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PROTECTED SPECIES: PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANISATIONAL LIFE

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SIG: ORGANISATIONAL BEHAVIOUR
TRACK: ORGANISATIONAL BEHAVIOUR GENERAL TRACK

Protected species: Perspectives on organisational life

ABSTRACT

Analogies can be drawn between a modern organisation and a complex ecosystem. In both, the players compete for scarce resources; survival often depends on how effectively an individual, organism or group capitalises on what is available to them. In natural settings, the laws of nature provide a backdrop to relationships, including where each individual or group is positioned in the hierarchy. In such settings, unusual and complex inter-relationships can be formed where groups either assist or manipulate each other to survive. In organisational settings, the laws and boundaries are less clear, context specific and subject to organisational cultures and norms, yet, similar interrelationships to those in natural settings may be observed. This paper explores an aspect of the stated interdependency: the concept of 'protected species' in organisations. Such insights can be useful in better understanding interactions at work.

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Analogies can be drawn between a modern organisation and a complex ecosystem. In both, the players compete for scarce resources; survival often depends on how effectively an individual, organism or group capitalises on what is available to them. In natural settings, the laws of nature provide a backdrop to relationships, including where each individual or group is positioned in the hierarchy. In such settings, unusual and complex inter-relationships can be formed where groups either assist or manipulate each other to survive. In organisational settings, the laws and boundaries are less clear, context specific and subject to organisational cultures and norms, yet, similar interrelationships to those in natural settings may be observed. This paper explores an aspect of the stated interdependency: the concept of 'protected species' in organisations. Such insights can be useful in better understanding interactions at work.

Keywords: Workplace relationships, self-interest, protection, power, organisational culture

INTRODUCTION

> As many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and as, consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence, it follows that any being, if it vary however slightly in any manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be naturally selected (Darwin 1859 cited in Mahadevan, 2009: 207).

The concept of protection is about safeguarding and preserving; usually in circumstances where the subject in question is powerless or unable to help themselves. Species is a term derived from the biological sciences and relates to the lowest order on the taxonomy of life; it represents a group of similar organisms capable of interbreeding (Starr, Evers and Starr 2007). Protected species refers to biological organisms, usually in reference to Kingdom Animalia or Plantae, needing special management and protection by law (c.f. Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, nd). Protection is often needed when the organism is under some manner of threat that can adversely affect continued survival. Most threats to natural organisms which lead to them becoming protected species are a result of human intervention in natural systems.

In organisational settings, protection can mean different things in different contexts. The power to protect can be exercised in two ways: through support, nurturing or empowering the disadvantaged, or through shielding or providing benefit to some for less identifiable reasons. Those who are supported, nurtured or empowered may not be able to openly compete; this may be due to systemic and ingrained environmental elements (e.g. discrimination). Those who are shielded or provided some benefit for less identifiable reasons may be protected for the value they offer to the protector (i.e. for mutually beneficial reasons). At times the reason for protection may not be apparent to the observer, and this can complicate the act of protection and its outcomes in organisations.

The aim of this paper is to consider the nature, causes and consequences of self-interested relationships in organisations. The discussion will bring together threads from organisational life including organisational behaviour, leadership, management and ethics. Analogies will then be drawn with concepts from the natural environment. Self-interested relationships are explored in the context of 'protected species' in organisations; that is, individuals or groups of people who, for some reason, are protected in their work-life. What is protection? What types of relationships provide protection? Why are some being protected, by whom, and from what? What are the outcomes of this protection? A brief discussion of the organisational context is followed by contemplation of these questions, with reference to natural systems and the biological sciences.

THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

Organisations are comprised of interconnected open systems with feedback loops (Thompson and McHugh 2009). This usually means that behaviours resulting from strategies, policies and processes in one part of the organisation affect others. The end result is that different,

possibly disparate, elements of organisations can become highly dependent on each other (Bratton, Sawchuk, Forwshaw, Callinan and Corbett, 2010).

The notion of interdependence implies that one part of the organisation relies on another to function effectively. Policies and procedures are therefore enacted to ensure effective interdependence. Policies, however, are subject to interpretation, and power and resources may not be distributed evenly. In this environment, different factions and unaligned individuals, on the surface working towards common (organisational) goals, may compete internally for their share of scarce resources, place or position.

It is well recognised that organisational context and culture establish norms and patterns of behaviour. Weaker organisational cultures can result in fragmentation and the development of sub or counter-cultures (Bratton *et al.*, 2010), each with their own core values and agendas. An imbalance of power coupled with internal competition may facilitate the building of coalitions and alliances - comprised of like-minded individuals who strive for a common goal. Factionalism is a by-product of diverging interests and may create a breeding ground for the recruitment of people who provide their unquestioning support in exchange for favours or protection: quid pro quo. This is not dissimilar to the metaphor of "currencies" used by Cohen and Bradford (1989) to describe organisational influence based on "mutually satisfactory exchanges". In such settings, the building of alliances becomes critical to survival and those with knowledge or power are actively enlisted and protected.

Change is an integral part of modern organisations and by its very nature threatens established systems. Political behaviour becomes rife where there is uncertainty and imbalance (e.g., Jones, 2013). Those with knowledge or power become key commodities in such settings. Their knowledge or power may be positive in terms of maintenance of culture and corporate

memory, or negative in what may be termed as 'dirty secrets' and 'hidden burrows'. Either way, alliance building can become paramount in determining survival, especially in ever changing and politically charged environments.

Politically charged environments are associated with high levels of pressure, competition and change. Leadership in these settings can be autocratic and uncompromising, or involve abrogation of responsibility or a laissez-faire style of management. Such an organisational environment may be characterised by a lack of fairness or procedural justice and lack of trust and secrecy. This in turn breeds political gaming (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008), manifest through such behaviours as empire building, scape-goating and passive aggressive behaviour. Organisational reward systems can serve to perpetuate these inappropriate behaviours leading to workplace toxicity. The toxic workplace at its extreme may be seen to have a complete and total focus on end-results and profits at the expense of human factors.

No organisation sets out to become toxic (Thomas and Burns, 2004). 'Deadly' environments come about as a result of inappropriate behaviours, by members and leaders alike, in turn establishing acceptable, and less than ethical norms of conduct. Lubit (2011: 117) contends that, "like a rock thrown in a pond, [such behaviours] … cause ripples distorting the organization's culture and affecting people far beyond the point of impact." In a politically charged environment, self-interested actions of those with power may lead to protection of others, some of whom may not warrant such patronage. For example, a non-performing senior colleague may be protected at all cost as, due to seniority, their support strengthens the protector's powerbase. This will award the protector the ability to drive personal agendas, in turn creating a dependency of sorts between the two players.

WHAT IS PROTECTION AND WHO ARE THE PROTECTED?

Protection in organisations can be linked to a range of terms including patronage, cronyism, favouritism and in-group behaviours. Patronage defined as "favouritism based on attributes not connected with merit or performance" (Martin, 2009: 3) unlike other related terms such as cronyism or favouritism, may have both positive and negative connotations. Patronage is used in a positive sense when advantages are afforded to a less privileged individual in the interests of the greater good, for example, patronage of an artist for the benefit of the arts. On the other hand, it has negative connotations when the actions of the patron are perceived to be driven by self-interest. In the context of this discussion, protected species benefit from this latter form of patronage.

Protected species can be found at all levels of organisational life. These individuals are protected because they hold some form of influence over others. This influence can emanate from different sources: popularity, image, charisma, charm, 'an aura', status, strong powerful networks, having access to or control of information or other resources, including financial resources. The source of their influence is not always apparent, but it is evident that a relationship exists between them and the protector which affords them protection.

In organisational life, protected species might be synonymous with those in the 'in-group', the chosen few, 'us' (Winstanley, 2008) or a purple circle (Paull and Redmond, 2011). Power is a tool for thriving in organisational life, and the association between power and the protected is a given; this is not necessarily positional power, it can be referent, information or expert (Osland, Kolb, Rubin and Turner, 2007).

In the natural world, in order for the fittest to survive, the weak may have to be sacrificed or used in some way. It is noteworthy that the title of Charles Darwin's seminal book is usually

truncated to: *On the origin of species*. The full title of the work which is rarely used is: *On the origin of species by means of natural selection or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*. The use of the words "preservation" and "favoured" are of interest. The migratory patterns of some animals demonstrate the notion of the survival of the fittest, for example, the Wildebeest in Africa. During migration, the herd must cross crocodile infested rivers, the less capable are often sacrificed for the fit and savvy to get through to ensure the continued survival of the species (Starr, Evers, and Starr, 2007). In organisations, sometimes individuals or groups are protected from being called to account even when they are not 'fit and savvy', but are favoured or given immunity by the actions and interference of others, in turn disrupting the 'natural order'. This differential or preferential treatment in turn creates dependencies between protector and protected, helping each to safeguard and strengthen their respective powerbases.

PROTECTION IN ORGANISATIONS

Why are some people protected? Does protection from the rules provide a greater good, perhaps for the organisation? For example, there is ample evidence that in workplace bullying scenarios, those who push themselves and others hard to achieve results (for the organisation and personally) can be above reproach from an organisational perspective (Omari, 2007). These driven individuals use certain tactics – sometimes less than ethical or appropriate – for personal *and* organisational gain. Star performers who consistently meet performance indicators or sales targets may be perceived as invaluable to organisational survival by those at the top, and as a consequence their less than desirable tactics, actions and behaviours are tolerated. An example of this is a high performing employee whose hard core negotiation tactics have secured a lucrative deal with a contractor, and whose interpersonal behaviour in meetings is the source of discomfort for many; and yet, their behaviour goes

unchecked and has tacit, and sometimes explicit, support of the leadership as they are deemed 'valuable' to the organisation.

In context of this paper, self-interest and personal outcomes are other notions in need of exploration. Immunity is derived from personal associations as well as outcomes achieved. Inter-relatedness may mean that if one party, the protected species, 'goes down' so too will others associated, or in league with them. This interconnectedness creates a mutually beneficial or symbiotic relationship, where both parties' best interests are served by protecting the other at all costs. Vested interests and organisational politics therefore become strong drivers for preserving and maintaining the status-quo.

Symbiosis in the natural world is between different species and may take the form of mutualism, where both parties benefit, or commensalism, where only one benefits (Zaman, 2005). Some symbiotic relationships are obligate, both symbionts depend entirely on each other for survival, whereas, others are facultative and one does not have to depend on the other but benefits from doing so. In parasitic relationships, the parasite survives only due to the survival of the host.

Again, parallels can be drawn with organisational life. Mutualism can take the form of exchange of favours involving a fairly equal relationship; for example, supporting each others' motions at the board meeting. Commensalism would see one party benefitting with the other not necessarily harmed; for example, giving advance warning or strategically passing on information not shared with others in the organisation. In parasitic relationships, one relies on the other for survival, seeking favours, information and support, without any return.

What is not immediately apparent in parasitic relationships is why the host (or protector) tolerates or protects the parasite. Why does the host expose themselves to potential harm from the parasite? Do they not have the means available to remove themselves from the relationship? In contrast to the natural world, in an organisational setting, the answers to these questions are even more obscure. Is it that the parasite offers some unseen protection to the host, like keeping a secret? Could it be that the host is indirectly protecting his or her own standing or image? Or does the parasite offer some other hidden benefit to the host, by action or inaction, making the relationship more mutually beneficial than is apparent?

In the context of workplace interdependencies, it is interesting to consider what may happen if a symbiotic relationship fails. This may occur as a result of the withdrawal of protection by one party by choice or necessity, the absence of one party or the evolution of the relationship to a new form. Will one or both parties be left exposed? Will each try to create new alliances and turn against the other? Human nature being what it is, the fallout may be bitter and could pull people surrounding either party into a vortex and work to the detriment of the organisation. In the end, it is the exercise of will and power in organisational life which is a central theme.

SELF-INTEREST AND POWER IN PROTECTION

The abuse of power is an attribute commonly exhibited by less than ethical leaders in organisational settings in which self-interest prevails. This contrasts with ethical leaders who use power for the benefit of others. The behaviour of leaders who misuse the privileges of their position to appoint allies, friends and family (nepotism) is consistent with those observed in symbiotic relationships.

According to Bachrach and Baratz (1970) there are 'two faces' of power. The first face acknowledges the work of Dahl (1957: 203) who asserts that power is a relationship among people and occurs when '[A] has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do'. This dependency postulate identifies closely with less than ethical overt abuses of power. Bachrach and Baratz's (1970) second face of power refers to more covert behaviours. These are more difficult to identify and challenge, particularly if they are applied to the protection of another. For example, rule-bending means these individuals find ways to create exceptions to rules, and in doing so allow others to by-pass scrutiny usually applied in the organisation.

Abuse of power consists of "[a] set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals, and institutional procedures ('rules of the game') that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others" (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970: 43). This abuse of power is exercised by placing those who benefit in a preferred position to defend and promote vested interests. Few individuals are prepared to challenge the behaviour of people who hold influential positions in the organisation. Therefore, protected species may be allowed to systematically misuse their positional power to secure outcomes for themselves and other individuals; most often those who are protecting them.

The choice or decision associated with becoming protector or the protected may be a conscious one, the outcome of opportunistic chance, or an unplanned outcome of entrapment or manipulation. Narcissistic leaders, less than ethical decision makers and tyrants may determinedly target others for personal gain. For example, Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006) maintained that charisma is a key ingredient in the ascendancy and success of narcissistic leaders. Maccoby (2000; 2004) used the term "productive narcissists" to describe charismatic leaders who provide a grand vision, have stimulating personalities that inspire followers, who

in turn support the leader's need for admiration. Therefore, some individuals may seize an opportunity which comes their way, and others may find themselves a target or victims to bad luck. Elements of Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser's (2007) toxic triangle: destructive leaders, conducive environment and susceptible followers, can contribute to any of these situations.

Susceptible followers may become protected species because they conform due to unmet esteem needs. There is also a natural tendency for people to obey authority figures, imitate higher status individuals and conform. Alternatively, those followers who Padilla *et al.* (2007) term colluders, may accept protection to feed their own power and ambitions. Some followers benefit from destructive activities and thus contribute to the toxic vision of the protector.

There is a link between susceptible followership and the dark side of leadership. McIntosh and Rima (1997: 29) describe the dark side of leadership, in general, as "[i]nner urges, compulsions, motivations and dysfunctions that drive us towards success or undermine our accomplishments". There are five behaviours, according to McIntosh and Rima (1997), which typically qualify as the dark side of leadership: narcissism, compulsiveness, co-dependence, passive-aggressiveness and paranoia. In its extreme form, there are examples of charismatic cult leaders who coerce followers into submission to the leader's power and, in so doing, damage their personal and professional relationships, including cutting ties with family and loved ones. Impression and perception management play a critical role in the ability to exert this level of influence over others. Researchers have identified these forms of management as contributing to the leader's popularity and success (e.g. Anderson, 1990; Bryman, 1992; Kodish, 2006; Sosik and Dworakivsky, 1998). The ability to channel desired perceptions requires sophisticated skills and a very high level of emotional intelligence in order to 'read' what the constituents need and want from the leader.

Luzio-Lockett (1995) contends that organisations are clusters of people naturally leading to conflict due to difference, competition and group dynamics. Therefore, it is both individual and organisational factors which contribute to environments in which protected species can be created.

THE MANIFESTATION OF PROTECTION

Self-interested protection may be founded in a relationship which has evolved from some other form. An example of this is the personal or executive assistant who has information power, and is able to manipulate situations to the benefit of the protector, in return for favourable treatment. Most people in these positions do not abuse the trust placed in their role in an organisational context. Another example is the long-term colleague with whom the protector has a shared history, possibly of indiscretions, bad decisions or simply embarrassing situations. Once again, for many, this is latent energy, it is never exercised, but the threat or potential threat that it could be converted into kinetic energy (exercise of power) could lead to protection unless there is either absolute trust, or certainty that the individual is trustworthy.

The opportunity to receive protection, and the development of networks and affiliations is promoted and encouraged as part of the milieu of organisational life. The currency of favours and reciprocity can be a key component of the foundation of social capital in organisations; but, it is where the culture and climate in an organisation are rife with political behaviours, and self-interested actions are rewarded, that protected species of the sort considered here, will be created and thrive.

Perception plays an important role in the evaluation of whether protection is deserved. The personal judgement of the evaluator as to whether an individual is the recipient of unwarranted protection is a key consideration. A value judgement about whether an

individual is the recipient of unwarranted perception will be influenced by a number of factors, including perceptions of fairness or justice. Favourable treatment *per se* is not likely to be judged as unfair or unjust, unless it is not equally available to others, therefore becoming favouritism. Similarly, not being called to account is unlikely to be judged as protection, unless it is likely that the same act or omission by another would lead to them being held accountable.

Organisational justice has been found to be a predictor of individual employee health independent of established stressors at work (Kivimaki, Ferrie, Head, Shipley, Vahtera, and Marmot, 2004). Organisational values, strategies, policies and practices are never clear cut or black and white; the shades of grey often open the door for interpretation of messages therefore setting the scene, and establishing the 'laws of nature' in corporate settings. Universalism (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2002) would see these laws applied equally and equitably to all. In organisational settings, however, power and politics result in an approach more in line with particularism; and therefore the differential or preferential application of rules and procedures. These differences in behaviour and practice can lead to some individuals or groups being favoured over others, and in turn being afforded protection and benefits not available to other organisational citizens.

HOW IS PROTECTION DETECTED?

What is it about a colleague or co-worker which alerts others to the fact that they are protected? Is it the behaviour of the person, or the patron, that reveals to others their protected status? The observer may come to awareness of protection in different ways. At one end of the continuum is a realisation that blatant, arrogant disregard for the rules goes unpunished; at the other end is a creeping realisation that there are subtle differences in the way an individual is treated. For example, while most colleagues might be reprimanded for

antisocial behaviour, the protectant is allowed to continue. On the other hand, colleagues may gradually become aware of favoured treatment or undue concessions such as higher duties opportunities or reduced workload pressures. This latter form of insidious protection may be less obvious, but the realisation of the inequity of the situation can lead to a perceived (and actual) lack of fairness in the workplace.

The behaviour of the protected may alert observers to their special status; they may behave as though they know they are invulnerable, not taking as much care and engaging in unapologetic, undefended behaviour such as in some workplace bullying scenarios. The protector's behaviour in ignoring some actions and encouraging others may also be an indicator. Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) use the term ethical fading to describe individuals who engage in self-deception and psychologically do not see or acknowledge their unethical conduct. This term may be applied to the rationalisation of less than ethical behaviour on the part of both the protector and protectant which may serve to warn others. Further, once an individual is recognised by others as having protected status, the behaviour of others is likely to warn the observer of the individuals' special status. For example, people may warn each other about patronage; or more subtle forms of communication such as body language or nuances in conversation may signal the special status of the protected.

Being afforded special protected status therefore creates an alternative organisational hierarchy, one where powerbases are more reliant on relationships and interdependencies than organisational control systems and structures.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has explored the concept of protected species in organisations. It has considered those who are recipients of some form of protection which is derived not from an interest in

the greater good, but from the self-interest of the patron or patrons, or from some form of favouritism or cronyism. These behaviours create perceptions of injustice and lack of fairness within organisations. Investigation of such notions are uncomfortable and confronting, but also necessary in the quest to understand workplace relationships and how organisations work to ultimately strive for improvements in both.

The question then arises: What is the true value of identifying the existence of protected species in organisations? It might be argued that greater understanding of the relationships and power-plays within an organisation will allow organisational members to examine their perceptions, actions and relationships and to better interact with others in the organisation. It might also be argued that such knowledge can be used for the betterment of organisations, or to the advantage of individuals who seek to improve their own position.

In an ideal world, understanding the creation and thriving of protected species will allow leaders, managers, and employees to work towards eradicating the less than ethical forms of relationships referred to in this paper. In practice, understanding protected species may simply lead to others being able to reduce their negative organisational impact. Sadly, or perhaps pragmatically, understanding such relationships may in fact only lead to creation of more such alliances. The key at this stage, however, will be to further examine these relationships. Establishing a research framework to probe the nature, causes and implications of protected species in organisations, and scrutinising the contexts in which they thrive is a research imperative. This work may be a starting point for the development of a typology to explore different protected species in organisations, each with its own antecedents and consequences at individual and organisational levels.

In the meantime, it is incumbent upon all organisational citizens to contemplate their relationships and actions and to question whether acts of collegiality, protection and patronage are merely self-serving, or whether they are also at least somewhat altruistic in their nature. In the end it may come back to personal values and ethics, and to the standards to which individuals hold themselves accountable.

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