

March reading (Exploitation vs. Exploration), Fox (“sandwich strategy”), and Kelman (chap3)

Dear class, here is some clarification about the March article you are reading for class 3, since he is assuming some knowledge of the rich empirical literature of sociology, and builds on this literature to make a new argument. Loosely paralleling distinctions made in Kelman’s Chapter 3 and Fox’s Chapter 6, March is distinguishing between—in his case—only two different types of workers in an organization—the “explorers” and the “exploiters.”

The exploiters are those who know and keep up to date with the existing knowledge and practices about their jobs—they “exploit” what is already known and practiced. On the other hand, the explorers are those who push the envelope, looking into new realms for knowledge, different ways of doing things. Knowing these two words and their difference in meaning, you should be able to enter this article with more ease. March, in contrast to Kelman and Fox, is arguing that an organization often has both types and *needs* both to keep up. Similarly, March is focusing on a dual distinction, while Kelman’s article uncovers more than two categories, in order to show how things work. Fox, in turn, explores three distinct categories within the organization, and their differences.

Because March launches right into a discussion of the “explorers” and the “exploiters,” it may not be clear to you—at least from the beginning—what these people are as categories. In the March article, there is no one category that is “better” than the other, improvement. There is no judgement here that the “reformists” are one group and not the other. Upon starting the article, in fact, one might actually think that March is going to identify one of the two groups as more key—particularly after reading the Kelman and Fox readings, which identify important collective groups within an organization—as opposed to others within the organization—that help reform to move forward, as well as those who resist or are simply silent.

Across these three articles, keep in mind the distinction between the types of groups and pressures that are *inside* the organization from those that impinge on it from outside. In much of the recent literature of planning and bureaucracy in general, the focus is more on tweaking the forces for change that impinge on the organization from the outside. The contribution of March’s and Kelman’s articles (as well as Wilson, Lipsky, and others to come), is revealing the inside dynamics. It goes without saying, of course, that the inside and outside dynamics are intertwined, but it is analytically and empirically important to distinguish the two (the “outside” or “external” environment, for example, is central to later readings like Pfeffer, etc.)

Finally, note that March draws on the literature, to a considerable extent, from large firms—which share with the public sector some traits of large organizations. And many of these readings, as with Kelman in particular, examples are taken from both public and private.

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