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Author(s): David Ulrich and Jay B. Barney  
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# Perspectives in Organizations: Resource Dependence, Efficiency, and Population<sup>1</sup>

DAVID ULRICH

University of Michigan

JAY B. BARNEY

University of California, Los Angeles

*Three perspectives on organizations recently have been the object of increasing interest: the resource dependence, efficiency, and population perspectives. This paper reviews the driving force, organizational concept, assumptions, and literatures of each, then identifies three points of integration across the three perspectives. The suggested meta-theoretical framework within which the perspectives can be interpreted as selection processes may provide the basis for more elaborate theory development by enhancing debate and confrontation among different theoretical perspectives.*

The development of any science, including organizational science, depends on the ongoing competition and debate among alternative explanations of a given phenomenon (Kuhn, 1970, Morgan, 1980; Pondy & Boje, 1975; Ritzer, 1975). Unfortunately, the norm in organizational science has been to develop new perspectives on organizations with relatively little regard for previous work done in different theoretical traditions. Many papers begin by hailing a new paradigm shift, then proceed to outline new sets of assumptions, how these assumptions are drawn from different disciplines (i.e., sociology, economics, biology), and the implications of these new assumptions for understanding organizations. In the enthusiasm of examining these assumptions and their implications, the relationship between new and old organizational perspectives often is neglected. Only when the textbooks are written many years later are different perspectives on organizational phenomena “stacked up” one against another (Miles, 1980; Pfeffer, 1982; Scott, 1982) and here usually only for the purpose of review rather than for debate and integration.

The lack of comparison and integration among perspectives often results in an underexamining of

many important similarities and differences among organizational perspectives. In many cases, proponents of different theoretical perspectives run the risk of arguing past one another, not communicating differences and similarities and possible points of integration. Moreover, without debate, individual perspectives may not be fully developed. One can know the full implications of a particular theory only if it is contrasted with the implications of others.

Organizational science is not devoid of debates on alternative perspectives (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976; Williamson & Ouchi, 1981). This paper continues and extends this effort by reviewing, contrasting, and suggesting points of integration for three distinct perspectives in organization theory: resource dependence, efficiency, and population. These three perspectives are selected to highlight a potential integrative framework because: (1) they are three important and currently popular alternative perspectives on organizations (Pfeffer, 1982; Scott, 1982); (2) each perspective draws from distinct disciplines—resource dependence from sociology and political science, efficiency from economics, and population from biology; and (3) these perspectives appear to be competing (Williamson & Ouchi, 1981) in offering explanations of organizational behavior. The paper is limited to these three perspectives because they are indicative of the history and breadth of work in organizational science and provide a helpful example of an integrative framework proposed in the paper.

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## Resource Dependence Perspective

### Organizational Success, Concept, Assumptions

Strongly rooted in sociology (Weber, 1947), organizational success in the resource dependence perspective is defined as organizations maximizing their power (Kanter, 1979; Pfeffer, 1981). Within this perspective, organizations are viewed as coalitions, altering their structure and patterns of behavior to acquire and maintain needed external resources. Acquiring external resources needed for the organization comes by decreasing the organization's dependence on others and/or by increasing others' dependence on it, that is, modifying an organization's power relations with other organizations. The resource dependence perspective rests on a number of assumptions that explain how organizations work to acquire power. First, organizations are assumed to be comprised of internal and external coalitions (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Coalitions emerge from social exchanges that are formed to influence and control behavior. Second, the environment is assumed to contain scarce and valued resources essential to organizational survival (Pfeffer, 1978). As such, the environment poses the problem of organizations facing uncertainty in resource acquisition. Uncertainty refers to the variability and complexity in acquiring resources from other organizations. For example, a firm can minimize its uncertainty in supply relationships by engaging in coalition activities such as forming links with influential individuals in supplier firms, becoming partners with such firms in joint ventures (Provan, Beyer, & Kruytbosch, 1980), or acquiring key supplier firms. Third, organizations are assumed to work towards two related objectives within their environment: (1) to acquire control over resources that minimize their dependence on other organizations and (2) to acquire control over resources that maximize the dependence of other organizations on themselves. Attaining either objective is thought to affect the exchange between organizations, thereby affecting an organization's power (Pfeffer, 1981).

In general, resource dependence theorists characterize the links among organizations as a set of power relations based on exchanges of resources. Organizations attempt to alter their dependence relationships by minimizing their own dependence or by increasing the dependence of other organizations on themselves.

## Theoretical and Empirical Literature

Research on the bases of power *within* organizations began as early as Weber (1947) and included much of the early work conducted by social exchange theorists (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1962) and political scientists (Dahl, 1957). More recent work on the role that personal or subunit power plays in the structure and functioning of intraorganizational processes has been conducted by Crozier (1964); Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schneck, and Pennings (1971); and Hinings, Hickson, Pennings, and Schneck (1974).

Generalization of power-based arguments from intraorganizational relations to relations *between* organizations began as early as Selznick (1949). In Selznick's view, organizations have the capacity to develop distinctive competencies, then draw resources from actors external to the organization to support these central tasks through co-optation. Co-optation, viewed in this light, is essentially an organizational attempt to gain power by minimizing the organization's dependence on others and by maximizing the dependence of others in its environment on itself.

Selznick's original power insights have been modified and developed by Yuchtman and Seashore (1967), Thompson (1967), and Pfeffer, Salancik, and their associates (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974, 1978; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Pfeffer, Salancik, & Leblebici, 1976; Pfeffer & Leong, 1977; Pfeffer & Moore, 1980). These numerous studies, although done in different organizational settings, are consistent with the resource dependence perspective. Pfeffer and Leong (1977) and Provan et al. (1980), for example, argue that relative power in a United Way agency is a function of interorganizational relations. Agencies minimize self-dependence and maximize other-dependence by generating alternative sources of funding, by establishing numerous links with community leaders, by demonstrating higher demand for services, and by providing intensive services to clients. These acts limit an agency's dependence on United Way headquarters and increase other agencies' respect and dependence on it. By so doing, the agency acquires more power relative to other agencies.

## Efficiency Perspective

### Organizational Success, Concept, Assumptions

Whereas the resource dependence perspective is rooted in sociology, the efficiency perspective draws heavily from economics. As its name implies, the

major criterion for organizational success in this perspective is efficiency. That is, for efficiency theorists, successful organizations are those that are able to manage their transactions efficiently. In this view, organizations exist to mediate the economic transactions among members inside and/or outside the organization.

A number of assumptions underlie this perspective. First, the unit of analysis is the transaction, and economic actors are assumed to engage in activities to minimize transaction costs. Transactions are exchanges of goods or services between economic actors and can occur both inside an organization between individuals or departments and between an organization and external actors. Transaction costs arise when it is difficult for parties in an exchange to determine the value or other characteristics of a good or service exchanged.

Second, three broad classes of governance mechanisms can be used to mediate transactions, thereby reducing transactions costs: markets, bureaucracies, and clans (Barney & Ouchi, 1983; Ouchi, 1980). Markets govern transactions through competitive pressures that assure that the qualitative and quantitative value of a good or service being exchanged is accurately reflected in its price. Bureaucracies, a type of hierarchical structure, govern transactions through the imperfect application of rules. Rules in the organization establish what each party can expect to give and receive from a transaction, and their application is designed to maintain a perception of fairness and equity among parties to the exchange. Clans, another type of hierarchical structure, govern transactions through the application of a system of shared values. The underlying shared values of the parties, if understood and signaled in believable ways, can assure parties to the exchange that they are being dealt with fairly, even when more formal bureaucratic mechanisms might not be able to. These governance mechanisms imply the purpose of organizations: to minimize transaction costs when markets fail (Williamson, 1975).

Third, in this framework, the appropriateness of different governance mechanisms depend on transaction characteristics. Transactions can be characterized as to their complexity, uncertainty, difficulty of enforcement, goal congruence, and investment specificity (Barney & Ouchi, 1983; Williamson, 1979).

Fourth, the major theoretical objective of the efficiency perspective is to match governance mechanisms to transaction characteristics to indicate optimally efficient mediators between parties in a transaction. Under many conditions, markets are efficient mediators of economic transactions. However, when the goods or services exchanged are complex, delivered over a long period of time, or exchanged in noncompetitive settings, then fair prices are difficult and costly to set. Thus, a market fails to govern the exchange efficiently. Under conditions of uncertainty, the transaction costs of a market governance mechanism would be prohibitively expensive, if not impossible, and thus the transaction would not occur over time. To improve efficiency and lower the transaction costs, markets can be replaced by bureaucracies.

In a bureaucracy, rules are set that allow decisions about the items of an exchange to be made and adjusted over a long period of time (e.g., the employment contract). The rules in a bureaucracy minimize the need for continual, close inspection of the exchange in order to ensure that neither party cheats the other because both parties in the transaction have common investments in the bureaucracy governing the transaction. However, bureaucracies also can fail when the ambiguity about performance becomes very great. When the cost to governing behavior in a bureaucracy becomes prohibitive, a clan governance mechanism may emerge as an alternative. In a clan, both parties to the transaction share a common value or goal. Because of shared values and goals, parties to an exchange can be assured that equity will exist in the long run.

In brief, the efficiency perspective matches transaction characteristics with alternative governance mechanisms to specify conditions under which these alternative governance forms will efficiently and equitably mediate exchanges.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Literature**

Coase (1937) originally characterized a firm from an efficiency perspective. He argued that the appropriate unit of analysis for understanding firms is the transactions between parties within it and that the costs of transactions affect firm behavior. He recognized that a market mechanism of governing transactions will not always be as efficient as the firm (hierarchy) mechanism:

The main reason why it is profitable to establish a firm would seem to be that there is a cost of using

the price mechanism . . . The operation of a market costs something and by forming an organization and allowing some authority (an entrepreneur) to direct the resources, certain market costs are saved (Coase, 1937, p. 390).

Coase also suggested that markets will be more efficient than firms in governing transactions when the uncertainty of the transaction is low and knowledge necessary for market contracting is high.

Williamson (1975) integrated Coase's general framework with literature from economics and organizational theory to derive what he called an organizational failures framework. In Williamson's view, markets fail to govern economic exchanges efficiently because of two characteristics of individuals in the transaction (bounded rationality and opportunism) and two characteristics of the environment surrounding the transactions (uncertainty/complexity and small numbers bargaining). Because of opportunism, bounded rationality (Simon, 1945), uncertainty, and small numbers bargaining, markets may fail and be replaced by hierarchies as a governance mechanism. Hierarchies may foster common goals and objectives between transacting parties and facilitate close monitoring of each other's behavior through rules, thus overcoming some of the difficulties of a market governance mechanism.

Williamson's work has been extended to show how some transactions may be so ambiguous or complex that they cannot be governed efficiently by either markets or bureaucratic hierarchies. Long term, but very complex, transactions may lead bureaucracies to be inefficient, to be replaced or assisted by clans (Barney & Ouchi, 1983). Clans become a mechanism for efficiently governing exchanges under conditions of very high uncertainty/complexity and high anticipated longevity of the relationship.

## **Population Perspective**

### **Organizational Success, Concept, Assumptions**

If power maximization defines organizational success in the resource dependence perspective and if efficiency plays the same role for the efficiency perspective, then organizational success in the population perspective can be defined as survival. The population perspective addresses two interrelated issues in the analysis of survival: classification and selection (Ulrich, 1982).

Drawing concepts from biology, the population perspective views organizations as systems that are

determined, to a great extent, by environmental factors. Although this perspective acknowledges individual organizations, the focus is not on individual organizations, but on organizational forms, or populations of organizations (McKelvey, 1982). Organizational form represents the structure, processes, and systems that characterize individual organizations.

In the study of organizational survival, the population perspective makes assumptions about both classification and selection. First, the population perspective assumes that individual organizations can be classified into populations based on common organizational forms. Classifying organizations into populations allows more precise statements to be made about organizational behavior within and across populations.

Second, the population perspective assumes that once organizations are grouped into populations, the dynamic relationships among populations, niches, environments, and long term organizational survival can be explored. This second phase of analysis often involves the development of an evolutionary theory of organizational change, in which specific population characteristics are evaluated relative to their survival potential in different environmental settings (Aldrich, 1979; Astley & Fombrun, 1983).

Within a population framework, evolutionary models of organizational selection and change generally focus on the relationships between populations of organizations and their niche and environment. Environments define a strategic and resource path that an organization must follow to be selected for and survive over time. Niches provide the resources that a firm must attract to survive. Because limited environmental resources constrain the number of populations a niche can support, some populations and organizations are selected against and disappear; other are selected for and survive. The relationship between characteristics of populations and environmental conditions that lead to this differential selection are called selection mechanisms. Several such mechanisms have received attention in the literature, including specialist and generalist structures (Hannan & Freeman, 1977, 1981), resource dependence, organizational strategy, and organizational life cycle (Ulrich, 1982). The evolution of organizations and populations over time is defined by the selection mechanism and processes that exist at the interface of a population and its environment.

## Theoretical and Empirical Literature

The population perspective draws heavily from biology. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the emphasis on classification (McKelvey, 1982). The importance of the concept of a population in biology has been demonstrated in work by Mayr (1969) and Sneath and Sokal (1973). McKelvey (1982) has argued that organization theory needs to develop an accepted classification scheme analogous to that in biology. According to McKelvey, an organization classification scheme would help the development of organizational science, provide a basis for information retrieval about organizations, increase the generalizability and predictability of organization studies, and provide a basis for sampling in organization research. McKelvey (1982) argues that the classification of organizations should provide a basis for information retrieval about organizations, increase the generalizability and predictability of organization studies, and provide a basis for sampling in organization research. He argues further that as in the biological sciences, the classification of organizations should rely on evolutionary or historical studies (Aldrich & Mueller, 1982; Blute, 1979) as well as numerical taxonomic methods (Haas, Hall, & Johnson, 1966).

Hannan and Freeman (1977) have related the concepts of niche, environment, population-environment relations, and competition to a discussion of selection mechanisms in organizational theory. Much of this research has focused on organizational structures and strategies that firms can adopt within their environments: specialists versus generalists organizational structures and *r* versus *K* strategies. Hannan and Freeman (1977) also have begun to specify the environmental conditions under which certain strategies increase or decrease the likelihood of firm survival.

Although research on selection has focused on specialist/generalist and *r*/*K* strategies, other characteristics of populations of organizations also could be related to survival within an environment over time. Research on organizational life cycles (Kimberly, Miles, & Associates, 1981) could be recouched within a selection framework. Indeed, Freeman (1982) has argued that firms in the later stages of the life cycle are less flexible, both strategically and organizationally, and thus are more likely to be selected for by stable, certain environments. Also, work by Lippman and Rumelt (1980) argues for the role

of luck in selection processes. Because the selection pressures in an environment are essentially unpredictable and the strategies of successful firms are only partially subject to imitation, firms and populations of firms that are selected for may, in fact, simply be lucky. Finally, both the resource dependence and efficiency perspectives of organizations may be thought of as selection mechanisms within a broader selection framework.

## Integration of the Perspectives

The resource dependence, efficiency, and population perspectives, as three alternative ways of thinking about organizations, are summarized in Table 1. Each of these perspectives has been developed separately in the literature. It now is important to compare and begin to integrate these alternative perspectives.

### Unit of Analysis

Each of the perspectives reviewed focuses on different units of analysis. For the efficiency perspective, the unit of analysis is the transaction, or the exchange of goods and services between economic actors. This microanalytic unit of analysis appears to stand in marked contrast to the resource dependence perspective, in which the organization and its relation to the larger environment is the primary unit of analysis (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Finally, in the population perspective, a group of similar organizations—the population—and how the population interfaces with its niche and environment (Ulrich, 1983) are the relevant units of analysis.

At first glance, these three units of analysis seem distinct. However, from another point of view, they are, in fact, closely related. In the efficiency perspective, the transaction is the key unit of analysis. However, as transaction after transaction is entered into and mediated by economic actors through transaction governance mechanisms, the accumulation of governance mechanisms begins to take on its own structure. In the resource dependence perspective, such structure is called an organization, and it may be conceived of as a bundle of transaction governance mechanisms with certain characteristics in common. In this sense, there is an aggregational relationship between the transaction as the unit of analysis and the organization as a unit of analysis. As more transactions are engaged in and standardized, organization structures are developed to govern consistently

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Resource Dependence, Efficiency, and Population Perspective**

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Resource Dependence Perspective</i>	<i>Efficiency Perspective</i>	<i>Population Perspective</i>
Organizational success:	Maximize organizational power	Maximize organizational efficiency	Organizational survival
Organizational concept:	Coalitions acquiring resources	Mediator between parties involved in economic transaction	Organizational form
Assumptions:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Organizations comprised of coalitions.</li> <li>2. Environment contains scarce and valued resources. Environment is uncertain.</li> <li>3. Organizations gain power by               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—controlling resources to minimize their dependence</li> <li>—controlling resources to maximize others' dependence on them.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Study transactions between organizations.</li> <li>2. Identify alternative governance mechanisms (market, bureaucracy, and clan).</li> <li>3. Assess transaction characteristics.</li> <li>4. Match governance mechanism to transaction characteristic to get lower transaction cost.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Populations of organization can be defined.</li> <li>2. Selection mechanisms can be specified for each population.</li> </ol>
Literature:	Sociology and political science	Economics	Biology
Key Work:	Pfeffer & Salancik (1978) Pfeffer (1981)	Williamson (1975, 1981) Ouchi (1980) Barney & Ouchi (1983)	Hannan & Freeman (1977, 1981) Aldrich (1979) McKelvey (1982) Ulrich (1982)

the pattern of transactions. The same aggregational relationship may exist between organizations and populations as units of analysis. In this sense, populations are simply bundles of organizations that have certain characteristics in common.

It is certainly the case that the processes by which one can go from transactions as a unit of analysis to organizations to populations is underspecified, both theoretically and empirically. But, in fact, it has received substantial attention. Indeed, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) begin their discussion of resource dependence with a discussion of intraorganizational phenomena in which the unit of analysis often approximates the transaction. Also, Williamson's (1975) work on the M-form hypothesis can be understood as an attempt to specify the processes by which transaction specific governance mechanisms come together to form an organization. In a similar vein, McKelvey's (1982) and Ulrich's (1982) work on numerical taxonomy can be seen as attempts to specify the relationship between the organization and population as a unit of analysis. Although it may be true that these attempts to develop theories of aggregation are currently underdeveloped, they suggest that the three perspectives are not as mutually inconsistent because of different units of analysis as might have been previously thought.

### Scarce Resources

A second point of possible integration among the three perspectives might be the degree to which each deals with scarce resources. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) assert that organizational survival depends on the acquisition of scarce and valued resources from the environment in a stable and low cost manner. Strategies that maximize an organization's interorganizational power presumably yield such desired relations. For example, if for some reason one firm is highly dependent on a second for a particularly scarce and valued resource, the first might acquire the second in order to ensure stable, low cost supplies. The acquisition shifts power away from the second firm and centralizes power in the former firm. Such upstream integration to ensure stable supply relationships was practiced, for example, by General Motors in acquiring Fisher Auto Body in the 1920's (Chandler, 1962). In these situations, power is centralized in the acquiring firm, and the likelihood of a stable supply relationship is enhanced.

The efficiency perspective, like the resource dependence perspective, also assumes that firms seek to establish low cost, stable—and here the word “efficient” can be added—resource acquisition. Despite the apparent similarities, it would be inappropriate

to conclude that these two perspectives offer identical explanations of resource acquisition relationships. Resource dependence theorists have emphasized power maximization strategies, that is, strategies that centralize power in one or a set of firms. Such strategies represent a movement away from and an abandonment of market forces between firms. Efficiency theorists recognize that power centralization sometimes will be necessary to ensure efficient supply relations (e.g., through bureaucracies or clans). But they also recognize, under conditions of moderate or low exchange complexity or uncertainty, market forces will ensure efficient supplies.

The following example helps demonstrate the differences between these two approaches. (This example was first suggested by William G. Ouchi, 1980. However, the present authors have developed it in ways for which he is not responsible.) Suppose a semiconductor manufacturer develops a unique product that a computer manufacturer designs into its new machines. Using a power perspective, the computer firm, in order to ensure low cost, stable supplies, could acquire the semiconductor firm or the firm's technology and build the desired chip itself. Such a centralization of power through vertical integration would be necessary to avoid becoming dependent on the single autonomous semiconductor firm. IBM's purchase of 12 percent of Intel's stock is an example of this integration.

From an efficiency perspective also, one could argue for vertical integration or centralization of power. However, a market alternative also exists. Instead of acquiring the firm, the computer manufacturer could require the semiconductor firm to license another semiconductor firm to fabricate the product. In other words, the computer firm could attempt to develop a market situation with alternative suppliers, and thus assure itself low cost, stable supplies through competitive market forces. Such second source relations are quite common in the electronics industry ("Semiconductor Rivals," 1981). Within the efficiency framework, the choice between centralized (e.g., bureaucracy or clan) and decentralized (e.g., market) governance mechanisms depends on characteristics of the transaction itself. An efficiency analysis generally is not bound to the consideration of different types of centralized power relations to ensure stable resource acquisition relations; it also may consider decentralized market forces.

The above discussion clarifies this relationship between the efficiency and resource dependence perspectives. Both theories posit the same basic organizational objective: the low cost, stable acquisition of valued and scarce resources from sources in a firm's environment. However, resource dependence perspectives generally consider only power maximization strategies to ensure the desired relations. Such strategies involve some degree of centralization of power from between firms to a single firm. Efficiency perspectives recognize that power maximization, through power centralization, sometimes may be appropriate to ensure stable and low cost supplies. However, market forces, or decentralized power relationships, also may be used to ensure efficient supply relations. Moreover, work has begun to specify conditions under which centralized power governance mechanisms or decentralized market forces will be most appropriate in developing and maintaining low cost, stable supply relations (Barney & Ouchi, 1983; Williamson, 1979, 1981). In brief, this work has proposed that under conditions of low uncertainty or complexity, markets or decentralized structures will efficiently and equitably mediate exchanges. Under conditions of high uncertainty and high anticipation longevity, clans, a form of centralized power structure, will more efficiently mediate exchanges. Under conditions intermediate to these extremes, bureaucracies, another form of centralized power structure, are most appropriate. Although more research is needed in this area, the key insight is that an efficiency perspective recognizes the existence of both decentralized markets and centralized hierarchies as viable means through which organizations can mediate relations with their environments, depending on the transaction characteristics.

### **Survival**

It has been argued that both efficiency and resource dependence perspectives posit the development of stable, low cost resource relations as a precursor to organizational survival over time. Thus, in an important sense, organizational survival becomes a common concern of both perspectives, and stable supply relations become one means to attain this common end.

Of the three perspectives discussed in the paper, however, only the population perspective directly addresses the issue of long term organizational survival. Although it can be derived from applications of the efficiency and resource dependence models, it is a key

variable of fundamental importance in the population perspective. Organizational selection and survival may result from any number of organizational characteristics. Many theorists have argued that organization structure and strategy relate to organizational survival (Dalton, Tudor, Spendolini, Fielding, & Porter, 1980; James & Jones, 1976; Rumelt, 1974). In addition, other organizational characteristics, including the successful formation of long term, low cost supply relations, whether by power maximization strategies or by maximal transactional efficiency, also could be related to organizational survival (Williamson, 1981). If resource acquisition is assumed to affect the probability of organizational survival, then the resource dependence and efficiency characteristics of organizations can be thought of as first order alternative selection mechanisms within a broader population context, along with other organizational characteristics that might have an impact on survival (e.g., structure, strategy, life cycle, luck). (See Ulrich, 1983, for a complete discussion.)

One conclusion of this discussion could be that, because both the resource dependence and efficiency perspectives deal indirectly with organizational survival, the population perspective has no unique characteristics. However, it seems more appropriate to recognize that nonresource dependence or nonefficiency explanations of organizational survival might also exist. Thus the population perspective should not be dissolved into the other two. Some potential alternative explanations of organizational survival might also include organizational structure, strategy, or luck (Lippman & Rumelt, 1980). In practice, it may be the case that an organization can establish stable, low cost supply relations, either with resource dependence or efficiency mechanisms, and still not survive. The strategic choice of market, the characteristics of the organization structure, and even the intangible role of luck may all play a part in ultimately determining long term survival. The population perspective addressed these fundamental issues through its emphasis on selection mechanisms leading to survival.

### **An Integrative Framework**

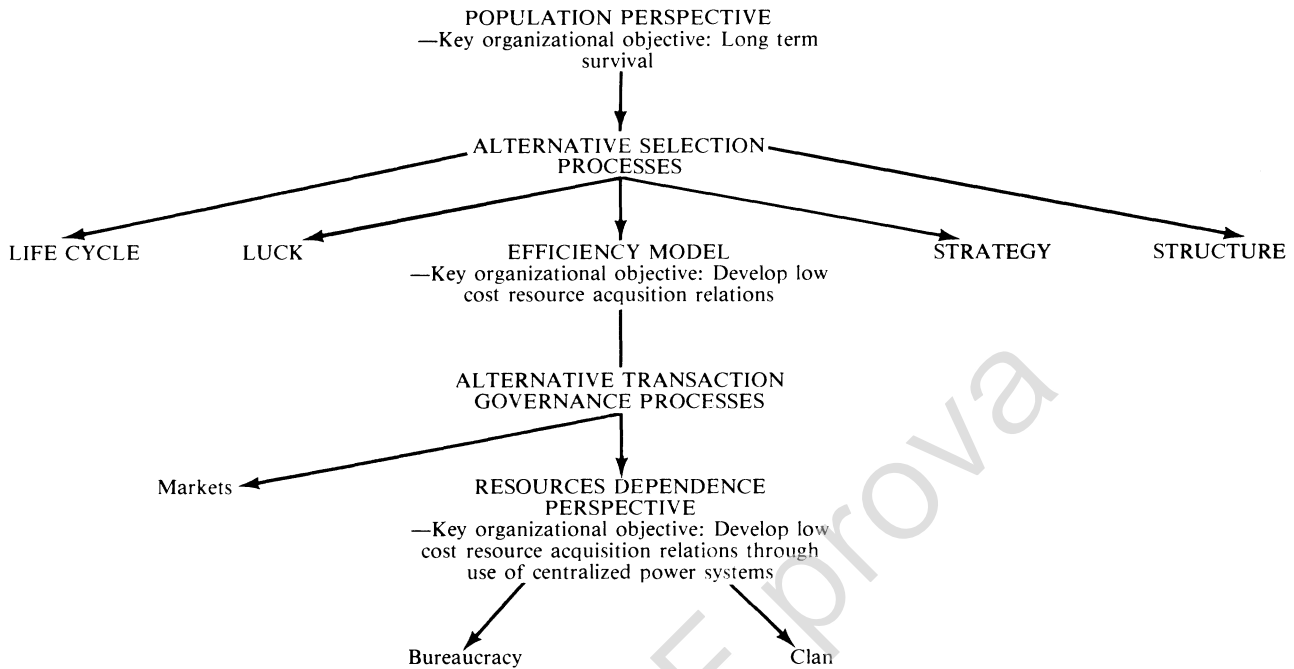
The above discussion implies a complex set of relationships among the resource dependence, efficiency, and population perspectives in organization theory. Previous work (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976) has

suggested that resource dependence and selection are alternative approaches to organizational analysis. Several points of overlap between these two perspectives and the efficiency perspective have been shown here. In addition, a framework within which these interrelationships can be understood is suggested (Figure 1). In this framework, the population perspective's emphasis on survival and selection indicates that it can be thought of in terms of a meta-theory. This is a broader organizational perspective within which the other two perspectives can be seen as alternative theories of organizational selection. The selection process associated with the efficiency perspective is management's ability to develop stable, low cost supply relations and to govern those relationships as efficiently as possible. Organizations that accomplish these tasks, through markets or hierarchies, enhance their probability for survival. Within this context, the resource dependence perspective focuses on one class of strategies that an organization can employ to attain stable supply relations, strategies that involve the development of centralized hierarchical power relations. Throughout, movements from different units of analysis could be considered through the application of theories of aggregation discussed above.

### **Implications of the Integrative Framework**

This analysis does not imply that one theory is preferable, in any sense, to another. Indeed, each perspective plays a vital role in the overall understanding of the field of interorganizational relations. Moreover, the position of each theory in the framework points to both strengths and weaknesses. In recognizing the population perspective as a meta-theory, the centrality of organizational survival is established as a concern in many theories of organization. At the same time, this framework suggests that without theories of various selection processes, the population perspective remains a nonpredictive vocabulary to describe the idiosyncratic evolution of organizations over time. The characterization of the resource dependence perspective as a discussion of a limited number of means for the development of stable resource relations reveals the limits of the perspective. Yet, the broad literature in the resource dependence tradition attests to the important role of centralized power structures in understanding organizations (Astley & Sachdeva, 1984). Finally, though efficiency theorists generally have thought of theirs

**Figure 1**  
**A Framework for Integrating Perspectives**



as a very general explanation of organizational development and survival, the present discussion suggests that alternative, noncontradictory theories also must be considered, within a selection context, to help explain long run organizational survival. Efficient transaction governance may be an important determinant of organizational survival. But it needs to be understood within the context of an organization's life cycle, strategy, structure, and luck—to name just a few alternative and complementary selection processes.

The proposed integrative framework may also have several empirical implications. For example, within this context, one would expect empirical work done in the resource dependence perspective to be consistent with efficiency analyses of hierarchical governance mechanisms, especially as the latter work focuses on bundles of transactions governance mechanisms within a single organization. Thus, many of the important antitrust implications of the efficiency and resource dependence perspectives should be consistent, though perhaps couched in somewhat different terms. Also, the recognition of alternative selection processes within a population perspective recognizes the importance of evaluating conditions under which selection processes are more or less

related to organizational survival. From the perspective of population theorists, this observation suggests that movement must be made beyond recognizing that environmental forces have an impact on organizational survival. Not only must alternative selection processes be isolated (beyond current structure and strategy discussions), but their relative impact on organizational survival must be addressed in an explicitly multiperspective context. Rather than studying organizations with a narrow strategy/structure paradigm, population theorists must take a broader, more integrative approach. Organizational survival may be a function of many selection processes. Thus a sufficiently broad theoretical approach must be developed to ensure an understanding of these processes.

For theorists working with particular selection processes, work needs to continue to elaborate their implications for organizational survival. The constraints and contingencies that affect an organization's survival need to be more carefully specified. This, again, will require a more multidimensional approach than generally has been the case in the organizational literature.

Finally, to complete the integration of the three perspectives, attention must be paid to the concept

of populations (McKelvey, 1982). The alternative selection processes identified in Figure 1 may differ, depending on the organization's population (Ulrich, 1982). For example, efficiency research is likely to generate quite different insights as a selection process when studied in competitive versus noncompetitive populations. Resource dependence, structure, and strategy also may have different impacts on selection and survival, depending on the organization's population.

## Conclusion

Organization theory is a discipline comprised of a large number of alternative perspectives on organizations. Three increasingly important perspectives are resource dependence, efficiency, and population. To understand alternative views in organizations, more fully, efforts need to be made to distinguish

clearly each view and to identify potential linking mechanisms among alternative perspectives. This paper proposes one such analysis. Resource dependence, efficiency, and population perspectives are distinguished on four dimensions: definition of organizational success, organizational concept, assumptions, and literatures. Three points of integration and a potential integrative framework have been introduced to identify the population perspective as a meta-theory in which alternative selection processes such as resource dependence and efficiency may exist. The integrative framework proposed in Figure 1 can be applied fruitfully to specify relationships among alternative perspectives of organizations. Although this review does not include all perspectives on organizations or offer a definitive integration, it and future similar efforts may begin to further organizational science.

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*David Ulrich is an Assistant Professor of Management in the Graduate School of Business Administration and Faculty Associate in the Institute of Social Research, University of Michigan.*

*Jay B. Barney is an Assistant Professor of Management in the Graduate School of Management, University of California, Los Angeles.*