

Institutional Betrayal and Metacontingencies

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Abstract

Institutions do not always serve the interests of survival, and in many cases they harm and betray their workers. The roots of institutional betrayal are found in the metacontingencies, which are complex combinations of interlocking behavior contingencies that result in aggregate products and incorporate receiving systems. Individuals selected for betrayal have performed recurring operants and components of cooperative behaviors patterned as metacontingencies. They have contributed to the adaptive capabilities of the organization. Their actions would be expected to continue. However, managers may intervene and alter the contingencies and metacontingencies in which workers are involved, resulting in arbitrary obsolescence of workers' functional behaviors. As acts of institutional betrayal are targeted toward workers, they adversely affect others who participate in marginalizing targeted workers. Steps can be taken to measure and monitor institutional betrayal. Managers' interventions in institutional metacontingencies not only harm workers; they also can weaken the response of institutional receiving systems to aggregate products. Cultural selection of products by receiving systems is generally best for institutions and workers.

Keywords: institutional betrayal, metacontingency, contingency, workplace culture, worker alienation

INTRODUCTION

It is logical to expect that institutions will generally act in ways that foster their survival and the well-being of individuals who contribute to institutional products. Institutions have been described as betraying communities (Beamish, 2001). Institutions also betray the workers who contribute to organizational survival. Morrison and Robinson (1997) believe that a sense of betrayal occurs when employees believe that an organization is not living up to contractual obligations. More recently, in an analysis by Smith and Freyd (2014, p. 575), institutional betrayal has been defined as "trusted and powerful institutions (schools, churches, military, government) acting in ways that visit harm upon those dependent on them for safety and well-being". Their analysis has focused on institutional betrayal associated with incidents of sexual assault (Smith & Freyd, 2014) and domestic violence (Platt, Barton, & Freyd, 2009), which may be followed by institutional responses designed to ignore the assault and/or to protect perpetrators and cause fear.

Unlike previous analyses of institutional betrayal, we believe that the roots of betrayal are found in institutional metacontingencies. The concept of metacontingency is based on foundations of behavior analysis, which evolved from operant conditioning theory (Skinner, 1953; 1981). Operant behaviors are acts that have consequences. Within organizations, over time and in response to changing environmental selection patterns, operants are structured as required for organizational survival. They are the behaviors of individuals that enable them to successfully perform their position responsibilities. As individual operants

change over time, some become more important and yield more positive consequences, while others cease to have functional value for the organization and are selected out of the corporate repertoire. In an organization, metacontingencies consist of recurrences of interlocking behavioral contingencies, which lead to the production of aggregate products (Glenn, 2004; 2010; Malott & Glenn, 2006). When operants are emitted in a sequence of recurrences, they take the form of operant lineages (Malott & Glenn, 2006). In an organization, the operant lineages of individuals are articulated with each other within metacontingencies. The aggregate products of organizations are selected by receiving systems (Glenn & Malott, 2004). For an organization, receiving systems consist of consumers.

Selection is the principal dynamic of change in individual behavioral contingencies and metacontingencies. For individual behavioral contingencies, the process is behavioral selection. For metacontingencies, the process is cultural selection. Change in institutions takes place when products, offered by institutional metacontingencies, are selected by receiving systems. Changes in receiving systems are defined by alterations in demand for products. Thus the metacontingencies that make production possible are responsive to change in demand. As new products are released in response to selection, established metacontingencies evolve to result in the new products or modifications of old products. Cultural lineages produce changes in the evolution of institutional interlocking behavioral lineages. Metacontingencies change in terms of process, as component individual operant lineages

become articulated in new ways. They change in material ways as new individuals come to play different roles as associated with particular operant contingencies.

Metacontingencies can structure complex articulations of interlocking behavior contingencies resulting in the most precisely crafted and finely conceptualized aggregate products. The performance of a symphonic work by an orchestra is an example of the complexity with which individual behavioral contingencies interlock. Each musician uniquely realizes a part within a symphonic performance controlled by operant contingencies and a unique articulation of operants. The actions of a particular musician provide are guided by the stimulus control of a printed part. At the level of individual contingencies, the conductor provides discriminative stimuli, adding precise directions with regard to how the work is to be realized. Some cues are provided for all members of the orchestra, while others are for particular contingencies. Cues are managed to control tempo and dynamics. The responses of the other musicians provide additional signals with regard to all of these dimensions of the performance including dynamics, section articulation, and bowing style. At the level of metacontingencies, the contingencies of particular musicians are interlocked with the contingencies of other musicians in real time. The contingencies of all sections articulate. Individuals and section contingencies are interlocked with the contingencies of the conductor, and with the contingencies of members of the audience are a part of the complex articulation of this complex of metacontingencies. Members of the audience constitute a receiving system from which the musicians receive indicators that may be used to select aspects of the realization of the symphonic work.

Metacontingencies in organizations provide many other examples of complex functioning and aggregate products. Optimally, receiving systems provide control to selecting and structuring metacontingencies. However, in some case, practices implemented by managers apart from, and perhaps inconsistent with, processes of cultural selection by receiving systems, result in outcomes that are contradictory to the selection of receiving systems. Often the best of managers is to allow markets to select continuation of established products, timing of release of new products, continuation of established products, and modifications of products. Ineffectiveness of managers increases in a direct relationship with the extent to which they fail to understand or acknowledge the dynamics of receiving systems.

Continuity of institutional character over time is controlled by selection of products in receiving

systems. Markets do not only select products, but also the unique ways in which a sequence of products in an institution adapts to, and evolved within, cultural change. That is, markets can also indirectly select organizational metacontingencies. The characteristics of an organization characteristic represented by metacontingencies become important parts of the identity of the organization. When certain companies release new products, there is an expectation concerning not only the product, but the culture of the organization, which affects how the product will be released. The identities of companies are managed as a matter of the style, which is in part shaped by organization metacontingencies.

INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL

A symphonic metacontingency is successful if there is a high degree of audience receptivity. This is not always so for a symphony orchestra, and it is not always so for other organizations. Receptivity for organizational aggregate products changes over time. Products once in demand may become less desirable or useful for the receiving system. Regardless of the extent of continued usefulness of the aggregate product, workers involved in the metacontingency resulting in the product may find that they have been selected within the organization for contingencies of institutional betrayal. Their products and their metacontingencies are no longer valued or included in the culture of the organization.

At the level of the organization these phenomena can be examined using the language of metcontingencies. However, it is also important to recognize the phenomenology of events for the worker. For example, instances of acute and chronic institutional betrayal may be experienced with greater impact as workers accrue longevity in an institution. With long-term employment comes greater familiarity of workers with each other. Workers acquire knowledge of capabilities and limitations of others, and information about workers' limitations may be used to damage them within the organization. This can lead to strong feelings of betrayal, trauma, and distress.

For a worker, the perception of being betrayed by trusted individuals while still needing to maintain daily relationships with them can be very disconcerting. Freyd (1996) suggested that abuse perpetrated by strangers is less traumatic than abuse that occurs within close relationships. At first, individuals may intentionally ignore what they perceive as abusive experiences. However, abusive encounters may continue and perhaps intensify, perhaps evolving into more serious forms of betrayal. The confidence and trust of individuals are lost when an organization ceases to value personal strengths and/or chooses to augment and amplify vulnerabilities and limitations.

THE ROLE OF CONTINGENCIES AND METACONTINGENCIES

Institutional betrayal is directed selectively at individuals on the basis of performance of operant behaviors and participation in interlocking behavioral contingencies. Individuals selected for betrayal in the organization have performed recurring operants and components of cooperative behaviors patterned as metacontingencies. Since many of these actions are components of patterns of behavior resulting in products that have been selected by the institution's receiving systems, they have contributed to the adaptive capabilities of the organization. These actions would be expected to continue within the organization as receiving systems continue to select the aggregate products with which they are associated. This is not necessarily so. At the moment when betrayal is felt, it is likely that there has been an intervention into the processes of cultural selection of the aggregate products. Managers have altered the contingencies of individual operants and/or in the metacontingencies that have yielded adaptive aggregate products.

Individuals try to understand their experiences; however they may be confused because they understand the true nature of the adaptive advantage of their operants and their participation in interlocking behavioral contingencies for the institution. Managers, when they intervene, now say that these operants and contributions to interlocking behavior contingencies are no longer effective. Workers do not understand how their operant lineages have become unacceptable. Their individual behavioral contingencies are now not considered to effectively interlock with the cultural metacontingencies of the organization. Their failures to understand are likely augmented by disinformation, as they become aware of destructive narratives that have been constructed about them and their contributions to important interlocking behavioral contingencies. Since these narratives are aimed at alienating workers, not surprisingly, they see themselves as unworthy, incapable, and unable to contribute to the organization. The new narratives pejoratively describe their operant lineages and/or their contributions to metacontingencies of institutional betrayal. When techniques of institutional propaganda are used, the goal is to strongly assert the necessity of betrayal, as it is said that this is in the best interest of the organization.

METACONTINGENCIES OF BETRAYAL

As acts of institutional betrayal are made public in institutions, other workers may become involved in cooperative behavior intended to achieve further marginalization and alienation of the betrayed. Metacontingencies of institutional betrayal are created within which individuals collaborate for the purpose of discrediting and denigrating workers who

are selected as recipients of betrayal. Harper (2014) describes this as mobbing. Other workers come to share the negative perceptions and express dislike for the betrayed individuals (Harper, 2013). Even subtle comments made by coworkers can add to the collective betrayal, and each contribution becomes a part of a complex web of metacontingencies of betrayal. As co-workers learn of these metacontingencies, they may be eager to participate, perceiving the opportunity for personal gain.

As metacontingencies of betrayal are created for selected workers, metacontingencies of favoritism may be created for others. While some workers are openly discredited for participating in productive metacontingencies, others receive notable public acknowledgements for participating in metacontingencies that contribute relatively little to the institution. It can be said that these behaviors contribute relatively little, because receiving systems do not necessarily select organizational products on the basis of behavioral contributions made by these individuals. The accomplishments that yield these acknowledgements may be meritorious in some respects and, therefore, are not disqualified as fraudulent. Yet, the public accolades represent, for betrayed workers, the arbitrariness and fraudulence inherent in the process of managerial selection in the organization. That fact that the organization would engage in this kind of action can further erode the sense of self-worth of the betrayed individuals and further destroys confidence and trust in the organization.

IMPLICATIONS

Institutional betrayal must first be acknowledged as real, and can be measured by the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire (Smith & Freyd, 2013). This instrument was designed to detect manifestations of betrayal at several levels. For example, an organization may fail to prevent institutional betrayal. Other indicators reflect intent to actively betray, which may be indicated by creating a culture in which experiences of betrayal are normalized. In the extreme, institutional betrayal can take the form of punishment and discrimination against those who report instances of betrayal. Measurement may require special attention to face validity by referencing the particular contingencies and metacontingencies that have become the framework of betrayal in an organization.

Next steps should be considered carefully. Some might advocate a variety of new policies to convey an institutional resolve to eradicate betrayal. This can lead to unintended consequences. Intervention with contingencies formed of logical consequences may not be effective. Managers may attempt to bring operants under stimulus control by altering

discriminative stimuli in the form of powerful language and cultural icons.

A problem with this strategy is that it attempts to replace environmental selection with arbitrary or logical control. These contingencies and their products may be less adaptive in the receiving systems in which product selection naturally occurs and in which institutional advantage is to be gained.

Managers also may attempt to control how contingencies in organizations become interlocked in metacontingencies. The nature of interlocking contingencies at a particular time is optimally defined by functionality in bringing about aggregate products. When managers adversely alter the functionality of the interlocking contingencies by arbitrarily changing how contingencies interlock, the result may be confusion, or even worse, chaos, as well-functioning metacontingencies come apart and become ineffective.

Organizations are adaptive when their aggregate products are culturally selected by receiving systems in which their products are used. When managers impose arbitrary stimulus and/or consequence control of individual operants and interlocking behavioral contingencies, the organization will tend to become less adaptive and less functional. Individuals whose material and intellectual characteristics make contingent relationships possible will feel betrayed. The once well-functioning cooperative metacontingencies become arbitrarily and unnecessarily defined as dysfunctional. These arbitrary changes do not lead to marketable products.

In conclusion, managers may intervene in institutional metacontingencies without understanding outcomes of metacontingencies, thus disrupting the production of aggregate products. From the perspective of workers, this is institutional betrayal. Cultural selection of products by receiving systems is generally best for institutions and workers. These generalizations can be useful in planning and managerial functions of many institutions. These conclusions would not be applicable in situations where the principal goal is reduction of personnel. However, when an organization sets this as a principal goal, rather than the production of the most broadly effective and marketable aggregate products, it may reveal a fundamental flaw in managerial strategy.

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