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Problems of Describing Social Institutions

Let us start by considering some of the special problems that arise whenever any attempt is made to make a systematic exploration or study of social institutions, as such.

   Consider, for example, a discussion that might be held with a number of senior social workers about the general nature of their roles as leaders of teams of social workers, social work assistants and trainees in some local office of a social welfare agency. Let us suppose that four senior social workers are involved – Miss A, Mr B, Miss C and Mrs D. The discussion turns to one particular aspect of their work – supervision of team members. Miss A says she makes a practice of having regular supervision sessions with her trainees and assistants, but leaving the social workers themselves to approach her at their own initiative if they have work problems to discuss. Mr B observes that this is not the case for most seniors, who, like him, try as far as possible to arrange regular supervision sessions with social workers as with the others. Miss C then breaks in, drawing attention to a memorandum from the director of the department. This quite clearly describes senior social workers as 'in charge' of teams, and 'responsible for keeping a regular check on all the work done'. Surely this means checking on the work of social workers as well as the others, she argues. At this point Mrs D darkly observes that there is far too much talk of supervision and checking in social work. Any 'decent' professional social worker should be able to get on with his own work. She herself would like to see the senior grade, which is currently tied closely to administrative responsibilities, kept simply as a means of giving higher pay to more experienced practitioners.

   Quite regardless of the possible merits of various viewpoints, it is clear that the argument is being conducted at a number of different levels. Miss A and Mr B are describing their individual perceptions or assumptions about the roles of team leaders as they are currently played. Miss C is talking about an official statement of the team leaders' role, which may or may not have affected the working assumption that people make in practice. And Mrs D is on quite another tack: she is addressing herself to how the role ought to be conceived if things were as they should be, and quite regardless of what, in practice, it is taken to be at present.

   In social-analytic thinking these levels have been distinguished as the 'manifest', the 'assumed' and 'the requisite'[1] The terms can be

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[1] *Exploration in Management,* Chapter 2.

applied equally to any enactable aspect of social institutions: to functions to be performed, authority, procedures to be observed, expected role and so forth. *Manifest* statements of any aspect of social institutions are those which carry a stamp of authority by virtue of coming from some 'higher' level, or by virtue of having received some general and formal sanction. They are the official enacting statements[2] Such statements have their own reality, but whether or how far they are observed in practice is a matter for exploration. Another kind of 'reality' is comprised by the various perceptions of different individual actors in the situation. Since these are more than just idle perceptions but are adopted in fact by each person concerned as his own basis for action and interaction, they are aptly described as *assumed* views or statements of social institutions. That people's assumptions of the nature of their roles vary from those with whom they interact, or even from those in similar positions, is a fact that is re-demonstrated in practically every piece of social-analytic exploration carried out.[3] On the other hand, there is clearly some shift in argument when the discussion moves from existing assumptions to what ought to be the case if things were differently and better arranged – what in social analysis has been dubbed the *requisite* situation.[4]

Clearly, in undertaking discussions such as those described above, it is very difficult to talk in any straightforward sense about 'collecting the facts'; the facts, that is, of the social institutions at work. Nor is it any use attempting to revert to direct observation. Social institutions cannot be directly observed. All that can be observed is people's overt behaviour. From this the external observer may make his own inferences about what is implied beneath, but only at some considerable risk.

Suppose, for example, that an attempt is made to observe the institutions prevailing in a group of hitherto unknown people in

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[2] This is very close to Robert Merton's well-known conception of the 'manifest functions' of any social institution. However, there is more of a problem with his complementary conception of 'latent functions'. He defines these as 'objective consequences which are unintended' (Merton, 1968, *Social Theory and Social Structure,* Chapter 3). But who is in a position to make such 'objective' interpretation, and to decide that these represent the 'real' functions? Is it the omniscient social scientist? What of the assumption of various other actors in the situation?

[3] *See* similar findings in Gross *et al* (1957), *Exploration in Role Analysis: Studies of the School Superintendent Role;* and Kahn *et al* (1964), *Organisational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity.*

[4] Exactly what is implied in the concept of 'requisite' is explored in detail in the chapters that follow, particularly in Chapters 5 and 8.