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CHAPTER 28

SCHOOL AND SUPER-SCHOOL

David Strang

Since the late 1970s, Stanford-based research and researchers have been absolutely central to the field of organizational studies. Cohen, March, and Olsen's "A garbage can model of organizational choice," Meyer and Rowan's "Institutionalized organizations: formal structure as myth and ceremony" (1977), Hannan and Freeman's "The population ecology of organizations" (1978), Pfeffer and Salancik's "The external control of organizations" (1978), and Scott's "Organizations: rational, natural, and open systems" (first edition, 1981) defined distinctive perspectives that shaped and continue to shape the scholarly conversation. It is hard to underestimate the influence of these authors and of the many other students of organizations who have taught and/or been trained at Stanford.

It is thus of interest that references to "the Stanford school" are relatively few and far between. One main reason is that Stanford is home, not to a school, but to a collection of schools – a super-school! Adaptive learning, institutionalism, population ecology, resource dependence, and more: each can well be described as a school in its own right.¹ All have their own charismatic leaders, central and peripheral participants linked by graduate training and personal collaboration, gangs of student apprentices, and long and distinguished traditions of scholarly production. While scholars often patrol the "school" concept to keep out the small-fry, organizational studies at Stanford could be excluded because it is too big.

The distinction is relevant when we consider the dynamics of spatial concentration. Most schools form around one or two individuals who

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combine the attributes of intellectual leadership and personal appeal. Much like communal groups founded by charismatic religious leaders, these schools are in many ways the natural reflection of the stature, capacity, and magnetism of a central figure or duo. Adding the reinforcing effects of interlocking joint recruitment and the staying power of a critical mass, we have dynamic stability as well as its basin of attraction. Schools in this sense are commonplace, though they cannot grow too large. Their gravitational pull is countered by the expanding distance of the average member from the school's charismatic center as well as by field-wide resistance to concentrated power and privilege.

A super-school involves not only these dynamics within its component schools but also exchange and rivalry between them. The various intellectual subgroups share ideas, techniques, and fringe members, and provide knowledge of cutting-edge developments that more isolated scholars must labor to keep abreast of. Mutual success spurs a healthy competition and a sense that more can and should be accomplished. If component schools unite around their common interests rather than struggle destructively over control of local resources, each will gain from the presence of others.

From an individual perspective, the pull of the super-school is particularly strong, as personal experience makes clear to me. I came to Stanford with a mild interest in organizations. But my fate was sealed when Dick Scott asked me if I wanted to serve as a research assistant on a project that he and John Meyer were conducting on schools; sealed again when I took Jim March's early morning seminar; yet again when Jim Baron presented his work on gender segregation in California state government; and yet again at a kumbaya-moment at a bonfire at Asilomar.² (Actually, that last one left me cold.) It is really not apropos of organizational studies, but the related memory I will always treasure is of the conversation when I first found myself following John Meyer's train of thought. The ocean of organizational studies was so large that little fish didn't even know they were all wet, or that there was anything outside that deserved real attention. Talk about conditions for successful recruitment and retention!

For a super-school to emerge and be stable, however, positive interdependence and centripetal forces cannot be too strong. Participants must gain from a shared institutional identity while resisting movement towards a convergent intellectual identity. Unlike the simple school grounded in the gravitational field formed by a single individual, a super-school involves a complex equilibrium whose component groups remain both proximate and distinct. Charismatic leaders must define themselves as allied free agents and followers must breed true.

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A problem with the notion of a super-school is that its substance as an intellectual enterprise is hard to define. A centralized simple school, organized around a few leaders, will always have a conceptual and intellectual core, often one that can be meaningfully linked to its time and place. A super-school, by contrast, is a messy business. Since it is formed out of the institutional proximity of multiple intellectual leaders whose interests connect but do not coincide, a super-school lacks a unified scholarly profile. It is marked instead by broad commonalities and consistencies, sufficient to keep members of the several tribes at peace though insufficient to impel them to merge.

What are these substantive commonalities, in the case of Stanford? It is easier to begin with scholarly themes that are generally absent, before describing the super-school in more positive terms. First, organizational studies at Stanford seldom takes "work" as a central concern. Stanford researchers are not much interested in the job experience of those on the assembly line or even on the phone lines. Stanford-based research diverges sharply from industrial sociology's attention to structural sources of alienation, the union movement, industrial relations, and new forms of emotional labor. Exceptions occur, for example, in Jeff Pfeffer's work on labor unions and more recently in the impact of Steve Barley, but nevertheless work in Stanford's organizational tradition is notably not about work.

The Stanford super-school has also generally displayed little theoretical attention to the other side of the equation – to the elites who own and manage American corporations. There is little work on the social class bases of corporate leadership and the prospects for classwide rationality, though Don Palmer's work on social networks (a concern more compatible with the super-school's general theoretical proclivities) provides another exception that proves – demonstrates – the rule. Likewise, what managers do all day is seldom a topic of interest, and there is limited attention to the substantive content of managerial practice. The Stanford school differs greatly here from the focal concerns of institutions as disparate as Michigan and Harvard, which have characteristically sought to identify and broadcast conceptions of enlightened corporate leadership. Still less have Stanford organizational researchers aimed to take up the banner of the besieged middle manager, the politically thwarted engineer, or the belittled human resources expert.

If the Stanford super-school turns away from work and class, what does it turn towards? Organizations are treated as sites of generic social processes. Jim March and other students of organizational learning his students stress

routine adaptation to experience and the virtues and pitfalls of simple forms of bounded rationality. Resource dependence views organizations from the perspective of a field of power and strategic networks. Ecology studies vital events that reshape organizational populations through selection. Institutionalism focuses on formal structure, seen as symbolic displays emblematic of broader cultural forces at work. The operative principles in these lines of inquiry are highly variable – from cognition to power to culture – but their deepest intellectual commitments are not so different.

This preference for the abstract and structural can also be seen when we consider how Stanford organizational research has approached the core sociological issue of inequality. Very general forms of discrimination linked to individual identity replace the particulars of class and occupation. This is visible in Jim Baron's close analyses of racial and gender segregation in the workplace; it appears as well in institutionalism's concern with the way organizations interpret and respond to equal employment laws. Ecological research on the way organizational founding and failure generate employment opportunities provides yet another highly structural analysis of individual-level outcomes.

A second source of intellectual coherence across the Stanford super-school is methodological, where a taste for formal and quantitative dominates. There is little in the way of case-specific research or focused small *N* comparisons – the goal is instead to characterize general tendencies and sources of variation across many cases. (Students can be especially doctrinaire here; I recall a workshop where Mike Hannan noted the benefits of an exploratory case study but aspiring ecologists would have none of it.) Stanford's bent for clean generalization also leads methodologically to simulation analysis, especially in research on learning, and to formal logical methods.

The most prominent common thread at Stanford, of course, is its causal focus on the "environment." This is almost emblematic of the main lines of theoretical analysis that make up the super-school – resource dependence, ecology, institutionalism, and adaptive decision-making. Their complex object of study is not the individual organization made up of multiple interdependent sub-systems, routines, or actors, but a larger network, field, or population within which the organization forms a relatively undifferentiated node. (This shift is especially clear in Dick Scott's textbook introduction to the field; Scott's brilliant conceptualization of rational, natural, and open systems perspectives integrates and celebrates the multiple forms of environment-centered analysis, that is, Stanford's hallmark.) I recall a comment made by a fellow doctoral student in sociology in the

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mid-80s to the effect that the contemporary turn towards environmental effects would presumably soon be balanced by a return to interest in what went on inside the firm. If so, the corrective will not come from Stanford.

In many ways, the collective approach of the Stanford super-school represents the application of modern social consciousness and modern social scientific consciousness to the organizational setting. We live less of a work-a-day life than we once did, a world where most of us contribute more as consumers than producers.³ Organizations do indeed crowd in on each other, and in John Meyer and Brian Rowan's wonderful language their building blocks come to be littered around the environment. Management is increasingly routinized and standardized, and grows distant from industry- or organization-specific traditions. In tracking these phenomena, the Stanford super-school updates Weber while slighting Durkheim and Marx.

What conditions led a modernist perspective on organizations to flourish so vigorously at Stanford, of all places? Stanford is a fairly young university, founded with a strong engineering emphasis, and at considerable geographic distance from most centers of social scientific scholarship. Youth and pragmatism separated Stanford from many traditional sociological and managerial concerns and towards a highly contemporary mindset. Spatial distance also made it easier for Stanford researchers to diverge from well-established lines of scholarship elsewhere. As in other settings, a little isolation promotes a lot of speciation.

Even more telling, however, is Stanford's location in San Francisco's South Bay, as theorists of open systems would have already surmised. When faculty and doctoral students ventured down Palm Drive, they ran into the agglomeration of electronics and software companies that turned had farming towns into Silicon Valley. The organizational/occupational community that these high-tech firms generated shows many affinities with themes dominant at Stanford. Hero managers and deep-seated internal conflict were out, exchange and adaptive learning among densely connected organizations were in. Idiosyncratic organizational traditions were out, a cookie-cutter façade protecting substantive innovators was in. Agonized organizational surgery was out, fruitfully high birth and death rates in.

A final consideration, perhaps the most important, is with the personal qualities of the leaders who brought the Stanford super-school into being, not only through their scholarship but through their work as institution builders. The flip side of environmental conditions and generic social processes are the constructive activities of particular individuals who locate opportunities for mutual gain, find harmony where others hear only cacophony, and form connections rather than extinguish them. But as a

good Stanford student of organizations, of these putative "actors" and "actions" I can have little to say.

NOTES

1. On the concept of school as a central unit of scholarship, see Tiryakian (1979). Collins (1998, and elsewhere) finds that intellectual inquiry is often structured by four to six schools that compete with and define each other. Perhaps not coincidentally, Stanford's super school is also made up of four to six schools that compete with and define each other.

2. From the 1970s through the 1990s Stanford organizational scholars – led by Dick Scott via an NIMH training grant that involved some 20 faculty – held an annual conference at Asilomar in Pacific Grove. The conference grew from a Stanford affair to include faculty and students at Berkeley and other universities across the country, and seamlessly combined intellectual stimulation, community building, and recreation.

3. A good indicator of this is the way studies of boutique consumer goods providers like wineries and movie studios have replaced studies of auto manufacturers and industrial plants. Academic research always follows leading sectors and sites of supernormal profits.

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