

# Understanding public organisations: collective intentionality as cooperation

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## **Abstract**

*This paper introduces the concept of collective intentionality and shows its relevance when we seek to understand public management. Social ontology – particularly its leading concept, collective intentionality – provides critical insights into public organisations. The paper sets out some of the epistemological limitations of cultural theories and takes as its example of these the group-grid theory of Douglas and Hood. It then draws upon Brentano, Husserl and Searle to show the ontological character of public management. Modern public institutions – such as advisory organisations and service delivery agencies, including schools and universities – are expressions of human collective intentionality. The central concept within these institutions, as a phenomenology reveals, is cooperation. Public institutions are natural structures that emerge from our evolutionary ancestry as cooperative animals and enduringly display all the features of that ancestry.*

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## **Introduction**

Social ontology provides an alternative theory to those in common use when we seek to understand public institutions. We will understand the phenomena of public institutions when we can (1) give an integrated and coherent account of how people can work together to pursue a common goal, and (2) relate this ability of people to the functioning of public institutions. Much of this paper deals with the theory that takes us towards (1). This theory is an intellectual tradition which from the mid-nineteenth century to the present moves from Brentano, to Husserl, to Searle. Others are involved but the paper focuses on those theorists. The move from (1) into (2) depends on Searle's insights which this paper develops. In the language of social ontology, (1) is concerned with the foundation of human collective intentionality and (2) addresses the use of this concept in explanations of public institutions. It is of course necessary to say more about what the expression "public institutions" means in this project.

What emerges is a theory of cooperation. Social ontology – in marked contrast with the epistemology of cultural theories – is a theory of human interdependence, willingness and optimism. The philosophers in another age held the ideas that 'Man is a political animal' (Aristotle in *Politics, I*) and 'Man is a social animal' (Baruch Spinoza in *Ethics, IV*, proposition 35) and the significant truth that they capture appears here metamorphosed into a modern theory of human cooperation and institution building.

## **Cultural theories**

Public service managers and professional officers are familiar with explanations about their institutional situation that we may group under the broad heading "cultural theories". Theorists

continue to discuss cultural theories in various guises as explanations of public management (Dixon-Woods & Bosk, 2011; Hood, 2011; Huxham & Hibbert, 2011; Margetts, 2011; Wilson, 2011). The intention of such theories is usually to explain the dynamics of public organisations with a view to suggesting how to improve management practice. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a universally credible variant of the cultural paradigm. Why are such promising theories not adequate? It is because of confusion about the nature of public management, or as continental philosophers might say, we fail to grasp the foundational mode of being or existence involved. There is uncertainty about what it is that we seek to explain. Without an adequate account of what it is that we wish to understand, we are unlikely to produce an enduring account of dynamic public management. It is the purpose of an ontological theory to resolve such uncertainty and thereby indicate precisely our topic of enquiry. An example will enable us to explore these strong claims about the difficulties within cultural theories.

One cultural account of public management which has captured an audience is that of Christopher Hood. He takes an historical stance and deploys the grid-group cultural theory of the anthropologist Mary Douglas (Douglas, 1982, 1986; Hood, 1998). The pattern of thought Hood establishes continues into his analysis of historical expressions of public management, including most notably “New Public Management” (Hood, 1991). It is opportune to consider the foundation of Hood’s thesis as New Public Management remains current and controversial in both the practice and the theory of public administration (Hood, 1991; Lodge & Gill, 2011).

Hood sets out seven propositions that together constitute a cultural theory of public management. His propositions include:

1. Grid/group cultural theory captures much of the variety in current and historical debates about how to organize in government and public services, because it offers a broad framework for analysis which is capable of incorporating much of what is already known about organisational variety;
2. Application of a cultural-theory framework can illuminate many of the central analytic questions in public management...;
3. If we look across time and space, we can identify ideas about how to organize government and public services that correspond to each of the four polar categories contained in cultural theory;
4. No one of those recipes for good organisation has clear claim to be considered more ‘modern’ than any of the others and each has in-built weaknesses...;
5. Variation in ideas about how to organise in government is not likely to disappear...;
6. The dimensions identified by cultural theory enable analysis of organisational variety to be pursued at a range of levels, to explore variants and hybrids as well as broad-gauge polar forms;
7. The understanding of cultural and organizational variety, within a historical perspective, merits a central place in the study of public management ... (Hood, 1998, pp. 6-7)

Hood has an enduring concern with the classic and recurring ideas about public management. He commends this theory to us because it may assist with the analysis of the collapse and failure in public services, “the analysis” of control and regulation, and the analysis of how public management ideas become persuasive (Hood, 1998, p. 6). His expression ‘the analysis’ appears in the context to refer to our *understanding* or insights, as opposed to the process of

analysis. This view gains support from his use of the word “understanding” in his list of propositions (7 above). There is herein some contrast to the object of the New Public Management theory (for example) itself, which is about “how to organize in government and public services” (1) and which is a “recipe(s)” (4). The purpose of the theory at issue is normative, the debate is about “how to” organise as opposed to the mere *description* of how things are organised. The reference to “ideas” (3) and the placement of ideas into a “broad frame-work” (1) indicates the mental character of cultural theory and this continues when the objects that associate with these ideas are brought together in “categories” (3) and “forms” (6). The ideas refer to whatever is organised in government and public services, and we understand these to be the many physical supports and benefits that governments provide to the citizens and with regard to these there is stress on historical (as in “time and space”, 3) “variety” (7). As indicated earlier, this is all founded on the group-grid theory which Douglas articulates. What is its provenance?

Douglas is frank and explicit about the derivation of her grid-group theory. The path she treads was pioneered by Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture* (1934). In that “influential” book:

with minimal justification, she [Benedict] holistically insisted upon the internal consistency of a culture and identified three types: Appollonian (the equilibrium-loving, moderate Zuni), Dionysiac (the ecstatic, immoderate, sensationalist Kwakiutl), and the anxiety-ridden, secretive, paranoiac Dobuans. (Douglas, 1982, p. 185)

Benedict apparently does not offer much justification for her categories. In contrast, Douglas divides social experience into social context and cosmology and proceeds to “get a full array of possible social structures”. As she says:

A start for this will be to construct (yes, I mean construct, fabricate, think up, invent) two dimensions. ... I use ‘grid’ for a dimension of individuation, and ‘group’ for a dimension of social incorporation. (Douglas, 1982, p. 190).

This becomes the foundation for an influential theory of organisational culture based on the notion of “sociality”. According to its proponents, people take on roles or attitudes in accordance with their inclinations on the dimensions of Group (beliefs about the bonds between people) and Grid (beliefs about how people take on roles in groups). Thus, there are four ways that we may understand public management: the hierarchical way, the individualistic way, the egalitarian way and the fatalist way. In the main, we appreciate these as descriptions of the way things are for individuals in organisations, and are not normative or prescriptive. Hood (1998) describes these with examples and later suggests that they might be elaborated by the addition of two hybrid types or style of public management organisations.

To examine grid-group theory further, and thus Hood’s theory of public organisations, we need to reflect on its epistemological foundations. Already, in the brief analysis of Hood’s seven propositions, attention has been drawn to critical words that reveal their epistemological provenance. In their practical work, both Douglas and Hood look at phenomena, classify and seek relationships. What they see and the words they select to describe that which they observe are critical. When we read words such as “categories” and “ideas”, and when we read that the purpose of the theory is to explain what public management, the paradigm of the social sciences looms. The approach to the development of the Douglas/Hood social theory is characteristic of that of modern science, some essential aspects of which – such as the role of laws, the importance of accurate observation and measurement – originate with Galileo and Newton. The

technique of enquiry is a social science version of the methods of the physical science. One aspect of this, which Douglas highlights, is the narrowing or confining of the phenomena under study. Is it not remarkable that just two dimensions are of paramount importance in such complex situations as those which we encounter in public management? Both Douglas and Hood acknowledge the limitations of their theory, but proceed anyway on the basis that their innovative interpretation is an improvement on previous work. In this they are correct.

With regard to the Douglas/Hood objects of enquiry there is already much theory and we have an account of their nature. Their objects of enquiry (including the non-physical objects) feature in Aristotle's classification of what there *is* that we might enjoy or investigate. In *Categories*, Aristotle begins with a discussion of the relationship between words and things, "If things have only a name in common, and the account of the essence corresponding to the name is different for each, they are called harmonious" (Catg. 1a1, Aristotle, 1995, p. 1). He identifies ten categories of things and they are substantially the same categories to which grid-group theorists' appeal. The leading category is Substance of which there are primary substances and secondary substances that are groups or kinds of things (Catg.1 1b25-2a10, Aristotle, 1995, pp. 3-5). One important test of what is primary and what is secondary is found in substance not involving degrees: a man is a single, unitary whole; whilst men are groups that may contain any number of units. 'Substance' is the nature (form of being or existence) of the many specific examples that Hood offers. Whenever he talks about a particular concrete physical structure – he might point to a building or a public authority – he draws upon Aristotle's first categorisation of what may be present. When he talks about the intellectual discipline of public organisation, he has brought together some collective of these primary items and established a secondary substance. Someone might suggest the public authority is itself to be taken as a collective noun in the sense that it is composed of people and buildings and the services it provides. In such examples it is useful to ask if this, or any, public authority might exist if it does not actually provide public goods or services. Further, when Hood talks of the analytic question of public management, many of them relate to the discernment of common features of organisations, or in Aristotle's terms, he seeks properties.

Cultural theory, as in the Douglas-Hood example, prominently displays two of the characteristics that Heidegger associates with modern science. The first is that the theory "sets itself upon the real" (Heidegger, 1977b, p. 167). Douglas and Hood claim they are describing things they can see and which public officials observe. Heidegger's second characteristic – the forced disclosure of nature – need not concern us here. The third characteristic is Heidegger's observation that science will forever generate new objects of enquiry and thus new sub-disciplines. As he says about the way science has to generate new possibilities of procedure (methodological expansion is one part of the "third characteristic"): "This having-to-adapt-itself to its own results as the ways and means of advancing methodology is the essence of research's character as an ongoing activity" (Heidegger, 1977a, p. 124). This is referred to in several places in the present paper and is characteristic of explanations made by way of reductionism.

### **The ontological alternative**

In broad terms, we find alternatives to cultural theories of institutions (of which Hood work is an important example) in the theory of social ontology. Modern ontological theories owe much to the pioneering work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. There are three propositions about public management that an ontological theory of public management takes seriously:

1. The task is to understand public management, not to explain it.
2. Public management appears within the context of human beings organising themselves.
3. Our understanding of public management must be integral to our understanding of both the context and human beings.

These propositions together assert that we seek a holistic understanding of a situated human phenomenon. An example will suffice to show how this relates to Hood's theory. Hood identifies three "Administrative Reform Ages" and his discussion is around the extent to which particular administrations have moved through these "ages". The ages are junctures of development, quite recent, which he constructs from many observations, discussions, and research. The ages are Progressive Public Administration (which shows through procedural controls and rules, and a belief in the distinctiveness of public services), New Public Management (which shows is disaggregation, competition, the use of incentives, explicit contracts with performance standards, and output controls), and Post-New Public Management (which shows in attempts to overcome the perceived failures of NPM and blends the characteristics of PPA and NPM). Of course, in individual practical cases we do not find public management falling into tidy categories (Hood never claims they do), nevertheless this the inherent nature of the proposed structure of concepts which makes sense to us and facilitates discussions.

What, we may ask, is public administration that it can have ages and admit to descriptions in this way? This question is distinctly Heideggerian – it seeks the grounding of phenomenon. It admits that the various human activities – establishing contracts, restructuring to disaggregate, following rules, competing – are unified into an understanding that we hold about the nature of public administration. Our understanding of an individual human beings engagement in a specific activity (say, writing a contract, or ordering goods) must be integral to our understanding of the organisation's activity (contracting, the need for supplies), which in turn must be integral to our understanding of the organisation's involvement in a societal context (as an organisation operating in a city), and indeed the nature of that societal context (our city is a part of a country and we have complex inter- and intra-relationships). This is a distinctively "ontological" way of looking at public management and it contrasts with all accounts that seek to explain aspects of public management by discerning laws. It is a way which accords with phenomenologists such as Husserl, Heidegger and Searle. Accounts of public management that seek to explain phenomena though laws do so by restricting the phenomena in order to make it explainable. (Heidegger's first characteristic of modern science as mentioned above is relevant here.) Douglas, subsequent to the work which was particularly relevant to Hood, explores the nature of theories about institutions and concludes that a "theory of institutions that will amend the current un-sociological view of human cognition is needed, and a cognitive theory to supplement the weakness of institutional analysis is needed as well" (Douglas, 1986, p. ix). In this conclusion she is consistent with the thesis of the present paper.

The concept of intentionality arises from an astute discernment: much that you "know in your mind" is about something identifiable beyond your thought. Your thoughts aim at something. In the words of the theorist who is central to this paper, "Intentionality is that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects

and states of affairs in the world”(Searle, 1983, p. 1). Thus, some conscious states are intentional and the concept applies equally to animals as to human beings.

Searle’s project on collective intentionality began as a sequel to his technical book *Intentionality*. In Searle (1990) he set out his theory of collective intentionality and provided some cautious suggestions about its applicability in relation to institutions. In subsequent works he develops the project (Searle, 1995, 2007, 2010). Collective intentionality is one of several concepts in the theory which Searle named as “social ontology”. The concepts primarily are collective intentionality, status functions, deontic powers and free will. In Searle’s view the subject social ontology comes from a need, which is in our own lives and in philosophy, to reconcile the objective scientific world of objects, physical causation, brute facts and hard technology, with our lived world of subjectivity, human volition, emotions, social facts, and higher human purposes. The present paper has a more modest purpose, which is to gain insight into public institutions on which we depend and within which many of us work.

As you might expect, ‘intentionality’ has a tortuous history. A concept of intentionality is to be found in Plato, Aristotle’s books on the Soul, and the writings of Scholastics such as Aquinas, and today ‘intentionality’ occupies central role in modern phenomenology (Brentano, 1995, p. 67; Mohanty, 2006, p. 69). Brentano’s lectures on psychology were a far-reaching influence on those who sought to understand human understanding as the foundation of all the disciplines of humankind. In *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* 1874, when he considers the distinction between mental and physical phenomena, he says:

Every mental phenomenon is characterised by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) in-existence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction upon an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as an object within itself; although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on. (Brentano, 1995, p. 68)

The seminal notions in this statement for our purposes are *in-existence* (which we might loosely call “idea” or “thought” although it is a controversial concept and more properly translates to “intentional in-existence”), *direction* (of the object to its in-existence), *object* (which does not refer just to physical objects to but all that is experienced, including pains, fears, joy, money, institutions, and managers).

Although Husserl’s concept of intentionality develops through several texts the description given here takes his 1913 account in *Ideas I* as definitive (Particularly sections 87-90, Husserl, 1999). Husserl’s broad purpose is to develop a theory about the human structure of meaning and the world in which meaning occurs. Intentionality is a central concept in his project and it is important to realise that the key concepts in this brief introduction relate to a wider picture. A significant step in the development of Husserl’s theory is the move from “a theory of objects” (which means a theory of categories of what exists, similar in intention to that proposed by Aristotle) to “formal ontology” (the most inclusive use of this term makes it equivalent to “pure” or “transcendental” ontology/phenomenology). Some suggest that Husserl derives his transcendentalism from a consideration of the categories of things that exist, to some extent because of the order in which he wrote texts (B. Smith & Smith, 1995, pp. 138-187; Chapter 4, D. W. Smith, 2007). Be this as it may, the approach taken is to focus on the

phenomenology of the individual human being – an organic creature characterised by its unique sense-making or understanding. Basic realism (there are various types of objects in a real world each distinguished by its inherence of a distinctive essence) is inherent in Husserl's theory: Husserl is (most consistently) an ontological realist.

What features of Husserl's concept are most relevant in the discernment of organisations, institutions, and management initiatives? One aspect of the concept of 'intentionality' which endures and is prominent from Husserl to Searle is the involvement of our physical bodies in human existence and intentionality. As Husserl says:

The Body is in the first place, the medium of all perception; it is the organ of perception and is necessarily involved in all perception. In seeing the eyes are directed upon the seen and run over its edges, surfaces, etc. When it touches objects, the hand slides over them. Moving myself, I bring my ear closer in order to hear. Perceptual apprehension presupposes sensation-contents, which play their necessary role for the constitution of the schemata and so, for the constitution of the appearance of the real things themselves. (*Ideas II*, section 18, Husserl, 1999, p. 163)

Another strength that Searle derives (in-part at least) from Husserl is dependence on phenomenological descriptions. These are our *first-person* descriptions of that which we experience in consciousness and contrast with scientific or interpretive descriptions. Examples of phenomenological descriptions are: I believe George wrote the strategic plan. I hear the fire alarm and believe it is a false alarm. I want to be promoted by two salary increments. I can imagine re-structuring again.

Each of these sentences describes a current personal experience of desire, intention, hope, action or observation. You discern something of the 'intentionality' at work when you ask what conditions will satisfy as a response. In some examples you discern the intentionality in each when you ask what must occur to make the statement to be true. My belief about George is true if he was fired and is exiting the building. My interpretation of the fire alarm is correct if there is no fire. If I buy the car, vote to close the workshop and implement the strategic plan, these actions satisfy the Husserlian criteria for intentionality.

A third aspect of Husserl which Searle develops involves their recognition of the organic nature of the human being and thus the relevance of animals as examples of phenomena. The progenitors of our institutions and organisational structures are apparent in the noble campaigns of animal collectives. Human beings are not the only purposeful creatures that work together towards communal goals. When wolves hunt in packs they cooperate to pursue a common objective. When bees swarm they move as a community and subordinate the individual. When they care for their young many animals cooperate and the genders may have different assigned tasks. In such examples the purpose is a community purpose from which individuals benefit, although individuals are at risk in such institutions and sometimes lost. It is to such examples that we must turn when we seek to discern the foundations of the institutions in which we work and which have such a pervasive influence on our human lives.

To what extent are these phenomena the result of deliberations by conscious and rational individuals? They are expressions of instinct, the result of minds at work but not the outcome of deliberative reflection in the calculative sense. We might speculate by analogy to ourselves and thus they appear to be examples of transparent coping (to use the expression once favoured by Dreyfus). The animal knows what to do but does not mentally step-by-step work out how to act

in each situation. Learning the behaviour may involve learning from others and we may impute the distant origins of apprenticeship schemes.

Husserl made several claims about animals and saw value in considering them to gain insight into human consciousness. His famous *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1927 article begins with an account to of the limitations of pure psychology and relates the human and the animal:

Modern psychology is the science dealing with the “psychical” in the concrete context of spaitiotemporal realities, being in some way so to speak what occurs in nature as egoical, with all that inseparably belongs to it as psychic processes like experiencing, thinking, feeling, willing as capacity, and as *habitus*. Experience presents the psychical as merely a stratum of human and animal being. (Husserl, 1999, pp. 322-323)

Following this description of the natural sciences and the final sentence that indicates their limitation, he concludes that anthropology and zoology are the appropriate disciplines for the study of animals in their *concrete context*, and continues:

By contrast, however, if the psychic aspect of the animal world is to become the topic of investigation, the first thing we have to ask is how far, in parallel with the pure science of nature, a pure psychology is possible. (Husserl, 1999, p. 323)

He argues that the foundational study (ontology) of the animal world includes the human animal and that the scientific disciplines (in the modern sense) are integral to unity of enquiry. It follows that when we seek a complete understanding of the human engagement in organisations, organisational structures, and the functioning of institutions, we should require an integrated account, a single ontology that addresses the diversity we encounter. Grid-group theory in its nature is a scientific theory (psychology, sociology or anthropology) about an aspect of our enquiries. It must take its place within the ontological framework, but it cannot be adequate as an account of the domain of human institutional life.

The starting point in the quest for insights into institutional life is the body of the primordial animal which now reflects in ourselves. It is “primordial originariness” which provides us with insights into the ontological situation of the animate organism (Husserl, 1999, p. 148). From that point Husserl proposes a theory of ego and alter ego, in which the alter ego may be shared with another (human being). This shared overlay constitutes as a “mutual transfer of sense” (Husserl, 1999, p. 148):

This overlaying can bring a total or a partial coincidence, which in any particular instance has its degree, the limiting sense being that of complete “likeness.” As the result of this overlaying, there take place in the paired data a mutual transfer of sense that is to say: an apperception of each according to the sense of the other, so far as moments of sense actualized in what is experienced do not annul this transfer, with the consciousness of “different.”

There is a part of the self which is mutual with others – an alter ego which under certain circumstances we share. Although Husserl’s primary concern is the associate constitutive component of my experience of someone else, his insights are the foundation of the concept of collective intentionality. This is because that which constitutes as a mutual transfer of sense is the animals, hopes, desires, purposes, and wishes.

## Conclusion

In our quest to understand public management we must involve ourselves with new theories and initiatives that occur outside the discipline of public management. Insights into public management occur when we learn from the work of others. The cultural theories of public management are shown to be questionable when we consider the epistemological and ontological foundation of one example, namely grid-group theory. Grid-group theory has the hallmarks of modern science: it begins by restricting and defining the objects of study; it seeks to measure relationships between only those objects; and it seeks to elaborate the relationships as laws that function as explanations or facilitate predictions. Yet the vast majority of enquires into public management have this positivist complexion. They assume a framework of categories which (as the present paper shows) were understood by Aristotle and which confine our thinking about public management. Practitioners in public management know that their involvement with institutions is an integral part of their living, which is to say at home and at work. They know that problems do not always involve understandable causal relationship, indeed it is the unexpected that made many jobs both interesting and worthwhile. Thus, they do not find positivist theories contribute greatly to the resolution of dynamic and complex situations they confront every day.

John Searle's ontological theory of society-institutions-organisations-groups-individuals breaks with the scientific paradigm. His ontological account of our human situation, including the situation of public managers, holds potential for those who seek a more profound understanding of their experience. For public sector managers this theory is a bridge between two things they already understand: their own biological/animal origins, and, the reality of work in public sector management. That which is distinctive about human beings is their inclination to create institutional facts, to make things what they are by all agreeing that this is what they are: this is a contract and not just a piece of paper because we all agree it is a contract; the manager has certain powers because we all agree the manager has certain powers and we are complicit in the exercise of those powers.

To appreciate Searle's theory in itself we need to consider its foundational concepts in the work of Edmund Husserl. The present paper embarks upon that project. Husserl establishes *intentionality* and Searle establishes *collective intentionality*. The issues within the concept of 'intentionality' remain in the concept of 'collective intentionality'. One profound challenge to the Husserl/Searle notion of intentionality is that begun by Heidegger and continued by Dreyfus (Dreyfus & Hall, 1982; Wakefield & Dreyfus, 1991). There is controversy amongst academics about Searle's theory but this should not deter those who wish to use social ontology in a bid to understand public management. The theory is a significant advance on constructivist and positivist accounts such as the grid/group theory advanced by Douglas and Hood.

What is spectacular in social ontology is the privilege it accords to cooperation. Many public sector managers, in the author's experience at least, believe that cooperation between colleagues is essential for the effective delivery of public services. It is diversity rather than conformity which distinguishes the situations that public sector managers face daily and in addressing diversity and novelty they inevitably require the cooperation of others. Practical requirements, resource constraints and personnel are forever in flux, even in what appear to be apparently simple situations. Cultural theories, betraying their positivist foundation, frequently seek to address new circumstances or requirements by adding categories of relevance. The

effect of this is that the theory itself expands, fragments, produces new lines of enquiry and ultimately new sub-disciplines of public management. We saw earlier how Douglas invents categories and Hood also in his major work adds two categories to make the grid/group model accord more with reality. In contrast, the leading concepts in social ontology (particularly collective intentionality) facilitate a unified theory of public management. That theory of public management is an integrated account of human life which is described holistically to embrace society, public policy and institutions. Those who want to understand their own involvement in public management should pursue social ontology.

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