Studying Deciding: An Exchange of Views Between Mintzberg and Waters, Pettigrew, and Butler

Preface

This exchange of views on the study of decisions and change in organizations was prompted by the question, 'Does decision get in the way?', which is asked in the opening piece by Henry Mintzberg and James Waters. They distrust the concept of decision itself; so does Richard Butler, but he tries to prevent any throwing out of the baby with the bathwater, arguing that existing theory can cope with this distrust. Andrew Pettigrew prefers to enlarge the scene so that the changing activity around the baby in the bath is not missed.

Sadly, Henry Mintzberg's colleague, Jim Waters, died suddenly before this exchange could be published. It has become a posthumous memorial to him and his work.

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Does Decision Get in the Way?

'Decision' is one of the most widely and firmly accepted concepts in the field of organization theory. With the ambiguities that surround so many of the field's other concepts — decentralization, participation, planning, etc. — there tends to be a sense of security about decision. Everyone knows that it exists and what it is. True there may be some overlap with concepts such as 'problem'; debates may have continued over the extent to which organizations really can make choices; and much ambiguity certainly remains about how organizations make decisions. But *that* they make decisions which determine their actions is universally accepted. Even so strident a group of critics of conventional views of decision-making as March and his colleagues nonetheless seem to accept as given the assumption that organizations do make 'choices' and 'decisions' (see, e.g., March and Olsen 1976: 10–13).

For years, we studied the process of strategy formation based on the definition of (realized) strategy as 'a pattern in a stream of decisions' (e.g., Mintzberg 1972, 1978; Mintzberg and Waters 1982). Eventually it occurred to us that we were in fact not studying streams of decisions at all, but of actions, because those are the traces actually left behind in organizations (e.g., stores opened in a supermarket chain, projects started in an

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architectural firm). Decisions simply proved much more difficult to track down. As Barnard noted many years ago:

'Not the least of the difficulties of appraising the executive functions or the relative merits of executives lies in the fact that there is little direct opportunity to observe the essential operations of decision. It is a perplexing fact that most executive decisions produce no direct evidence of themselves and that knowledge of them can only be derived from the cumulation of indirect evidence. They must largely be inferred from general results in which they are merely one factor, and from symptomatic indications of roundabout character.' (1970:192–193)

If a decision is really a *commitment* to action (see Mintzberg, Raisinghani, and Théorêt 1976), then the trace it leaves behind in an organization can range from a clear statement of intent — as in the recorded minute of a meeting — to nothing.

To proceed with our research, based on the definition we were using, we made the implicit assumption that decisions inevitably preceded actions, that if an organization *did* something, then it must have previously *decided* to do so. As Barnard suggested, it was just a matter of tracking the decision down, but, on reflection, another interpretation is possible: that decisions are difficult to uncover because sometimes they don't exist, in other words, that the relationship between decision and action can be far more tenuous than almost all the literature of organization theory suggests (Weick 1979, being one notable exception). To quote Nicolaides in his rarely cited dissertation on decision-making:

'It is evident on the basis of [my] analysis that an organizational decision is in reality a constellation or a galaxy of numerous individual decisions. Some of these decisions are "registered" in the book of the organizational activities, while others remain hidden in the inner sanctum of the human psyche. When and where a decision begins and ends is not always clear.' (1960:173)

Let us consider some of the ambiguities associated with the concept of decision.

For one thing, action can occur without commitment to act — as when a doctor strikes one's knee. Even the law recognizes such a phenomenon. Section 214 of the Canadian Criminal Code states that 'Murder is first degree when it is planned and deliberate,' otherwise it is second degree. In other words, a person can murder without deciding. In a collective context, Swanson (1971) has described 'commensal heteronomy,' as a 'set of legitimated procedures for collective action' in which problems are informally talked over and talked around 'until a kind of common view emerges [which becomes] the basis for action':

'In some societies, all small in population and localized in residence, the whole people, or the men, or all adults, will gather informally, once a day, to gossip, socialize, and debate . . . There is no agenda, no machinery for making decisions, and no apparatus for the people's acting jointly to carry out a collective task or to authorize some participants to represent or enforce the common view. There is an informal "leader" whose position depends upon the respect his abilities warrant.

He periodically summarizes the drift of the discussion and continues to do so over whatever period of hours, days, or weeks it continues; this until there is no substantial dissent from his report.' (pp. 613–614)

For those who think this is a far cry from the behaviour of formal organizations, consider the comment by an executive of the largest corporation in the world, remarkably similar to Swanson's words above:

'We use an iterative process to make a series of tentative decisions on the way we think the market will go. As we get more data we modify these continuously. It is often difficult to say who decided something and when — or even who originated a decision . . . I frequently don't know when a decision is made in General Motors. I don't remember being in a committee meeting when things came to a vote. Usually someone will simply summarize a developing position. Everyone else either nods or states his particular terms of consensus.' (Quoted in Quinn 1980:134)

But social systems can act even without censensus. The story circulated in Europe several years ago that the top management of another large automobile firm had hired consultants to find out who in their company had 'decided' to introduce a major new model. Perhaps someone really did decide, in a clandestine manner; the consultants would then track him or her down. But conceivably no one did. Perhaps someone merely sketched a new speculative design, someone else picked up on that to see what a mockup would look like, and, like a rolling snowball, these activities developed their own momentum: thousands of 'decisions' and actions later — concerning bumpers and assembly lines and advertising campaigns — a new model appeared. In effect, 'decisions', like strategies, can emerge inadvertently.

To further complicate matters, the environment can sometimes 'decide' too, as we noted in our study of an architectural firm (Mintzberg et al. 1988). It was prepared to do a variety of projects, taking whatever work came along that was up to its standards. As it happens, what came along in disproportionate numbers, for a time, were performing art centres. The firm had received considerable publicity for the first one it did, and so the world of such centres beat a path to its door. In effect, the firm ceded those decisions to its clients, who chose for it by asking it to do this particular kind of work. From the firm's point of view, its actions reflected its performance more than its decisions.

One fundamental problem with decision is the difficulty of identifying commitment in the collective context of organization. Must there always be a clear *point* as well as a clear *place* of commitment? What, in effect, is commitment? Associating it with some specific document may simplify the problem of identification, but sometimes at the price of distortion.

Consider the example of a company that announces the 'decision' to build a new factory. Tracing back, one might find the minute of a meeting in which the decision was 'made', which really means recorded. But perhaps the real commitment preceded that minute by six months, when the president visited the site and made up his mind. Here, then, commitment (i.e.,

decision) has to be traced back to someone's mind, indeed perhaps even to that person's subconscious, and that can become rather problematic.

Shift this into the more complex organizational setting where the commitment must be collective, and the problem of identifying decision magnifies enormously. Given that an action was taken, and that broad support preceded it, we must find out when and where consensus emerged — for that must be the real 'point' of decision. Unfortunately, it may not be a point at all, but a gradually unfolding and subtle process, as the comment of the General Motors executive suggested earlier, and as Snyder and Paige (1958) noted about the United States decision in 1950 'to resist aggression in Korea'. The stages they identified in their research 'do not reveal and cannot reveal when the individual decision-makers made up their minds. What is revealed is the time when group opinion coalesced and was made official . . .' (p. 369). In essence, commitment — and, by direct implication, decision — is an elusive concept, at the limit no more than some presumed psychological state, individual or collective.

Another associated problem with decision in an organizational context is that it reinforces an undifferentiated, mechanistic image of one or few central decison-makers, thereby diverting attention from the fact that organizational actions do not always correspond directly to leadership intentions. For example, in a study of a film-making agency (Mintzberg and McHugh 1985), the formal decision was made to fund a short documentary film. But the film inadvertently ran long, and so had to be marketed as a feature. The organization 'acted' though the management never 'decided'. There are other instances when a central decision is consciously subverted by others in the organization, so there is decision but no action. To explain this, conventional management theory falls back on the convenience of 'implementation'. The 'organization' (meaning its top management) decided, but failed to implement its choice, but might it not be equally correct — indeed descriptively more illuminating — to say that the 'organization' (meaning the true collectivity) never really did 'decide'?

A focus on decision can also mask the ways in which general commitments are reshaped, elaborated, and defined over time through complex processes within and without organizations. For example, a company may announce a decision to diversity its related businesses, but, over the years, based on the firms available for acquisition (and their prices) and the company's own successes and failures with those it does buy, the result comes to look like conglomerate diversification. In effect, the pattern (the many actions, forming the *realized* strategy) subverted the original commitment (the single decision at the outset), indeed, ironically in this instance, probably at the management's own hand. Thus, preoccupation with *the* decision runs the risk of imputing a direct relationship between the abstraction of mental intention at the individual or small group level and the concreteness of realized action at the organizational level. A great deal of real-world behaviour can get lost in between.

As a result of all this, in our research we were drawn into defining strategy as 'a pattern in a stream of actions,' instead of decisions (Mintzberg and Waters 1985). For us, realized strategy came to mean consistent behaviour, whether or not decisional. (Indeed, and fully in the spirit of our own research, which set out to study behaviour and work back to intention, our actions reflected this before we became aware of what was happening and then 'decided' to change our formal definition!) It made more sense for us to study streams of actions, and then go back and investigate the role of decision, *if any*, in determining these actions.

The implications of this go well beyond our research on strategy, however. The important general conclusion is that the concept of 'decision' may sometimes serve to confuse things. In essence, decision, like so many other concepts in organization theory, can sometimes turn out to be an artificial construct, one that in this case imputes commitment to action. We have seen that, for individuals as well as for organizations, commitment need not precede action, or, perhaps more commonly, the commitment that does precede action can be vague and confusing. This view does for decision what the thrust of our research does for strategy: just as the *pattern* in behaviour (strategy) may or may not have been intended, so too the *single* behaviour may or may not have involved prior commitment (decision).

Of course, it is in one context in particular, the traditional machine-like bureaucracy, that decision is assumed to precede action. Administrators are supposed to decide on all things, and then have those decisions formally authorized at a higher level before others implement them down below. Likewise, in a bureaucratic society, citizens are expected to decide formally and receive approval before acting, whether it be to enlarge a house (get a building permit), to engage in work (get put on the payroll), sometimes even to propagate the species ('Even the decision to bear a child is usually made by the [Chinese work] unit; the married women within the group decide whose turn it is to become pregnant' [Mathews and Mathews 1983:19]). A research community intent on operationalizing its concepts falls into the same trap, forcing itself, however inadvertently, to restrict its study to the context of machine bureaucracy, and likewise ends up bureaucratizing its own procedures, for the sake of 'scientific rigor'.

Not all organizations or all society, not even all research, is fully bureaucratic (yet), and so we must apply our concepts with care. 'Decision' can sometimes get in the way of understanding behaviour.

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