Wenzel Matiaske:
Soziales Kapital in Organisationen. Eine tauschtheoretische Studie

Empirische Personal- und Organisationsforschung, hrsg. von W. Weber, A. Martin, W. Nienhüser, Bd. 12
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Social capital, intra- and inter-organizational networks, trust and power are terms that have influenced the discussion on management considerably. However, theories and methods to analyze these subjects still remain fragmented. This gives reason to take a closer look on a book that provides a theoretical and methodological basis for investigating social capital, networks and power in organizations.

In a networked world in which shared knowledge is regarded an important factor of production, the following questions arise: How do social networks work in organizations? How is power distributed in organizations? In what way is (individual) social capital measurable? How can social networks be designed and managed?

Wenzel Matiaske aims at providing answers to these questions. The objective of the work is to extend the toolkit of empirical research on organizations and human resources and to develop instruments that enable researchers to analyze networks and social capital theoretically and empirically. The investigation of lateral cooperation in the form of information exchange between employees that hold hierarchically equivalent positions serves as an example that illustrates the functionality of the instruments presented.

In the first chapter, the relevance of lateral cooperation and of social exchange theory and social network analysis is considered. The depiction of modern organization technologies which follow from the contingency approach reveals a need for methods to map and analyze information networks. A brief survey of network analysis tools and instruments and their evolution is provided which discloses that so far, network analysis does not provide sufficient theoretical explanations of social networks.

Following the logic to proceed from the universal to the concrete, the second chapter introduces components of a general explanation of social phenomena. The rational-choice approach, which is engrained in methodological individualism, provides the plan for constructing a theoretical framework that is likely to be also valuable for applications other than this. The socio-economic macro-micro-macro model that constitutes the basic principle of construction explains collective results as intended and unintended effects of individual action. The action of individual actors is modeled according to a general thus simple theory of action that considers the situation in which action takes place. The model of man considered here is the homo socio-economicus whose resourcefulness distinguishes him from other models of man. The maximizing principle is provided by SEU theory (Subjective Expected Utility Theory). The author describes ways to represent habitualized decisions within a rational choice theory and thus integrate arguments usually put forward against rational choice approaches. Following content theories of motivation, Matiaske elaborates which resources actors are interested in.

As an introduction to the third chapter about modeling the micro-macro transition according to social exchange theory, Matiaske shows how (social) exchange can be reconstructed rationally. The comparison of social and economic exchange reveals that the major difference between these two is the absence of a general medium of exchange (i. e., money) in the former case.

By introducing James S. Coleman's social exchange theory, a model is provided that depicts social exchange as an analog to economic exchange under perfect market conditions. A perfect social system implies that actors have unrestricted access to all others in the system and that they fully trust everyone. Based on these assumptions, Matiaske deduces empirically testable hypotheses on exchange relations between actors, their power and the value of resources in the linear exchange system.

In order to develop a less demanding model in terms of exchange barriers Matiaske combines a theory of power and social exchange theory. According to considerations provided by power-dependency theory the access structure is considered a secondary resource and is integrated in the Coleman model. In doing so, Matiaske shows a way to measure individual social capital. Furthermore, different theoretical means to solve the problems related to trust are discussed. To put trust in someone – a prerequisite for successful exchange - is considered a decision under uncertainty. From a socio-centric point of view, it is rational to establish symbolic capital to appear trustworthy. By arguing this way, Matiaske reveals opportunities for a theory-immanent explanation of norms and symbols. Additionally, the discussion shows that trust is tested gradually and that putting trust in someone is dependent on the probability of a future encounter.

The fourth chapter shows that socio-economic exchange theory allows for a formal analysis. Coleman's exchange model and some concepts of network analysis are developed formally. In order to not only determine the value of events, the resource-based power of actors and the distribution of control in equilibrium, but also predict exchange relations, the author refers to Kappelhoff's interpretation of the Coleman model as a resource flow model. The next step taken is to modify the Coleman model such that the assumption of unrestricted access is abandoned. Matiaske shows different ways to imply this in formal analysis based on Coleman's proposition to consider transaction costs as economic frictions as well as on other approaches. Moreover, Matiaske develops a new solution which measures the access structure using Bonacich indices and which integrates the access structure as a secondary resource. Thus he incorporates structural theories of power in the exchange model. Several computations indicate that this extension provides results similar to those of structure theory models.

The fifth chapter presents an exemplary application of the Coleman model and its modification by Matiaske to examine their predictive power. The author investigates lateral cooperation, or more precisely, information transfer within four work groups in different organizations. Their members are interviewed according to a detailed structured questionnaire. The results provide evidence that the Coleman model is able to explain outcomes of social action. The formal analysis based on exchange theory offers information about the structure of interaction, results of exchange processes, and the power of actors. To improve this instrument Matiaske suggests to develop more valid measures of central concepts and to integrate other modifications of the Coleman model, e.g. the model of habitualized action described in chapter two.

Summing up: Wenzel Matiaske offers researchers in HRM and organizational behavior valuable theoretical and methodical tools suitable to analyze issues related to networks, social capital, power and exchange in (and also between) organizations. The building blocks form a coherent framework based on rational choice theory. The goal of this work to introduce a research perspective based on social exchange theory and network analysis, to explore its potential and utilize it for diverse issues. Consequently, the empirical investigation serves as an exemplary application. The implications for network design and management thus remain rather vague. Nevertheless, this book can be recommended to managers as well because it directs their awareness to informal networks and exchange relations.

A specific merit of this book is that it complies with the popular request to integrate economic, sociological and social psychological insights. Coleman's social exchange theory introduced here directly corresponds to economic concepts and is suitable to include approaches from social psychology and sociology. Rather than constituting another strand of research, it proves to be highly compatible with established approaches and thus encourages a dialogue between different theoretical disciplines. Beyond doubt, the frequently postulated bridging of economy and sociology succeeds in this case.

Still, the question remains why this book that is likely to become a classic in human resource management and organizational behavior literature has not gained more attention five years after being published. One might speculate about reasons. Possibly, building the bridge starting on the bank of sociology and leading sociologist towards economy does not arouse the personnel and organizational economists' interest. Metaphorically speaking, they might be standing with the back towards the river. However, it is desirable – not only for this book but more importantly for research in organizational behavior – that more researchers recognize the value of social exchange theory. Applying social exchange theory and network analysis on organizational and personnel issues and thereby refining theoretical reasoning and enhancing instruments is likely to enrich the debates in these fields.

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