The Logic of Political Action: an Experiment with the Epistemology of the Particular

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The first objective of this paper is to develop understanding of organizational political behaviour in the context of change implementation, through a constructivist approach grounded in the interpretations of the initiating actor. The basis of this exploration is the concept of ‘logic of action’, which describes the cognitive schema that an actor brings to behavioural choices linking means to ends. The second objective of the paper is to demonstrate strengths and inadequacies in current conceptualizations of political behaviour, and to develop a framework to guide further research in this area. These aims are achieved through analysis of an account of political behaviour from a single initiator, who is responsible for a specific organizational change, in relation to a single target individual, who is blocking or subverting that change. This account thus represents an experiment with the ‘epistemology of the particular’. Methodological concerns surrounding the external validity of single case accounts are therefore explored, and the concepts of analytical and naturalistic generalization are deployed in contrast with statistical generalization. The main elements in the logic of action identified include characteristics of the organizational context, formal and tacit warrants for managerial action and political behaviour respectively, the variety of ongoing political tactics, the interrelated mix of personal and organizational outcomes being pursued, and the reputation of the initiator of political behaviour, which in turn hinges on the ability to generate acceptable public accounts of one’s behaviour. A revised approach to the ‘defining elements’ of organizational political behaviour is advanced based on this analysis.

A distastefully intrusive ugly duckling

The first objective of this paper is to explore the logic of political behaviour in the context of organizational change, through a constructivist approach based on the interpretations of the initiating actor. The second objective is to expose limitations in current conceptualizations of political behaviour, and thereby to develop a framework to guide further research in this area. These objectives are pursued through analysis of an account of political behaviour from a single initiator, responsible for a specific organizational change, in relation to a single target individual, whose actions are potentially subverting that change. This account thus represents an experiment with the ‘epistemology of the particular’ (Stake, 1994).

Organizations are political systems. Most commentators seem to agree that organizational change, in generating uncertainty and conflict, intensifies political activity around the processes and outcomes of the changes being introduced. However, Czarniawska-Joerges and Jacobsson (1995) note that ‘political’ in organization theory remains an ‘ugly duckling’, a ‘distasteful but persistent phenomenon’, an ‘irrational intrusion’, the appropriate stance towards which is apologetic rather than analytically curious. Thus, in the

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literatures of organization development and planned change, political behaviour is typically to be avoided as both unnecessary and unprofessional (French and Bell, 1995; Hutton, 1994; Stone, 1997; Thompkins, 1990; Ward, 1994). Other commentators have argued that political behaviour is an inevitable, even desirable, facet of organizational change (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992; Dawson, 1994; 1996; Frost and Egri, 1991; Kanter, 1983; Kumar and Thibodeaux, 1990; Mintzberg, 1983; Pettigrew, 1985; Pfeffer, 1992). Such ambivalence is reflected in managerial perceptions of political behaviour as distracting, but also as unavoidable (Buchanan, Claydon and Doyle, 1999; Gandz and Murray, 1980).

In the organizational behaviour literature, the term ‘political’ is typically used, loosely and pejoratively, to distinguish a category of interpersonal behaviour which includes a range of influence tactics, more or less covert, and more or less cunning. We are thus dealing with what may be more appropriately described as ‘micropolitical’ behaviour. The less clumsy term, ‘political’, will be used here for convenience. Mangham (1979, p. 15, in what is now regarded as politically incorrect language) observes that ‘each of us has the capacity consciously to manipulate our own behaviour and that of others and that many of us fully utilize that capacity, for good or ill’. Traditional organization theory, he notes, emphasizes cooperation and collaboration and ‘chooses to ignore “the darker side of humanity”, man’s evident capacity, and occasional ardent desire, to screw his fellow man (or, in more polite terms, to achieve his ends at the expense of his colleagues)’.

This view is reflected in the argument of Dunphy and Stace (1988) concerning the need to explore consensus and collaboration views of organizational change alongside coercive restructuring involving conflict and power. Kakabadse and Parker (1984, p. 62) go so far as to claim that ‘social order rests on deceitfulness, evasiveness, secrecy, frontwork and basic social conflicts’. Our understanding of ‘the dark side’ of organizational behaviour, of this ‘deceitfulness and frontwork’, however, remains relatively weak.

Political behaviour in organizational contexts (as opposed to the conduct of national politics) is thus normally equated with the informal, parochial, divisive, illegitimate, devious, underhand and unsanctioned (Mintzberg, 1983, p. 172). However, defining ‘political behaviour’ with precision seems problematic. Mayes and Allen (1977) argue that political behaviour is characterized by lack of organizational sanction for either the means or the ends of an influence attempt. Behaviour is thus categorized as non-political where the influence means and ends are both organizationally sanctioned. Drory and Romm (1990) identify three ‘defining elements’ of political behaviour from a review of relevant literature. These include self-serving outcomes, covert and power-based means and an organizational situation characterized by conflict and uncertainty. Behaviour is thus categorized as non-political where the outcomes benefit the organization, the means are public and decision processes are not riven with conflict, resistance and uncertainty. In the national and international political domain, behaviour may be classed as non-political when ends are achieved covertly (espionage), or through ‘behind-the-scenes’ activity (diplomacy).

These conceptualizations of politics are problematic. Who decides what is ‘sanctioned’ and what is not? This is typically a matter of local interpretation and judgement. Many organizations have rules which identify behaviours regarded as ‘illegitimate’ or unacceptable, if not illegal; but these rules typically cover the obvious topics of theft, disclosure of sensitive information, and health and safety regulations, for example. Such rules cannot cover every contingency that might arise in interpersonal and group behaviour across the organization over time. Managers are typically recruited and promoted on their ability to interpret policies and instructions in creative and appropriate ways, rather than for a propensity to follow established procedures and rules in a rigid and inflexible manner. These conceptualizations also appear to overlook the possibility that political behaviour may be deployed with corporate objectives in mind, instead of – or in some instances as well as – personal goals.

Organizational political behaviour has been explored from a number of different perspectives. Factors affecting choice of influence tactics have been widely studied (Cheng, 1983; Kipnis et al., 1984). Studies relating Machiavellian personality traits to career success and other variables have a lengthy history (Christie and Geiss, 1970; Graham, 1996). Surveys and interview studies illustrate the pervasiveness of organizational political behaviour (Drory and Romm, 1988; Riley, 1983). Numerous commentators list the tactics, or

Given the ‘ugly duckling’ nature of the subject matter, researchers have adopted relatively ‘distanced’ data-collection strategies, which fail to address the potentially complex and multidimensional components influencing individual choice in deploying political behaviour. Researchers have also typically sought to base data collection and analysis on their own operational definitions of organizational political behaviour (Drory and Romm, 1988, is an exception) rather than develop understanding of what respondents themselves interpret as ‘political’.

The difficulties in bringing rich qualitative data to this topic are significant, given the sensitivity of the issues, and the damaging consequences of disclosure. Researchers may often face personal and managerial pressures to overlook the ethically dubious. For example, Riley (1983) was able to ask her interviewees only four general questions about politics, following negotiation with executives who viewed her study as threatening. The descriptive ethnographic work of Jackall (1988) comes closest to revealing the phenomenological texture of political behaviour for organizational actors. Jackall, however, is concerned to demonstrate the morally contingent nature of managerial work in general, and he develops no systematic framework for understanding organizational political behaviour.

These more or less ‘distanced’ approaches to researching organizational political behaviour leave us with a limited understanding of the logic underpinning such behaviour as it is understood by initiators. Bacharach, Bamberger and Sonnenstuhl (1996) use the concept ‘logic of action’ to describe the cognitive framework that an actor brings to behavioural choices linking means to ends. A logic of action is thus a schema, a cognitive map or framework, linking actions to goals; it is a calculation resolving the issue ‘If I do this, then . . . such will be the result’. This logic is clearly contingent on the actual and anticipated behaviour of relevant others, and a logic of action can be either an individual or a group property. An individual’s logic of action is implicit, but becomes public in particular circumstances: ‘it becomes manifest when parties try to explain for themselves or justify to others the selection of specific means, ends, and the linkages between the two’ (Bacharach, Bamberger and Sonnenstuhl 1996, p. 478). The concept of a logic of action is neither fixed, static nor shared, but dynamic, as individual and group understandings and definitions of situations conflict, and adapt with experience.

The epistemology of the particular

The single case appears to occupy an ambivalent position in organization theory and research. Some seminal work has been based on data from single organizations (see Dyer and Wilkins, 1991). Management autobiography, relying on single focused life histories, appears to be a thriving popular genre. Outside autobiography, research reports based on single respondents are rare, but not without precedent (e.g. Boland and Day, 1989). Much evaluation research in organization development and change, for example on total quality management, business process re-engineering, and autonomous group working, relies on case reports from single (often tightly time-bound) applications. The case study remains popular as a teaching tool, as a vehicle for learning in which, presumably, general lessons are to be derived from analysis of singular organizational experiences. This latter point, it may be argued, confuses research with teaching, where the case is used as a vehicle for comparing and sharing knowledge, rather than for the more highly regarded academic activity of generating new knowledge.

However, organization researchers conventionally seek in published papers to emphasize the size and representativeness of their samples, the lack of idiosyncrasy in research sites and respondents and the broad applicability of findings. The ultimate small sample of one can thus be discounted as merely indicative, anecdotal, exploratory, opportunistic, idiosyncratic and, at the extreme, unscientific. The singular thus attracts both sympathy and suspicion.

This paper explores the logic of action underpinning political behaviour, through analysis of an account from a single respondent. This respondent was one of five (four male, one female) senior managers recruited personally, not as an employer’s representative (Buchanan, 1993), to a pilot study to develop a research methodology and an analytical framework for advancing understanding
of the shaping role of political behaviour in organizational change. Interviews were schedule-unstructured, based on fifteen questions which interviewees could address in their preferred sequence. Interviews lasted one and a half hours and were tape recorded, producing transcripts each around 10,000 words long. The interview schedule generated an interesting ‘methodological failure’. This concerned the lack of meaningful responses to ‘critical incident’ questions, designed to elicit examples of political behaviour in change contexts. Respondents appeared not to organize their understanding of political behaviour into more or less discrete events or incidents, but considered instead the ongoing development of relationships, and the unfolding of political tactical exchanges over time.

How can evidence from a single respondent aspire to the status of knowledge? External validity, or generalizability, is in positivist perspectives a basic criterion of research design, defined as the level of the researcher’s confidence that findings can be applied beyond the limits of the present investigation. There is rarely an unambiguous calculus for establishing the limits of external validity, particularly in qualitative research. Evaluating external validity is typically a matter of informed judgement, of ‘reasonableness’. As Bryman (1988, p. 17) notes, even ‘large’ samples in organizational research face this problem, as such samples often tend to be opportunistic, based on convenience, and are thus arbitrary.

Defending the notion that idiographic studies can be a source of generalizable claims, Tsoukas (1989) notes that, from a nomothetic perspective, single case studies are regarded as epistemologically inferior on two grounds. First, the single case has low external validity, is suitable only for the study of local causality, and cannot therefore be a source of legitimate theoretical claims. Second, the case study can be seen as the pilot or exploratory phase of research, to be followed by appropriately rigorous nomothetic methods. Tsoukas (1989) argues that studies of the pattern of events in single cases can clarify structural aspects of social configurations, associated causal or ‘generative’ mechanisms, and contingent factors leading to particular observed behaviours. Mitchell (1983) offers a similar defence of the single case, arguing that positivist criticism relies on a misunderstanding of the distinction between the procedures through which statistical inferences to a population from a sample are drawn, and the procedures appropriate to the study of idiosyncratic cases:

‘A good deal of the confusion has arisen because of a failure to appreciate that the rationale of extrapolation from a statistical sample to a parent universe involves two very different and even unconnected inferential processes – that of statistical inference which makes a statement about the confidence we may have that the surface relationships observed in our sample will in fact occur in the parent population, and that of logical or scientific inference which makes a statement about the confidence we may have that the theoretically necessary or logical connections among the features observed in the sample pertain also to the parent population.

In case studies statistical inference is not invoked at all. Instead the inferential process turns exclusively on the theoretically necessary linkages among the features in the case study. The validity of the extrapolation depends not on the typicality or representativeness of the case but upon the cogency of the theoretical reasoning.’ (Mitchell, 1983, p. 207)

Reinforcing the point that it is inappropriate to regard the case as ‘a sample of one’, Yin (1994) also argues that:

‘This analogy to samples and universes is incorrect when dealing with case studies. This is because survey research deals with statistical generalization, whereas case studies (as with experiments) rely on analytical generalization. In analytical generalization, the investigator is striving to generalize a particular set of results to some broader theory.’ (p. 36, emphasis in the original)

In advocating a qualitative idiographic approach, Dyer and Wilkins (1991, p. 614) note the value of ‘careful study of a single case that leads researchers to see new theoretical relationships and question old ones’. These authors are critical, for example, of the approach of Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1988) to the study of political behaviour, using an operational definition of politics with five elements: coalition formation, lobbying, cooptation, withholding information and agenda control. Such an approach, they consider, is unnecessarily restrictive and prevents capture of other dimensions of behaviour considered ‘political’ by actors in the context under investigation. They also argue that the case account should make
‘a coherent, credible and memorable story’ (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991, p. 616). Butler (1997, p. 944) similarly defends research strategies which use illustrative cases and interesting narratives in ways that seek to ‘link’ inquirer, respondents and audience, arguing that: ‘The test of an illustrative case is the richness of its story in relation to the general picture given by a broader framework of which it is an exemplar’.

Stake (1994) presents a compelling argument in defence of the study of the particular, again challenging the view that findings must lead to generalizations to the populations to which the units sampled belong. From a constructivist perspective, Stake (p. 240) argues instead for ‘naturalistic generalization’, which is a personal and potentially unconscious process conducted by the reader. In this perspective, the qualitative account represents vicarious experience which, if effective, serves to reinforce the reader’s own awareness and understanding. Naturalistic generalization is thus established to the extent that the reader is able to reconstruct the argument in a manner that is personally insightful and useful. Readers are invited to draw their own conclusions, in this case with respect to the causes, nature and implications of organizational political behaviour, in addition to and in comparison with those offered by the researcher. Stake (p. 241) notes that, ‘the reader too will add and subtract, invent and shape – reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it differently connected and more likely to be personally useful’.

Two approaches to generalization thus appear relevant to the analysis of the single case, beyond conventional concerns with external validity. The first concerns analytical generalization, exploring implications for current theory and conceptualizations of the issues explored. The second concerns naturalistic generalization, exploring links to the perceptions and experiences of the reader. The task of the researcher is thus to choose an appropriate case (or cases), to seek patterns, to develop assertions, to anticipate generalizations in a provisional manner, to link conclusions to current theory, then ‘handing on’ to readers who are able to accomplish comparisons of the account with their own personal perspectives and unique experience base.

Choice of case for study and analysis is thus based not on representativeness, but on opportunity or potential for learning. Questions of ‘typicality’, ‘representativeness’ or ‘atypicality’ are of subsidiary significance. A single case may represent a negative example exposing the limitations of ‘grand theory’, while being a poor representative of a group or population as a whole. The section of case narrative presented here was considered a useful learning platform, on several grounds. First, the narrator (whose anonymity was guaranteed) reports the use of a variety of political tactics, as initiator, and also as the target of tactics initiated by another member of the organization. Second, some of these tactics were relatively extreme, and could carry ethical challenge and career penalties for those involved. Third, these tactics were deployed in the context of a strategic organizational change for which the narrator had responsibility; there were, therefore, significant organizational and personal goals at stake. Finally, the case account appeared interesting to the researcher, one from which it seemed possible to identify significant elements in the logic of political action. Readers are thus invited to assess and to challenge that judgement, and to evaluate from their own experience the ‘typicality’ of this account, which is disguised to prevent identification of actors or organization.

Sidelining the salesman

This narrative was reported by a senior manager working for a computing company in the British Midlands. As the computing industry became more competitive in the late 1990s, profit margins on hardware fell, and profitability became dependent on sales volume and efficient distribution. Profit margins on advisory or consulting services, however, remained extremely attractive. The narrator was recruited to develop ‘professional services’, but found himself in conflict with the company’s most successful hardware salesman, Simon. Simon had been recruited to deal with problems concerning a major customer. He had established an excellent relationship with the customer, generating significant business for the company and substantial commission payments for himself. The fact that one major account was now controlled by one salesman was recognized as a company problem.

‘When I came along, that was a threat to him. When I arrived, he was – is – a salesman, and he
holds the largest account that we have. In fact, 75% of my business comes through that one account, and 40% of the company’s turnover comes through that account. So he’s quite an influential man, a key player.

He got off on the wrong foot. The very first day I met him . . . first of all he called me “Mr Project Manager”, which I don’t take offence to. The second line he came out with was, “you realize that when I want to get rid of you, I’ll get rid of you?” Now, I’d been in the company for all of three days when this line came out. I’m not somebody that backs down. I take that as a threat, I really did. I didn’t enjoy that at all. Once he had said that, he’d got trouble on his hands. So I guess that I’ve been a little rough – a little abrasive in my approach towards him on occasion.

But you have to look at the background. The relationship with the client is actually between himself and one other person. And that other person just happens to be in the position where he can spend a lot of money. Whether it’s wisely spent or not, is neither here nor there. The organization for which he works is huge, very poorly organized internally, especially in IT. So you have a very personal relationship, to the point of best man at each other’s wedding, so it’s not a professional relationship.

Of course, I came along and I looked at the situation and, somewhat unwisely I probably expressed my opinion about the whole thing. I said, OK, well, we’ve got a lot of good business there, but it’s not the way that we want to go forward, this isn’t what our group of people does, it isn’t going to work that way. Well, that immediately put him on the defensive.’

The role of the professional services manager was to amalgamate four separate departments, to create a professional services section and to develop that aspect of the business. This meant absorbing two of Simon’s staff, and also changing the way services would be provided – and charged – to Simon’s main customer, and to other customers.

‘I challenged his authority. Simple as that. He wants adulation. That’s the sort of personality he has. He’s a very insecure man. My figures didn’t convince him, but unfortunately they convinced others. So he was at that time on the management team. There was myself, the financial director and the general manager. Simon was on the management team but he didn’t contribute a lot. He used to do a stand-up act on the whiteboard, show all his figures for the next month. He has this wonderful talent of changing between foreign currencies, so you’re never quite sure what’s on the board. You don’t know whether it’s a million in one currency or a million in another, which can be a huge difference. I think that’s one of the things he does on purpose. And Simon feels he is able to manipulate in the background, to challenge you through the back door. He has various means of doing this.

The first one, which is the most common, is he has a way of capturing all your e-mails. I also think I know who it is that does it for him, which unfortunately is somebody in my team, so I have a double problem here. I know that he keeps it on the general manager, he keeps it on the finance director, he certainly keeps it on the guy who used to run field services because he’s publicized it twice. I know that all of my messages are captured. Simple answer to that is, you don’t put anything in there that can be incriminating – I do things like that by phone. I assume that he can’t record the phone. I’m told that he holds a personal file on everybody, and I must have one so thick, and I don’t know what he’s got in there. A twist in the tail is that Simon refuses to use e-mail, because he doesn’t believe it’s safe.

The second thing that he does, because of his very good relationship with the customer, he can keep me out of there. That has come unstuck because I got involved in something – same client, separate department – and I got involved personally, by default, not planned on my behalf. As time has gone on, I have got more involved in that, and my position, my power in that part of the organization, has become stronger. This is very worrying for my friend Simon, because he doesn’t have any friends in that side. So I’ve sort of closed that door off too.

His next thing was, through the management team . . . you’d be stunned at how childish some of the things are that affect him. We were due to have the Christmas party a few weeks back. Just before it, I had to stay at home for a few days, and I sent a message out advising that something was happening. In fact it was a job that had started in Taiwan, and I sent out the details and I copied Simon, it’s his account, let’s be open about it. And I sent these details out. Unfortunately Simon didn’t know anything about this at all, until I sent them. And he took that as a big offence. Why was he not involved in the sales process? Why hadn’t he been informed? With that, the toys came out of the pram: “I’m no longer going to the Christmas party if he’s going there. And I’m resigning from the management team.” Well, he didn’t go to the
party. And the management team haven’t missed him.

We went out to Poland, and that was my manager being devious, because I was sat in a conference call and Simon was on the call. This was before what is potentially the largest single project that the company, globally, has ever had. This is the one that I’m programme managing at the moment, which Simon can’t get his fingers on, which is a huge problem for him. The first country we’re working on is Poland. Simon said, we’re going out there to meet some suppliers and so on, during this conference call. My director in London said, I think you should be with Simon on that one, we’ll make the arrangements from here. And I sat there on the other end of the conference call thinking, do I want to go? I had no interest in going, but he said, just get yourself there and see what he’s doing.

So he put me out there just to keep tabs on him. And while I was there, in the hotel, it turned out that Simon had made no appointments. We arrived on the Sunday night, there was nothing to do on the Monday, so I made all the arrangements and managed to see several suppliers and parts of our organization out there as well. On the Monday evening, we arranged to meet for dinner, and I had a phone call about half an hour before. “This is Denise, from such and such escort agency. I understand that you like blondes. We can’t make it for quarter past but we’ll have somebody to you at quarter to seven. Would you like me to send them up to your room?” And I said, terribly sorry, I think that somebody’s been playing a rather unpleasant game with you here and – this is Simon trying to trap me. I don’t know how he would do it, but he would have photographs or whatever.

I have a long-term strategy here. I know that in order to either get him to change, or to get rid of him, my department has to take a controlling hand in his account. That is where all of his power comes from. It’s not his personality, it’s not his background, he doesn’t have friends in high places. It comes purely from that account. So, I have to take control of that. And I do that through selecting and motivating and encouraging my team to go there with a certain agenda. Number one is do the job properly. I would never put that second. I think that would reflect badly on me. So it would work against me if I said, make the job go badly. The second thing is that you’re in there to sell. Consultative selling; look for opportunities, look for areas where we can spread further in there, stay clear of the internal politics because they’re not going to do you any favours. Their political situation is far worse than the one that I deal with. And just make yourself very important in there. Make it so that the business is coming through you. Keep Simon in copy of everything you do. But if you are developing the order yourself, if you’re bringing that order out, and then you inform Simon, what’s Simon’s purpose in there any more? He’s no longer required. His power is getting less, to the point where I think he’ll know that he no longer has any influence and on he’ll move from that. So the politics, my fighting against him, is working on behalf of the organization.

So, bit by bit, I squeeze him tighter and tighter. I think another six months to a year and I’ll have him out. Which is nasty, I know. I consider that to be a professional approach. I consider that because I don’t believe that his attitude and his motivators are for the good of the organization. Whereas I consider mine to be.

You have to have sparring partners. You have to have people you can bounce ideas off, and in some ways politics can be used as that sounding board. Fighting against people, yes, but there are good things coming out of that. The new experiences that are being learned which are good for the individual. My sparring with Simon is beneficial to the organization, because they know they cannot rely on one person, especially somebody as temperamental as that, to run with one contract which has such a large percentage of the revenue. Putting somebody like me in there who is abrasive, who will not lie down and surrender, somebody who will fight against it, is working on behalf of the organization, and the fights that I have with Simon will actually give me insight into the next move – how do I go on to the next stage, I’ve done this to him, kicked the pedestal away and he’s now the same level as everybody else – his role is diminishing, what’s the next stage in that. How do you actually learn what the next move is within that arena?’

What will be the consequences of this political strategy for Simon and his career?

‘Yes, it can be damaging and time consuming. We’ve had a number of situations recently where Simon has threatened to resign. I very nearly had enough of it. Just couldn’t be bothered with the fighting any more. So there are times when it becomes a very negative thing. But I believe the outcome will be positive for the organization. I’ve not sat and worked it out on paper, but there is a cost-benefit there.
The fact that Simon might be thrown on the streets at the end of this, the fact that he’s 37 years old and possibly is going to struggle to get another job, recently married, hoping for children . . . actually doesn’t come into it at all. In my perception, he is damaging to the company, and he is certainly damaging to me, so he’s got to go. Or change. I’ll give him the choice. He can do one or the other.

I think that Simon will probably leave. I think that the days of the cowboy box-selling salesman are limited. We’re developing professional services. Simon will be in a world which I don’t believe he understands. I don’t think he can thrive in that world. And I think he will have a lot of difficulty in gaining credibility elsewhere. He may move into another organization, but he’ll be the new boy on the block. Unless he gets results very quickly, he’s not going to regain his old position. And I think that his career will go backwards. You play with fire, you get burned.’

Professionally nasty: context, tactics and outcomes

What does this single account reveal about the logic of political action? This question can be explored in relation to the context in which this action takes place, the tactics deployed and the outcomes, for the organization and for the two key participants. A brief discussion of the ethical dimensions of political behaviour also follows.

Context

The organizational context is characterized by declining profit margins in the company’s traditional business, and by the strategy of developing higher-margin professional services. The company’s revenue stream is dominated by one traditional customer, whose account is controlled by one influential salesman. The relationship between salesman and customer is personal as well as professional. Managers regard the company’s dependence on this customer relationship as a problem. One director even uses the narrator to monitor the salesman’s activities on an overseas assignment. The salesman is successful and influential, and resents the narrator’s intrusion as the new professional services manager. This resentment is made clear to the narrator in the form of a personal threat. The narrator thus has a clear, formally sanctioned warrant to develop a new area of business, but finds this agenda threatened by a colleague with a stake in the status quo. This threatened agenda gives the narrator a tacit, informal, unsanctioned warrant to respond to subversive political tactics. The narrator thus implicitly invites the listener/reader to regard his political behaviour as justified and as reasonable in context.

Tactics

The political behaviour used by Simon the salesman includes:

- insult and personal threat to new colleague;
- attempts to influence the management team with ‘fancy figure-work’;
- exploitation of a key customer for personal as well as corporate gain;
- ‘spying’ on colleagues by covertly capturing their e-mail messages;
- holding personal ‘dirt files’ on colleagues;
- deliberately attempting to exclude colleagues from a key customer;
- symbolic resignation from the management team;
- attempted entrapment and/or embarrassment of a colleague with prostitutes on an overseas assignment.

The political behaviour used by the narrator includes:

- a conscious decision to respond ‘abrasively’ to Simon’s insults and threats;
- being open with Simon about ‘this is not the way forward’;
- rational appeal (‘my figures didn’t convince him, but they convinced others’);
- avoiding placing ‘incriminating’ material in e-mail messages;
- personal involvement with other sections in the key customer’s organization;
- advising colleagues to act professionally, to ‘get the job done’;
- ‘keep him copied, but keep him out’;
- pursuing a long-term strategy to marginalize Simon by placing other team members in strategic and influential positions with his key customer.

These tactics are considered here as ‘political’ because they were so categorized and described
by the narrator, not because they appear to belong to a predetermined operational definition of ‘political behaviour’. The deployment of these tactics clearly did not occur in a single event or incident, but in the context of an ongoing exchange between the participants. In terms of the concept of logic of action, and from the standpoint of the narrator, these tactics can be represented as appropriate means to desired ends, in this particular context.

**Outcomes**

Several personal and organizational outcomes are evident in this account. One concerns ‘getting Simon out of the customer’. The strategy is to achieve this over a six to twelve month period, using tactics that the narrator describes as ‘nasty but professional’. While admitting that political behaviour can be time-consuming and damaging, the narrator also argues that this ‘sparring’ is ‘good for the organization’ in terms of the ongoing exchange of ideas, the personal skills development involved and in the eventual sidelining of the salesman. The main organizational outcome concerns the implementation of the narrator’s formal agenda, to develop the higher-margin professional services business.

Another anticipated outcome concerns ‘getting Simon out of the company’, which could entail potential ruin for the salesman. He is young, married, about to have children and also about to be unemployed if the narrator’s tactics are effective. The narrator, however, dismisses these considerations. The salesman is damaging the organization and the professional services agenda. He has to change or leave. The narrator is thus able to sustain a potentially satisfactory account (Bies and Sitkin, 1992; McLaughlin, Cody and Read, 1992; Read, 1992) of his behaviour, justifying his actions in this context, defending the use of those means to those ends, in his own view. Bacharach et al. (1996, p. 478) note that an individual’s implicit logic of action becomes evident when justifying the use of particular means to particular ends, either to oneself, or to others if challenged. It seems reasonable to assume that this account would probably persuade other managers in the organization that the narrator’s behaviour was appropriate and acceptable in the circumstances.

**Ethical judgements**

But is the narrator’s account compelling for an outside observer? One approach to this question is to hold examples of political behaviour against a set of guidelines. One template, designed specifically to deal with organizational politics, comes from the work of Manuel Velasquez, Dennis Moberg and Gerald Cavanagh (Cavanagh, Moberg and Velasquez, 1981; Velasquez, Moberg and Cavanagh, 1983). Their concern is to establish a structure for ethical decisions that will allow us to distinguish ‘dirty politics’ from ‘responsible political action’. Their approach is based on the normative ethical concepts of utilitarianism, individual rights and natural justice. They argue that these criteria are complementary, and that they should be combined in reaching ethical judgements of political behaviour.

A **utilitarian** approach judges behaviour in terms of the ‘balance sheet’ of benefit and damage to the population involved. Behaviour is acceptable if it passes the test of meeting ‘the greatest good of the greatest number’. Performing the necessary calculation of interests, satisfaction and other potential consequences can be problematic. An approach based on the **theory of rights** judges behaviour on the extent to which fundamental individual rights are respected. This includes, for example, the right of free consent, the right to privacy, the right to freedom of conscience, the right of free speech, the right to due process in the form of a fair and impartial hearing. Performing the ethical calculus here can be a complex matter of establishing whether an individual’s entitlements have or have not been violated. Finally, an approach based on the **theory of justice** judges behaviour on the extent to which the benefits and burdens consequent on an action are fairly, equitably and impartially distributed. Distributive justice implies that individuals in similar circumstances should be treated equally, rules should be applied consistently, and individuals should not be held responsible for matters beyond their control. As with utilitarian calculus, these issues can be awkward to resolve in practice. How is ‘responsibility’ to be established? On what criteria can differential treatment be based?

This argument becomes a decision tree, in which the first question is, ‘gather the facts surrounding the political act’. This is immediately problematic as ‘the facts’ represented will inevitably depend
on the perspective of the narrator – other actors will doubtless produce contradictory accounts – and there may be limited value in assessing ‘the political act’ outside the context of an ongoing exchange. An ‘effective’ account is one which ‘sticks’, is one which will be considered reasonable. It may thus be necessary to abandon, or at least to treat with caution, ‘universal’ normative ethical principles which fail on contact with real examples. This prompts resorting to a situational ethic which asks, what is appropriate, acceptable, justifiable, defensible in this context? Disputes over these questions can be resolved in the court of public debate, attracting specific, concrete, local responses (in this case, from other managers and salespeople). Disputes over universal ethical principles are dealt with in the court of intellectual discussion, which has no closure.

Velasquez et al. (1983) point to ‘incapacitating factors’ which can prevent the straightforward application of normative ethical principles in particular circumstances. In other words, beyond the straightjacket of their decision tree, there are a number of ‘escape routes’ or ‘fudge factors’ which seem to permit the application of reasonable judgement in the circumstances. As Velasquez et al. (1983, pp. 79–80) point out:

‘The manager who is unable to use ethical criteria because of these incapacitating factors may justifiably give them a lesser weight in making decisions about what to do in a political situation. The underlying rationale for such systematic devaluation of ethical criteria is simple. A person cannot hold himself responsible for matters which he cannot control or for matters of which he is sincerely ignorant or sincerely in doubt. However, determining whether a manager’s lack of freedom, lack of information, or lack of certitude is sufficient to abrogate moral responsibility requires one to make some very difficult judgements. In the end, these are hard questions that only the individuals involved can answer for themselves.’

From the account reported here, the utilitarian calculus appears to be in favour of the organization as a whole, or at least is represented as such by the narrator, considering the medium to long-term development of the business. However, individual rights are damaged in the process – a potentially ‘weak’ argument as both actors are operating covertly in pursuit of personal goals. Justice is being seen not to be done in relation to the target, who is systematically excluded from key business developments. The ‘incapacitating factors’ which could be cited here relate to the radically changing nature of the business in this sector, and the relatively extreme political tactics of the target. The narrator’s actions clearly have a ‘double effect’ in developing the business, while damaging the target’s career prospects. The narrator thus faces ‘incapacitating factors’ in applying ethical rules to the extent that his own corporate responsibilities and personal reputation are being put at risk by the target’s actions.

The narrator has at least one other significant personal outcome clearly in sight in contemplating this political behaviour. This is evident from the comment, ‘Number one is do the job properly. I would never put that second. I think that would reflect badly on me. So it would work against me if I said, make the job go badly’. This is reinforced by comments concerning advice to team members to act professionally. In other words, one critical outcome from this exchange for the narrator concerns reputation. Laver (1997) defines reputation as a ‘socially defined asset’, painstakingly constructed, but vulnerable and fragile. Reputation is thus an incentive to engage in political behaviour. The narrator presumably does not want to develop a reputation for failing to implement the new business development strategy. However, reputation is also a potential barrier to extreme political behaviour. For example, Simon’s reputation in the eyes of his various management colleagues is doubtless conditioned by his personal relations with a key customer, by his resignation from the management team and by his attempt to entrap a colleague with a prostitute (knowledge of the latter not being widespread). The maintenance of reputation is thus irrevocably linked with the pursuit of corporate as well as personal goals. Whatever the views of the outside observer in this case, the narrator’s reputation within the organization seems likely to be strengthened considerably. The target is a ‘known problem’. The strategy for handling this appears to be effective.

The logic of political action

Figure 1 attempts to map the logic of political action from the standpoint of this narrator, identifying the main elements in the cognitive schema that seem to arise from the events analysed here.
The Logic of Political Action

The top half of the figure represents the context factors identified in the previous section, giving the initiator a tacit warrant to engage in political behaviour in support of a formal warrant to fulfil specific management responsibilities. The lower half of the figure represents the personal and organizational outcomes of political behaviour, taking into consideration the potential need to generate a satisfactory account of political behaviour, and of the implications for the initiator’s reputation. The exchange of tactics is represented by the central element in the figure, ‘the ongoing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>organizational features</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>margins on ‘old’ business falling, means a shift to new high margin business area: strategic change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>stakeholders</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other managers and directors, salesmen, professional services team members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>narrator/initiator</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>formal management responsibility for implementing strategic change agenda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| formal warrant for strategic organization change agenda |
| tacit warrant for political behaviour, based on subversive tactics of other |

| the ongoing action: political strategies and tactics |
| organizational outcomes: implement the change agenda, develop the new business area |
| accounting for actions: justify to self and others that political behaviour is reasonable in context |

| reputation: |
| maintain credibility as effective manager, as effective political ‘player’ |

Figure 1. The logic of political action
action’. The main elements in this provisional framework thus seem to include:

1. The organizational context, including its current ‘defining features’; a new corporate business strategy, other stakeholders, some of whom are supportive, and in this case one of whom is subversive, and the organizational position of the narrator as responsible for implementing the new strategy, and as a potential initiator of political behaviour.

2. The initiator’s formal warrant to implement, in this case, a strategic change agenda, and a tacit warrant to deploy political behaviour given the context in which he is operating, including the actual and anticipated subversive political tactics of the target individual.

3. The ongoing action, expressed in terms of the tactics of political behaviour used by both initiator and target. As suggested earlier, this is a ‘long game’, not a ‘single play’.

4. The organizational and personal consequences of the ongoing action. These consequences are closely interlocked. It is difficult from the illustration offered here to disentangle corporate goals from ‘self interest’ as the one implies the other.

5. The implicit need to generate a convincing account of the political behaviour described. This accounting seems to have two dimensions – personal and public. It is reasonable to assume that, at least in some circumstances, the initiators of political behaviour may wish to reassure themselves that their actions are indeed warranted. A personal account thus provides self-justification. It is also reasonable to assume that, at least in some circumstances, initiators of political behaviour may subsequently be challenged (in a research interview, say) to defend their behaviour. A public account thus provides self-defence in the view of the relevant constituency from which the challenge derives.

6. The reputation of the initiator of political action. Reputation here appears to be a trigger for political behaviour (to ‘get the job done’ in adverse conditions) as well as a constraint on extreme political behaviour (to avoid damaging one’s own credibility).

These interrelated factors can thus be regarded as elements in the logic of action, linking means to ends, in this particular setting, and for this initiator. This framework can also be considered from the standpoint of the target in this case, the salesman, who is also a initiator of political behaviour. It is not difficult to presume that, given his manifest sales success, he similarly feels warranted in acting to protect his customer, his sales figures and the company’s revenue from that source, and presumably also feels warranted in the political tactics he is using to subvert the new professional services manager. However, the salesman’s difficulties, on this evidence (which is admittedly biased), lie with the relatively extreme tactics he is using (in particular, spying and attempted entrapment), with the implications of disclosure of these tactics on his reputation and with the observation that he is confronted by a potentially more highly skilled political ‘player’.

Analytical generalization: the link to theory

Table 1 attempts to link the implications from the analysis of this case to the various characterizations of organizational political behaviour reviewed earlier. Nine dimensions of current conceptualizations are identified from that brief review. The case analysis appears to confirm three of these, and to be inconsistent with two. On the remaining four items, the case analysis suggests that current conceptualizations may be oversimplified.

Consistencies

The observation that managers have an ambivalent regard for political behaviour, recognizing its inevitability but not necessarily enjoying the consequences (e.g. Gandz and Murray, 1980) finds support here. The narrator of this case argues that political ‘sparring’ is both beneficial and time-consuming. The characterization of political tactics as covert (e.g. Drory and Romm, 1990) also finds support, to the extent that the tactics deployed in this case are known only to a limited number of actors. The argument that politics can be a desirable facet of organizational change (e.g. Frost and Egri, 1991) is also supported by the narrator’s claim that this can be a valuable forum for debate and a learning experience.
The portrayal of organizational politics as an ‘irrational intrusion’ (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges and Jacobsson, 1995; Stone, 1997) is contradicted by this case example. The narrator’s actions appear rational, reasonable and defensible in context. Political behaviour in organizational change has also been portrayed as unnecessary and unprofessional (e.g. French and Bell, 1995). The case also challenges this characterization. The political actions of the narrator appear necessary in context, and management colleagues could regard his failure to address these political issues as incompetent and unprofessional, particularly if this failure damaged or delayed the change agenda for which the narrator was responsible.

Political behaviour has been defined as illegitimate and unsanctioned (e.g. Mayes and Allen, 1977). This case suggests that a simple dichotomy between sanctioned and unsanctioned actions fails to capture the complexity of political action. The narrator had formal management sanction for implementing a change agenda, and what has been described as a ‘tacit warrant’ for political action. However, it can reasonably be presumed that the narrator’s management colleagues, as already indicated, would sanction the narrator’s effective political actions as reasonable in context.

Table 1. Analytical generalization: linking case findings to current conceptualizations of political behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptualizations of politics</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Implications of this case analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regarded with ambivalence by managers</td>
<td>Buchanan, Claydon and Doyle, 1999; Gandz and Murray, 1980; Pfeffer, 1992</td>
<td>Yes. Narrator claims that ‘the fighting’ is beneficial, but that it gets tedious at times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characterized by covert means</td>
<td>Drory and Romm, 1990</td>
<td>Yes. Behaviour reported is ‘non-discussable’ in public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An ugly duckling, and an irrational intrusion, requiring an apologetic response</td>
<td>Czarniawska-Joerges and Jacobsson, 1995; Stone, 1997</td>
<td>No. Rational, reasonable, defensible response in context; no apologies required or offered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnecessary and unprofessional</td>
<td>French and Bell, 1995; Hutton, 1994; Thompkins, 1990; Ward, 1994</td>
<td>No. Political steps were necessary. Would be seen in context as unprofessional for the narrator to ignore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegitimate and unsanctioned behaviour</td>
<td>Mayes and Allen, 1977; Mintzberg, 1983</td>
<td>A simple distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned is not appropriate. Management sanctioned the change agenda; and would probably sanction the narrator’s effective political actions as reasonable in context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divisive, devious and underhand behaviour</td>
<td>Mintzberg, 1983</td>
<td>Conceptualization oversimplified. Behaviour was devious and divisive in a personal but not an organizational sense. Narrator’s actions actually encourage team solidarity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triggered by conflict and uncertainty</td>
<td>Drory and Romm, 1990</td>
<td>Conceptualization oversimplified. One relationship conflictual, but not organization relationships as a whole.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inconsistencies

The portrayal of organizational politics as an ‘irrational intrusion’ (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges and Jacobsson, 1995; Stone, 1997) is contradicted by this case example. The narrator’s actions appear rational, reasonable and defensible in context. Political behaviour in organizational change has also been portrayed as unnecessary and unprofessional (e.g. French and Bell, 1995). The case also challenges this characterization. The political actions of the narrator appear necessary in context, and management colleagues could regard his failure to address these political issues as incompetent and unprofessional, particularly if this failure damaged or delayed the change agenda for which the narrator was responsible.

Oversimplifications

Political behaviour has been defined as illegitimate and unsanctioned (e.g. Mayes and Allen, 1977). This case suggests that a simple dichotomy between sanctioned and unsanctioned actions fails to capture the complexity of political action. The narrator had formal management sanction for implementing a change agenda, and what has been described as a ‘tacit warrant’ for political action. However, it can reasonably be presumed that the narrator’s management colleagues, as already indicated, would sanction the narrator’s effective political actions as defensible in context, although it is unlikely that such sanction could be publicized.

Political behaviour has been defined as that which is divisive, devious and underhand (e.g.
Mintzberg, 1983). In this case, while the tactics deployed can be labelled as devious and underhand, these actions were divisive only in a personal sense, concerning the narrator and the salesman. On the contrary, the narrator’s political behaviour was designed to foster both solidarity among members of his team and support for a major shift in corporate strategy.

Political behaviour is normally equated with self-serving actions (e.g. Drory and Romm, 1990). In this case, the narrator’s political behaviour serves a combination of personal and organizational goals which are inextricably linked. The narrator’s professional reputation is associated with the effective implementation of a major change agenda. Dealing effectively with political interference of the kind reported here is thus central both to the fulfilment of his organizational management responsibilities and to personal career prospects.

Finally, one of the defining elements of political behaviour concerns an organizational context characterized by conflict and uncertainty (e.g. Drory and Romm, 1990). This also appears oversimplified in the light of the case analysis presented here, where one relationship can be portrayed as conflictual, but not organizational relationships as a whole.

The analysis of this case thus suggests a tentative reconceptualization of organizational political behaviour, as behaviour with the following nine ‘defining elements’:

- regarded with managerial ambivalence;
- characterized by covert, and potentially devious and underhand, tactics;
- a desirable aspect of organizational change;
- necessary in many settings, unprofessional to ignore or to avoid;
- potentially rational, reasonable behaviour, defensible in context;
- potentially warranted by aspects of the organizational and interpersonal context;
- defensibility contingent on initiator’s credible accounting for political actions;
- used to maintain support for change initiatives as well as to deflect resistance;
- accompanied by initiator’s concern with reputation.

As a guiding framework for further qualitative research in this area, this raises a number of questions concerning the shaping role of politics in organizational change. For example, is it possible to identify and perhaps classify the defining features of different organizational contexts, beyond ‘uncertainty and conflict’ (Drory and Romm, 1990), intensifying and ameliorating political behaviour respectively? How is political behaviour understood and interpreted differently in different contexts? How do other initiators of political behaviour in other organizational settings typically account for and justify their actions, to themselves and to others when challenged? How do observers – neutral and involved – respond respectively to those accounts? How do the initiators of political action, particularly more extreme forms (covertly gathering incriminating information on colleagues; acting deliberately to wreck someone’s career), evaluate the potential risks to their reputations? Are there male–female differences in approach and response to political behaviour (none were detected in this pilot study) and how is this mediated by local contextual factors?

From a hypothetico-deductive perspective, it may be possible to derive a series of testable propositions from this singular account. For example, one might predict that initiators will be more willing to resort to political behaviours when:

- contextual pressures (urgency, competition for resources, challenge to objectives) threaten a strategic change agenda;
- a strategic change agenda is threatened by the subversive behaviour of others;
- initiators believe that they are warranted by organizational and interpersonal circumstances in using tactics to protect a strategic change agenda;
- initiators believe that, if challenged, they will be able to offer a convincing account of their political behaviour in the circumstances;
- initiators believe that their reputation will either be unaffected or enhanced by the use of political behaviour to achieve particular ends.

The formulation of prescriptive guidelines from this analysis is inappropriate, and could be both counter-productive and risky. Effective and defensible political behaviour in one setting may be highly damaging in another. However, the political action framework, and the re-conceptualization of political behaviour tentatively proposed here could be of value in the development of practical...
analytical skill and judgement. While the texture of political issues can be expected to differ across organizational contexts, it is possibly the case that issues related to warrant, accounting and personal reputation, as ‘generative mechanisms’ (Tsoukas 1989), will be significant in different settings.

**Naturalistic generalization: was it good for you?**

In the context of naturalistic generalization, this paper must also ask the reader: was this account interesting, relevant, insightful, memorable and useful from your perspective? Does the logic of political action derived from this account reflect the evidence presented? Would you draw different conclusions? From your theoretical and experience base, is this account typical of the use of organizational political behaviour, or is it idiosyncratic? What are the implications of that judgement for the wider applicability of the framework?

There are at least three difficulties with the notion of naturalistic generalization. First, it is inevitable that readers pass analyses and arguments through the filters of their own related experiences and conceptual frameworks. It may be unnecessary to elevate these natural comparisons to the status of a methodological criterion. Second, this step throws analytical and interpretive chores on to the reader, who is presumably interested in the analysis and arguments of the researcher. Third, this may be seen to sidestep questions surrounding the purpose of this account of political behaviour. Whose interests are served by this account and these conclusions? Does this analysis offer managerial guidance on more effective wheeler-dealing and manipulation, or does it expose political behaviours to wider public visibility, scrutiny, and therefore challenge? Can such accounts serve multiple purposes?

The reader’s judgement may be that this argument is not insightful, that the conclusions do not reflect the evidence, that the case is highly idiosyncratic, that this analysis is not personally illuminating and that the elements in the framework (contexts, warrants, tactics, outcomes, accounts and reputations) are not a useful guide to further research in this area. There are several possible explanations for this outcome, lying perhaps with the capabilities of the researcher and author, or with differences in perspective and experience between author and reader. One other explanation lies with the meta-methodological issues related to the epistemology of the particular, and with different perspectives on the value and validity of this approach. However, if the reader’s answers to questions such as those above are broadly positive, then this experiment with the epistemology of the particular may be deemed to have enjoyed at least some modest success.

**References**


