RESEARCH STARTERS
ACADEMIC TOPIC OVERVIEWS

Oligarchies

Social Interaction in Groups & Organizations > Oligarchies

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Abstract

This article presents an overview of oligarchy and its inception. From a historical perspective, Robert Michels' work is introduced and his definition of the "iron law of oligarchy" presents insight into ways organizations are governed and power is distributed. Michels first concluded his analysis of oligarchy in terms of the German Social Democratic Party, but this article will further explore and overview the concept in terms of specific organizations and leadership within other organizations. Applications are made that present an oligarchical framework in terms of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the British Communist Party, and women in the professional fields. Issues are explored that review definitional impacts and the impact of formal authority as opposed to informal authority. A conclusion is given that indicates the need for further research into the nature and impact of oligarchy on different organizations and structures.

Overview

Robert Michels (1915), Vilfredo Pareto (1935), and Max Weber (1946) are considered the sociological forefathers of the study of organizational structures and organizational change. These theorists proposed a number of hypotheses, theories, and laws concerning organizational structures and change. While many organizational researchers emphasized either inconsistencies or ideological systems of belief by analyzing actual organizational behavior and change, Robert Michels (1915) identified organizational inconsistencies when he analyzed and interpreted organizational phenomenon within the German Social Democratic Party. He stated: "Whoever says organization, says oligarchy" (Michels, 1962, p. 365).

Michels (1915) indicated that all organizations regardless of governing procedures or philosophical underpinnings will eventually transform to oligarchy, which is defined as "an organization that is controlled by an elite group consisting of a few members,"and the organizational tendency towards oligarchy is known as the "iron law of oligarchy." Moreover, Michels further indicated that oligarchy occurs in democratic organizations after a process of separation of leadership from the masses or those governed. While leaders may arise spontaneously, their functions are superfluous and ornamental; however, as leaders become more professional, they become "stable and irremovable" (p. 393-409; 417-418). Furthermore, Michels envisioned "organic necessity" as a resulting tendency that is present in all large organizations. The tendency within large organizations toward oligarchy is due to both the large size and an elaborate division of labor that requires centralization and regulation in order for effective action to occur (p. 421). Michels (1915) also indicated that leaders have a tendency to organize themselves and consolidate their interests and for the masses to develop a sense of gratitude towards leaders and results in the manifestation of apathy, immobility, passivity, and immaturity among the masses. Moreover, the apathetic masses develop an "incurable incompetence for the solutions of the diverse problems which present themselves for solution, because the mass per se is amorphous, and therefore, needs divisions of labor, specialization, and guidance" (p. 421). Apathy among impassive rank-and-file members of an organization further perpetuates the organization's tendency toward oligarchy.

Keywords

Bureaucracy

Leaders

Michel's Law of Oligarchy

Oligarchies

Rank-and-File Members

Despite the fact that Michels was "a dedicated socialist at the time," he "concluded that in modern society, socialism and democracy were both structurally impossible—that the very principle of organization made oligarchy the inevitable result or any organized collective endeavor" (Leach, 2005, p. 312). Moreover, Michels (1962) created his famous "iron law of oligarchy." This law indicates that regardless of democratic ideologies and forms, organizations almost always evolve toward rule by an established elite. Subsequent research (Brulle, 2000; Hall, 1999; Scheuch, 1993) suggested that Michel's model may be broadly applicable to a multitude of voluntary organizations.

According to Michels' "iron law," three basic claims can be made.According to Michels' "iron law," three basic claims can be made. First, bureaucracy occurs in large-scale organizations, because, as an organization develops, it requires more efficient administration, resulting in the creation of a formal hierarchy and division of labor. Second, as an organization becomes more bureaucratic, power expands. The structure of a rational-bureaucratic organization concentrates power within the organization's professional leaders, granting them a monopoly on skills, knowledge, and resources. Once this leadership, or "power elite," consolidates its power, it will seek to maintain its power, even if it must deviate from the organization's interests or employ undemocratic means to do so (Leach, 2005, p. 313).

Michels (1962) further indicated that leadership positions in voluntary organizations are prestigious and the combination of prestige and remuneration make leadership attractive. Based on the fact that leadership is time consuming and may require high levels of expertise and experience, leaders with experience become irreplaceable. As a result decision making must be made quickly, which disables the democratic process and creates an atmosphere of apathy, because organization members may lack the skills, knowledge, and time to participate in the democratic process. Therefore, members abdicate participation in democratic leadership in favor of oligarchical leaders (Markham, Walters, & Bonjean, 2001, p. 106).

M. E. Olson (1968) identified and interpreted major points made by Michels and stated the following:

- Centralized coordination and regulation in organizations can be attributed to the large size and division of labor in organizations.
- A few elite leaders make speedy and efficient decisions for the collective population.
- As incumbent leaders develop special skills and experience in running an organization, they become essential to the maintenance of the organization and other members of the organization are then unable to deprive them of power.
- As leaders within an organization develop a network of personal influence, they develop the formalized right to higher ranking positions in office, which increases the leader's power.
- As leaders in organizations acquire control of organizational finances, communications, evaluative procedures, leaders then can utilize all of these practices to their advantage.
- Leaders can thwart or absorb challengers, because they tend have higher degrees of unity with other leaders.
- Most "rank-and-file" members of organizations tend to be passive and apathetic regarding problems of the organization and willingly leave problems of leadership to individuals willing to assume them (Olson, 1968, p. 310).

Overall, it has been argued by many theorists that oligarchies or oligarchical tendencies exists in various organizations and other organized groups. In order to understand ways organizations or organized groups are impacted by oligarchy, a short review of literature is necessary. Finally, organizations or groups will be surveyed and include the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the British Communist Party, and women in professional fields.

Applications

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)

Within the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), evidence of oligarchy exists in three ways. First, the leadership and rank-and-file members are divided into two groups. These two groups are the drinkers or social members of the organizations and the leaders or "working members" of the organization. Between these two groups, evidence suggested that more respect was given to the "leadership group" or "working members." The working members generally hold positions of authority in the organization and are actively involved in work at the local, state, and national level. From a military perspective, many working members held non-commissioned officer ranks The respect given by the social group to the working group is not reciprocal, and in fact, research has shown that the relationship between the leadership group and the drinking group was met with contempt and hostility, because the "old boozers" were seen as impeding the growth and operation of the organization. In fact, drinking members were described as inarticulate, ill-informed, or were not at ease socially. They were only concerned with local club activity and during interviews quickly referred researchers to leaders who might answer in-depth questions regarding organizational structures, business and decision making. Based on these observations, researchers indicated that the phenomenon revealed during their case study demonstrated that Michels' observations regarding leadership in large organizations appeared to have validity (Fox & Arquitt, 1981, p. 207- 208).

Second, within the leadership ranks of the VFW, leadership positions were passed around. Examples of this phenomenon were indicated when several working members presently holding leadership positions introduced other members to researchers by saying, "You need to meet Jim. He's the next post commander after Sam does his time." Despite the fact that the organizational constitution outlined a democratic procedure for guaranteeing every member the right to hold office, both social members and working members could identify the next person to hold positions of leadership within the VFW. Moreover, potential leaders within the organization could maintain control of leadership by staying in the inner circle of other leaders. One post commander indicated,

> Certainly everyone has the same rights within the organization, but,…many people don't care. If we want to grow and become stronger we need to ensure that individuals who are aware and willing to work are those who are elected (Fox & Arquitt, 1981, p. 208).

An "old boys" network was also portrayed. All of these phenomena were indicative of Michels' claims that leaders legitimize their power base and seek to maintain power by passing power around a specific group of male individuals within the organization (p. 208-209).

Finally, ideological differences also presented support for Michels' law of oligarchy. Leaders within the group perceived the purpose and mission of the VFW was to protect veterans' rights. Secondary functions were indicated as national defense concerns, the promotion of patriotism, and charitable works. In contrast, the rank-and-file membership indicated their concern of maintaining a "congenial bar atmosphere" or to help veterans. As of 1981, a Political Action Committee had been voted into existence concerned with the protection of veterans' rights. However, according to researchers, the significant demarcation between leaders and rank-and-file membership created major differences in purpose and organizational philosophy, which further evidences the oligarchical nature of the organization (Fox & Arquitt, 1981, p. 209). Oligarchical tendencies can be further glimpsed in other organizations.

The British Communist Party

The British Communist Party of the Cold War era has been claimed to be more "oligarchical" than either the British Conservative or the Labour Party. In the British Communist Party, the line of power is not directed by the existence of a Parliamentary section of the Party. Within the British Communist Party, power is effectively retained by a narrow circle of leadership and maintained at the top of the hierarchy. In order to position themselves for leadership, minority factions within the British Communist Party must meet to discuss their ideas and arrive at common ground in order to ever be considered for leadership in the majority. Moreover, factions themselves exist for the purpose of concerted action, which restricts discussion or critiques of the Party through specific channels. Lastly, election policies within the Party are limited to a panel system, which exists to maintain power in the choice of the successor, rather than promoting power within the general electorate thereby controlling who become leaders within the Party and how leadership is applied. The Party itself consists of a body of full-time Party workers, who hold a formal meeting every week to control the day-to-day running of the Party and makes policy statements and other official duties. All of these operations are the main organizational devices for maintaining the oligarchy of the Party (Grainger, 1958) and across professions of both academic and professional orientation.

Women in Professional Fields

As Heward (1999) has observed, as the rise in the number of professional and managerial occupations have impacted labor markets and societies, (Perkin, 1989) power and the understanding and interpretation of power has dramatically changed (Johnson, 1972; Corfield, 1995). The role of women in this change has elicited much debate and greater controversy (Crompton, 1987; Witz, 1992). Research has indicated the three of the oldest professional occupations, the clergy, medicine, and the law, were earlier established as gendered oligarchies, with "their power legitimized by structural their structural interactions with the State and the universities" (Heward, 1999, p. 81). Moreover, professional organizations and associations were created that regulated and controlled these professions. Gidney and Miller (1994) reported that the state was heavily instrumental in establishing monopolies which dictated delivery of professional services and overviewed the "political" process which had to be followed in order for members to increase their professional interplay and status within the organizational structure (Heward, 1999).

As Heward (1999) has observed, all of these structures were exacerbated by the treatment of girls and the contrasts by which boys and girls have been historically educated. Girls received their education at home or in nearby girls' schools, and the content of their education was only rarely intellectual. While girls were taught to be selfless, boys were initiated into the "learned" professions. Savage (1992) has suggested that women attain managerial positions less frequently than men, and research from 1971 and 1981 indicates that, though women were increasingly holding professional jobs, they did not attain management positions as frequently as men. Education is one field that seems to buck some of gender trends of other professions. However, 1997 data from the Department of Education showed that, while the field of education has seen a rise in the number of professional women, their advancement in the field is still impeded, indicating that gendered oligarchies still exist. Even while women teachers outnumber men by 4.5 to 1 in elementary schools, only 1 in 12 women are headteachers while 1 in 3 men are (Evetts, 1991). In universities, the promotion of women is even more diminished. Women face a series of obstacles in gaining footing within academic circles. In order to advance in academic circles, women must self-promote and assert, which poses a dominance risk. Moreover, additional research indicates that men are mentored, advised, and supported in their careers by other men, while women are often not offered these resources and must pursue career opportunities without assistance (Bourdieu, 1988; Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; Bagihole, 1993; Heward, Taylor, & Vickers, 1997; and Brooks, 1997). All of these indicators points to the gendered oligarchical nature of the aforementioned professions.

Issues

Defining Oligarchy

Quite simply, oligarchy can be defined as "the rule of the few" (Leach, 2005, p. 315). However, comprised within this definition several questions must be answered. First, researchers have asked to clarify the definition of "rule." Others ponder the considerations that organizations must make to be considered oligarchic, and the accompanying actions that individuals must enact. Another question might be to consider if organizational leaders must hold an official position in the organization or if they can be merely "behind the scenes." Further inquiry can be discerned distinguishing primary differences between "ruling" and "leading" which can be further differentiated between the exercises of "power" contrasted with "influence."

Overall, one of the main issues regarding the definitions of oligarchy is the lack of specificity and clarity regarding definitional context. For example, as Leach (2005) has observed, one approach has treated oligarchy in structural terms, such as the "formal authority structure" (Schmidt, 1973; Stone, 1972; Zald & Ash, 1966; Michels, 1962; Lipset, Trow, & Coleman, 1956; Lipset, 1952). Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956) described oligarchy as a hegemonic system in which "one group, which controls the administration, usually retains power indefinitely, rarely faces organized opposition, and when faced with such opposition often resorts to undemocratic procedures to eliminate it" (p. 317). The authors concluded that political oligarchies can be prevented by implementing a two-party system. "Democracy," they argued, "in large measure rests on the fact that no one group is able to secure such a basis of power and command over the total allegiance of a majority of the population that it can effectively suppress or deny the claims of groups it opposes" (Coleman, 1956, p. 317). But, as Leach (2005) has noted, the problem with this definition is that "at the abstract level…[it] does treat democracy (and by implication, oligarchy as well) as a distribution of power—an oligarchy being essential any minority with enough power to suppress dissent. The problem is that power is only operationalized in structural terms" (p. 317). An oligarchy's power may be rooted in informal leaders, Leach contends, rather than produced by a formal hierarchy, and, if so, then an ostensibly democratic political system could still manifest oligarchical tendencies. In fact, history has shown that oligarchies are very often not politically based, but rather grounded in economic and cultural elites (Whitney, 2001; Dosal, 1995; Ramseyer & Rosenbluth, 1995; Hammer, 1986; Clark, 1977; Alba, 1968; and Wertenbaker, 1947).

Based on the definitions of legitimate and illegitimate forms of power a new definition of oligarchy can be derived, which is that "both authority and influence become oligarchic at the point where they become illegitimate and resistant to majority dissent" (Leach, 2005, p. 329). Moreover, "oligarchy is a concentration of entrenched illegitimate authority and/or influence in the hands of a minority, such that de facto what that minority wants is generally what comes to pass, even when it goes against the wishes (whether actively or passively expressed) of the majority" (Leach, 2005, p. 329). Additional research is necessary to test and determine this definition and potential applications in organizations, governmental entities, and non-profits or other volunteer associations.

Conclusion

As the field of organizational and leadership theory develops, external environments play an increasingly important role in the development of organizations, their role in society, and the relationship of the leadership in terms of organizational constructs and circumstances. Within this ever developing field, it seems that the iron law may actually be less hard and fast than social theorists originally thought. Therefore, additional research in the way in which bureaucracy functions in mature social movements is mandated. It seems that organizations might restructure, may gain new momentum, and might transform (Voss & Sherman, 2006, p. 345). For sociologists, the field of Leadership Studies or Organizational Psychology might be a natural academic extension for further research and to develop a deeper awareness in the way organizations are constructed and interact internally and externally. From a matter of public interest, research into our own democracy and oligarchical considerations might be indicated as it seems that some aspects of oligarchy have spilled over into United States governmental policies and practices. As a matter of public interest, it can be argued that it is the duty of every citizen of every government to understand and potentially impact their leaders and governmental operations.

Another area that should be considered for further research within the contexts of oligarchy is research into the impact of oligarchies and women's studies. Additional research should be concentrated on understanding the structural integration between the State, professions, and universities. Moreover, the maintenance of these structures in terms of the institutionalization of changing structures within gendered power relationships in the professions should also be examined. Thirdly, gendered professional identity and professional socialization is also another area for research consideration. Lastly, the differentiation between men and women in reputation building, networking, family issues, and sex and mobility should also be considered for further research and exploration by sociologists (Heward, 1999, p. 90). Clearly more work must be done in clarifying, researching, and understanding oligarchy, the nature of oligarchy, all aimed at potential revision of oligarchy and organizational constructs.

Terms & Concepts

Bureaucracy: An organizational system which contains a clear division of labor, an organizational hierarchy, and formal channels for communicating information.

Leaders: Leaders are as the central and controlling individuals in an organization seeking to limit their status to a small, elite group seeking to maintain their powerbase.

Michel's Law of Oligarchy: This law indicates that regardless of democratic ideologies and forms, organizations almost always evolve toward rule by an ingrained elite. Also known as the "iron law of oligarchy."

Oligarchies: Oligarchies are organizations or organized groups that are controlled by an elite group consisting of a few members.

Rank-and-File Members: Rank-and-file members are the non-leader actors in an organization.

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Essay by Sharon Link, Ph.D.

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