

The Inadequacy of Bureaucratic Organizations

Organizational Adaptation through Boundary Spanning in a Civil-Military Context

By Aida Alvinus

Introduction

The Bureaucratic Structure of Military Organizations

Government bodies such as the Armed Forces are examples of bureaucratic organizations characterized by centralized hierarchical structure, rationality, stability, impersonal rules, clear boundaries, responsibility and authority.¹ A typical image of hierarchical bureaucratic organization is the pyramid-shaped chain of command whereby each group within a formal rank system answers to one or more superiors above it and is linked to one or more subordinate groups below. Historically, the use of formalized ranks in a hierarchical structure became widespread with the rise of the Roman Army.² In modern times, executive control, management and administration of military organizations is typically undertaken by the government through a ministry or government department within the structure of public administration.

Organizational theory appears to lack consensus on the adequacy of the bureaucratic organizational form in contexts characterized by insecurity. Critics claim that because of a rigid structure, organizations with a strict vertical hierarchy of authority do not function well in non-routine situations where creativity and flexibility are required.³ In contexts characterized by uncertainty, such as disaster situations, researchers have highlighted such key problems of bureaucratic management as slow decision-making, inability to absorb and process outside information, and escalation of commitment to failed courses of action.⁴ The question is whether military bureaucracies are ill-suited to managing their tasks in stressful environments.

Robert Merton, a classic among organizational researchers, speaks of bureaucracy as an organizational form characterised by dysfunctionality, meaning that the many rules which govern it can be directly counterproductive.⁵ According to Merton, too much focus on the *how* distracts from the *what*.⁶ Other critics, such as von Mises, denounce bureaucracy for completely quashing its members' ability to be creative and take the

¹ Weber, 1905 ; Andreski, 1954 ; Shamir & Ben-Ari, 2000 ; Burkle & Hayden, 2001.

² Andreski, 1954.

³ Alvinus et al, 2010ab; Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003.

⁴ Takeda & Helms, 2006a and 2006b.

⁵ Merton, 1949.

⁶ *Ibid.*

initiative,⁷ while Crozier directs his analysis at the internal workings of the bureaucracy, incapable of adapting to changing external circumstances.⁸ Yet other authors, such as Adorno *et al.* consider the march of rationality and bureaucratic methods of organization to have paved the way for highly impersonal but also inhuman actions, such as the war crimes of WWII. This theory is also supported by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman.⁹ Some organizational studies point out that bureaucracies are ineffectual and a hindrance when swift, time-sensitive action is required.¹⁰ Charles Perrow summarizes this in a select few words : *Bureaucracy is a dirty word...*¹¹

The above-mentioned studies adopt a classical view and are critical of Weberian bureaucratic organization. Contemporary researchers, however, take a more nuanced approach to the function of bureaucracy in relation to its environment.

According to Du Gay,¹² bureaucracy is not a hard and fast trans-historical model, as many critics put forward. Rather it is a “*many-sided, evolving, diversified organizational device*”.¹³ Du Gay states that when criticizing bureaucracy, one has “*to be quite precise about which bureaucratic ethics, capacities and compartments one is seeking to criticize*” in relation to a specific purpose. A bureaucracy can be “*something of an expert*”, du Gay writes, referring here to the public administration in Britain “*that in the aftermath of the Second World War, under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, succeeded in establishing the National Health Service*”.¹⁴ Hierarchy as an organizational form (bureaucracy) has an ability to realize the rapid increase in compactness and concentration that most people have experienced when important shared duties have been completed. A typical example is the surgical team at a hospital. One minute it appears to be a loosely linked network, while the next it performs like an actor with an acute task to solve.¹⁵

The hierarchical order typical of the Armed Forces has a greater chance of retaining its legitimacy since it is possible to identify or support the leadership. Legitimacy places a responsibility on the leader to act but also to delegate responsibility downwards. It is more difficult to demand responsibility from a network when incorrect action is taken. Charles

⁷ Von Mises, 1944.

⁸ Crozier, 1964 ; Crozier & Friedberg, 1977. Crozier contends that (a) as Herbert Simon had seen, pure rational action often consumes too much time and energy, and rational behaviour is usually of a ‘bounded’ type ; (b) that the organization is governed deep down by hidden (*de facto*) power relationships that develop in the interstices of the formal structure as individuals and groups, struggling to secure maximum autonomy and focusing on means and regulations rather than on the organization’s chief aim, seek to escape the control of others – whenever possible – by maintaining a veil of uncertainty over their options ; as a result, (c) that the functioning of the organization is generally sub-optimal.

⁹ Adorno *et al.*, 1950 ; Bauman, 1991.

¹⁰ Lanzara, 1983.

¹¹ Perrow, 1970, p.50.

¹² Du Gay, 2000 ; Du Gay, 2005.

¹³ Du Gay, 2005, p.3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁵ Abrahamsson, 2005.

Goodsell¹⁶ claims that bureaucracy has the ability to fulfil two main functions of governance : rules and response. He argues that bureaucracy is the same as being an accountable authority – even under uncertain conditions.

Classic research showed early on that uncertainty is to a great degree absorbed at the outer boundaries of an organization.¹⁷ It was not until the mid-1970s, however, that organizational researchers began to seriously take on board the idea that it is not the organization that integrates with the environment. Scholars discuss a new form of flexible and boundaryless organizations,¹⁸ also known as post-bureaucratic.¹⁹ It is characterized by loose structures and temporary systems which allow people to move and more easily and frequently between and within organizations.²⁰

Organizations are not homogenous, active entities and in fact, cannot act at all – only individuals can do that.²¹ As Johansson explains, it is the people in the organizations who act on behalf of the organization²² and in particular, those who adapt and act in the no man's land between the organization and the environment.

Organizational Adaptation through Boundary Spanning

Hierarchy thus appears to be the dominant overall structure, one of its characteristics being that it survives by incorporating elements that are not traditionally found in a classically bureaucratic structure.²³ In the military context, liaison officers and military observers are examples of such elements, frequently operating with a high degree of independence between the boundaries of their own organization and its environment. They prevent and solve conflicts, gather valuable information, liaise and more. The organizational term for them is 'boundary spanners'.²⁴ Aldrich and Herker state that boundary spanners have two main tasks or functions. The first is to manage information to and from the organization, and the second is to act as its representative.²⁵ In a way then, boundary spanners are an outward embodiment of the organization, through negotiations or liaison, for example. Information management may involve filtering information in both favourable and unfavourable ways.²⁶ Boundary spanners may also act as innovators and ideas men, as they have a better operational picture of what is going on outside

¹⁶ Goodsell, 2005.

¹⁷ March & Simon, 1958.

¹⁸ Ashkenas *et al.*, 1995.

¹⁹ Hecksher and Donnellon, 1994.

²⁰ Shamir & Ben-Ari, 2000.

²¹ Johansson, 1997.

²² Ahrne, 1993 ; Johansson, 1997.

²³ Burkle & Hayden, 2001 ; Fountain, 2001 ; Alvinus *et al.*, 2010a, 2010b.

²⁴ See also Ancona & Caldwell, 1992 ; Williams, 2002 ; Willem, Buelens, & Scarbrough, 2006 ; Marrone, Tesluk, & Carson, 2007 ; Lomsky-Feder *et al.*, 2008.

²⁵ Aldrich & Herker, 1977.

²⁶ Adams, 1976 ; Aldrich & Herker, 1977 ; Williams, 2002 ; Kapucu, 2006.

organizational parameters.²⁷ Challis *et al.* along with Leadbeater and Goss discuss the ability of boundary spanners to be flexible and creative, to employ lateral thinking, and break the rules if necessary.²⁸

Boundary spanners are unique because they are positioned and operate at the organization/ environment interface, particularly when the organization is absorbing uncertainty from the latter, a circumstance which should also apply to crisis management and military contexts. Additionally, Ancona and Caldwell point out that the special combination of high uncertainty and multiple forms of interdependence with multiple groups calls for boundary spanning activities.²⁹ Given the stark similarity of the above conditions with that of military operations and disaster management, it may well be that boundary spanning is a key enabler to achieve successful results.

Characteristics of the Selected Context and Organizations

Why are boundary spanners so important for bureaucratic organizations and organizational adaptation ? One key aspect is the complexity of the environment.³⁰ A multinational peacekeeping or peace enforcement mission is often highly sensitive to the context's geographical and social facets. Peacekeepers have to adapt to the environment provided by the host country, which is many times characterized by squalor, decimation and extreme climatic conditions ; peace enforcers need to take into account the variety of socio-cultural traditions and customs manifest therein. In addition to the local population, there is often a multitude of actors in the area of operation, including the armed forces from different countries, clan warlords, local police, politicians, and a range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Typical military collaborative tasks in these contexts involve liaison, negotiation and intelligence gathering, observation and situation outlook reporting.

According to Soeters *et al.* military organizations are “greedy institutions”³¹ because they require a lot from their staff, many jobs in the military being dangerous and potentially life threatening. For this reason, military personnel are usually armed or at least equipped with protective instruments and materiel. If necessary, the military can make use of legitimized violence, which differs from other work.³² Pahlavi and Ali³³ emphasize the need to study organizational adaptation in a military context. This study is based on informants' experiences and thoughts of situations during collaboration in a civil-military

²⁷ Dodgson, 1994; Ahuja, 2000.

²⁸ Challis *et al.*, 1988 ; Leadbeater & Goss, 1998.

²⁹ Ancona & Caldwell, 1988.

³⁰ See Winslow & Klep, 2000.

³¹ Soeters, Winslow & Weibull, 2006. The phrase and concept of “greedy institutions” were first used by Lewis Coser in *Greedy Institutions : Patterns of Undivided Commitment*, New York, Free Press, 1974, and applied for the first time to the armed forces by Mady W. Segal in “The Military and the Family as Greedy Institutions”, *Armed Forces & Society*, vol.13, n°1, 1986, pp.9-38.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Pahlavi & Ali, 2012.

context and aims to gain a deeper understanding of military organizations' adaptation to complex environments. The question raised is : how can bureaucratic, hierarchically structured organizations that are said to function optimally in a predictable world³⁴ function in a demanding and dynamic environment characterised by life and death situations?

Method

Selection of Informants and International Missions

In order to gain as wide a variety of experiences as possible, the selection of informants for this study was made in accordance with the guidelines for Grounded Theory developed by Glaser and Strauss.³⁵ The empirical material is based on 21 interviews, 19 of which were with military officers from the Swedish armed forces, their positions being military observers, liaison officers, contingent commanders, and military attachés. All but one of the informants were men. Of the two civilian informants, one had a police background and had been working as a liaison officer on a number of international missions; the other was First Secretary to the Swedish Ambassador, envoy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The informants had wide experience of a number of international operations ranging over a time period from 1960 to 2008, and from the following countries: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chad, Congo, Cyprus, East Timor, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Kosovo, Lebanon, Liberia, Macedonia, Mozambique, Pakistan, Peru, and Sudan.

Liaison Roles Included in this Study

The liaison roles included in this study can be found in the table below. The first four are further described in the text, while the fifth (other roles – one informant) is not described due to the risk of identifying the individual participant in the study.

Table 1: *Interview Participants' Positions*

Military	Civilian
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military Attaché • Contingent Commander • Liaison Officer • Interpreter (self-described) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Secretary to the Swedish Ambassador (worked alongside a Swedish liaison officer) • Police officer

A *defence attaché* has a military background but is a member of the embassy's diplomatic staff. Assigned to a specific country for a period of time, he or she has the task of collaborating with other actors in the defence operations area, the role including, for example, monitoring the development of Swedish defence and security policy and promoting in-area relations of operation between Sweden and actors in the host country.

³⁴ Burns & Stalker, 1961.

³⁵ Glaser & Strauss, 1967.

The *contingent commander* is in charge of the assemblage of units or troops assigned to the Swedish international mission. As head of contingent, the individual may be brought into contact with various collaborative partners in the host country, a situation more closely described in the results section.

Liaison officers have the task of coordinating the operations of their own unit with that of other actors in the host country, which may comprise other military units or even civilian groups and other local organizations. Tense relations arising from military operations have led to an increased need for liaison officers, to be found today at all levels of military organization, from company level to the highest levels of command.

Interpreters (military and local) have the task of interpreting/translating the language that is spoken in the host country, often in the context of a three-way discussion in a liaison meeting. In Sweden, military interpreters are Swedish citizens educated at the Swedish Armed Forces' Interpreter School and employed by the Swedish Armed Forces, while local interpreters are hired in the host country.

Data Collection

The interviews conducted for this study followed a previously determined interview guide consisting of open-ended questions, followed up with individually tailored questions. The themes chosen were as follows:

- Background questions
- Experience of service on international missions
- Own liaison duties
- Organizational liaison experience
- Experience of tensions on international missions
- Information and communication in collaborations
- Assessment of collaborative efforts post operation

The interviews were conducted in the period February-July 2008. One interview took place in the informant's home, several took place on Swedish Armed Forces premises, two were conducted by telephone, and the remainder at the informants' respective places of work. The interviews, each lasting between 50-210 minutes, were all conducted by the main author.

Data Analysis and Presentation

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, after which they were analysed in accordance with grounded theory application.³⁶ The first step in this analysis consisted of what is known as open coding, which involves identifying units of meaning or codes in each individual interview. These could, for example, include special lines of thought, feelings or actions related to the interview's sphere of enquiry. An example of a code is given below:

³⁶ *Ibid.*

When you go into a town and come close to where you've just shot a building to bits, that's when you're greeted by smells, terrible stench...you know, sewage pipes, obviously, everything goes to pieces when you blow up a building. Bodies that have been left hanging in barbed wire for a couple of days – they stink of garlic. When you open mass graves, it's that garlic stench; it smells exactly like rotten human beings (Bosnia).

This quote was coded as *mass graves and stench – complex and demanding environment*. Step two in the analysis consisted of evaluating and categorizing the codes according to similar content. From the above example, the code *mass graves and stench – complex and demanding environment* was then sorted into the category *type of environment* which in turn was sorted into the over-arching category *contextual characteristics*. The fourth and final step involved a comparison between overarching categories, categories and codes, generating a hypothetical model, which is presented in the results section below followed by all the over-arching categories, categories, codes and illustrative interview excerpts. I feel this order of presentation provides most clarity as to these respective parts in relation to the model as a whole.

Results

Military organizations' adaptation to unpredictable environments can be shown empirically to be a balancing act between improvisation and flexibility on the one hand, the pursuit of structure and adherence to established hierarchical order on the other. Which of these is emphasized entirely depends on the situation and the characteristics of the individual and the environment. Improvisation is defined as the departure by organizational members (here individuals in liaison positions) from various rules, if required by the situation. One example may involve bypassing the chain of command. Structuring is a form of adaptation that prompts individuals to follow policies and refer to regulations when necessary – calling on rank, grade and age are typical examples of such measures. The pursuit of structure involves re-creating bureaucratic organization in the long term. In contrast, following chain of command in one instance and breaking it another is a way for bureaucratic organizations to adapt through individual actions. By way of introduction, I will highlight this with the example of an informant who exhibits awareness of balancing structure and improvisation, depending on whom he or she is addressing.

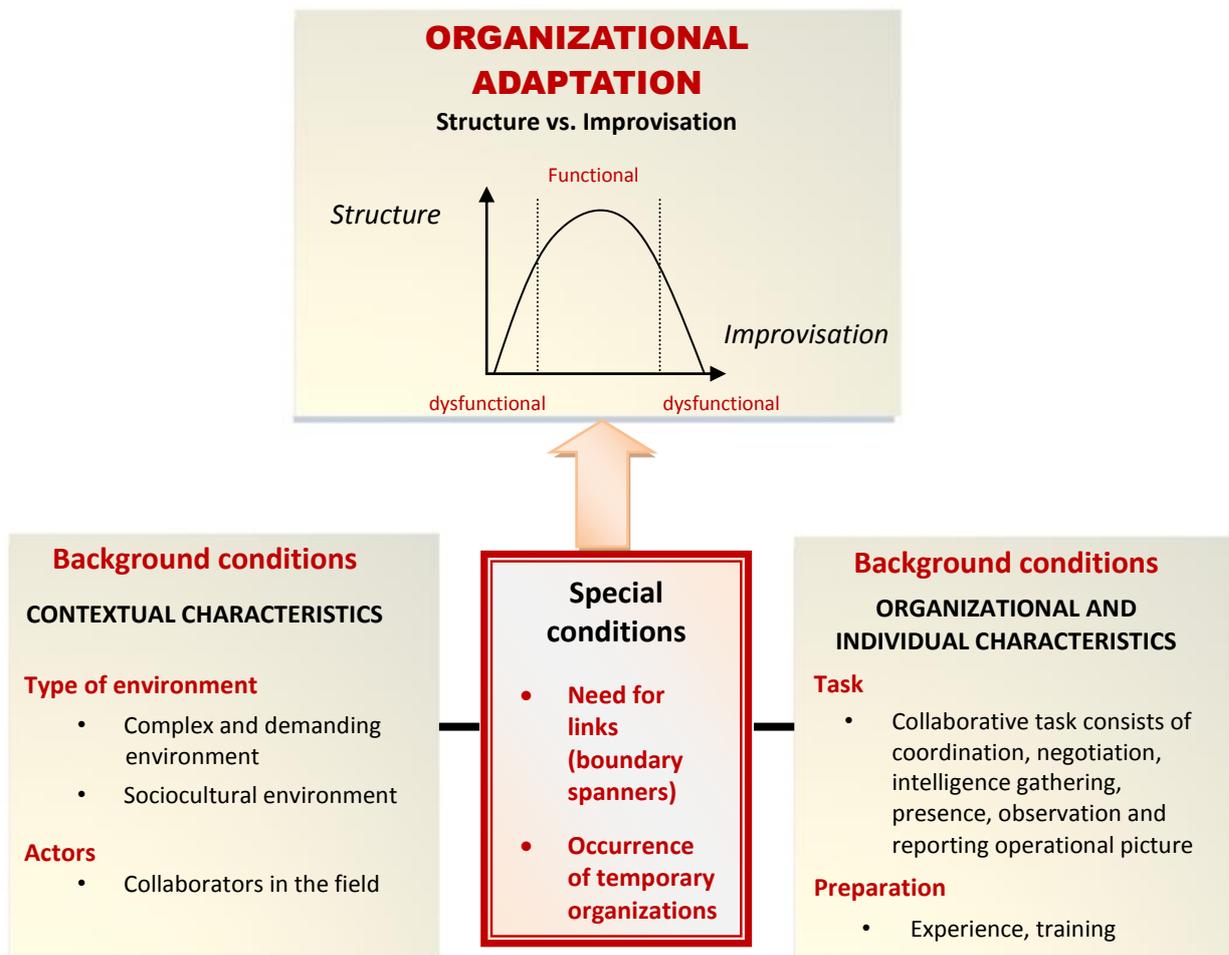
It was sometimes more important just to be able to get something as simple as a pass or something like that when you were going in to your own ISAF administration. That's when it could be very important to behave like an officer towards that Italian corporal who was sitting there, stamping entry permissions or something like that. I didn't need to make an issue of my rank in the contact we had in Afghanistan because there it was really important to have a personal relationship because we were meeting representatives from the police or from their armed forces or authorities – civil servants – and then rank wasn't that important then – at least that's the impression I have, so to speak.

Adaptation may also be dysfunctional and have negative consequences. Too much structure or too much improvisation may partly have negative consequences for the

organization and partly result in a less accurate threat scenario. This hypothesis is empirically exemplified in the text and in the theoretical model as an inverted U.

Irrespective of its functionality or dysfunctionality, adaptation is generally affected by background circumstances, which may be organizational, individual or typical of the environment. Organizational and individual characteristics describe what type of liaison task individuals must tackle in the field, as well as how experienced and prepared they are as delegates. ‘Typical of the environment’ describes the type of geographic and socio-cultural environment that individuals find themselves in, and the type of actors they will meet. Additionally, there are specific prerequisites that may facilitate the process of adaptation, namely the occurrence of links (boundary spanners) and of temporary organizations in which the exchange of information can take place between the members of the bureaucratic organization and other collaborators. Thus it is in the interaction between organizational members and in the environment of the temporary arena that adaptation takes place. The success of the adaptation depends on how well prepared, trained and experienced the individuals are, what their assignment is, and how complex a situation and environment they meet in the civil-military context. The relationship between all of these concepts is illustrated below:

Figure 2: *Adaptation of military bureaucratic organizations*



Organizational Adaptation

The analysis of interview data demonstrates that organizational adaptation can be defined as a balancing act between structure and improvisation, one that involves managing uncertainty outside the parameters of the organization. The category 'improvisation' consists of a number of codes: depart from rules, redefine mandates, utilize other countries' Rules of Engagement, and bypassing chain of command. The category 'structure' encompasses a need to follow hierarchical order in terms of rank, grade and age, and finding an appropriate channel to collaborate with. The pursuit of structure is perceived by informants not only as something intrinsic to themselves but also as something their collaborators expect of them. Structure may also be created when something unforeseen happens and it is necessary to feed back higher up the hierarchy in order to make a decision. A companion result appears to be dysfunctional adaptation, highlighting the effect of being excessively resistant to structure and pro improvisation or vice versa.

Improvisation

The Swedes were critical not only of the Swedish regulations; in some cases they also referred to 'national business' if they perceived their partner countries' mutual regulations to be too rigid. The Swedish rules allowed for a greater sphere of operation:

I followed UNIFIL's regulations most of the time but if they were too limiting, then I could in fact say it was 'national business' and then I could do what I liked. Although, on condition that I had permission to do so from my boss so, as a Swede over there, I had the task to fulfil within the parameters of UNIFIL. And I had to kind of adapt to their regulations of course, but if they were too limiting or something I had the option of saying it was national business; so you step a little outside the UNIFIL framework.

Improvisation was largely about departing from stipulated rules and adapting them to the prevailing situation. In Lebanon, for example, it was simply not possible to follow the mandate to the letter. One informant describes how his task was redefined to make it practically viable.

UNIFIL's mission and mandate is to act as a buffer zone between Hezbollah and Israel. (...) The mandate states that Hezbollah are to be disarmed, but they aren't; UNIFIL didn't do that now and it's not possible either because Hezbollah wouldn't have thought much of UNIFIL if they had, and of course there's the political history as well. And UNIFIL had, so to speak, some kind of second phase in which to disarm Hezbollah, but it's kind of, it isn't possible in practice – it's not doable. So it's a buffer zone of course. Its task is just to make sure Hezbollah can't operate in here and that Israel can't operate in Lebanese territory.

In another instance, improvisation had to do with determining when to permit the use of violence in self-defence. Other nations had more lenient rules than Sweden, and improvisation here meant sharing transport with those who were permitted to shoot in order to defend themselves.

In Kosovo we had I think it was the Czechs who were allowed to shoot to defend property, I think – use lethal violence under their laws, like I said. We aren't allowed according to our laws so in certain cases it was brilliant – then we could use them to protect property because they could use lethal violence, while our Swedish soldiers couldn't.

Liaison between representatives from two different Swedish authorities in Lebanon was made possible even though the rules did not permit it. All communication was supposed to be centrally routed, but the informants found this to be a waste of time and collaborated in the field regardless.

We don't have an embassy in (NN), it's in (YY). No, so the answer is Yes, we did [have contact between the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Swedish Armed Forces, author's note], but it was because I, or my friends and I, we found a really good embassy secretary, a woman, who we had contact with. But that had nothing to do with the Foreign Service: we have direct vertical communication in Sweden. So what we did was we took the back door, using an undefined process, we made contact, directly down to her.

Structure

In a number of the described liaison meetings, informants felt it was important to consider the age, rank and grade of their fellow collaborator, with the aim of adhering to structure. Selecting the right collaborator from their own team in order to avoid cultural and organizational *faux pas* was also mentioned. In most of the military operations, informants stated that meetings went more smoothly if a major met with a major or if the Swede was a higher ranking officer. Most shared a perception that their message was understood, and one defence attaché with experience from Egypt felt that respect for seniority in liaison situations facilitated the creation of personal networks. Evident too was the importance of showing respect by communicating privately with higher ranking individuals, as illustrated by a number of examples given by informants:

If you only look at recruitment, then I think you can, I mean when you're recruiting for an international force, then there are varying levels of liaison officers. Sometimes it's enough to be a captain, sometimes you have to be a major, and sometimes you have to be a grade III officer or very occasionally grade I and that's connected to this thing then that you have a grade, the right grade so to speak for liaising; we can't send a lieutenant to liaise with a minister perhaps, no, we have to send at least a lieutenant colonel – it's a bit like that.

You have to make sure the oldest person – either in age or status – gives his presentation first. (Egypt).

Adaptation of communications and information occurred via the appropriate channels, in the knowledge of which individuals were appropriate to contact and collaborate with.

Try to open the door and get a little information through other routes, and then you won't have access ; you can't go around and ask anyone in that (NN) administration, because there is really no-one with the authority to speak – it's this military person in the intelligence service or that civilian if it's about security policy, so they have to know who this official is getting a visit from if

the visitor is a foreign diplomatic attaché or actually, it's enough that the person in question is of foreign origin I suspect, and for instance as attaché I can't phone an Egyptian officer directly because he won't get their phone number; as a rule they don't speak English, mainly Arabic, so there's also a language barrier but even if they speak fluent English it's not permitted to phone, because then the person risks ending up in some sort of difficulty if he, because it's always a he, there are no female officers, if he collaborates with a foreign attaché. So if you're going to collaborate with someone in (NN) you have to first collaborate with the military protocol where there are special liaison officers allocated, as in my case, a he, a lieutenant colonel, had a number of countries. And it was very easy to get access to him.

Dysfunctional Adaptation – Excessive Structure or Excessive Improvisation

Dysfunctional adaptation results in some form of frustration irrespective of whether excessive structure or excessive improvisation is pursued. According to informants in the field, too much structure leads to powerlessness to act and unresolved tasks.

In the collaboration between different organizations, the various and lengthy chains of hierarchy can cause frustration. Sometimes, collaboration may not even be allowed because the home organization demands that requests are passed up the hierarchy from the field to Sweden and permissions passed back down again via a different channel. The quote below testifies to the imbalance that can arise.

I (defence attaché) chose our domestic organization, the Department of Foreign Affairs who thought and said that I should get in touch with these people (Swedish liaison officers in the field in Lebanon). How do I go about it? Well, we get in touch with the Ministry of Defence and of course they have their own contacts. And so after two or three weeks we still haven't heard anything. Finally, the Lebanese administrator from Ministry of Defence gets back to us and says 'no can do', whadd'you mean 'no can do' – it's a critical situation and we need to exchange information, there's an embassy there and aren't you going to speak to us? It's ridiculous. And then she actually says that she sent an email, right, that the Ministry of Defence is saying that all contact between the embassy in Damascus and 'the girls and boys at sea', goes, so to speak, via the Ministry of Defence, at which point I explode and say: ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MINDS?!

And you often find that the police have much shorter chains of command in relation to the organization...while we have quite a few stages to go through, which takes loads of time. It can also be very frustrating.

Excessive improvisation also leads to negative experiences. The below quote describes how, during his international tour of an African country, an informant took a photograph when he was not really permitted to do so and was immediately accused of espionage. Despite being a UN employee and protected as such, he and his companions were threatened.

We leave that place and meet a few policemen on the road, and they greet us and are happy to see us there – very positive in general towards us, on the whole. As always, I have my digital camera in my breast pocket and I take it out and take a picture with the border behind me and looking towards the country,

then, over the town, really. But once I get the picture I put the camera back in my pocket and we start going over to the mayor's office and after the 100 meter check point we're stopped by Congolese military intelligence and they're like... they do their own thing, nothing can stop them if they want to catch someone in this kind of situation... And that was the bee in their bonnet – they didn't get that we were from the UN straight off, even though we were wearing berets, caps, badges, the whole lot. They thought we had come from the Zambian border and were spies, by definition. And it was me they really wanted because I'd taken a picture. And it got awkward and troublesome and that was one of the few times when I spoke fluent French because I was shit-scared you know, because I was sure that I wouldn't get out of here – it's all over. I had no support whatsoever from my boss or the colleague who was with me because he didn't speak English or French or anything other than his own language, you know. So I stood there by myself, just me and our interpreter who was 21 years old and not worth a sou to these intelligence guys. It ended up... the mayor couldn't do anything either because I explained the situation to him after we managed to get into his office. He said, I can't do anything about it but I'll just try to plead with them. And all hell broke loose when we came out because they were on to us straight away and wanted my camera and wanted to take me away. My boss was completely apathetic; he only cared about himself; he didn't care if I went back with them to Bombashi or not. It ended anyway by my showing... I got hold of myself and said that they couldn't do anything to me – you have no right according to the mandate and this and that, which was all Greek to them. They were completely uninterested in hearing that spiel.

Special Circumstances that Facilitate Adaptation

For adaptation to be possible there must be actors to implement it and localities in which it can take place. Many of our informants stated there was a need for liaison officers who could operate in the field on behalf of their organization and under the existing circumstances. Moreover, there is a need for special meeting places where the organization's members can meet other collaborators to exchange information and work together. This is an expression of the organization's outermost boundary, where input from the environment is received. The categories arising from the interview analysis were need for links and the creation of temporary organizations, as highlighted in the quotes below.

Need for Links (Boundary Spanners)

Whatever the type of international service, there is always talk of the need for a temporary liaison link – someone who can communicate information and is despatched from one organization to collaborate with another. The quotes below concern experiences first from Kosovo and then Lebanon. Despite different experiences, both informants felt it was necessary to have a bridge-builder, someone who could facilitate collaboration.

The next stage is about collaboration and building bridges – who's the one doing that, either you get things arranged at the next level or if you have a command centre in place, you can manage the others from there. Yes, you do that with the help of a liaison officer. They trained very hard in Pristina city, you know, as soon as something happened in Pristina we got a request, this is when a UN policeman got involved – they sent their riot control force in, and

we went in on the other side of the boundary so that there wouldn't be any influx or outflow from there. At the same time, each time it happened, we sent a situation officer from brigade command to the local police HQ so that we had a contact there and he would go and tell the police how to go about it. But they had their task and we had ours and it was important to liaise so that we could achieve a combined effect.

You know it all happens so fast now, and most conflicts, most situations are very fast-paced and then if you drop tempo because you don't really know what the others think – because you haven't got an obvious partner to work with – then I think the chain of liaison, I mean being a liaison officer, having that role in joining your own unit with another or your own organization with another – I think that's what's important. If something happens, liaison links have to be set up fast. You either have a well-established collaboration, in which case you might take the liaison officers out of it because you have a very clear idea of what the other party is doing. But before that you should have it [liaison officers].

The Creation of Temporary Organizations

Temporary organizations or meeting places can be provisionally set up in containers, as verified by the informant cited below. The handling of sensitive information in an exchange takes place in designated localities, not only for security reasons but also to ensure the exchange can be carried out on equal terms and in a more 'neutral' setting. One of our informants with experience from Lebanon elaborates on this:

Each nation has its intelligence outfits or sources in this area – informers or analyses or whatever, right? And then they have to be of service to the command centre – in the national pipeline then. The problem is that these things are relatively sensitive and you're reluctant to release it between nations because it's a commodity... it's currency, isn't it? That's why nations make use of this buying and selling stuff – you buy and sell information between nations. So you have to have national intelligence services, so you literally build a village with containers arranged in a circle. Each container gets its information from home so you really have to make an assessment. So you meet in the middle to exchange information because they (the liaison officers) have a mandate from Swedish intelligence and security services as to what they can and cannot say. Then they exchange information with each other and then they can confirm things with the commander.

Favourable and Unfavourable Background Circumstances

Contextual Characteristics

Understanding context is important in order to understand an organization's adaptation to its environment. In particular, it is about the experiences of challenging conditions that boundary spanners have in the environment they find themselves in – far away from their home organization in Sweden. The purpose of the results described below is to highlight the complex environment that the individual must handle in order to execute his task and thereby adapt the organization to its prevailing circumstances.

The context of civil-military collaboration consists of the individuals who are the collaborating parties, their tasks, and generally demanding environments. In this study, context has been divided into geographical and sociocultural aspects. I will use the term 'geographical environment' to chiefly mean the environment of the host country, which is many times characterised by squalor, while the sociocultural environment consists of various cultural traditions, customs and habits. The common denominator for both categories is that they present some form of difficulty for the execution of collaborative tasks. Context also has a critical bearing on the formation of temporary organizations.

Type of environment

Complex and Demanding Environments

The geographical environment can be more or less threatening as a result of aggressive groups or other types of stressful events. The quote below highlights chaotic environments such as filthy living quarters, extreme heat, the stench of dead bodies and bombings that were perceived as highly dangerous to life and limb. Close proximity to the smell of cadavers and having to stay in filthy quarters gave rise to feelings of repulsion and disgust. These emotions were so strong, the mere memory of something repulsive could induce interviewees to grimace.³⁷ Repulsion and disgust can also be activated in conflict-filled interpersonal relations or upon witnessing an atrocity. Repulsion and disgust are common emotions in the geographical environment, as we will see.

The First Secretary to the Ambassador was closely affected by the hostilities in Lebanon, when the Swedish/Danish embassy went up in flames.

I was in Beirut so I saw the demonstrations and how they got out of control – I'd travelled back to Damascus afterwards and it was awful – I saw it on TV and it was terrible to see the embassy ablaze. Seeing your embassy like that – it was poignant – it was really tough; that's when the hostilities suddenly came so close (Lebanon).

In Lebanon, a liaison officer considered the standard of accommodation to be inadequate. It was 'filthy' and there was 'organizational chaos':

But what I was confronted with was really organizational chaos – nothing had been arranged. They conjured up a room but it wasn't in order. It was really filthy (Lebanon).

Foreign bacteria that the Swedes were unused to meant that food and drink served by the locals could be a direct health risk.

And sometimes you need a bit of experience to learn how to negotiate your way out of drinking a glass of goat's milk that someone presents you with as the best they have, and I know that if I drink that glass of goat's milk warmed by the sun, I'll be bedridden for four weeks and risk being sent back home to Sweden (Afghanistan).

³⁷ Tomkins, 1963.

Foreign bacteria were not only a problem with consumables – infected dogs could also be a source of contagion and had to be put down. Shaking hands with the locals presented another risk and resulted in heavy usage of hand disinfectant. Several interviewees with experience from both Africa and the Balkans pointed out the importance of good hand hygiene:

There's a great risk of infection if you touch a dog. People who don't understand why we put down dogs in the camps, for example, have not seen the effect on a human who has been infected by some amoeba which has been on an animal. Likewise, we used huge amounts of alcohol gel, for example, as soon as we'd touched someone, so when the opportunity arose we wiped our hands and stuff (Afghanistan).

Working outside in extreme heat on the African continent was something the Swedish officers initially appeared to find difficult to adjust to. The heat was perceived as challenging and inescapable.

It was mainly the heat that was so pervasive – you couldn't get away from it – it was tough. It was like being really seasick on a boat – you just want to get out of there. You sit there and like, there's nothing you can do to make it better. That feeling is tough to deal with but at the same time it's your job (Tchad).

Ill-behaved cliques were commonly observed in the mission area, for example, drunk soldiers randomly shooting their weapons and creating a threatening atmosphere among the UN personnel and the local population. Rebel attacks on UN staff were common in mission areas, particularly in Africa. Hostage scenarios were another threat that some of our informants had witnessed or experienced personally. I will illustrate with a quote:

I was taken hostage up on a mountain, well, hostage – I wasn't a hostage because I escaped, but I was supposed to be a hostage – where I managed to talk my way out of the situation and then had to make a run for it, run, and it's because it was downhill and I'm fairly fit that I got out of there. But I was in trouble then (Pakistan).

Individuals who had drunk alcohol could be difficult to manage. Armed rebels were a threat to UN personnel, but even the latter, when inebriated, were a big problem:

It can be a real pain when people are drunk and it's difficult when you encounter drunk soldiers, which has happened on occasion, if they're armed, then it's troublesome and then you have to be very careful because they don't act normally, when you meet drunk people, and it can be hard (Congo).

Unfortunately, a lot of the guys here who drive around and have big drinking problems, they drive drunk in UN vehicles, behaving arrogantly towards the civilian population, which creates a hostile image of all UN staff (Sudan).

Sociocultural Environment

Cultural expressions in terms of greeting rituals vary from country to country and can be perceived as rather trying by the visiting collaborators. A liaison officer's work may require him to deal with what would be considered a homosexual invitation back home but

should actually be interpreted as a friendly greeting, as is common in Afghanistan and certain parts of Africa. In a collaborative situation, the ‘guests’ must initially adapt to the ‘culture of the host’. Having shown their receptiveness to the greeting rituals of the host country, they can then exchange information regarding the norms of their own countries – a procedure that is possible after some time. If goodwill is shown from the beginning, the host collaborators will also exhibit good will and openness towards the culture of their Western guests.

Swedish liaison officers have perceived some cultural expressions, such as Afghani greetings, as difficult, as they involve more bodily contact than is usual back home.

Afghans have a penchant for those big plush sofas (laughs) – from the 70s – if you’re looking at it from a Swedish perspective, preferably kind of strip club red; and you’re sitting in one of those sofas with an Afghan policeman on either side of you, watching local TV, and then they might put a hand on your leg and it’s completely normal. A lot of my lads had beards, and they’re sitting there, tugging a little at their beards, saying : ‘nice beard’. So for them this is completely normal but in Sweden we would immediately associate it with homosexuality.

Racism towards whites in Africa was described by one liaison officer, which we interpret as symbolic violence in that they as ‘foreigners’ were met with dismissive and degrading behaviour. Flam and Beauzamy³⁸ are in fact talking about the experience of immigrants as ‘foreigners’ but in this study, the liaison workers experienced a similar reception in the host country:

I actually asked the guy who was the prefect up there in Riba (at a university in Tchad) if there were any special habits we should avoid in our contact with the liaison party. And then he said, there isn’t really anything – there is stuff of course but you’re white Europeans and we’ll let you off. Then his exact words were: yes, you’re white – that’s the biggest mistake you’ve made (Tchad).

Interviewees with broad international experience were able to compare how the liaison parties in the Balkans and in Africa reacted. This is what one contingent commander had to say about different nationalities, based on his experience:

When you meet and talk with people in the Balkans you might think, this is going to take a few minutes, and then they react quickly compared to the people in Africa – they can switch in a tenth of second (Bosnia, Congo).

Actors

The collaborative parties considered in this report are integral to the context of the host country, greatly influenced by their own culture, and express this in their various actions. Swedish collaborators need to take into account all organizational and environmental aspects in relation to their own competence, perceptions and emotional frame of mind. These individual prerequisites influence the organizational adaptation, as will be described in more detail.

³⁸ Flam & Beauzamy, 2008.

Collaborative Actors

Actors meeting in the collaborative arena were to be found at various societal levels and comprised representatives from the host country and visiting nations, official and sometimes unofficial organizations, groups, political levels and different cultures in the mission area. These first two quotes illustrate the cooperation between aid organizations in Afghanistan and village chiefs in Kosovo:

We collaborated with the aid organizations (NGOs). Before we came over, they hadn't collaborated with anyone on their terms, because they didn't want to collaborate with the military (Afghanistan).

I was responsible for intelligence in the rifle unit, and collaborated a lot with the police, various village leaders and local government officials. We had meetings with the village leaders about once a month (Kosovo).

The quote below describes meetings with unofficial groups who, although having criminal backgrounds, also played an important societal function. Their role and position made them inevitable collaborative partners, as one liaison officer relates:

We collaborate with people in the grey zone – sometimes you're forced to collaborate with certain individuals but even if we perhaps know or have good reason to believe that they might be criminals, well, we still have to meet them because he happens to be the mayor in this village (Afghanistan).

Organizational and Individual Characteristics

Task

Collaborative Task

The collaborative task has been described not only to highlight the main occupational task of the actors concerned but also to highlight its degree of difficulty in a challenging environment. The interviews revealed that the main collaboration task consists of the following component parts: coordination, negotiation, intelligence gathering, presence, observation and reporting of the operational picture. Some tasks are perceived to be more complicated than others, as the quotes below make clear. Coordination as a task differs from intelligence gathering and observation because the latter two are riskier and more sensitive. The observation task – viz. that of a military observer in the field who makes his presence known to the parties concerned – involves physical vulnerability as well as emotional exposure. The degree of difficulty raised by such physical and emotional vulnerability varies from one component task to another. Several interview narratives reveal that it is the task of liaison in itself that motivates individuals to go on international service. It is one that involves discussion, information exchange and reporting back to your own organization. It is also described as temporary – i.e. that the liaison task continues for as long as it is necessary or until a replacement takes over on the next mission.

The following quote illustrates only one aspect of liaison – observation and reporting:

There are 45 of us observers along a 2,000 km long stretch, our only task being to observe, report – and we do that to headquarters and then to New York (India/Pakistan).

It was not uncommon for liaison officers to have to deal with several tasks concurrently in a demanding situation where threat was imminent. One interviewee talked of the 'double demands' made on him due to the presence of hostile factions in the village of Gracanica, Kosovo, and felt that having to negotiate, discuss and at the same time be a probe were difficult tasks to juggle :

I was down in Gracanica, where there was an Albanian crowd and a Serbian crowd, and they were moving towards each other and we're between them. So there was an element of negotiation in which I was standing between the two groups, as a go-between, talking to both Albanians and Serbs. At the same time, there was a demonstration somewhere else [Caglavica, 2004 : author's note]. So on the one hand there's being a liaison officer and being a probe and then there's being a negotiator on the ground between two agitated groups of people.

Preparation

Experience

According to interview analysis, preparation and training facilitate improvisation. Experience makes individuals skilful and better able to operate in a highly demanding environment. I will illustrate with two quotes:

He's well-known to everyone who's been to Afghanistan. And he said a lot about the culture, how he'd been received, so somewhere along the line he was the one who set the stage for what I was getting into in my liaison and discussions with the Afghans. Then we were trained by the guys who'd been over before. MOT [Military Observation Team] leaders – they led the big courses. And then there were some Afghan figurants who had come to Sweden and live in Sweden now, and in that respect it was very credible but at the same time it's during the final exercise, it was as realistic as it could possibly be.

So of course it's always good to have experience but you can't always have people on every mission who've been out a huge amount because somewhere you've got to restock and get it to work in the long term, so I think the advantage is that you have some who've been out before and some who are new and so their knowledge kind of gets carried along.

Discussion

This study is based on informants' experiences and thoughts of situations during collaboration in a civil-military context and aims to gain a deeper understanding of military organizations' adaptation to complex environments. The purpose was to study bureaucratic, hierarchically structured organizations adapting to demanding and dynamic environments characterized by life and death situations.

The results show that organizational adaptation occurs on an individual level by balancing structure on the one hand with improvisation on the other. Adaptation can be both favourable and unfavourable, however. Favourable adaptation occurs when improvisation or structure meets the requirements of the situation, unfavourable adaptation when actions lean either towards too much improvisation or too much structure. The requirements of the situation are not met, and neither are the expectations that different

organizations have of each other when they meet. Similar findings regarding the balance between structure and improvisation in a military context have come to light in Larsson *et al.*³⁹ but also in the field of disaster management research.⁴⁰ Previous research emphasizes a particular need for improvisation as a type of adaptation by bureaucratic organizations.⁴¹ Such organizations are often criticised for their lack of improvisation and for their ability to function only in stable environments. Central to this article is the idea that both structure and improvisation are required for adaptation to occur and for the organizations to survive.

The results also show that there are other – contextual, organizational and individual – circumstances that affect organizational adaptation: these are dependent on the type of environment, the tasks at hand and the individuals encountered. Boas Shamir and Eyal Ben-Ari discuss similar research results but from a military leadership perspective. They identify four environmental developments that affect military leadership and organizations: electronic and information technologies, the more diverse operational environments and tasks of contemporary militaries, the transformation of military organizations from democratic countries into “open systems” with resilient boundaries, and lastly, the requirement for such new skills as liaison, negotiation, management of inter-cultural relations, etc.⁴²

Organizational adaptation is nevertheless only feasible when boundary spanners materialize and when temporary organizations are created. The individual or the link in this case unites the organization and the environment, interprets information, collaborates and solves tasks on behalf of the organization. As previous studies confirm, temporary organizations materialize in the field and boundaries are created between the ‘real’ organization and the environment. Sociologists Göran Ahrne and Roine Johansson⁴³ discuss the concept of the semi-organized field, which is defined as an area delimited by prior arrangement, the purpose of which is to facilitate the exchange between organizations and individuals on the ground. The current study evidences the development of a semi-structured field, with a slight variation on the definition that makes it especially appropriate for difficult circumstances. In the semi-structured field, temporary organizations arise – a common occurrence in military contexts, offering an atmosphere of neutrality, a meeting place where exchanges take place on equal terms. Similar results have been shown in a study of how formal organizations act when something unexpected happens. Lanzara⁴⁴ argues that formal organizations can be paralyzed in the event of an accident, and that is why temporary organizations arise, facilitating the clear-up operation. One explanation as to why temporary organizations emerge may be that individuals within them have local knowledge of the incident area, and have the ability to be creative, precisely because they have not had the time necessary to erect more formal structures. This is characteristic of

³⁹ Larsson *et al.*, 2007.

⁴⁰ Alvinus *et al.*, 2010.

⁴¹ Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2006.

⁴² Shamir & Ben-Ari, 2000.

⁴³ Ahrne, 1993 ; Johansson, 1997.

⁴⁴ Lanzara, 1983.

crisis management, but in a military context it is about creating a meeting point as a preventative measure, when life or death is at stake.

The idea floated by March & Simon (1958), viz. that uncertainties in the environment are for the most part absorbed on the outer periphery of an organization, certainly applies. Organizations are not homogenous, active entities and in fact cannot act at all – only individuals can do that, as Johansson explains.⁴⁵ Ahrne further maintains that when an individual acts on behalf of the organization, it is still the persons in their own right who give something of themselves in their actions, and describes those who are part of this phenomenon as “organizational centaurs”.⁴⁶

This study takes as its point of departure both the individual and the organization in order to highlight the phenomenon of organizational adaptation. Nevertheless, it is still the individuals’ perception of adaptation – or what is known as an actor’s perspective – that forms the basis for the analysis.

Organizational adaptation requires individuals or ‘links’, boundary spanners to represent the organization. In order to operate on behalf of the organization, the boundary spanners must have a mandate in this regard, and they must have the acceptance and trust of their own organization.⁴⁷ A variety of theoretical perspectives must be discussed in order to understand the importance of the role of boundary spanners in organizational adaptation to the environment. There is a need to unite the rational view of organization, exemplified by bureaucracy and hierarchy, with the viewpoint of systems theory, the clearest example of which is, in fact, organizational adaptation to the environment. Bengt Abrahamsson⁴⁸ is one organizational sociologist who draws a clear line between rational and systems perspectives. However, in order to understand an organization’s adaptation to its demanding environment, one must unite both perspectives on the way organizations function. Boundary spanners are the very individuals who unite these theoretical viewpoints in that they are able to decide for themselves when to be flexible and when to be more structured. They assess the complexity of the environment – the level of risk and threat – and through their actions they greatly influence whether adaptation is functional or dysfunctional. Adaptation is influenced by the kind of task, experience, education and skills possessed by the boundary spanners, but also by whom they meet in the field and the type of environment – which in and of itself is an expression of the systems-theoretical perspective.

Practical Implications and Study Limitations

The results may contribute to military organizations establishing effective positions for liaison officers, military observers and attachés. Other practical implications include encouraging openness towards organizational adaptation through balancing structure with improvisation. Further studies of both qualitative and quantitative character are necessary

⁴⁵ Johansson, 1997.

⁴⁶ Ahrne, 1993.

⁴⁷ Alvinus *et al.*, 2010b.

⁴⁸ Abrahamsson, 2000.

in order to study boundary spanners in challenging contexts such as war and crisis management, at various organizational levels. Considering that challenging environments can trigger fear, grief and other types of emotions, there is a need to conduct further research in the field of organizational adaptation, boundary spanning and emotion management from a sociological perspective.

A specific implication is also suggested, and leads to a possible recommendation: that organizational gate-keepers and boundary spanners be educated to avoid an over-emphasis on control-driven compliance. This is a long-term endeavour and points to the importance of organizational climate.

In conclusion, it should be borne in mind that this investigation is a case study and, as such, does not permit generalizations. However, this was not the goal of this qualitative piece of research. In the general terms of Glaser and Strauss,⁴⁹ “*Partial testing of theory, when necessary, is left to more rigorous approaches (sometimes qualitative but usually quantitative). These come later in the scientific enterprise*”. To use Blumer’s words, the concepts derived from the data may be of a sensitizing, rather than of a definitive character.⁵⁰ Moreover, the study relies on self-reported data only. These may be inaccurate, and a broader range of data would have been desirable. Yet, although the interview data is based on a limited number of informants, this form of information is important as it contributes to our understanding of the informants’ actual duties and the relationship between problems that may arise in stressful situations with collaboration and boundary spanning in international military contexts.

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⁴⁹ Glaser & Strauss, 1967, *op.cit.*

⁵⁰ Blumer, 1954.

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