

2005), scholarly trends can rapidly bring an author in or out of favor. The ongoing interactions of academic conversation, most prominently played out in scholarly journals, shape reputations, but these also operate against a backdrop of history and social context. In this study, I explore how the initial reception of Barnard's work in *Functions of the Executive* shaped and foreshadowed scholarly thinking to come.

My findings suggest that usage of Barnard's concepts was shaped over time by the specialized disciplinary interests of social science publications, with different sets of writers highlighting and appreciating different aspects of his work. Over time, the rise of other scholars characterized as being "like" Barnard in their perspective contributed to reinforce certain insights of Barnard's work at the expense of others. The expansive aims of the book, packed with material covering a broad conceptual territory, may have exacerbated a tendency to capture its insights in fragmentary ways. Further, the pressure toward scientific research methods, both in the social science disciplines to which the book was largely of interest and in the study of management overall, prompted assessment of Barnard's concepts in light of utility for those ends, a screening process that devalued contextualized insights in favor of testable propositions. Ideological conflicts arising from labor-management tensions and the Cold War era also spilled over into scholarly conversations at this time, and the presumed loyalties of Barnard or scholars with whose work his was grouped further influenced perceptions about him and his ideas.

CHESTER BARNARD & *FUNCTIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE*

Space does not permit a full review of the life and career of Chester Barnard (for extended treatments, see Scott, 1992; Wolf, 1974), but his core biography is that of a successful business and civic leader, and an insightful, but always avocational, intellectual who developed systematic thought about human organizations. Hired in 1909 by A.T. & T., Barnard rose to become president of New Jersey Bell in 1927, where he served until 1948. Alongside managerial pursuits, Barnard was in contact with academia through service on committees at Harvard where he met, among others, the Business School's dean, Wallace Donham, and H.J. Henderson, a chemistry professor who was an avid fan of sociologist Vilfredo Pareto's approach to social science and led a discussion circle on Pareto at Harvard that included Talcott Parsons and Elton Mayo (Heyl, 1968). Barnard, though not sharing Henderson's unqualified admiration for Pareto, was nevertheless well-acquainted with his work, having read *Traité de sociologie générale* in the French edition (Wolf, 1974). Barnard and Henderson collaborated on the development of a sociology course for Harvard Business School, sharing an interest, as Barnard described it, in reconciling "the strictly intellectualist's view of what ought to be human behavior and the practical and realistic view" (cited in Wolf, 1974: 18). Through Henderson, Barnard was recommended to Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard, to deliver the annual lecture series for the Lowell Institute (the family's private foundation) in 1937. Barnard presented his thinking about the functions of the executive in organizations as an eight-lecture series, which he was then invited by Harvard University Press to develop into a book (*The Functions of the Executive*). Outside of this book, Barnard's work appeared as chapters in books edited by others, but only one other book was published under his name—*Organizations and Management* (1948), a collection of essays and speeches, some previously published elsewhere.

Barnard's stance with a foot in both worlds—of extensive and varied general management experience, on the one hand, and avocational knowledge of social scientific theory on the other—contributed to his approach in *Functions of the Executive*. In his preface to the

work, he highlights a desire to bridge a perceived gap in understanding between these worlds. Of his readings in social science to the point of the book's publication, he writes: "[N]othing of which I knew treated of organization in a way which seemed to me to correspond either to my experience or to the understanding implicit in the conduct of those recognized to be adept in executive practice or in the leadership of organizations" (1968 [1938]: xxvii). He pointed to contradictions he found in studies of organizational phenomena among scholars from sociology, psychology, economics, political science and history and also their ultimate lack of penetration into the subject: "[T]he social scientists—from whatever side they approached—just reached the edge of organization as I experienced it, and retreated" (1968 [1938]: xxix).

Barnard's book reflected an attempt to make accessible to scholars for further development the kinds of insights he saw lacking in theoretical approaches from any single disciplinary lens. His work, while including references to Parsons, Pareto and Henderson, as well as scholars of organizations such as Mayo, Roethlisberger, T.N. Whitehead and Mary Parker Follett, does not base its theoretical concepts in any one stream of social scientific research. Rather, Barnard uses his own accumulated experience in organizations as the primary source of evidence to develop his conceptual model. This determination to draw from experience as a way of supplanting deficiencies he saw in single-discipline approaches to describing organizations meant, however, that no one discipline was likely to embrace the full scope of his conclusions, either.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The period from 1938 to 1955 encompasses several important developments in the history of U.S. industry, management education and management scholarship. Broadly speaking, the era saw rapid growth in industrial productivity in the U.S., spurred on by World War II. As a result of the partnership between business and government, seen as a key to wartime success, large corporations emerged from World War II as central public players, able to contribute to the strengthening of society (Khurana, 2007). As World War II gave way to the Cold War, businesses also carried the banner for capitalism, whose linkage with democracy in the ideological competition against communism was paramount. Organized labor's gains were threatened by accusations of union links to communism. Even as tensions rose between management and labor on how to split the growing pie of profits from industrial expansion, global ideological conflict demanded patriotic cooperation in the face of nuclear-armed communist expansion efforts. Also, the study of management was moving beyond the "Scientific Management" era of Frederick Taylor and expanding in its linkages with the realm of academic social sciences. *Management and the Worker*, by Roethlisberger and Dickson, was published in 1938, the same year as Barnard's *Functions of the Executive*. Though its interpretations of the now-famous Hawthorne Studies are contested into the present day (cf. Hansson & Wigblad, 2006; Jones, 1992), Roethlisberger and, in related books, his Harvard colleague, Elton Mayo (1933; 1945), emphasized the extent to which the data showed that effective management of workers demanded an understanding of the social nature of workplace interactions. This new Human Relations approach largely took cues from perspectives developed in anthropology and psychology. A parallel and overlapping movement, to which Roethlisberger and Mayo's work would also be linked (cf. Hacker, 1955; also Wren, 1985), was that of industrial sociology, with the first course with this focus taught in 1940-1941 (Wren, 1985). As the field emerged, methodological pressures did as well—sociologists had contended

virtually from the start with economists who denigrated as non-scientific their efforts to wed reformist values with research (Oberschall, 1972). To build credibility, sociologists were encouraged toward more rigorous empirical methods (Homans, 1949). The period also saw new incentives for building a scientific perspective in the study of organizations—perceptions that organizational technology had fueled the Allies’ success in World War II made maintaining this advantage a national imperative, attracting students to business schools and private foundation funds to organizational research (Khurana, 2007). Rushing to take advantage, social scientists sought to carve out niches for their respective disciplines in the field of organizational studies.

METHODS

To find journal articles that referenced Barnard’s book in some way, I employed a text-based search method in JSTOR. I focused on citations from the book’s 1938 publication through 1955, searching for the book’s title or author’s name, and screening out matches not focused on scholarly evaluation or use of the book’s concepts. From this screening process, 139 articles remained for analysis. Of these, six were formal book reviews of *Functions of the Executive*, which I set aside for comparison as a set. For the remaining 133 articles, I examined each item to determine how Barnard’s work was characterized, making notes of the concepts mentioned. Where Barnard was listed along with one or more other researchers that his work was “like” or who had contributed similar studies, I noted the other scholars listed. After taking notes on all 133 articles, I reviewed the notes for themes, arriving at a summary list of 13 conceptual codes, plus an “other” category for themes that only appeared in two or fewer articles. In addition to conceptual themes, I coded for the appearance of key scholars in listings with Barnard where his work was implied to be like or akin to theirs. Finally, I added a code for the article being a “negative citation” (i.e., where the author expressed disagreement or disapproval of Barnard’s views). Multiple codes could be applied to one article. In addition to these codes for article content, I used coding to identify the journal’s category of subject matter (e.g., Business, Economics, Sociology, including hybrids). Further details on searching and coding methods are available from the author.

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

Book reviews of *Functions of the Executive* represented four of the journal groupings (Business, Business/Economics, Political Science and Sociology), with two reviews in the first two categories and one each in the latter two. All reviewers note the tension in the book between its first half, presenting a theoretical model of organization, and the more detailed comments on leadership practice in the book’s second half, most viewing one as more useful or intriguing than the other. The sociological reviewer and one business reviewer largely value the theoretical perspective and budding organizational model, while the rest are mildly to strongly disdainful of it. What attracts them to the book seems to be either its appreciation for the informal element within formal organization, regarded as a relatively under-observed phenomenon, or Barnard’s perspective as an “executive insider” (which leaves those of that mindset disappointed to find him attempting to write as a social scientist instead).

As the differing perspectives among reviewers imply, the issue of how to parse the array of topics covered made this book a candidate for the proverbial case of the blind men assessing the elephant—each one approaching the book tended to describe the part that was most readily

accessible and to present it as the whole (or the whole that was of value). Looking initially at the trends in citations and conceptual content mentioned during the first 17 years after publication (from 1939 to 1955), it is apparent that a certain conceptual categorization in views of the book was developed, strengthened by the emergence of subsequent scholars into distinctive camps and the existence of separate academic disciplinary journals and conversations.

Interestingly, in the earliest four years subsequent to its publication, the most frequently mentioned of coded concepts was the book's definition of formal organization, trailed only slightly by reference to its discussion of informal organization and the potential testability of its propositions. That is, its more clearly theoretical content sparked initial notice, and only one colleague was noted as doing work "like" Barnard's—Fritz Roethlisberger, whose *Management and the Worker* was published at almost the same time as *Functions of the Executive*.

In the next four years, from 1944 to 1947, Barnard's book came much more to be cited for its insights into the role and characteristics of executives—the conceptual focus that would remain in the lead for the rest of the period. A second insight—the recognition of non-economic motives or non-material incentives—began to be recognized also, and Barnard's work began to be characterized more clearly with either a sociological or a "human relations" perspective. Roethlisberger continued to be the scholar most commonly noted in connection with Barnard for producing writings with a similar perspective. Also beginning to be cited more frequently in this period was Barnard's bottom-up or follower-based conception of authority.

From 1948 to 1951 a new character and theme in citations emerges, as the 1947 publication of Herbert Simon's *Administrative Behavior*, with a foreword by Barnard, marked the rise of decision-making as a topic of citations and presented Simon as a colleague whose writings were now classed with Barnard's almost as much as Mayo's (whose prevalence in mention with Barnard surpassed Roethlisberger's at this time period). The following three years saw a retreat from Barnard's citations in the topic of decision-making, but now Simon became the pre-eminent name with which his was linked, often in connection with writings about the executive's role or nature of work. The second tier of topics continued now relatively steady with categorizations of Barnard's work as sociological or non-economic in nature, and recognition of his theory of authority and ties to the Human Relations School and the phenomena of formal and informal organizations.

When these same measures are assessed by the types of journals in which articles appeared, distinct disciplinary foci can be seen to emerge. Interestingly, the topic of executive function and characteristics, dominant in the overall citations, leads only in the journal groupings of Business, Blended Social Science, and Other journals (i.e., those "others" not falling in the defined classifications). That is, business-related interests and those from other professions or fields (including law, general science and statistics) recognized the book, at least at a superficial level, for this contribution. Publications classified as Business/Economics interestingly most often cited the book for its non-economic or sociological perspective, so it was brought into the conversation as a contrast to existing wisdom (only one of four was a negative citation). For sociology publications, however, the book's most frequent citation is for its discussion of informal organizations, a topic not appearing on the leading lists for any other disciplines.

In terms of colleague groupings, a disciplinary perspective also appears in that Simon is most often noted as "like" Barnard in Political Science, Business/Economics and Other groupings of journals, while Mayo and Roethlisberger remain more prevalently-named in all other categories. Philip Selznick shows up also in the Sociology category as doing work theoretically congenial with Barnard's but is not widely mentioned by other disciplines.

In addition to these citation trends, I examined in detail the five “negative citations” expressing disapproval of Barnard’s work in some way. These likewise span a variety of journal codings (Business/Economics, Political Science (2), Psychology and Blended Social Science). They vary from an economist’s lament of the book becoming “lost in sociological conceptualism” (Nourse, 1941: 197n) to a political scientist’s critical comments in his effort to adapt Barnard’s definition of “organization” into a form deemed suitable in theoretical testing (Cassinelli, 1953). Notably, two articles make implicitly-opposing assessments of Barnard’s ideological stance—one political scientist critiquing Barnard on apparent communistic tendencies of thought (O’Donnell, 1952) and another lumping him among the “industrial sociologists” influenced by Pareto (Hacker, 1955). O’Donnell, like Cassinelli, also finds time to cast aspersions at the extent to which Barnard’s writing meets standards expected of scientific writing. The fifth article (Jenkins, 1943), in a psychology journal, makes an oblique criticism of Barnard with the statement that: “The thoughtful reader may occasionally feel sharp objection to what Barnard has to say about communication, or willingness to serve, or common purpose, presented as the elements of organization” (1943: 151). It is hard to be clear what Jenkins expected a “thoughtful reader” to notice, but this objection too seems to have ideological overtones.

CONCLUSION

Upon publication, *Functions of the Executive* was a book the likes of which had not been previously seen—namely, a major piece of writing by a business leader who drew upon his experiences with an aim of abstracting from them a theoretical framework of organizational life. This work reached a motivated but somewhat bifurcated academic community, with scholars in various social science fields interested in demonstrating the value of their discipline’s approach in the study of organizations, but those closer to practitioners of business skeptical. By drawing insights from his experience in organizations and insisting on creating a theoretical model from them while not being confined to a single disciplinary paradigm, Barnard developed theory frustratingly resistant to translation by researchers hoping to build what qualified as “scientific” studies—though interested in this aspect of his contribution, they viewed it as being of minimal utility. A second set of objections to Barnard were ideological as, in the context of the Cold War and the era’s shifting labor-management relations, scrutiny was applied to identify the political camp he might represent, and academics of differing allegiances raised criticisms.

It seems that the most-readily received aspect of the book was either Barnard’s explicit observations on the nature of executive life (in which his experience gave him credibility) or his concept of “informal organization,” which was novel but also was reinforced by contemporary academic work (most notably the Hawthorne Studies). With such complexity in the book itself, long-term characterization of it came to be shaped more by those whose work Barnard’s was deemed to be “like” (whether Pareto or contemporary scholars like Roethlisberger, Mayo, Simon and Selznick) than by the work itself. Such contemporaries with the academic credentials that Barnard lacked also had vocational interests bringing their voice into better alignment with the concerns of fellow scholars, enhancing their likely impact over his. Further considering these patterns in scholarly treatment of Barnard may help illuminate not just the nature of his book’s influence but how possibilities for fruitful study from it may have been lost over the years.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR

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