



December 1998

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## Recommended Citation

Sherer, Moshe (1998) "Organizational Position: Influences on Perceived Organizational Properties," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol25/iss4/2>

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# Organizational Position: Influences on Perceived Organizational Properties

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*People perceive and interpret their work place in different ways that may be related to their hierarchical position in the organization. Workers' attitudes toward their organization can exert a negative effect on their own and other people's feelings and behavior, and have detrimental consequences for the achievements of the organization. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of organizational characteristics maintained by three levels of human service organization employees: Managers, supervisors or instructors, and line workers. Respondents in the present sample (n = 135) indicated their perceptions about seven organizational properties. Results reveal that the higher the organizational position of the subject, the more positive are the subject's perceptions concerning the organization, and the importance attached to various organizational properties. Results are interpreted in terms of the potential problems resulting from the different views of employees toward their organization, and the possible implications this holds for the staff of human service organizations.*

The positions, roles, perceptions and behaviors of staff are of particular importance in human service organizations built of people, and their core activities consist of relations between staff and clients (Hasenfeld, 1983). However just as people shape organizations, so do organizations shape employees in assigning positions, roles and functions to them, and causing them to interact with other people (Lauffer, 1984). Employees are trying to make sense of everything that is happening in the organization (Hutri, 1995), their perceptions are important since they determine to some extent employees' self-esteem, job satisfaction, and production levels (Finlay, Martin, Roman, & Blum, 1995; Ferris &

Kacmar, 1992, Snizek & Bullard, 1983). While being subjective, perceived reality is as important as the reality itself in determining people's behavior (Lewin, 1936). These perceptions are a result of different variables that may be categorized as organizational (size, technology), personal (gender, personal experience), and environmental job influences (attitudes of other employees) (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Ferris, Russ & Fandt, 1989; Lorsch & Morse, 1974; Wiley & Crittenden, 1992). A considerable influence on workers' attitudes toward the organization is exerted by the behavior patterns of management and other employees (Parker, Dipboy, & Jackson, 1995). The purpose of the present study was to discover whether there are differences in the perceptions of human service organizational properties related to hierarchical position in the organization.

Since so much importance is attached to organizations in our society, the views people hold regarding their organizations are highly significant. Our perceptions moreover have a strong impact on our descriptions, diagnoses, and subsequent behavior. Examining the factors that affect it is therefore important. However, employees' perceptions of their organization are not unidirectional; employees hold different views for objective reasons (different sources of information) and subjective ones (their views regarding benefits they receive) (Kahn, Wolf, Quinn, & Snoek, 1964). The importance of behaviors in an organization and whether these are beneficial or harmful to it may depend more on how the behaviors are perceived than their reality (Parker, Dipboy, & Jackson, 1995).

James and James (1989) stress the importance of defining the environment in terms of perceived attributes. Negative perception may lead to a decrease in work motivation and an absence of extra-role effort on the individual's part (Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989; Parker, Dipboy, & Jackson, 1995). Moreover Aldrich (1979) shows that occupational groups may interpret the same regulations and objectives differently, and interpersonal differences based on ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic origins influence workers' interpretations of the same organizational situation.

Research has revealed differences of perceptions among employees at different levels of the organization. Gordon (1991)

claims that managers and their subordinates, coworkers, or supervisors often see and describe the same situation differently. Packard (1993) studied actual and ideal levels of participation in decision making, and found differences between line workers, and their supervisors and administrators as to line workers' actual level of participation, and perceptions of line workers' capabilities in this area. Line workers believed they had less power than the other two groups attributed to them.

Perceptual differences influence group and intergroup interactions, the particular role of an individual and the group to which he or she belongs influence these perceptions (Lieberman, 1956; Gordon, 1991). Just as individual perceptions influence people's views of their own roles and statuses compared with others (Kahn, Wolf, Quinn & Snoek, 1964), so can they influence people's perceptions and attributions of various organizational characteristics as well. We follow Burrell and Morgan (1979) in leaning toward the deterministic perspective. People typically react according to their role and position in the organization, regardless of the specific setting. All line workers share notions regarding the need to improve the organization, doing so to a greater extent than supervisors and top management.

Within the human service organization, in which professionals hold managerial, supervision, and line workers position, there is sometimes the tendency to prefer professional rules over organizational ones (Hasenfeld, 1983; Sherer, 1986). This may influence differences of perception and importance attached to different organizational properties.

Thus, many variables shape employees' reactions to their organization. There is however the possibility that organizational position is one of the more influential factors in this process. The purpose of this study was to reveal if such differences exist among three levels of organizational hierarchies. Accordingly we hypothesized the following:

1. Differences in perception of organizational properties will be found among the three subgroups of organizational hierarchies: The higher the rank the more positive the perceptions of organizational properties.
2. Differences of opinion about the importance of organizational properties for the organization will emerge among the three

hierarchical levels: The higher the rank, the more important the perceived properties of the organization.

### Method

*Sample:* The sample was randomly selected by 47 M.S.W. students participating in an introductory course on human service organization. Most of the students worked in various human service organizations (43 in all), and were asked to choose randomly one employee from each of three hierarchical positions in their organization: Top management; supervisory or instructional (supervisors); and line workers. In the rare instances in which two students came from the same organization, they were asked to coordinate their random sampling. Of the expected 144 questionnaires, 135 valid ones (92%) were returned.

*Questionnaire:* The questionnaire included two parts. The first part consisted of five demographic questions regarding position, professional and job tenure, years of education, and gender. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 35 questions regarding perceptions of organizational properties. The questionnaire was a modification of the Management Appraisal Guide (MAG) of Knighton and Heidelman (1983). It was originally devised for evaluating organizational properties in seven areas (General Agency Information; Policies and Procedures; Personnel; Communication; Problem Solving; Monitoring and Evaluation; Financial Planning and Management). Managers were to use the questionnaire to study and evaluate the reality of their organization, as they perceived it at the time, compared with their ideal vision of where the agency ought to be (Knighton & Heidelman, 1983).

To learn about employees' attributions of these same properties and the importance that the different organizational properties had for various levels of personnel, the questionnaire was revised to include answers on two scales. For each question that dealt with an aspect of organization property, the respondent was asked to indicate on one Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = "very little" to 5 = "to a very high degree") the level of existence of the property in the organization, and to indicate on another Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = "not important" to 5 = "very important") the importance of the property to the organization. Thus for

the question "does the agency have a stated mission?" the subject indicated on one scale the level of existence of this property in the organization, and on the other scale, its importance to the organization. We have used the questionnaire for several years for class assignments. The students delivered the questionnaires to the three hierarchical levels of top management, supervisors and line workers, anonymity was granted. The questionnaires were then analyzed and used in class for educational purposes. Results were systematic and called for thorough analysis.

The current version retains the original seven areas of organizational properties but contains only 35 of the original 70 questions. The contents are as follows: "General Agency Information" (e.g., Do agency staff members understand the social problems its programs are designed to alleviate?)—Includes the original questions 1,2,4,6,7; "Policies and Procedures" (e.g., Does the agency have policy and procedure manuals?)—includes questions 1,2,3,5; "Personnel" (e.g., Does the agency have written job descriptions and specifications for each staff member?)—includes questions 1,2,3,4,9; "Communications" (e.g., Does the agency have a formal communication system?)—includes questions 1,3,5,6,8,9; "Problem Solving" (e.g., Does the agency have a formal process for the management of problem situations?)—includes questions 1,2,3,4,8; "Monitoring and Evaluation" (e.g., Does the agency conduct program monitoring and evaluation on a regular basis?)—includes questions 3,6,8,9,10; "Financial Planning and Management" (e.g., Does the agency have an adequate budget to accomplish its mission, goals, and objectives?) includes questions 1,3,4,5,8 (see Knighton & Heidelman, 1983). The choice of questions is based on clarity, relevance and reliability tests of the original 70 questions determined by results gathered during three years of study (see Tables 2 & 3 for current study reliability scores).

## Results

Our sample consisted of 48 line workers, 38 supervisors and 49 managers. The lower figure for supervisors probably results from the fact that some came from outside the organization, and were therefore difficult to reach. (See Table 1 for sample characteristics).

Table 1

*Sample Characteristics by Function*

<i>Variables:</i>	<i>Position in the Organization</i>					
	<i>Line Workers</i> (N = 48)		<i>Supervisors</i> <i>Instructors</i> (N = 38)		<i>Managers</i> (N = 49)	
1. Educational Years	16.68 <sup>a</sup>	1.64 <sup>b</sup>	17.39	1.38	17.75	1.07
2. Professional Tenure	7.81 <sup>*</sup>	5.45	14.07	6.00	17.40	6.90
3. Tenure on the Job	4.5	4.11	5.50	4.01	5.30	4.86
4. Gender:						
Males	9 <sup>c</sup>	19 <sup>d</sup>	22	58	24	49
Females	39	81	16	42	25	51

\*  $p < .05$ <sup>a</sup> Mean<sup>b</sup> Standard Deviation<sup>c</sup> Number<sup>d</sup> Percentage

The finding of higher years of education and professional tenure among higher ranks may confound the results regarding the effect of hierarchical position on actual and importance of perceived organizational properties. However a correlation test revealed only few significant low correlations (the highest  $r = .24$ ) among these variables and the perception of actual and importance levels of organizational properties variables. The explanation of differences among our employees should be explained on other grounds.

To examine the data for possible differences among the three hierarchical levels for professional characteristics, we employed a MANOVA test on years of education, professional tenure, tenure on the job by position (manager, supervisor, line worker) and gender (male & female). Also, post hoc analyses were used to decide specific differences that contributed to overall effects.

The MANOVA test showed a significant main effect of position: Wilks = .68,  $F(6,254) = 8.75$ ,  $p < .001$ . Univariate differences showed up on years of education ( $F(2,129) = 6.15$ ,  $p < .003$ ),

and professional tenure ( $F(2,129) = 23.15, p < .001$ ). Scheffe post hoc analysis revealed that managers and supervisors had higher mean scores for educational years than did line workers. On professional tenure, managers had higher mean scores than either supervisors or line workers, and the supervisors had higher mean scores than line workers (See Table 1). No significant differences were indicated for gender or for the interaction of position and gender.

In examining the data for possible differences among the three groups of subjects and gender regarding their organizational attributions, we employed a  $3 \times 2$  MANOVA test (position: manager, supervisor and line worker  $\times$  gender: male or female) for each of the seven principal categories of organizational properties of the actual properties and on the importance of the properties. Additionally, individual ANOVAs were carried out to decide specific differences. Also, post hoc analyses were used to decide specific differences that contributed to the overall effects. What follows, then, is an account of the results of the MANOVA tests.

Regarding actual organizational properties, the MANOVA test showed a significant main effect of position: Wilks = .81,  $F(14,246) = 1.90, p < .026$ . Univariate differences showed up on Policies and Procedures:  $F(2,129) = 6.41, p < .002$ ; Personnel:  $F(2,129) = 8.51, p < .001$ ; and an approaching significant result on Problem Solving:  $F(2,129) = 2.48, p < .087$ . Scheffe post hoc analysis revealed that managers had higher mean scores than line workers on Policy and Procedures; managers and supervisors had higher mean scores on Personnel than did line workers; again the ANOVA revealed an approaching significance result for the Problem Solving, Duncan post hoc analysis showed that managers had a higher mean score than supervisors and line workers (See Table 2). No significant differences were indicated for gender or for the interaction of position and gender.

Regarding the importance of organizational properties, the MANOVA test showed a significant main effect of position: Wilks = .80,  $F(14,244) = 2.01, p < .018$ . Univariate differences showed up on Policies and Procedures:  $F(2,128) = 4.21, p < .017$ ; Personnel:  $F(2,128) = 7.86, p < .001$ ; Communication:  $F(2,128) = 3.55, p < .031$ ; Problem Solving:  $F(2,128) = 5.53, p < .005$ ; and an approaching significance result on Financial Planning and Management:



Table 2

*Means and Standard Deviations of Actual Organizational Properties by Function*

<i>Variables:</i>	<i>Position in the Organization</i>					
	<i>Line Workers</i>		<i>Supervisors</i>		<i>Managers</i>	
	<i>(N = 48)</i>		<i>(N = 38)</i>		<i>(N = 49)</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. General Agency Information (n = 5) <sup>a</sup> ( $\alpha = .77$ ) <sup>b</sup>	3.67	.48	3.82	.58	3.82	.51
2. Policies and Procedures (n = 4) ( $\alpha = .68$ )	3.17*	.66	3.22	.71	3.64	.53
3. Personnel (n = 5) ( $\alpha = .72$ )	2.68*	.78	3.12	.76	3.42	.61
4. Communication (n = 6) ( $\alpha = .56$ )	3.74	.59	3.80	.50	3.95	.45
5. Problem Solving (n = 5) ( $\alpha = .83$ )	2.95	.77	3.01	.76	3.27	.67
6. Monitoring and Evaluation (n = 5) ( $\alpha = .78$ )	2.62	.88	2.90	.86	3.15	.76
7. Financial Planning (n = 5) ( $\alpha = .65$ )	2.80	.74	2.95	.84	3.05	.70

\*  $p < .05$ <sup>a</sup> Number of items in each scale<sup>b</sup> Reliability coefficient Alpha

$F(2,128) = 3.02; p < .052$ . Scheffe post hoc analysis revealed that on Policies and Procedures, managers had higher mean scores than the supervisors and the line workers. The managers had higher mean scores than did line workers on Personnel; Communication; Problem Solving; Financial Planning and Management (See Table 3). Again, no significant differences were indicated for gender or for the interaction of position and gender.

Our hypotheses were largely supported. Differences of perceived organizational properties and the perceived importance of these properties emerged among the three organizational hierarchies; and the higher the rank, the higher were the mean scores.

Table 3

*Means and Standard Deviations of Importance of Organizational Properties by Function*

<i>Variables:</i>	<i>Position in the Organization</i>					
	<i>Line Workers</i> (N = 48)		<i>Supervisors</i> (N = 38)		<i>Managers</i> (N = 49)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. General Agency Information (n = 5) <sup>a</sup> ( $\alpha = .78$ ) <sup>b</sup>	4.38	.51	4.40	.52	4.53	.51
2. Policies and Procedures (n = 4) ( $\alpha = .78$ )	4.03*	.66	4.07	.65	4.40	.50
3. Personnel (n = 5) ( $\alpha = .80$ )	3.78*	.73	4.11	.69	4.35	.47
4. Communication (n = 6) ( $\alpha = .60$ )	4.03*	.41	4.20	.48	4.30	.44
5. Problem Solving (n = 5) ( $\alpha = .82$ )	3.68*	.75	4.04	.60	4.16	.53
6. Monitoring and Evaluation (n = 5) ( $\alpha = .84$ )	3.88**	.84	4.12	.72	4.24	.57
7. Financial Planning (n = 5) ( $\alpha = .76$ )	3.92*	.68	4.13	.79	4.31	.63

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $P < .052$

<sup>a</sup> Number of items in each scale

<sup>b</sup> Reliability coefficient Alpha

## Discussion

The most interesting finding of this study is that linear differences in terms of the perception of actual organizational properties and the importance of central properties of human service organizations exist among organizational hierarchies. The higher the rank, the more positive are some basic organizational properties perceived and the more important are organizational properties regarded. Gender had no effect. Assuming that the organizational properties studied were well known to the

employees, the differences we found may reflect different expectations regarding organizational properties, or an inherent distortion of organizational reality linked to organizational hierarchical position. The design of this study does not enable answering the interesting question of who is right, who distorts the truth. Is it the managers, supervisors or line workers? However, the implications raised by these questions will be considered here.

As for actual organizational properties, we found significant differences on two out of seven organizational properties, and one result approaching significance. In all three cases the managers had the highest mean scores, and line workers the lowest; supervisors were between. Two explanations are in order for these results. The first is that they reflect the true state of the organizations, as perceived by workers in different positions of the organizational hierarchy. This is a logical explanation since managers, supervisors, and line workers draw information about their organization from different sources. Accordingly we can expect results that reflect the true state of the organization as perceived by employees with different positions in the authority structure and thus having different sources of information on organizational properties.

However, the fact that we dealt with simple, well-known properties to all members of the organization, and that we found consistent results, meaning that managers hold more positive views about organizational properties than line workers are interesting, and calls for another explanation. Moreover, the fact that consistent differences regarding the importance of organizational properties were found among the three hierarchical levels would suggest that there are differences of opinion among them. This strengthens the expectation of finding differences of opinions regarding the state of actual properties as well. The second possibility therefore is that organizational positions and roles determine to some extent perception of reality. The latter seem to us to be the more plausible case. This line of reasoning is consequently the one that we will follow.

Conflict theory proposes that organizations are in constant conflict (Hall, 1991). Organizational lives call for competition for professional and promotional reasons. A gap between workers and administrators is to be expected; and too often a "we-they" stance is adopted by direct line workers and administrators

(Weissman, Epstein, & Savage, 1983), these attitudes may shape reactions of employees toward their organization. Moreover, the expectations employees have of others in the organization are partly explicable in terms of the organizational position that they hold (Kahn, Wolf, Quinn, & Snoek, 1964). We can thus assume that the higher the rank of an employee, the greater will be the satisfaction and the more positive the perceptions about the state of the organization.

Drawing from another, but related field of study, a positive relationship was found between job satisfaction and hierarchical organizational level, the higher the position on the hierarchy, the higher the job satisfaction (Carlopio & Gardner, 1995). This satisfaction is probably related to the characteristics of the job, which are more demanding from lower hierarchical employees (Carlopio & Gardner, 1995). On this ground, we can expect differences of opinion regarding organizational characteristics as well. However, we assume that workers' attitudes are being shaped by a broader array than the organization. They are influenced by cultural and professional expectations regarding what should be the level of accepted organizational characteristics, and thus can be regarded as "objective," once judging the organization.

The lower mean scores of line workers on the importance of organizational properties are probably related to a lack of appreciation for the organizational and administrative parts of the organization (Weissman, Epstein, & Savage, 1983). Such an explanation is supported by the tendency of professionals to emphasize the importance of professional activities (i.e., treatment) over organizational ones (Maluccio, 1979). The managers' attention and responsibility lies within the administrative sphere. We may expect them to be much more oriented toward the importance of organizational properties to organizational survival than the line workers.

The results show that line workers tend to hold fewer positive perceptions regarding the organization. Since people tend to share their judgements with peers, and they receive feedback that shape their beliefs (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Wittenbaum & Stasser, 1995), it is reasonable to assume that line workers influence each other (Wilder, 1990). This would be the case as well with managers, who tend to stick with their reference group

(Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Perlmutter, 1990). Such a behavior may lead employees at all levels to make decisions based on incorrect perceptions of other workers, which might have harmful results. Moreover role theory predicts that people's behavior is determined in part by the expectations of certain significant others in related positions (Kahn, Wolf, Quinn, & Snoek, 1964). If this is true, then prior expectations play an important role in the attribution process (Wittenbaum & Stasser, 1995), and organizational properties are interpreted accordingly.

Another probable explanation in this regard relates to position and responsibility. Managers reflect the highest position in the organizations we have studied, and they therefore maintain the highest responsibility for their functioning. On the other hand, the lower one's rank, the less responsible one can feel and the more critical one can be. This line of reasoning is supported by the finding that self-serving attributes arise from the need of people to maintain and defend a positive self-image (Brown & Rogers, 1991; Wiley & Crittenden, 1992). Moreover, we found that the higher the rank the higher the tenure and years of education. This may lead to justification and rationalization based on past decisions and behaviors (Van Dyne, Graham, & Dienesch, 1994).

We argue that perception of the organization relates to the commitment one has toward the organization. It will be heightened by positive perceptions and *vis versa* (Marsden, Kalleberg & Cook, 1993). However, the negative side effect of holding more positive, and probably unreal perceptions regarding some basic organizational properties might lead toward improper decision making.

The higher mean scores for the attributions made by the managers would suggest these to be defensive attributions ("a desire on the part of the perceivers to make whatever attributions will best reduce the threat posed by the situation." Shaver, 1975, p. 55). This being the case, the higher mean scores can be explained by the threat felt by managers in accepting the organizational situation in real terms, since they bear the greater responsibility for its functioning. Moreover, as indicated by Van Dyne, Graham and Dienesch (1994), we may expect higher level employees to have affective attachment to the organization and thus "go the extra mile" in describing its' properties. On the other hand, the

lower mean scores of line workers may reflect their disagreement with some organizational properties.

The supervisors' results are interesting. Supervisors usually find themselves caught between their position as administrators and their role as educators and supporters; the later role includes their relationship with their supervisee in this case the line workers (Kadushin, 1976; Middelman & Rhodes, 1985). If our reasoning is correct, then the attributions made by supervisors are again indicative of people interpreting and shaping their organizational attributions according to their position and the expectations of their peer groups.

Gender differences are probably quite modest and shaped by the kind of jobs they hold, this is probably why we found no significant gender difference. Thus attachment to the organization has little to do with gender than with attributes of position (Marsden, Kalleberg & Cook, 1993).

The limitations of the study derive from the fact that we studied only human service organization, so generalizations can be made concerning this sector alone. Though we have dealt with a broad array of organizational properties, we have not considered many others. Future research should use instruments that can determine whether our findings are valid for other types of organizations and for other organizational properties as well. More independent variables, such as the size of the organization, should be used. It is possible that more variables contribute to the relationships we have found, and these should be explored. An intriguing possibility is to examine these relationships by studying one organization at a time as the unit of analysis. Such an approach would strengthen the results and might sharpen them as well. We need also ask how conscious managers and supervisors are of the perceptions of the line workers and vice versa; and what are the most effective ways of dealing with these gaps of perceptions?

Some preliminary suggestions may be derived from these findings. All employees, whatever their rank, should learn that their perceptions of organizational properties are influenced, to some extent, by their position in the organization. Assuming that perceptions influence behavior, discussions should be held between managers, supervisors, and line workers regarding their

perceptions of organizational properties to clarify expectations or misconceptions. This should lead toward the study of the organization in valid ways to analyze the situation, clarify misconceptions and finding the proper ways to improve the problematic organizational properties. Being part of the organization milieu, all employees—despite their organizational position, should be more open to criticism. They should be ready to face the fact organizational reality is probably not as they expect it is; other workers may have different views, and their perceptions are important for the survival and efficiency of the organization. This means that employees must find ways to discover the true state of the organization, and be receptive to ideas and points of view from people in other ranks performing functions different from their own.

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