

Academy of Management Review, 1984, Vol. 9, No. 2, 284-293.

Toward a Model of Organizations as Interpretation Systems¹

RICHARD L. DAFT
Texas A&M University
KARL E. WEICK
Cornell University

A comparative model of organizations as interpretation systems is proposed. The model describes four interpretation modes: enacting, discovering, un-directed viewing, and conditioned viewing. Each mode is determined by (1) management's beliefs about the environment and (2) organizational intrusiveness. Interpretation modes are hypothesized to be associated with organizational differences in environmental scanning, equivocality reduction, strategy, and decision making.

Consider the game of 20 questions. Normally in this game one person leaves the room, the remaining people select a word that the person is to guess when he/she returns, and the only clue given about the word is whether it signifies an animal, vegetable, or mineral. The person trying to guess the word asks up to 20 questions that can be answered yes or no in an effort to guess what the word is. Each question is designed to provide new information about the correct word. Together, the questions and answers are the process by which an interpretation is built up by the person who is "it."

Organizations play 20 questions. Organizations have limited time and questions, and they strive for the answer. The answer is discovering what consumers want that other organizations do not provide. The answer is finding that there is a market for pet rocks, roller skates, encounter groups, erasable ball-point pens, or zero population growth. Many organizations presume that there is a correct answer to the puzzle of 20 questions. They query the environment with samples, market surveys, and test markets. They may establish specialized scanning departments that use trend analysis, media content analysis, and econometric modeling to obtain answers about the external environment. These organizations try to find

an acceptable answer before their resources run out, before competitors corner the market, before people's interests change, or before more compelling opportunities in other environmental sectors dominate the search.

All of these activities, whether in organizations or in 20 questions, represent a form of interpretation. People are trying to interpret what they have done, define what they have learned, solve the problem of what they should do next. Building up interpretations about the environment is a basic requirement of individuals and organizations. The process of building the interpretation may be influenced by such things as the nature of the answer sought, the characteristics of the environment, the previous experience of the questioner, and the method used to acquire it.

Why Interpretation?

Pondy and Mitroff (1979) recently reminded organizational scientists that organizations have characteristics typical of level 8 on Boulding's (1956) 9-level scale of system complexity. Boulding concluded that organizations are among the most complex systems imaginable. Organizations are vast, fragmented and multidimensional. Pondy and Mitroff argue that most empirical research is at Boulding's level 1 to 3, which assumes that organizations behave as static frameworks or mechanical systems.

¹This paper is an extension of Weick and Daft (1983). The preparation of this manuscript was supported by the Office of Naval Research grant N00014-83-C-0025.

One purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptualization of organizations that is at a higher level of system complexity and incorporates organizational activities and variables that have not been captured in other approaches (Weick & Daft, 1983). The critical issue for interpretation systems is to differentiate into highly specialized information receptors that interact with the environment. Information about the external world must be obtained, filtered, and processed into a central nervous system of sorts, in which choices are made. The organization must find ways to know the environment. Interpretation is a critical element that distinguishes human organizations from lower level systems.

A second purpose of this paper is to integrate diverse ideas and empirical facts that pertain to organizational interpretation of the environment. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) reviewed the literature on organization and environment relationships. They concluded that scanning is a key topic for explaining organizational behavior, yet practically no research had been reported on environmental scanning processes. There also is little understanding of the interpretation process and the organizational configurations that may enhance interpretation. The scarcity of empirical studies remains, although a few findings have been reported in diverse areas, such as organization theory, policy and strategy, futures research, and planning. The consolidation of these ideas and the organization of them into a model of interpretation system characteristics may provide a stimulus for future research into scanning and interpretation processes.

Working Assumptions

Any approach to the study of organizations is built on specific assumptions about the nature of organizations and how they are designed and function. Four specific assumptions underlie the model presented in this paper and clarify the logic and rationale on which the interpretation system approach is based.

The most basic assumption, consistent with Boulding's scale of system complexity, is that organizations are open social systems that process information from the environment. The environment contains some level of uncertainty, so the organization must seek information and then base organizational action on that information. Organizations must develop information processing mechanisms capable of detecting trends, events, competitors, markets, and technological developments relevant to their survival.

The second assumption concerns individual versus organizational interpretations. Individual human beings send and receive information and in other ways carry out the interpretation process. Organization theorists realize that organizations do not have mechanisms separate from individuals to set goals, process information, or perceive the environment. People do these things. Yet in this paper it is assumed that the organizational interpretation process is something more than what occurs by individuals. Organizations have cognitive systems and memories (Hedberg, 1981). Individuals come and go, but organizations preserve knowledge, behaviors, mental maps, norms, and values over time. The distinctive feature of organization level information activity is sharing. A piece of data, a perception, a cognitive map is shared among managers who constitute the interpretation system. Passing a startling observation among members, or discussing a puzzling development, enables managers to converge on an approximate interpretation. Managers may not agree fully about their perceptions (Starbuck, 1976), but the thread of coherence among managers is what characterizes organizational interpretations. Reaching convergence among members characterizes the act of organizing (Weick, 1979) and enables the organization to interpret as a system.

The third assumption is that strategic-level managers formulate the organization's interpretation. When one speaks of organizational interpretation one really means interpretation by a relatively small group at the top of the organizational hierarchy. A large number of people may span the boundary with the external environment (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Leifer & Debeq, 1978), and this information is channeled into the organization. Organizations can be conceptualized as a series of nested systems, and each subsystem may deal with a different external sector. Upper managers bring together and interpret information for the system as a whole. Many participants may play some part in scanning or data processing, but the point at which information converges and is interpreted for organization level action is assumed to be at the top manager level. This assumption is consistent with Aguilar's (1967) observation that below the vice presidential level, participants are not informed on issues pertaining to the organization as a whole.

The fourth assumption is that organizations differ systematically in the mode or process by which

they interpret the environment. Organizations develop specific ways to know the environment. Interpretation processes are not random. Systematic variations occur based on organization and environmental characteristics, and the interpretation process may in turn influence organizational outcomes such as strategy, structure, and decision making. For example, Aguilar (1967) interviewed managers about their sources of environmental information. He concluded that scanning behavior might vary according to the breadth or narrowness of the organization's viewing and also by the extent of formal search. Other authors have suggested that institutional scanning can be classified as regular or irregular (Fahey & King, 1977; Leifer & Delbecq, 1978) or by the extent to which organizations passively perceive the environment versus creating or enacting external reality (Weick, 1979; Weick & Daft, 1983).

Definition of Interpretation

Organizations must make interpretations. Managers literally must wade into the ocean of events that surround the organization and actively try to make sense of them. Organization participants physically act on these events, attending to some of them, ignoring most of them, and talking to other people to see what they are doing (Braybrooke, 1964). Interpretation is the process of translating these events, of developing models for understanding, of bringing out meaning, and of assembling conceptual schemes among key managers.

The interpretation process in organizations is neither simple nor well understood. There are many interpretation images in the literature, including scanning, monitoring, sense making, interpretation, understanding, and learning (Duncan & Weiss, 1979; Hedberg, 1981; Weick, 1979; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). These concepts can be roughly organized into three stages that constitute the overall learning process, as reflected in Figure 1. The first stage is *scanning*, which is defined as the process of monitoring the environment and providing environmental data

to managers. Scanning is concerned with data collection. The organization may use formal data collection systems, or managers may acquire data about the environment through personal contacts.

Interpretation occurs in the second stage in Figure 1. Data are given meaning. Here the human mind is engaged. Perceptions are shared and cognitive maps are constructed. An information coalition of sorts is formed. The organization experiences interpretation when a new construct is introduced into the collective cognitive map of the organization. Organizational *interpretation* is formally defined as the process of translating events and developing shared understanding and conceptual schemes among members of upper management. Interpretation gives meaning to data, but it occurs before organizational learning and action.

Learning, the third stage, is distinguished from interpretation by the concept of action. Learning involves a new response or action based on the interpretation (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Organizational *learning* is defined as the process by which knowledge about action outcome relationships between the organization and the environment is developed (Duncan & Weiss, 1979). Learning is a process of putting cognitive theories into action (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Hedberg, 1981). Organizational interpretation is analogous to learning a new skill by an individual. The act of learning also provides new data for interpretation. Feedback from organizational actions may provide new collective insights for coalition members. Thus the three stages are interconnected through a feedback loop in Figure 1.

Figure 1 and the definitions of scanning, interpretation, and learning oversimplify complex processes. Factors such as beliefs, politics, goals, and perceptions may complicate the organizational learning cycle (Staw, 1980). The purpose of Figure 1 is to illustrate the relationship of interpretation to scanning and learning as the basis for a model of organizational interpretation.

Figure 1
Relationships Among Organizational Scanning, Interpretation, and Learning



Toward a Model of Organizational Interpretation

Two key dimensions are used here to explain organizational interpretation differences. They are: (1) management's beliefs about the analyzability of the external environment and (2) the extent to which the organization intrudes into the environment to understand it. The proposed model provides a way to describe and explain the diverse ways organizations may obtain knowledge about the environment.

Assumptions About the Environment

Many organizations undoubtedly play the interpretation game with the goal of finding the correct answer, just as in the game of 20 questions. The game of 20 questions, however, is of limited value as a metaphor because there is one way in which it mocks many organizational worlds. Many organizations have nothing that corresponds to "the answer." In everyday life the act of questioning may be much more influential in determining the correct answer than is the case with the clear-cut roles of asking and answering and the fixed answer present in the conventional version of 20 questions.

The game, 20 questions, becomes more typical with a variation suggested by the physicist John Wheeler. Once the player leaves the room so that those remaining can choose the word, the game unfolds in a different fashion.

While he is gone the other players decide to alter the rules. They will select no word at all; instead each of them will answer "yes" or "no" as he pleases—provided he has a word in mind that fits both his own reply and all the previous replies. The outsider returns and, unsuspecting, begins asking questions. At last he makes a guess: "Is the word 'clouds'?" Yes, comes the answer, and the players explain the game (*Newsweek*, 1979, p. 62).

When the questioner began, he assumed the answer already existed. Yet the answer was created through the questions raised. If the player asked different questions, a different answer would emerge.

If some organizations play 20 questions in the traditional way, seeking the correct answer already in the environment, and if others play 20 questions John Wheeler's way, constructing an answer, then there is an interesting difference in interpretation behavior. This difference reflects the organization's assumption about the analyzability of its environment.

If an organization assumes that the external environment is concrete, that events and processes are

hard, measurable, and determinant, then it will play the traditional game to discover the "correct" interpretation. The key for this organization is discovery through intelligence gathering, rational analysis, vigilance, and accurate measurement. This organization will utilize linear thinking and logic and will seek clear data and solutions.

When an organization assumes that the external environment is unanalyzable, an entirely different strategy will apply. The organization to some extent may create the external environment. The key is to construct, coerce, or enact a reasonable interpretation that makes previous action sensible and suggests some next steps. The interpretation may shape the environment more than the environment shapes the interpretation. The interpretation process is more personal, less linear, more ad hoc and improvisational than for other organizations. The outcome of this process may include the ability to deal with equivocality, to coerce an answer useful to the organization, to invent an environment and be part of the invention.

What factors explain differences in organizational beliefs about the environment? The answer is hypothesized to be characteristics of the environment combined with management's previous interpretation experience. When the environment is subjective, difficult to penetrate, or changing (Duncan, 1972), managers will see it as less analyzable (Perrow, 1967; Tung, 1979). Wilensky's (1967) work on intelligence gathering in government organizations detected major differences in the extent to which environments were seen as rationalized, that is subject to discernible, predictable uniformities in relationships among significant objects. In one organization studied by Aguilar (1967), managers assumed an analyzable environment because of previous experience. Accurate forecasts were possible because product demand was directly correlated to petroleum demand, which in turn was correlated to well defined trends such as population growth, auto sales, and gasoline consumption. However, for a similar organization in another industry, systematic data collection and analysis were not used. Statistical trends had no correlation with product demand or capital spending. Facts and figures were not consistent with the unanalyzable assumptions about the environment. Soft, qualitative data, along with judgment and intuition, had a larger role in the interpretation process.

Organizational Intrusiveness

The second major difference among interpretation systems is the extent to which organizations actively intrude into the environment. Some organizations actively search the environment for an answer. They allocate resources to search activities. They hire technically oriented MBAs; build planning, forecasting, or special research departments; or even subscribe to monitoring services (Thomas, 1980). In extreme cases, organizations may send agents into the field (Wilensky, 1967). Organizational search also may include testing or manipulating the environment. These organizations may leap before they look, perform trials in order to learn what an error is, and discover what is feasible by testing presumed constraints. Forceful organizations may break presumed rules, try to change the rules, or try to manipulate critical factors in the environment (Kotter, 1979; Pfeffer, 1976). A survey of major corporations found that many of them established departments and mechanisms for searching and/or creating environments (Thomas, 1980). These organizations might be called test makers (Weick & Daft, 1983), and they will develop interpretations quite different from organizations that behave in a passive way.

Passive organizations accept whatever information the environment gives them. These organizations do not engage in trial and error. They do not actively search for the answer in the environment. They do not have departments assigned to discover or manipulate the environment. They may set up receptors to sense whatever data happen to flow by the organization. By accepting the environment as given, these organizations become test avoiders (Weick, 1979). They interpret the environment within accepted limits.

Research evidence suggests that many organizations are informal and unsystematic in their interpretation of the environment (Fahey & King, 1977). These organizations tend to accept the environment as given and respond actively only when a crisis occurs. For a crisis, the organization might search out new information or consciously try to influence external events. Other organizations actively search the environment on a continuous basis (Aguilar, 1967; Wilensky, 1967). Organizations thus differ widely in the active versus passive approach toward interpretation.

One explanation of differential intrusion into the environment is conflict between organization and

environment. Wilensky (1967) argued that when the environment is perceived as hostile or threatening, or when the organization depends heavily on the environment, more resources are allocated to the intelligence gathering function. Organizations attempt to develop multiple lines of inquiry into the environment. In the corporate world, intense competition or resource scarcity will lead to allocation of more resources into interpretation-related functions. Organizations in benevolent environments have weaker incentives to be intrusive (Child, 1974; Hedberg, 1981). Only rarely do organizations in benevolent environments use their slack resources for trial and error experimentation or formal search. A hostile environment generates increased search because of new problems and a perceived need to develop new opportunities and niches. More exhaustive information is needed.

Another explanation of different levels of intrusion is organizational age and size (Kimberly & Miles, 1980). New, young organizations typically begin their existence as test makers. They try new things and actively seek information about their limited environment. Gradually, over time, the organization interpretation system begins to accept the environment rather than searching or testing its boundaries. New organizations are disbelievers, are unindoctrinated, and have less history to rely on. They are more likely to dive in and develop a niche that established organizations have failed to see. But as the organization grows and as time passes, the environment may be perceived as less threatening, so search will decrease.

The Model

Based on the idea that organizations may vary in their beliefs about the environment and in their intrusiveness into the environment, organizations can be categorized according to interpretation modes. The two underlying dimensions are used as the basis for an interpretation system model, presented in Figure 2, which describes four categories of interpretation behavior.

The *enacting* mode reflects both an active, intrusive strategy and the assumption that the environment is unanalyzable. These organizations construct their own environments. They gather information by trying new behaviors and seeing what happens. They experiment, test, and stimulate, and they ignore precedent, rules, and traditional expectations. This or-

Figure 2
Model of Organizational Interpretation Modes

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ENVIRONMENT	Unanalyzable	UNDIRECTED VIEWING Constrained interpretations. Nonroutine, informal data. Hunch, rumor, chance opportunities.	ENACTING Experimentation, testing, coercion, invent environ- ment. Learn by doing.
	Analyzable	CONDITIONED VIEWING Interprets within traditional boundaries. Passive detec- tion. Routine, formal data.	DISCOVERING Formal search. Questioning, surveys, data gathering. Ac- tive detection.
		Passive	Active
ORGANIZATIONAL INTRUSIVENESS			

ganization is highly activated, perhaps under the belief that it must be so in order to succeed. This type of organization tends to develop and market a product, such as polaroid cameras, based on what it thinks it can sell. An organization in this mode tends to construct markets rather than waiting for an assessment of demand to tell it what to produce. These organizations, more than others, tend to display the enactment behavior described by Weick (1979).

The *discovering* mode also represents an intrusive organization, but the emphasis is on detecting the correct answer already in an analyzable environment rather than on shaping the answer. Carefully devised measurement probes are sent into the environment to relay information back to the organization. This organization uses market research, trend analysis, and forecasting to predict problems and opportunities. Formal data determine organizational interpretations about environmental characteristics and expectations. Discovering organizations are similar to organizations that rely on formal search procedures for information (Aguilar, 1967) and in which staff analysts are used extensively to gather and analyze data (Wilensky, 1967).

Organizations characterized as *conditioned viewing* (Aguilar, 1967) assume an analyzable environment and are not intrusive. They tend to rely on established data collection procedures, and the interpretations are developed within traditional boundaries. The environment is perceived as objective and benevolent, so the organization does not take unusual steps to learn about the environment. The viewing is conditioned in the sense that it is limited to the routine documents, reports, publications, and infor-

mation systems that have grown up through the years. The view of the environment is limited to these traditional sources. At some time historically, these data were perceived as important, and the organization is now conditioned to them. Organizations in this category use procedures similar to the regular scanning of limited sectors described by Fahey and King (1977).

Undirected viewing (Aguilar, 1967) reflects a similar passive approach, but these organizations do not rely on hard, objective data because the environment is assumed to be unanalyzable. Managers act on limited, soft information to create their perceived environment. These organizations are not conditioned by formal management systems within the organization, and they are open to a variety of cues about the environment from many sources. Managers in these organizations are like the ones Aguilar (1967) found that relied on information obtained through personal contacts and causal information encounters. Fahey and King (1977) also found some organizational information gatherings to be irregular and based on chance opportunities.

Examples of conditioned and undirected viewing modes have been illustrated by clothing companies in England (Daft & Macintosh, 1978). These companies developed different interpretation systems over time, although they were in a similar industry. Top management in the conditioned viewing organization used a data collection system to record routinely such things as economic conditions, past sales, and weather forecasts. These data were used to predict sales and to schedule production. These systems had grown up over the years and were used routinely to interpret problems that occurred. The other

company gathered information from personal contacts with a few store buyers, salesmen, and informants in other companies. Managers also visited a few stores to observe and discuss in a casual manner what seemed to be selling. This company used undirected viewing. Interpretation was based on a variety of subjective cues that happened to be available.

Another example of interpretation styles is illustrated by the relationship between corporations and their shareholders (Keim, 1981). A few corporations actively influence and shape shareholder attitudes. The enacting organization may try to manipulate shareholder perceptions toward itself, environmental issues, or political candidates by sending information to shareholders through various media. Discovery-oriented corporations actively stay in touch with shareholders to learn what they are thinking, and they conduct surveys or use other devices to discover attitudes. A few corporations handle the shareholder relationships through routine data transactions (stockholder voting, mailing out dividend checks), which is typical of conditioned viewing. Finally, some corporations rely on informal, personal contact with shareholders (undirected viewing). Managers use whatever opportunities arise (annual meetings, telephone contact about complaints and questions) to learn shareholders' opinions and to adapt to those opinions.

Other Organizational Characteristics

The model can be completed by making predictions about other organizational characteristics associated with interpretation modes. The predictions pertain to: (1) scanning and data characteristics; (2) the interpretation process within the organization; and (3) the strategy and decision processes that characterize each mode. The predicted relationships with interpretation modes are shown in Figure 3.

Scanning Characteristics

Scanning characteristics pertain to the nature and acquisition of data for top management about the environment. The data may vary by source and acquisition, depending on the interpretation mode of the organization.

1. Data Sources. Data about the environment can come to managers from external or internal sources, and from personal or impersonal sources (Aguilar, 1967; Daft & Lengel, in press; Keegan, 1974). Sources are external when managers have direct contact with

information outside the organization. Internal sources pertain to data collected about the environment by other people in the organization and then provided to managers through internal channels. Personal sources involve direct contact with other individuals. Impersonal sources pertain to written documentation such as newspapers and magazines or reports from the organization's information system.

Generally, the less analyzable the perceived external environment the greater the tendency for managers to use external information gained from personal contact with other managers. Organizations characterized as undirected viewing will obtain most of their information from the relationship of senior managers with colleagues in the environment (Keegan, 1974). Managers in enacting organizations also will use personal observations to a large extent, although this information often will be obtained through experimentation and from trying to impose ideas on the environment. When the environment is analyzable, a larger percentage of the data will be conveyed through the management information system. The discovering organization also will use internal, formal reports, although these reports are the outcome of specialized inquiries rather than a routine, periodic reporting system.

2. Data Acquisition. Organizational mechanisms for acquiring information and the regularity of acquisition are other distinguishing characteristics of organizational scanning (Fahey & King, 1977). Discovering organizations will allocate many resources to data acquisition. Special departments typically will be used to survey and study the environment. Regular reports and special studies will go to top managers. Conditioned viewing organizations will have regular reports available through the formal information system of the organization. These organizations will devote few resources to external scanning.

Undirected viewing organizations will make little use of formal management information. Data will tend to be irregular and casual. Scanning departments are not needed; formal reports will be ad hoc and irregular. The enacting organization also will use data that are somewhat irregular and will reflect feedback about selected environmental initiatives. The general pattern across organizations is that environmental information is more regular when the environment is analyzable, and more studies and information are available when the organization is active in information acquisition.

Figure 3
Relationship Between Interpretation Modes and Organizational Processes

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ENVIRONMENT	Unanalyzable	<p>UNDIRECTED VIEWING Scanning Characteristics: 1. Data sources: external, personal. 2. Acquisition: no scanning department, irregular contacts and reports, casual information. Interpretation Process: 1. Much equivocality reduction 2. Few rules, many cycles Strategy and Decision Making: 1. Strategy: reactor. 2. Decision process: coalition building.</p>	<p>ENACTING Scanning Characteristics: 1. Data sources: external, personal. 2. Acquisition: no department, irregular reports and feedback from environment, selective information. Interpretation Process: 1. Some equivocality reduction 2. Moderate rules and cycles Strategy and Decision Making: 1. Strategy: prospector. 2. Decision process: incremental trial and error.</p>
	Analyzable	<p>CONDITIONED VIEWING Scanning Characteristics: 1. Data sources: internal, impersonal. 2. Acquisition: no department, although regular record keeping and information systems, routine information. Interpretation Process: 1. Little equivocality reduction 2. Many rules, few cycles Strategy and Decision Making: 1. Strategy: defender. 2. Decision process: programmed, problemistic search.</p>	<p>DISCOVERING Scanning Characteristics: 1. Data sources: internal, impersonal. 2. Acquisition: Separate departments, special studies and reports, extensive information. Interpretation Process: 1. Little equivocality reduction 2. Many rules, moderate cycles Strategy and Decision Making: 1. Strategy: analyzer. 2. Decision process: systems analysis, computation.</p>
		Passive	Active
ORGANIZATIONAL INTRUSIVENESS			

Interpretation Process

Interpretation pertains to the process by which managers translate data into knowledge and understanding about the environment. This process will vary according to the means for equivocality reduction and the assembly rules that govern information processing behavior among managers.

1. *Equivocality Reduction.* Equivocality is the extent to which data are unclear and suggest multiple interpretations about the environment (Daft & Macintosh, 1981; Weick, 1979). Managers in all organizations will experience some equivocality in their data. Equivocality reduction will be greatest in organizations characterized as undirected viewing. External cues of a personal nature are subject to multiple interpretations. Managers will discuss these cues extensively to arrive at a common interpretation. Equivocality is reduced through shared observations and discussion until a common grammar and course of action can be agreed on (Weick, 1979). The enacting organization also will experience high equivocality, which will be reduced more on the basis of taking action to see what works than by interpreting events in the environment. Information equivocality generally is lower in the conditioned viewing and discovering organizations. Some equivocality reduction takes place before the data reach managers. Spe-

cialists will routinize the data for periodic reports and perform systematic analyses and special studies. The data thus provide a more uniform stimulus to managers, and less discussion is needed to reach a common interpretation.

2. *Assembly Rules.* Assembly rules are the procedures or guides that organizations use to process data into a collective interpretation. The content of these rules and the extent to which they are enforced depend on the organization. Generally, the greater the equivocality in the data, the fewer the number of rules used to arrive at an interpretation. Conversely, the smaller the perceived equivocality of data entering the organization, the greater the number of rules used to assemble the interpretation (Weick, 1979).

Fewer rules are used for equivocal information inputs because there is uncertainty as to exactly what the information means. Only a small number of rather general rules can be used to assemble the process. If the input is less equivocal, there is more certainty as to what the item is and how it should be handled. Hence a greater number of rules can be assigned to handle the data and assemble an interpretation (Putnam & Sorenson, 1982).

The number of information cycles among top management follows a similar logic. The greater the

equivocality, the more times the data may be cycled among members before a common interpretation is reached. The lower the equivocality, the fewer cycles needed. The number of assembly rules and cycles tends to be inversely related.

Undirected viewing organizations, which receive equivocal information, will have few rules but will use many internal cycles during the course of assembling an interpretation. By contrast, managers within a directed viewing organization receive unequivocal information that will be handled according to numerous rules, but few cycles are needed to reach a common understanding. The discovering organization also will use many rules, although a moderate number of cycles may be needed because of some equivocality in the reports and data presented to managers. The equivocality in interpreting the success of initiatives in the enacting organization will be associated with the moderate number of assembly rules and information cycles.

Strategy Formulation and Decision Making

The variables described above are directly related to the scanning and interpretation behaviors through which organizations learn about and make sense of the external environment. Two additional variables—strategy formulation and decision making—may be associated with interpretation modes. The hypothesized relationships with interpretation modes also are shown in Figure 3.

1. Strategy Formulation. Miles and Snow (1978) proposed that corporations can be organized according to four types of strategies: prospector, analyzer, defender, and reactor. Strategy formulation is the responsibility of top management and thus may be related to environmental conditions that are similar to interpretation modes. The prospector strategy reflects a high level of initiative with regard to the environment. The environment is seen as changing and as containing opportunities. The organization develops new products and undertakes new initiatives. This is consistent with the enacting mode of interpretation. The analyzer organization is more careful. It is concerned with maintaining a stable core of activities but with occasional innovations on the periphery if the environment permits. This strategy is consistent with the discovering orientation, in which the organization studies the environment and moves ahead only in a careful, constrained way.

The defender strategy is one in which top manage-

ment perceives the environment as analyzable and stable and the management is determined to protect what it has. This organization is concerned with maintaining traditional markets and is focused on internal efficiency rather than on external relationships. The defender strategy will tend to be related to the conditioned viewing mode of interpretation. Finally, the reactor strategy is not really a strategy at all. The organization moves along, more or less accepting what comes. This organization will react to seemingly random changes in the environment. Scanning behavior in this organization is based on casual data from personal contact rather than from specialized information systems. The reactor strategy will be associated with the interpretation mode classified as undirected viewing.

2. Decision Making. The organizational literature suggests that organizations make decisions in various ways. Organizational decisions may be influenced by coalition building and political processing (Cyert & March, 1963); by incremental decision steps (Lindblom, 1959; Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Théoret, 1976); by systems analysis and rational procedures (Leavitt, 1975); and by programmed responses to routine problems (March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1960). Decision making generally is part of the information and interpretation processes in organizations; it thus is posed that decision processes may be associated with interpretation modes.

In undirected viewing organizations, the environment is not analyzable. Factors cannot be rationalized to the point of using rational decision models. Managers respond to divergent, personal cues, and extensive discussion and coalition building are required to agree on a single interpretation and course of action. Managers will spend time making sense of what happened and reaching agreements about problems before proceeding to a solution.

In enacting organizations, by contrast, a more assertive decision style will appear. The enacting organization does not have precedent to follow. A good idea, arrived at subjectively, may be implemented to see if it works. Enacting organizations utilize the trial and error incremental process described by Mintzberg et al. (1976). When organizations decide on a course of action, they design a custom solution and try it. If the solution does not work, they have to recycle and try again. Enacting organizations move ahead incrementally and gain information about the environment by trying behaviors and seeing what works.

Discovering organizations also take an active approach, but they assume that the environment is analyzable. Here the emphasis is on rational understanding. Systems analysis will be an important decision tool. Operational researchers and other staff personnel will perform computations on environmental data and weigh alternatives before proceeding. This organization's decision process will be characterized by logic and analysis. Solutions will not be tried until alternatives have been carefully weighed.

Finally, directed viewing organizations may be considered the easiest situation for decision makers. The organization is passive and operates in an analyzable environment. Decision making by managers is programmed. Programs are built into the organization to describe reactions to external events based on previous experience. Rules and regulations cover most activities and are applied unless a genuine crisis erupts. Crises will be rare, but if one occurs, managers will respond with problemistic search (March & Simon, 1958). Problemistic search means that the organization performs a local search through its immediate memory bank for a solution. Only after exhausting traditional responses will the organization move toward a new response of some sort.

Implications

The purpose of this paper is to present a model of organizations as interpretation systems and to bring together a number of ideas that are related to interpretation behavior. The two variables underlying the model are (1) management's beliefs about the analyzability of the external environment and (2) organizational intrusiveness. These variables are consistent with empirical investigations of interpretation behavior (Aguilar, 1967; Wilensky, 1967), and they are the basis for four modes of interpretation—enacting, discovering, undirected viewing, and conditioned viewing. The model explains interpretation behaviors ranging from environmental enactment to passive observation. The model also makes predictions about scanning characteristics, interpretation processes, and top management strategy and decision behavior.

The model is proposed as a set of tentative hypotheses for future test. Evidence in the literature does support the general framework, but the specific predictions remain to be tested. The model might best be characterized as an initial organization of ideas about scanning and interpretation behavior, and it

has implications for research and the practice of management.

Organizational Research. The implications of the interpretation system model for organizational research are two-fold. First, the interpretation system perspective is concerned with high level processes on Boulding's system hierarchy (Daft, 1980; Pondy & Mitroff, 1978). An organization might be viewed as a framework, control system, or open system by organization scholars. The interpretation system view is concerned with specialized information reception, equivocality reduction, and sensemaking. This perspective represents a move away from mechanical and biological metaphors of organizations. Organizations are more than transformation processes or control systems. To survive, organizations must have mechanisms to interpret ambiguous events and to provide meaning and direction for participants. Organizations are meaning systems, and this distinguishes them from lower level systems.

Perhaps the process of interpretation is so familiar that it is taken for granted, which may be why little research on this topic has been reported. But interpretation may be one of the most important functions organizations perform. Indeed, the second research implication of the interpretation system perspective is that scanning and sensemaking activities are at the center of things. Almost every other organizational activity or outcome is in some way contingent on interpretation. For example, one of the widely held tenets in organization theory is that the external environment will influence organization structure and design (Duncan, 1972; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Tung, 1979). But that relationship can be manifested only if participants within the organization sense and interpret the environment and respond to it. Almost all outcomes in terms of organization structure and design, whether caused by the environment, technology, or size, depend on the interpretation of problems or opportunities by key decision makers. Once interpretation occurs, the organization can formulate a response. Many activities in organizations, whether under the heading of structure, decision making, strategy formulation, organizational learning, goal setting, or innovation and change, may be connected to the mode of interpreting the external environment.

The paradox is that research into environment-structure relationships gives scant attention to interpretation. An issue that seems crucial for explaining

the why of organizational form has produced little systematic research. One value of the model proposed here, then, is the introduction of an interpretation model and set of relationships as candidates for empirical research in the future.

Management. The interpretation system model has two implications for managers. First, it says that the job of management is to interpret, not to do the operational work of the organization. The model calls attention to the need in organizations to make sense of things, to be aware of external events, and to translate cues into meaning for organizational participants. Managers, especially top managers, are responsible for this process and are actively involved in it. Managers may do interpretations spontaneously and intuitively, without realizing their role in defining the environment for other participants. One implication is for managers to think of organizations as interpretation systems and to take seriously their roles as interpreters.

The other implication of the model is that it provides a comparative perspective for managers. The model calls attention to interpretation modes managers may not have thought of before. If managers have spent their organizational lives in a discovery-oriented interpretation system, using relatively sophisticated monitoring systems, they might want to consider modifying these activities toward a more subjective approach. The external environment may not be as analyzable as they assume. Discovery-oriented managers could consider intuition and hunch in some situations and decide to launch test markets instead of market surveys. On the other hand, passive, conditioned viewers might be encouraged to try breaking established rules and patterns to see what happens. The value of any comparative model is that it provides new alternatives. Managers can understand where they are as opposed to where they would like to be. Managers may find that they can create a new and valuable display of the environment by adopting new interpretation assumptions and modes.

Conclusion

Any model is itself a somewhat arbitrary interpretation imposed on organized activity. Any model involves trade-offs and unavoidable weaknesses. The greatest weakness in the model presented in this paper is reflected in Thorngate's (1976) postulate of commensurate complexity. His postulate states that a theory of social behavior cannot be simultaneously general, accurate, and simple. Two of the three characteristics are possible, but only at a loss to the third. The model in this paper has attempted to be general and simple, and the trade-off is a model that is not very accurate at specifying details. The loss in precision may not be all bad, however. An interpretation system is an awesomely complex human social activity that may not be amenable to precise measurement at this point in development (Daft & Wiginton, 1979). To design a model that is precise and accurate may be to lose the phenomenon of interest.

Interpretation is the process through which information is given meaning and actions are chosen. Even in the most objective environments, the interpretation process may not be easy. People in organizations are talented at normalizing deviant events, at reconciling outliers to a central tendency, at producing plausible displays, at making do with scraps of information, at translating equivocality into feasible alternatives, and at treating as sufficient whatever information is at hand (Weick & Daft, 1983). The result of these human tendencies is that the organization can build up workable interpretations from scraps that consolidate and inform other bits and pieces of data. The process and the outcomes are a good deal less tidy than many have come to appreciate with current models and assumptions about organizations. The ideas proposed in this paper suggest a new viewpoint—perhaps a starting point of sorts—from which to interpret the richness and complexity of organizational activity.

References

- Aguilar, F. *Scanning the business environment*. New York: Macmillan, 1967.
- Aldrich, H., & Herker, D. Boundary spanning roles and organizational structure. *Academy of Management Review*, 1977, 2, 217-230.
- Argyris, C., & Schon, D. A. *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978.
- Boulding, K. E. General systems theory: The skeleton of a science. *Management Science*, 1956, 2, 197-207.
- Braybrooke, D. The mystery of executive success re-examined. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1964, 8, 533-560.
- Child, J. Organization, management and adaptiveness. Working paper, University of Aston, 1974.

- Cyert, R. M., & March, J. G. *A behavioral theory of the firm*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963.
- Daft, R. L. The evolution of organization analysis in *ASQ: 1959-1979*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1980, 25, 623-636.
- Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H. Information richness: A new approach to manager behavior and organization design. In B. Staw & L. L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (Vol. 6). Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, in press.
- Daft, R. L., & Macintosh, N. B. A new approach to design and use of management information. *California Management Review*, 1978, 21(1), 82-92.
- Daft, R. L., & Macintosh, N. B. A tentative exploration into the amount and equivocality of information processing in organizational work units. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1981, 26, 207-224.
- Daft, R. L., & Wiginton, J. C. Language and organization. *Academy of Management Review*, 1979, 4, 179-192.
- Duncan, R. B. Characteristics of organizational environments and perceived environmental uncertainty. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1972, 17, 313-327.
- Duncan, R. B., & Weiss, A. Organizational learning: Implications for organizational design. In B. Staw (Ed.), *Research in organizational behavior* (Vol. 1). Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1979, 75-123.
- Fahey, L., & King, W. R. Environmental scanning for corporate planning. *Business Horizons*, 1971, 20(4), 61-71.
- Hedberg, B. How organizations learn and unlearn. In P. Nystrom & W. Starbuck (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational design*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, 1-27.
- Keegan, W. J. Multinational scanning: A study of information sources utilized by headquarters executives in multinational companies. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1974, 19, 411-421.
- Keim, G. D. Foundations of a political strategy for business. *California Management Review*, 1981, 23, 41-48.
- Kimberly, J. R., & Miles, R. H. *The organizational life cycle*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980.
- Kotter, J. P. Managing external dependence. *Academy of Management Review*, 1979, 4, 87-92.
- Leavitt, H. J. Beyond the analytic manager: I. *California Management Review*, 1975, 17(3), 5-12.
- Leifer, R. T., & Delbecq, A. Organizational/environmental interchange: A model of boundaries spanning activity. *Academy of Management Review*, 1978, 3, 40-50.
- Lindblom, C. The science of "muddling through." *Public Administration Review*, 1959, 19(2), 79-88.
- March, J. G., & Simon, H. A. *Organizations*. New York: Wiley, 1958.
- Miles, R. E., & Snow, C. C. *Organizational strategy, structure and process*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978.
- Mintzberg, H., Raizinghani, D., & Thoret, A. The structure of "unstructured" decision processes. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1976, 21, 246-275.
- Newsweek*, March 12, 1979, 62.
- Perrow, C. A framework for the comparative analysis of organizations. *American Sociological Review*, 1967, 32, 194-208.
- Pfeffer, J. Beyond management and the worker: The institutional function of management. *Academy of Management Review*, 1976, 1(2), 36-46.
- Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. R. *The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.
- Pondy, L. R., & Mitroff, I. I., Beyond open systems models of organizations. In B. M. Staw (Ed.), *Research in organizational behavior*. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1979, 3-39.
- Putnam, L. L., & Sorenson, R. L. Equivocal messages in organizations. *Human Communication Research*, 1982, 8(2), 114-132.
- Simon, H. A. *The new science of management decision*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1960.
- Starbuck, W. H. Organizations and their environments. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology*. New York: Rand McNally, 1976, 1069-1123.
- Staw, B. M. Rationality and justification in organizational life. In B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (Vol. 2). Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1980, 45-80.
- Thomas, T. S. Environmental scanning—The state of the art. *Long Range Planning*, 1980, 13(1), 20-28.
- Thorngate, W. "In general" vs. "it depends": Some comments on the Gergen-Schlenker debate. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 1976, 2, 404-410.
- Tung, R. L. Dimensions of organizational environment: An exploratory study of their impact on organization structure. *Academy of Management Journal*, 1979, 22, 672-693.
- Weick, K. *The social psychology of organizing*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979.
- Weick, K. E., & Daft, R. L. The effectiveness of interpretation systems. In K. S. Cameron & D. A. Whetten (Eds.), *Organizational effectiveness: A comparison of multiple models*. New York: Academic Press, 1983, 71-93.
- Wilensky, H. L. *Organizational intelligence*. New York: Basic Books, 1967.

Richard L. Daft is Professor of Management in the College of Business Administration, Texas A&M University.

Karl E. Weick is the Nicholas H. Noyes Professor of Psychology and Organizational Behavior in the Graduate School of Business and Public Administration, Cornell University.