Social Dilemmas

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http://www.public.iastate.edu/~soc.134

Social dilemmas
✓ Social dilemma: potential for a society’s long-term ruin because of individuals’ tendency to pursue their own short-term interests (p. 290)
✓ Tragedy of the commons: situation in which people acting individually and in their own self interest use up commonly available (but limited) resources, creating disaster for the entire community (p. 291)
✓ Free-rider problem: tendency for people to refrain from contributing to the common good when a resource is available without requiring any personal cost or contribution (p. 292)
  • Once considered a major problem for social movements; some argued that social movements must provide “selective incentives”

Critique
• People do not always pursue their own short-term interests
  • Instead, people connect their identities to those of their families, networks, ethnic groups, religions, nations, etc.

Bureaucracy
✓ Max Weber argued that bureaucracies were becoming the organizational model of the 19th Century
  • Bureaucracy: large hierarchical organization governed by formal rules and regulations and having clearly specified work tasks (p. 295)
✓ Weber saw bureaucracy as leading example of rationalization, the most important social development of modernity; decisions should be based on efficiency, not tradition
✓ Elements of bureaucracy
  • Impersonality: Decision-making criteria that ignore personal characteristics not related organizational goals
  • Division of labor: Subdivision of different people or groups in different tasks, characteristics of most bureaucracies (p. 295)
  • Hierarchy of authority: Ranking of people or tasks in a bureaucracy from those at the top, where there is a great deal of power and authority, to those at the bottom, where there is little power and authority (p. 295)

A non-bureaucratic organization
✓ What does a non-bureaucratic organization look like?
✓ Gypsum plant described by Alvin Gouldner (1950)
  • Half of workers related to other workers
  • Little paperwork; things handled on case-to-case basis
  • Workers could try different jobs until they found one they liked; rhythm determined by workers
  • Workers used plant materials and services
  • Workers were happy, but customers and company managers were not

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