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Organizational Theory in Japan

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Synonyms

Open office layout system; The Japanese organizational theory; The turf war

Definition

Theoretical trends in organizational theory as developed in Japanese public administration and bureaucracy research, and the characteristics and current realities of Japanese public organizations.

Introduction: Original Agenda of Bureaucracy and Organization in Japan

There are many commonalities shared across public administration, bureaucracy, and government under the rubric of "public organization." Japanese public administration theory has been significantly affected by the USA. This is especially true in terms of organizational theory despite the substantial differences between the two countries' democratic systems. As a result, Japanese organizational theory initially developed in two directions, theoretical and practical. Theory then evolved through ingesting other social science research. Later, empirical research has gradually been incorporated into theory, leading to convergence between theory and practice. This paper considers these characteristics of Japanese organizational theory and how it has differentiated over time by exploring its origins, development, and transformation.

The paper begins with an overview on the origins of bureaucracy and organization research proceeds to how Japanese theory has been affected by scientific management, classical theory, modern theory, and decision-making theory. Next, it describes how Japanese researchers transformed organizational theory to fit the realities of Japan's systems and issues, covering decision-making processes such as ringi-sei, "interagency struggles" understood as as sectionalism (*sekushonarizumu*), the open office layout system (*obeya-shugi*), and the well-defined mobilizing system (*saidaidoin*). Then it follows how Japanese theory diverges from these earlier trends in research by introducing behavioral theory, contractual theory, social system theory, and institutionalism, among others. In addition, it focuses on recent topics, such as reputational theory and organizational ecology. Finally, this paper concludes by considering future research directions.

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Japanese Organizational Theory Affected by Foreign Theory

In a dictionary, the word "theory" is may be defined as "a plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena" (Merriam-Webster dictionary). Organizational theory is a body of general principles for explaining organizations. According to Starbuck (2005, p. 143), although people have been creating organizations for many thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of years, generalizations about organizations are almost entirely products of the last half of the twentieth century. People proposed very few generalizations about organizations before 1850, when a trickle of making such propositions began. Propositions about organizations remained infrequent until the late 1940s, and they did not become prevalent until the 1960s.

A similar transition has been taking place in Japan, although at different times. In this section, we examine how the study of organizations has developed in public administration and adjacent fields. "Organization" is one of the main concepts used in public administration. As Woodrow Wilson (1887) pointed out, "The field of administration is a field of business" (p. 493). American public administration has characterized the management of organizations through focusing on the commonalities between public and private organizations. Therefore, although the topic of this article is "organization theory in Japan," this article mainly focuses on public administration.

From around the 1950s onward, overseas research on organizations in various social science fields began to be introduced to Japanese scholars. Since 1980, the success of Japan's economic development has attracted worldwide attention. In order to explore the factors behind this success, international researchers have looked to political science and economic studies of Japan with particular attention paid to Japanese "organizations" such as its bureaucracies and business organizations. Case studies focusing on Japanese organizations also began to emerge. Since the 1990s, new institutional economics gained ascendency in scholarship, under which research on the economics of organizations has flourished. However, the concomitant diffusion of new institutionalism in political science had an opposite effect on research on organizations, with dwindling interest in public administration and little progress made in generating related empirical research. This has contributed to a lag in the advancement of research by Japanese scholars on the topic of organizational theory compared to overseas scholarship. In the following, this trend is examined in detail.

Before and After World War II

Consideration of organizations began in the 1920s. Some Japanese translations were published to introduce Marxist theory of organization and anarchist theory of organization, as well as to introduce principles for the management of factory organizations based on the newly proposed theory of scientific management. In addition to these translations, there were publications on such topics as examination of industrial organization overseas (Kojima 1928), industrial organization theory (Kitazawa 1930), and market organization theory (Uchiike 1924).

In the 1930s, essays on organizations related to public administration were also published. For example, Masamichi Royama wrote "Administrative Organization Theory" in 1930 (Royama 1965), and Hiroshi Ikeda, a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Home Affairs, left behind a treatise on the local government of Tokyo called "Tokyo's Ward System Theory" (Ikeda 1935). Masamichi Royama was put in charge of the newly established Department of Public Administration at the Faculty of Law, Tokyo Imperial University, in 1927. Royama was a pioneer in public administration, studying it through a functionalist approach and describing state functions and tasks. Along with making direct observations about administrative structure in England through his own travels, he studied administrative structure and organizational management at the London School of Economics and at Oxford University, with particular attention to the British cabinet system and reforms carried out in central-local relations in wide area administration. He was considering how to adapt and apply scientific management methods from overseas to Japan, but in the end, practical experience and theoretical considerations were not joined. In general, these studies were based on the compilation of observations about organizations regardless of the field. This research approach played an important role in the early development of the field, though it is very different from contemporary organizational theory.

Organizational Theory Boom and Introduction of Overseas Research

In this way, although organizational theory found its way to Japan in the 1920s and 1930s, research on organizational theory in Japan started late, on a foundation of overseas theoretical developments in the 1960s. These foundational theories were proposed before and after World War II. American mechanical engineer and early management consultant Frederick Winslow Taylor produced many methods under the umbrella of scientific management, with the core being divisional management using the "science of work" to measure and standardize work. With the spread of workflow systems, management attention turned to the establishment of management structures, giving rise to classical organizational theory based on the principle of centralized command and the differentiation of staff and lines. In addition, human relations theory/neoclassical organization theory that focused on informal organizations was born. Building on these theories' emphasis on human behavior, modern organization theory emerged, triggered by the publication "The Functions of the Executive" by Chester Bernard in 1938 (Nishio 1990, p. 63).

It was after the 1950s that such organization studies from other countries were imported and introduced to Japan. Political scientist Takeshi Ishida criticized the boom in organization theory, which sprung from a desire to solve various postwar problems but led to excessive expectations and only served as a bandaid, given the difficult, social and political challenges facing Japan at the time (Ishida 1961, p. 238). Examination of the pre-war period revealed that organizations that were supposed to be independent and grassroots, such as found in Europe and the USA, were nonetheless absorbed by and came under the control of the government. This led to discussion on how Japan could establish a true democracy "from the bottom" as well as organization "from the bottom" in the post-war system. This question led to Japanese scholars poring over research from abroad.

Obviously, not all overseas organizational theories have been introduced to Japan. And the theories introduced in Japan are deeply related to the concerns about organizations in Japan. In addition, postwar public administration in Japan has been greatly influenced by American public administration. The history of organization theory in Japan contrasts with the history of public administration theory and managerial thought in Japan.

Of the foreign organization theories imported into Japan since the 1960s, American public administration research has been especially influential. At the time, American public administration theories were recognized as follows. The genealogy of American public administration has two lineages: administrative theory and organizational theory (Nishio 1990, 2001). The public administration theory lineage arose from politics-administration dichotomy theory, morphed into public management studies, and then evolved into a politics-administration integration. The organizational theory lineage developed from scientific management methods, classical organizational theory, neoclassical organizational theory, and modern organizational theory. These two developed in parallel, and the two systems of classical organizational theory and administrative management theory were combined. Influenced by these developments, theories from abroad were introduced to Japan. In the first issue of the journal of the Japan Society for Public Administration, as an introduction to theoretical trends in public administration, Kiyoaki Tsuji categorized overseas research trends into three schools: the efficiency school that inherited the tradition of scientific management methods; the human relations school of Bernard and others; and the social environment school of Selznick and others. Many subsequent papers dealt with organizational theory, introducing many theoretical trends related to organizational theory from the 1960s to the 1980s. In particular, the 1975 Annual Review of Public Administration featured a special issue on "Organizations and People in Public Administration." In general, the influence of L. Gülick, P. Selznick, D. Waldo, C. Barnard, H. Simon, and J. March is significant. In the 1980s, there was a debate on how to respond to the two separate American theoretical lineages.

I would like to add that, like the study of organizations in the USA, organizational theory has spread to other areas of social science besides public administration.

For example, in political science, Takeshi Ishida examined key issues in modern organizational theory by applying Simon and Bernard's discussion and G.H. Mead's research with Waldo, Goodnow, and J. March at that time, and presented an analytical perspective that views the organizational process (basic human relations) as a symbolic process. Using agricultural cooperatives as a case study, he conducted research on pressure groups.

In sociology, Kenichi Tominaga (1997) analyzed Japanese management and business organizations sociologically, using organizational theory, P. Blau's social exchange theory, and Luhmann's social system theory as analytical perspectives.

Transformation to Fit the Japanese System and Agenda

Starbuck (2005, p. 161) examined the development of organizational theory development and found that research in organizational theory after the nineteenth century generally can be categorized under two major themes. One theme emphasizes the defects of bureaucracy and studies how bureaucratic governments affect societies. The second theme focuses on how organizations can operate more effectively. He said that these themes were motivated by both perceived threats and perceived opportunities. Those who wrote about *bureaucracy* usually perceived it as a threat to something, such as to good government and individual freedom. In contrast, those who wrote about *organization design* were more likely to perceive organizations as offering attractive opportunities for something, such as efficient production, control by owners, and enhanced cooperation. After the 1960s, these two major themes merged, and organizational research became more scientific and empirical methods become more transparent.

As mentioned in the previous section, Japanese scholars have not produced many generalized theories that can be compared to those developed by researchers in other countries, but research in Japan has been conducted with a similar awareness of issues related to organizational design and decision-making. Such issues include how to manage superior-subordinate relations, how to overcome the dysfunction of the bureaucracy, how to effectively educate staff, how to optimally divide labor into specializations, and how to best use technologies. Some of these questions are examined below. This research is divided into two categories: research that uses foreign theories to explain the Japanese bureaucracy and Japanese administrative organizations, and research that springs from observations that are especially characteristic of Japanese bureaucratic and administrative organizations.

What follows is an overview of research on four main topical themes in the latter category. These are: decision-making processes such as *ringi-sei*, interagency struggle or turf war as *kakkyo* or sectionalism, Japan's well-defined mobilizing system called *saidaidoin*, and a particular open office layout system, *obeya-shugi.*

Ringi-sei Decision-Making Process

The "Ringi-system" was discussed in "A New Study of the Japanese Bureaucracy" by Kiyoaki Tsuji (1969), which is considered a classic study of Japanese bureaucracy. Specifically, Tsjui describes this process in which plans and decisions in the administration are made by first circulating a written request for approval, drafted by those closer to the bottom of the organizational hierarchy who then forward the document to formally receive a greenlight through a signature stamp called an *inkan* or *hanko* by the relevant officials. Next the stamped written request is relayed to higher officials for their review, who in turn transmit the document to the final decision-maker for approval. As a general rule, it is not necessary to hold a meeting at any time during this circulation and approval process. Although only the head of the administrative organ has the legal authority to approve a written request, this lengthy decision-making process continues to be practiced. Tsuji criticized this practice by pointing out that while it has certain benefits in terms of making it impossible for concerned parties to raise objections, securing cooperation, and preserving records, it has disadvantages in terms of reduced efficiency, dispersion of responsibility, and lack of leadership. Others have responded to Tsuji's criticism by contesting the accuracy of some of his characterizations of the process and asserting that the process is actually more flexible. Organizational decisions are also made through meetings and other processes without *ringi-sei* (Inoue 1981; Omori 1985). In addition, there are variations in the practice of *ringi-sei* in different ministries and agencies (Shiroyama et al. 1999).

Interagency Struggle or Turf War as *Kakkyo* or *Sectionalism*

The concept of sectionalism, which was proposed by Kiyoaki Tsuji (1966) as a characteristic of the Japanese bureaucracy, was examined mainly by Tsunao Imamura (1978, 2006). Interagency struggle can be found to a greater or lesser extent in the administrative bureaucracy of any country, but its manifestation tends to be unique within each country. This is because bureaucracy is a historical and cultural phenomenon. After the Meiji Restoration, which aimed to dismantle shogunate rule and consolidate imperial control of Japan, a modernized "Kansei" bureacratic system was established. This Kansei continued to guide the ethos of the bureacratic system after World War II, resulting in conflict and competition among ministries and agencies over authority and jurisdiction. Imamura examined the ambivalence of the traditionally negative concept of sectionalism, and discussed the utility of interagency conflict and the need to manage conflict (Shimada 2011).

The *Saidaidoin* Mobilization System

Focusing on the fact that the number of civil servants in Japan is small compared to other countries, Muramatsu (1994) summarized the state of the Japanese administrative system to date as "a system that efficiently mobilizes all human resources, funds, and institutions toward a goal." This system "has attempted to maximize the mobilization of the resources of society as a whole through the creation of networks that transcend administrative organizations and include private organizations, albeit on a ministry-by-ministry basis." He says that this is an "activist bureaucracy," a bureaucracy established under a continental-style administrative system in which the government plays an active role. He criticized this system for being rational as long as the goal was to catch up with the West, but after this goal was achieved, it began to work in a dysfunctional manner.

The *Obeya-shugi* Layout System

Wataru Omori (1980, 1990, 2006) spearheaded research on the total control administrative management system and the open office layout system, which are preeminent practices that characterize organizational arrangement in Japan. He clarified the characteristics of the large-room system, which is very different from the Western system of individual rooms and jobs specifically assigned to one individual. ***Obeya-shugi*** is the principle that the official unit of work assignment is the division or section, not an individual employee. It is the division of work among organizational units rather than among staff members. The tasks that individual staff members are responsible for are general in nature. The duties of each individual staff member are not clear as in a job classification system. Each staff member belongs to one of the organizations. Except for administrative staff, they are not directly assigned to individual job posts. They work together in a physically spacious room. They form a "territory" of desks. They sit opposite each other at their desks. Personnel transfers are carried out collectively by the human resources department within the government-wide general affairs organization. Direct supervisors do not do this. New employees learn how to perform their work through on-the-job training. The system is designed to avoid any disruption of workflow if a staff member is assigned to a new position. An advantage of the open-office layout system is that staff members can cooperate with, support, and assist each other while sharing the duties of the section as appropriate. A disadvantage is that although staff members can mutually evaluate each other's work performance, it is difficult to evaluate the performance of individual staff members. In particular, since a vague and reasonable "market rate" is formed for personnel evaluation, it is important to form and maintain human relationships. Having a nice disposition and regular communications with co-workers is important. The number of staff in an open office often remains unchanged, while the number of duties may accumulate, frequently exceeding the capacity or number of staff.

Empirical Studies That Apply the Lens of Foreign Theories

The studies outlined above draw from real-life observations of the Japanese bureaucracy and Japanese administrative operations. The challenge then is how to relate such research to concepts in organizational theory developed overseas. Other empirical studies that use foreign theories to explain the decision-making mechanisms, organizational management, and organizational behavior of the Japanese bureaucracy have advanced in parallel with foreign studies. For example, Izuru Makihara (1994–1995) examined "consultation," a mechanism for horizontal coordination among central government organizations such as the Ministry of Construction, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and the Ministry of Transport, using construction management policy for public facilities as a case study, and found that coordination takes place in individual "consultation units."

Some studies also explain the implementation process of individual policies from the perspective of organizational theory. Hideyuki Takechi (1996) applied Simon's theory and principal-agent theory to study organizational control in the process of administering public assistance and community welfare in Japan. He argued that when the predictability of bureaucracy is reduced, the bureaucracy is more likely to manipulate information and incentives in order to obtain the maximum effect with the limited administrative resources of authority, financial resources, information, and personnel available. He also asserted that social relations are transformed into intraorganizational relations to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of resource allocation and supply processes, which can indirectly improve the welfare of the people. In addition, he theorizes that the source of control is the authority of status rather than the authority of function. Altogether these factors uphold a system that prioritizes supplier sovereignty over consumer sovereignty, with incentive control as the key to control rather than information control.

On the other hand, while most research at the time focused on the central government, some studies emerged that examined the administrative organization of local governments and demonstrated their dissimilarities from the central government. Tao (1990) conducted a groundbreaking empirical study of the organization of local governments. He developed a theory of city hall organization that focuses on a comparison of public and private organizations and a theory of organizational management that analyzes the behavior of section chiefs in city hall. He found that the bureaucratic model does not accurately characterize local governments, and instead demonstrated that Japanese local governments are organizations with more flexible functions by necessity. In particular, he argues that section chiefs in local governments should have the ability to act as "political managers" who can make decisions based on their understanding of the administrative environment and make value judgments as a member in an open organization that transcends the formal human relationships of subordinates, superiors, and colleagues.

Focus on Japan and the Japanese Organization and the Bifurcation of Organizational Studies

Since the 2000s, research on bureaucratic and administrative organizations has ceased to apply concepts from organizational theory. Although the field of New Public Management (NPM) is closely related to organizational management, it has more of an emphasis on analyzing the current situation as it relates to institutional reform. For example, Hisashi Harada (2005) examined the broad reorganization of Japan's central government after the NPM reform, which included the separation of planning and implementation, the agency system, and the local independent administrative agency system. In particular, he examined interorganizational management of outsourcing, but did not apply organizational theory.

Second, since the 1990s, the theoretical trends in public administration in Japan have been strongly influenced by the new institutional theory popular in political science. As a result, public administration has been studied through a political process theory lens, with bureaucracy as one of the actors. For example, this research applies corporate contract theory, i.e., principal-agent theory, transaction cost theory, and game theory. Most of the research in this vein considers bureaucracy not as an organization but as a group of actors. In addition, the bureaucracy is positioned as a politician or an object controlled by politics. As a result, it has become unfashionable to analyze the internal organizational structure and nature of decision-making by focusing on the organization and the people who make up the organization. Although there has been a number of studies on bureaucracy that apply foreign theories, such as contingency theory, Daniel Carpenter's reputation theory (2001, 2010), and newer theoretical frameworks, they have been cited in Japan in fields other than organizational theory, outside of the theories' research origins.

In the 1980s, in order to understand the success of Japan's economic development, there was a lot of research conducted in the West on Japan in both the fields of political science and economics. In particular, in the study of government-political relations, political scientists from overseas conducted empirical research to come up with a theory of political superiority that rejected the theory of bureaucratic superiority, which had been the dominant argument in Japan, sparking debate. Since the 1990s, under the longstanding system of the one-party dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the nature of Japan's governance structure has been called into question, and a number of institutional reforms have been implemented to address the issues of how to strengthen the leadership of the prime minister and how to build a democracy in which there is a change of government. These reforms were attempts to strengthen politics against bureaucracy, and it can be said that research trends were dragged along.

In the fields of economics and business administration, unlike political science, the focus was rather on Japanese corporate "organizations" and organizational decision-making mechanisms, which are characterized by lifetime employment and seniority. Masahiko Aoki's series of studies (1988, 1989) using comparative institutional analysis received international acclaim and had a major impact on the above-mentioned research trends pursued by public administration scholars in terms of both conception and theory. Despite this, theoretical updates in the analysis of Japanese administrative organizations and bureaucracies have stagnated.

Third, although empirical research has become standard in Japan, the disclosure of information on administrative organizations has not progressed, and the empirical data necessary for organizational research is difficult to obtain, unlike in other countries.

The only exception to these trends is a study by Shin (2013). By applying the population ecology model of organizational sociology and following the growth and decline process of health centers, Shin provides an excellent historical account of the mechanism of selection of health center organizations and municipalities by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Although there are many theories that explain the growth or decline of organizations, this book clarifies aspects of organizational growth and decline together.

Since the 2000s, various administrative reforms have been implemented, starting with the reorganization of central government ministries and agencies; the implementation of NPM and other reforms in central government ministries and agencies as well as in local governments; the introduction of outsourcing and other forms of externalization, and the privatization of management. In addition, with the gradual development of digitalization and other technologies, the mechanisms that were once studied in Japan, such as the *ringi-system, sectionalism, saidaidoin*, and the *obeya-shugi* are likely to be transformed. An empirical examination of the state of administrative organizations in Japan after the reforms may have much to add to organizational theory itself.

Conclusion: The Lost Three Decades

In this essay, the development of organizational theory in Japan is examined, and the following points are made clear. The development of organizational theory also corresponds to research trends in public administration in Japan. In Japan, the introduction of overseas research concepts was the main focus until the 1960s. Research was divided into two categories: research that used overseas theories to explain the Japanese bureaucracy, and research that identified characteristics and derived from observations of Japanese bureaucratic and administrative organizations. The latter has not received much international recognition, but it is necessary to examine its relationship to overseas organizational theories. In addition, of the two categories of organizational theory research, the themes related to bureaucracy and bureaucratic organization continue to take different forms, but there has been little empirical research on administrative management that enhances organizational efficiency.

Three major issues remain as challenges for organizational studies in Japanese public administration. First, there is a bias toward theoretical trends imported from overseas. As Japanese studies have flourished in Japan since the 1980s, Japanese scholars have begun to draw from Japanese political science instead of following the research trends in public administration and adjacent social sciences overseas. As a result, organizational research has become thin. With the decline of Japanese political research itself internationally, the development of theories has waned. Specifically, studies exploring postmodern theory, particularly interpretive theory, which is prevalent in other countries and other social science fields, have been ignored, and despite changes in the way ministries, agencies, and local governments have been organized since the 2000s through NPM-type reforms, these changes have not been sufficiently analyzed to address real issues. In the future, the digitization of government will continue. As the digitization of public administration advances in the future, the nature of organizations and decision-making within organizations are expected to change drastically, and there is a strong need for research to examine these areas.

Second, there is a need for methodological innovation and remedying the thinness and weakness of the empirical foundation of administrative management research, which is in turn the foundation of organizational theory research. Michio Muramatsu (1983, p. 57) also pointed out this issue in discussing the challenges and prospects of public administration. The scholarly treatment of the various issues related to organizations in Japan, such as those introduced in the previous section, are mainly narrative and have not been refined to the point of being demonstrable propositions. In addition, regarding methodology, public administration research as a whole lags behind in collecting data related to organizations in a manner comparable to what is found in oversea studies, because researchers in this area often do not have the necessary skillsets to obtain primary data through means such as interviews and surveys.

Third, the state of data acquisition needs to be improved. Related to the second point, in business organizations, data related to organizational management is becoming more available, and joint research with companies is progressing, especially in economics. However, this is not the case in the field of public administration in Japan, where there has been less effort on the part of academia to fill this gap. Acquiring data and accumulating proper empirical research is vital for informing international comparative analysis of Japanese organizations.

Although there was a focus on the strength of Japanese organizations in the 1980s, a comparable assessment has not yet been carried out more recently. Current dysfunctions at the ministry level and other factors need to be fully examined. In addition, researchers need to answer fundamental questions such as how bureaucracies will be transformed, how they will affect society, and how organizations can work efficiently with the introduction of digitalization and other technological advances in public administration.

Reviewing the origins of organizational theory, Starbuck (2005, p. 176) has observed that organizational theory has developed considerable complexity, but the complexity of organizational theory makes sense, since organizations are diverse and complex, and they inhabit diverse and complex environments. He also pointed out that this complexity poses the classical dilemma of how complicated theories should be and that complex theories capture more aspects of what researchers observe, but they are more difficult to understand. Simple theories are easy to understand but they may overlook phenomena that some people deem important. In the case of Japan, the field of public administration in particular has not yet reached the stage of facing this dilemma. It is necessary for empirical research to evolve in order to compare the characteristics of existing Japanese administrative organizations. That is the task as was exhorted by Masamichi Royama, a great authority on public administration in Japan.

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