UNDOUBTEDLY, the techniques of empirical social research in complex human organizations are more like those used in family, community, national, and other settings than they are different from them. By and large, we use similar techniques and face similar problems of sampling, questionnaire construction, interviewing, measurement of social and psychological variables, and of analysis, statistical or otherwise. As in all concrete settings, however, research in organizations presents special problems and opportunities. In large part, the success of any actual study of organizations depends both on mastery of common tools of social research and on their skillful adaptation to the particular setting.

This paper focuses upon a special methodological problem of organizational research, the "problem of access" to organizations for research purposes. Since the author's research experience has been mainly in public agencies in the United States, the following remarks may not apply as well to private or foreign organizations.

The general strategy for studying organizations assumed here may be called the "systematic approach." This general approach provides a framework of broader ends and means within which the "problem of access" to organizations is discussed. What is meant by the "systematic approach"?

The "systematic approach" aims to produce knowledge of complex human organizations that, insofar as possible, meets the usual scientific canons of validity, reliability, generality, parsimony, explana-
tory power, and usefulness for purposive control. The strategic framework of means currently felt by persons following this approach as necessary to realize their aims includes the following:

1. An empirical focus on the behavior of persons and groups—description of institutional forms of public and private administration and of public ideologies of leaders and rank-and-file members of organizations is not enough.

2. A set of postulates to the effect that behavior of persons and groups in organizations, as in other settings, is a function of factors associated with: (a) individual personality and attitudes, (b) social organization, including the division of work, communication and power structures, and the like, and (c) culture, including formal and informal values, rules and sanctions both of the organization and of the wider community in which it functions, technology, and so on.

3. Some logically closed, middle-range theoretical system interacting with empirical research. Ideally, the research should be oriented to testing crucial hypotheses derived from some theory.

4. Use of the most rigorous possible research designs and methods of data collection and analysis in testing hypotheses. Quantification of observations, while desirable where possible, is not necessary; use of sampling or controlled observation to delimit the generalization of findings is necessary after the early, exploratory phase of research.

5. An emphasis upon current and immediately observable organizations in the interests of full and rigorous data. Historical research, while not ruled out, is given second-level priority and rigorous comparative studies substituted at the first-priority level.


THE PROBLEM OF ACCESS

In contrast to case studies of particular private or public organizations, research following the systematic approach ultimately must deal with either a probability sample selected from some larger population of organizations or with two or more organizations whose characteristics vary only in ways relevant to the theoretical problem under investigation. In other words, a systematic approach requires that organizations be selected for study according to either a sample survey or field experimental design, or some combination of the two.

At present systematic research into a range of theoretically signifi-
cant problems is seriously limited by the relative inaccessibility of organizations for research purposes. In most studies, the researcher cannot select organizations for study purely on sampling or other technical criteria, confident that he will receive official permission to conduct his study in a high proportion of organizations so selected.

As an example, consider a study made among some governmental agencies in Detroit, Michigan, in 1954 by M. Janowitz, D. Wright, and the author. In this study we were interested in the relationships between the general adult public and the governmental organizations in the Detroit metropolitan area. We had little difficulty in drawing an area probability sample of the adult population in Detroit and achieving a response rate of 86 per cent. However, our data collection for study of government agencies and their employees could not be so routine. We were interested in the population of city, state, and federal government agencies meeting certain criteria of visibility and contact, and performing either regulative or service functions vis-à-vis the public in the community. Although it would have been costly in time and money, a list of all city, state, and federal agencies in the community which met our criteria could have been compiled and, from that point on, the procedure would have been routine. We decided, however, not to attempt sampling, mainly because we expected that any sampling procedure established would inevitably be invalidated by official refusals to co-operate with the study. Subsequent events did not prove our estimate too pessimistic.

As an expedient method of selecting organizations for study we decided upon the design in Table 1.

Table 1. Design for selecting organizations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary agency function</th>
<th>Level of U.S. government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Local</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Federal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulative</td>
<td>Police</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unemployment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>compensation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Old-age insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selective service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tax collection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2For a more complete discussion see *Public Administration and the Public*, pp. 11–12.
RESEARCH NOTES

Though 92 per cent of the individual government employees sampled within agencies filled out paper and pencil questionnaires, only three of five agencies (60 per cent) approached for permission granted it. The two refusals were both regulative agencies. In view of this experience, informal approaches toward a third regulative agency were dropped short of formally making the request. What may well be an important social organizational factor in the behavior of government employees, whether the function of their agency is a service or a regulative one, went unexplored.

HOW TO GET IN: SOME FIELD NOTES

The problem of access may be seen as a tension between the scientific goals of the researcher, on the one hand, and the organizational realities he studies, on the other. From the point of view of the researcher, the “problem” is obviously to reduce organizational refusals to levels currently tolerated for respondents selected from populations of individuals or households.

Apropos of the current and growing interest of social scientists in improving their research techniques in field situations, this report upon the tactics and experiences of the author in attempting to gain access to public agencies in Detroit for research purposes may be of interest.8

Obtaining access to specific public agencies operating in the Detroit metropolitan area was the first problem which, obviously, had to be dealt with in the study. The first step taken to gain access to the agencies was to seek advice from members of the University of Michigan community having some experience with them. A half-page memorandum was sent to each of these persons. It described the general objectives of the study and the sort of advice sought. After the memorandum was sent, advice was sought in conversations on such points as: the best person in each agency from whom to ask formal permission to do the study; how best to approach this person

8Most reports and discussions of field techniques in the study of large-scale organizations have thus far focused upon techniques of interviewing, of “structuring the field worker's role,” and upon certain ethical problems of social research in such settings. Few research reports or technical discussions have focused upon the problem of access for research purposes and none upon this problem specifically in respect to government agencies. For discussion of methods of solving the problem of access in a number of community and industrial organizational studies see Stephen A. Richardson, A Framework for Reporting Field Research Experiences, Human Organization, 12 (1953), 31–34. Richardson discusses the problem of access under “Preparation for and Entry into the Field.”
for permission; possible sources of opposition within the agency; reasons for opposition to social research and how best to meet it; and, how to time and arrange the field work so as to minimize inconvenience to the agency.

When an adviser in the university felt that the use of his name or offices would be helpful in obtaining official co-operation, he was also used as an intermediary in asking permission to do the study. (It is wise to let the adviser decide whether or not use of his name will be helpful.) The importance of using intermediaries is indicated by the fact that two of the three agencies co-operating with this study did so, in part, through the good offices of intermediaries in the university community. In another agency where an intermediary was used, permission was at first granted, and later withdrawn when the agency head originally granting it was replaced by another official. With this new official and in the other case where permission was refused, we were not able to locate an intermediary to establish contact.

While seeking advice and intermediaries to help gain access to agencies, the author was simultaneously consulting Detroit newspaper clippings, agency reports, and other sources of information available in the university library. The objective was to gain some preliminary understanding of the agency, its history, program, leading personnel, and its friends and enemies in the Detroit metropolitan community. It was anticipated, correctly, that failure to demonstrate some understanding and knowledge of the organization would create a negative impression in early negotiations for access.

The research proposal must be presented to responsible officials briefly, understandably, and for the most part, accurately when requesting permission to do a study; usually the questionnaire has to be approved before a study can begin. (Again the situation differs from studies of householders or other individuals who can be approached directly and without permission of any sort.) In asking permission to do the research, we practiced a minimum of dissimulation. Unlike the college student as research subject, high executives

4It is clear, in retrospect, that the author should have been ready to begin research in this agency as soon as permission was granted. The accessibility of large organizations to research projects may shift suddenly with changes in personnel and a variety of other factors. Good tactics in gaining access requires both timely requests for permission and a research project in a state of readiness to exploit permission as soon as it is offered.

5In approaching individual respondents in the agencies and in questionnaire instructions, however, somewhat more dissimulation was practiced. For example,
are not characteristically compliant, naïve, or inclined to disinterested co-operation with researchers. Still, it is possible to supplement some-what one’s “manifest” research topic by using personal observation, informal interviewing and informants, and the public record, and this was done in our study.

Since a minimum of dissimulation is possible in these organizational settings, the actual research topic chosen will be a consideration in gaining or failing to gain access. For example, certain phenomena having to do with “controversial” attitudes were omitted from our study design largely because we expected they would seem too “threatening” or “impractical” to the agency or its employees. In retrospect, it appears we could have spared ourselves much of this concern about the research topic. In line with repeated and almost consistent experiences of public opinion researchers, we found that public officials were considerably more tolerant of “controversial” and “impractical” topics than we expected. Certainly organizational researchers should not toss prudence to the winds, but neither should they mistake it for timidity.

While the psychic rewards of being interviewed are usually an adequate quid pro quo for the co-operation of housewives and even individual public officials with social researchers, psychic rewards are not enough to win the permission of a responsible agency head to do research in his organization. In addition, the agency head must be able to see some definite collective gain to his organization from such co-operation, a gain that at least balances its costs and risks to the organization.

In addition to “feedback” of findings from the agency studies the author provided such a quid pro quo in the form of information about perspectives of agency clientele. At least until government agencies in the United States can command the resources to hire commercial polling firms, information about client perspectives will be an effective inducement which the university-based social research unit can employ to gain co-operation from some public agencies. Which ones? It would be ineffective, obviously, with respect to agencies not having a mass clientele, and, in the author’s experience, for agencies which regulate rather than serve the public. Regulative

individual respondents were not informed that an objective of the research was to test the accuracy of the employee’s information about public perspectives. On the other hand, the agency officials granting permission to do the study were informed of the real study objectives from the start. The reasons for dissimulation were explained to the official and his co-operation enlisted.
agencies contacted—police, selective service, and taxation—apparently were resigned to an imagined unpopularity and not particularly interested to know what the public thought of them. In addition, such agencies seem more predisposed to official secrecy concerning their own operations. This may be a defense against sensed public antagonism, or it may be an attempt to prevent exposure of unapproved practices that appear an almost inevitable aspect of government regulation in the American community.

Information about clientele could have been used more skillfully as a *quid pro quo* in the present study. For example, both the survey of the adult public in the community and of agency personnel would have benefited by consultation with officials in affected *service* agencies before the public interview schedule was crystallized into final form.\(^6\) In addition, postponing the selection of service agencies for the clientele survey until permission was given for the employee survey would greatly aid in solving the problem of access to public agencies. Agency participation in questionnaire construction for the clientele survey, moreover, would have greatly increased their co-operation with the study among agency employees.

In the case of regulative agencies the situation is different. The researcher should carefully consider the security of his university research base before deciding on such agency consultations. His public opinion survey may be endangered by local political pressure. In most cases we would judge that real dangers of this kind would not be great. On the other hand, consultations with regulative agency officials may not be fruitful. They may reveal that the price of agency co-operation in terms of freedom of inquiry into public perspectives is higher than the researcher can pay. The problem of access to regulative agencies of government is still a dilemma for the writer.

We were careful to approach administrators of each agency directly rather than through politically constituted boards or commissions supervising administrative staffs. It was felt, and rightly, that indirect approach through political figures would prejudice later rapport with administrators. Permission to do the study was formally requested in a two-page letter to one of the higher executives of each agency. Since it is necessary to communicate at the outset the detailed objectives and design of the study in this type of research, a letter

\(^6\)There is, in our judgment, no real danger that such consultation would cause the research to become unduly slanted to agency interests, as long as it operated from a semidetached university resource base. Contract research would be another matter, of course.
rather than a telephone or personal conversation seems advisable. While we usually wrote to the chief executive for permission to do the study, this need not always be the case. Most of the reasons for approaching an agency through its chief executive are obvious. One, not so obvious, is that it is sometimes difficult to include in the study population the official granting permission to do it and those at the same or higher levels in the agency. However, one experience of the author suggests that approach through chief executives need not be taken as a hard and fast rule. In the case of one agency studied, advice from persons familiar with it pointed to an official other than the chief executive as being equally powerful within the agency and probably more sympathetic with social research. The letter requesting permission was sent to this lower-ranking official. Permission was secured, and later no difficulty was encountered in including him and others at the same and higher levels of the agency in the study.

Each letter requesting permission ended by proposing that the author meet with the official at one of a range of suggested times for the purpose of discussing the more detailed arrangements for the study. This meeting served to introduce the author to the agency, get the study under way, and, if necessary, gave an opportunity to use personal persuasion in securing permission to do the study.

In all but two cases personal persuasion was not necessary or possible, since the letter itself resulted in definite permission or refusal. It was in these two cases only that the personal diplomacy of the author came into play in determining whether the study would or would not gain access. In both cases a helpful intermediary in contacting the agency could not be found. In both cases the doubt in the minds of agency officials seemed to hinge around the ideological-political sympathies of the researcher and those sponsoring the study. This was something about which the agency could not get adequate clues from a letter and, in the absence of testimonials from a personally known intermediary, officials sought them in apparently technical discussions with the author. I sensed this after one or two inconclusive meetings with officials of one agency, and was then able to give the reassuring clues desired. In the other case the agency broke off contact before the desired ideological posture could be intuited and conveyed.

While it is important for the social researcher to maintain the integrity of his research and thought in seeking access to large organizations for research purposes, he is unlikely to get co-operation from agency officials unless he somehow indicates to them that he is "neutral
on their side." The researcher in the area of public administration will not be seen by public officials as "neutral" on the many political and administrative issues affecting their agencies even if, in fact, he has no opinions concerning them. Since the biases imputed to the researcher and his study affect officials' willingness to permit access to their agencies and to co-operate with field work, it is a tactical error on the researcher's part to leave these imputations to chance by trying to adopt a strictly neutral role.

In our study, use of helpful intermediaries and the sponsorship of the Institute of Public Administration, University of Michigan, aimed from the beginning to establish the impression among the public administrators that the study was "neutral on their side." Where an appropriate intermediary could not be found or where further reassurance seemed to be needed, the author gave this reassurance himself by a tactfully biased manner or phraseology in early, personal contacts with agency officials. It is important, of course, not to be too obvious about this or overdo it. Public officials expect and want the social researcher to be neutral, i.e., they expect him to strive for the virtues of integrity, respect for facts, self restraint, and the ability to see more than one side of an issue, virtues associated by them with university affiliation. But, in addition, officials want to be reassured in a subtle and tactful way that, ultimately, the researcher's academic qualities will be used for, rather than against, their interest and those of their agency. Since the researcher's commitment to his study will eventually force him to give this reassurance anyway, it is best to do so deliberately and consciously from the outset. In this way the bias imputed to the researcher and his study produces its maximum benefits in terms of access to agencies and desired information while minimizing its subconscious influence upon himself and his study.

Ultimate solution of the problem of access to public agencies for research purposes will fall to those who can manipulate the long-run, strategic factors involved rather than the merely tactical ones suggested above. One strategy suggested by the author's experience involves using metropolitan or other large urban communities as a permanent base for a long-range program of systematic research into administrative behavior. The metropolitan community is large enough to offer the researcher a wide variety of public agencies; yet its population is

sufficiently compact, and an overview of its social system sufficiently practicable, to allow the researcher to trace not only agency structure but also its functioning in the wider community. A public administration research institute with university affiliation, a behavioral science orientation, and a relatively modest staff and budget could establish, over a period of two or three years, the conditions necessary for more or less routine, systematically designed studies in the area of administrative behavior. These conditions, aside from the institute itself, would include: complete, up-to-date lists for sampling purposes of all public agencies operating in the metropolis; information on crucial structural and functional variables for each agency to facilitate selection of agencies for field experimental designs; and, most important, a web of influential contacts and a favorable rapport with public administration circles in the metropolis and to some extent beyond to the state and national capitals. Under competent leadership such a research unit could, within several years, make access to almost any public agency a matter of sufficiently high probability to warrant routine use of systematic research designs testing a wide variety of important hypotheses about organizational behavior.

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