

# ISSA Proceedings 1998 - The Institutionalisation Of Argumentation Within Organisational Settings



## *1. Introduction*

Very little research has been undertaken which considers the organisational setting of argumentation. The research which does exist tends to emphasise agency at the expense of structure – it either takes the perspective of individual political power and influence (e.g. Jablin et al., 1987; Krackhardt, 1990; McPhee & Tompkins, 1985) or explores the language of micro-contexts using discourse analysis (e.g. Watson, 1995; Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Cooper et al., 1996), or provides a methodology for relating argumentation in organisational interaction to the measurement and representation of managerial cognition (Sillince, 1995). This paper aims at laying the foundation of an organisational theory of argumentation which provides more theoretical links than exist at present to organisational structure and its constraints on individual members' actions.

## *2. The setting*

The setting comprises prototypical collectivities of individual attributes (goal, role, action and artifact), situational atmosphere (friendliness, relaxedness, time for reflection) and organisational attributes (function, form and stage of change). These define where in the organisation the setting is located and determine whether or not any warrant is appropriate. The setting affects warrant appropriateness in several ways – for example, an organisation's function affects warrant appropriateness (e.g. trade unions use the *fairness* warrant), and also an individual's goal affects warrant appropriateness (e.g. a powerless listener will be more likely to be persuaded by the *fairness* warrant than a powerful one). The concept of setting is implicit in the question: "what types of arguments occur in what types of organizational social systems, and why this is so" (Willihnganz: 1994: 920). Setting provides one boundary condition constraining the explanatory power of any theory.

Rather similar to setting is the concept of argument field. Argumentation often occurs between individuals who share important interpretations and who occupy social, cultural or organisation spaces called “argument fields” (Willard, 1982; 1983; 1988) or “argument communities” (McKerrow, 1980). Such fields are social or organisational contexts in which particular discourse norms (Grice, 1975), common grounds, and shared values are taken for granted and in which specific premises, warrants, and claims are appropriate. Argument fields constrain behaviour, because people “surrender a measure of their freedom to the entailments of the field’s concepts and traditions” (Willard, 1983: 149). Argument fields within organisations enable specialists to reap the rewards of their expertise, so long as that expertise is organisationally relevant – part of the expert’s argument from *authority* derives from her role – “... factual claims imply institutionalized credibility: they cannot be made unless the speaker is seen as in some sense speaking for an expert domain” (Willard, 1989a: 73).

Cultural differences in argumentation behaviour have been observed – for example, American negotiators have been found to rely more on argument by *induction* (e.g. “X and Y occurred in a number of cases and X is true so Y is true”), Soviet negotiators more on argument by *deduction* (e.g. “X occurred, and X implies Y, so Y is true”), and French and Latin American negotiators rely more on argument by *analogy* (Glenn et al., 1970), whereas Middle Eastern cultures value the use of *hyperbole*, dramatic *non-verbal cues*, and elaborate *emotional expressions* during argumentation (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Chinese negotiators tend to ask many more questions and to interrupt one another more frequently than American negotiators (Adler et al., 1992). However, cultural similarities have also been discovered – for example, both Japanese and North Americans prefer positive compliance-gaining strategies, such as using *promises* over negative ones, such as using *threats* (Neuliep & Hazelton, 1985). It is in an attempt to transcend such potential sources of conflict that the idea has been introduced of the ‘ideal audience’ which rises above factional interests (Perelman, 1986: 8).

### 3. Institutionalisation of argumentation

Institutionalisation is the development of rules which specify and legitimise what should happen in particular circumstances, and involves typification, habituation, legitimation, sedimentation, and reification (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 65-146). In her cultural bias theory, Douglas (1982: 22) suggested that “the individual will fail to make any sense of his surroundings unless he can find some principles to

guide him to behave in sanctioned ways and be used for judging others and justifying himself to others." Argumentation is a context-based sensemaking process (Weick, 1995: 135-145) which varies according to (socially constructed) rules and (social) groups. These rules may exist in unofficial form and may oppose the official rules (Goffman, 1961). Bloor (1978: 259-260) has also made the point that reasons for assertions are selectively reinforced:

"characteristic forms of argument will emerge in a social setting, standing out by their frequency. This will give each social structure its dominant repertoire of explicit legitimations." Such repertoires solidify and therefore increasingly constrain social and organisational behaviour, and are used "for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena" which are "often organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 149).

Barley & Tolbert (1997: 98) suggest that institutionalisation varies according to the organisational setting: "Our contention is that institutions relevant to a particular setting will manifest themselves in behaviours characteristic of that setting and, hence, will appear as local variants of more general principles". We postulate that different groups and organisations have their own unique repertoires of institutionalised argument warrants. There is some evidence for this – for example, pilots' self-justifications emphasise group allegiance and de-emphasise external constraints, whereas scientists' self-justifications emphasise independence, individualism and external constraints (Bullis & Faules, 1991). The institutionalisation process involves encased learning of rules triggered by preconditions. These preconditions relate to individual attributes (goal, role, action and artifact), situational atmosphere (friendliness, relaxedness, and time for reflection) and organisational attributes (function, form and stage of change). There is a relationship between warrants and goals: "messages begin as purposes" (O'Keefe & Delia, 1982). The classical distinction between emotional and rational argumentation refers to goals, because emotional appeals attempt to persuade by referring to the desirability of goals, whereas rational appeals refer to evidence of the effectiveness of means (McGuire, 1969). Clark & Delia (1979) have provided a typology of communication goals which comprises instrumental goals (arguments to obtain something, to win compliance, and to change the other's mind), relational goals (argumentation used to change the relationship with the other), and identity goals (arguments to manage impressions of oneself and the other). Instrumental goals include information seeking and uncertainty

reduction (Berger, 1987), and advocacy, discovery and clarification. Relational goals include social acceptance, one's own well-being, and relational development (Graham et al., 1980) and unification of the group, relationship management, and establishing the group's standards of procedure. Identity goals include impression management and personal growth (Hample, 1985). People have been observed to check arguments against goals using their knowledge of the setting; if arguments fail to meet the goal the argument is suppressed (Hample & Dallinger, 1990) or modified (Flower & Hayes, 1984; Willard, 1979)

For example, when the goal is to justify change, then relevant warrants (among others) are *qualitative difference* (what is wanted is not just more of the same), *means-ends* (what is required and how to get it), and *maximise gain* (a tempting prize). When the goal is to motivate, some relevant warrants are *commitment* (why the listener should continue doing something) and *responsibility* (why someone should take responsibility). When the goal is to control, warrants become *means-ends* (how to control), *consequences* (of not controlling), and *responsibility* (who should do the controlling).

Another determinant of warrant appropriateness is individual work roles. For example, obstructors rely on *deterrence*, (obstruction will occur unless specific conditions are not met) coercors use *incompatibility* (of coercee's actions with a goal), *reciprocity* (an agreement has been broken), *deterrence* (resistance will be punished) and *consequences* (of the coercee's actions for the organisation), sponsors use *authority* (he who pays the piper calls the tune), *commitment* (they argue that they are playing the game long), and *promise* (less money now but more money later). The skillful choice of warrants is an important determinant of individual role performance.

The situation in which argumentation occurs affects the atmosphere (friendliness, relaxedness, time for reflection) . For example, an industrial dispute derives different meaning and arguments are ascribed different strength from being held in the chairman's office, the trade union office, or in an arbitrator's office. A merger debate is different in an expanding company (optimism, willingness to change) compared with in a declining company (in which there is pessimism and resistance to change).

We hypothesise that the function of the organisation also has an influences on the appropriateness of the warrants which are used. Figure 1 on the next page shows that this relationship between function and warrant appropriateness also involves

goals, actions, and artifacts.

Often these functions use incompatible warrants. For example, in one case a company began to insist that lab scientists justify themselves to production plants in terms of marketability of applications coming from the labs, rather than in terms of satisfying the scientists' curiosity (Riley et al., 1979: 879).

Organisations emphasise the use of warrants of *authority* (involving command and control and vertical communication), *part-whole* (the organisation's attributes derived from those of individual members) and *whole-part* (individual members' attributes derived from those of the organisation). Projects emphasise the use of warrants of *commitment* (in order to ensure project completion) In markets warrants of *hierarchy* (of price, cost, delivery date, brand visibility), and *minimisation of loss or gain* (by buying or selling) are emphasised. In networks *reciprocity*, (exchange of help and information between network members), *fairness* (equality of exchange) and *trust* (about confidentiality and longevity of relationships) are used.

So organisations comprise a variety of settings, in each of which a particular set of institutionalised warrants is most appropriate. This means that organisations contain a repertoire of such warrants, which we shall call an 'argumentation repertoire'.

#### 4. Sub-processes of institutionalisation

Typification is the identification of a setting with a type of warrant. Repetition in organisations with particular functions (e.g. trade unions) and stages of change (e.g. a pay dispute means a conception of a need to change) and containing similar individual goals (e.g. get a high pay deal) and roles (e.g. worker representatives) gives rise to typification of successful types of warrant (e.g. *fairness* of pay offer, *comparison* with other similar workers, *threat* of strike action). The typification process is reciprocal and thus involves rebuttals.

For example, employers use arguments attempting to show how workers have added nothing extra since the last pay deal with warrants of *qualitative difference* (e.g. "We want greater productivity but the workers don't want greater productivity so we don't reward them") or warrants of *dissociation* (e.g. "The new working arrangements are not a real increase in productivity").

Institutionalisation involves the use of a rule about types of action (e.g. "Only the Managing Director signs pay deals") and depends on historicity - (e.g. "The Managing Director has always signed such deals in the past") and control (e.g.

“The deal would not be honoured if the Managing Director was not involved”).

Habituation is the process of making a practice (use of a warrant in a certain setting) become taken-for-granted by repetition of a series of instances when a particular warrant is needed. For example, a series of meetings about pay between senior management and trades union representatives provides an opportunity for the use of arguments of *comparison* (between different grades of worker, between several trades unions, between the company and its competitors).

Legitimation is the fortifying of a warrant by a process of generalisation away from its relevance to one individual towards a wider audience and setting. Institutional theory suggests that a major purpose of organisations is to achieve legitimacy (Oliver, 1991). Legitimation enables the organisation to explain and justify actions by selective use of warrants. We hypothesise that this involves two processes, dignification and means-adaptation.

1. Dignification involves the representation of base actions as if they were noble. A non-compliant social worker wishing to give an over-generous handout is confronted with arguments like “That’s not how it’s done around here” (the simplest form of objection to her actions), “You have to be cruel to be kind” (a maxim), “If you are over-generous it’ll make them more dependent” (a theory), or “Remember to keep your distance” (an ideal). These are located on a rising scale of justifications to legitimate the social worker not being over-generous. The justifications dignify by avoiding reference to the penny-pinching motive and are used to maintain the semblance of an attachment to mainstream “caring” professional goals.

2. Means-adaptation involves the adapting of ends to means by a process of ‘reverse adaptation’ or “adjustment of human ends to match the character of the available means” (Winner, 1977: 229). Arguments redefine the ends to more closely follow from the available means. Depoe (1989) has shown that this process occurred in the public representation of the space shuttle program by two American presidents, and has suggested that this stance severely limited the range of policy options available.

Sedimentation of argumentation is the writing down, publicising, and formalising of warrants. This occurs as minutes of meetings (reasons for decisions), policies (justifications for ends and means), and memos (excuses for non-compliance, reasons for instructions or criticism). Sedimentation causes warrants to become

stable, recognisable and memorable and ensures continuity of reasoning and enables the organisation to initiate new members more easily. This suggests that organisations dealing with cases that stretch back over a number of years (insurance, litigation, trading agreements) may be more constrained by this sedimentation process than organisations without such cases. Sedimentation does not involve any conscious reasoning and so may enable several incompatible warrants to coexist without people noticing enough to do anything about it. In this way the sedimentation process may lead to a new definition (contained within discourse) overlaying but not completely replacing the old one (Cooper et al., 1996) in the same way that disagreement can be manifested in the existence within an organisation of two incompatible sensemaking discourses (Watson, 1995: 816) or of a set of contradictions (Hatch, 1997).

Reification is the treating of argumentation as if it were objective and unchallengeable. Reification affects argumentation by means of implicitisation or signification.

Implicit argumentation is often more persuasive than explicit argumentation (Potter & Wetherell, 1992: 33; Talmage, 1994; Ilatova, 1994). Premises or claims may be suppressed. Explicit argumentation (where premise, warrant, and claim are all present) is a 'front' or 'surface' behaviour concerned with rational reasoning processes, is 'respectable' (Goffman, 1961) and hence can be used with large and unpredictable audiences, (organisation-wide, or external to the organisation) although because it seeks to satisfy everybody it is ambiguous and because it uses unnatural, logical forms it is difficult to understand. Implicit argumentation occurs in narrative (e.g. metaphors in advertising), symbolic action (e.g. firing somebody, closing a plant) or as a continuation of earlier explicit argumentation. It is a 'back' or 'deep' behaviour concerned with irrational or informal processes, is 'unrespectable' (Goffman, 1961) and hence it is useful with small and selected cliques, or with audiences which share an extended past history and understand why an argument is being made. Because implicit argumentation uses powerful 'insider' imagery or well-known evidence it is easily understandable. Warrants may be made implicit by means of jokes and irony, *reductio ad absurdum*, (The unspoken argument is - "Don't do X because it implies Y which is absurd"), parables and narrative (using arguments by *example*, *analogy* and *generalisation*) (Bohrer, 1994).

Signification involves establishing the warrant within the organisational sign

system of warrants and thus rendering it 'implicit' by giving it a taken-for-granted character. We postulate two mechanisms for the signification of argumentation - writing and artifacts. Writing makes a warrant official, durable, and widely available. It is illustrated by the impersonal, formal, written, public statement: "When small projects repeatedly generate questions or problems then the issues they raise should be discussed in committee". Artifacts are imageable, memorable and visible externalisations of a warrant by means of some tangible artifact (document, regular meeting, decision, deadline, budget) which uses the warrant to generate recommendations. It is illustrated by the creation of a subcommittee to look at problems, questions and issues of small projects.

### *5. The institutionalisation process*

Barley & Tolbert (1997) have suggested a detailed research method for investigating the institutionalisation process, and this is appropriate for application to argumentation, because of the intimate connection between institutions and arguments -within an organisation institutions become "a set of procedures for argumentation and interpretation" (Cohen et al., 1972: 25). At the most general level, institutionalisation is relevant to the need for reward structures which reinforce and encourage argumentation and which protect disputing individuals from punishment (Hynes, 1990: 872).

Institutionalised warrants exist as objective, widely available rules, and tell the individual how to argue (e.g. "You get more time for your project by saying it is an export job"), perhaps in the form of a theory (e.g. "The company is small and so you shouldn't ask for large resources"), or a symbolic universe (e.g. "Originality is what we believe in") or a positional rule (e.g. "People like us don't behave like that" - Bernstein, 1972: 486). They are objectivised, existing outside of the individual, often created before the individual arrived in the organisation. Their persuasive strength largely depends on their linkage to beliefs which are salient and widely held within the organisation (Montgomery & Oliver, 1991: 652).

Barley & Tolbert (1997: 102-103) suggest a four stage process model of institutionalisation. We will extend and apply their model to argumentation. The four stages are:

(1) Encoding is the discovery by an organisation member herself or by being informed by others about a warrant's appropriateness in a particular setting. The encoding process involves typification (identification of particular settings where particular warrants are appropriate). We postulate the existence of two



mechanisms for encoding argumentation. Being informed is the explicit instruction of an organisation member by a colleague about the appropriateness of a particular warrant to a particular setting. It is illustrated by the spoken rhetorical question: "You mean we don't need to take this to Finance Committee?" where the rule is "This is a minor financial matter and so does not need committee approval". Being informed can come about reciprocally - a member may learn a warrant by having it used against her and having to produce a counter argument to it. Lone discovery is the implicit realisation by an organisation member about the appropriateness of a particular warrant to a particular setting. It is illustrated by the spoken assertion: "I feel that minor matters don't need committee approval".

(2) Enactment is the use of a sedimented and legitimated warrant often in a habituated way without too much conscious thought about its appropriateness to its setting. We postulate four mechanisms for the enactment of argumentation. Habituation is the routinisation of a warrant by repeated, persuasive application in appropriate settings. It is illustrated by the statement: "Just mention the American market opportunities again and they'll be eating out of your hand". Sedimentation renders a warrant unchangeable by making it irreversible (as in a written instruction) or by making it non-discussable (as when it is taken for granted). Irreversible sedimentation is making a warrant irrevocable by a formal, written, public statement and is illustrated by: "Projects with budgets larger than \$10,000 should get committee approval unless they have already been authorised by a partner". Non-discussable sedimentation is making a warrant non-discussable by acting as though it were taken-for-granted and is illustrated by the spoken, private justification: "I never bother the committee with minor matters". Legitimation is illustrated by the formal, written, public statement: "Committee scrutiny is essential for proper monitoring of projects. However, too much discussion of small projects would waste the committee's time and would slow up decisions that often have to be made immediately".

(3) Replication involves revision of warrants to enable them to flexibly adapt to changes in settings. We postulate the existence of a mechanism for the replication of argumentation. Revision is the particularistic identification of counter examples which provide a criticism of a currently used warrant, and derives its force from the very specific reference to a particular person and experience of a particular setting. It is illustrated by the first person, spoken statement: "I noticed similar problems with three small projects I have been supervising and so I have brought them to the committee for discussion".

(4) Externalisation or reification involves the disassociation of patterns with particular actors and particular historical settings and making the warrant become taken-for-granted by means of implicitisation (omission of warrant from an argument), or signification (externalisation by means of signs in the form of writing or artifacts).

Organisational function	Goal	Strategic action	Type of warrant	Examples of warrant	Proto-typical artifact
Sales promotion	Maximize volume	Gift-giving	quantitative efficiency	"We should start a campaign of a thousand more sales"	Sales promotion sheet
Welfare	Maximize welfare payments	Make risk payment	virtuous trust	"We cannot give additional amounts because we are cash-strapped"	Individually tailored telephone calls
Insurance	Maximize risk	Self-insure-theater	consequence	"Building on a single day may be the risk of not developing other things in theater"	Insurance report
			contrast	"Ideal of conditions will never allow us to be average"	Arrested table
			reference-free	"We should spend the same way we consumed"	Contingency plan
Finance	Maximize short-term gain	Investment	member-part/ member-free	"It is too late to abandon the project"	Profit & loss statements
Project management	Long-term example	Plan	commitment	"We will make it if you don't let us down"	Completion date
Tradition	Reproduce tradition	Preserve tradition	placeness	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	
		Adapt	distance	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	
			comparison	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	Wage differential
			reciprocity	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	Wage comparison
Accommodation	Predictability & continuity	White noise	authority	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	Big office
			provision	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	Decorative phase
		Set common budget	distance	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	Practicalization
Research	Originality	Invention	example	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	Text
			quantitative efficiency or value	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	
Commercial litigation	Protect assets	Go to court	distance	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	Just price public & domestic
Religion	Evangelize	Charismatic action	reciprocity	"The old style of dress is still in vogue"	Exorcism

Figure 1. Organisational function and warrant appropriateness.

Figure 1 Organisational function and warrant appropriateness.

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Organizational function	Goal	Prototypical action	Type of warrant	Example of warrant	Proto-typical artifact
Market positioning	Competitive advantage	Qualitative difference	association	"Plastic surgeons are not real Christians"	Marketing strategy document
			association	"The product is new, better, cheaper, and creates an entirely new market"	
			scenario	"The company is not a real market leader"	
			ontology	"The market will shake rapidly" "The enemy have the flow on their side"	

Figure 1 (continued) Organizational function and warrant appropriateness.

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