Characteristics of Bureaucracy

by Sophia Tutorial

> ### ☰ WHAT'S COVERED
>
> This tutorial will cover an introduction to bureaucracy, through the definition and discussion of:
>
> 1. Tradition
> 2. Rationality
> 3. Bureaucracy
> 4. Weber's Six Characteristics of Bureaucracy

1. TRADITION

Tradition is an idea, belief, custom, habit, or ritual that has been handed down from generation to generation. In addition to being idea-based, tradition can also include material culture.

In traditional society, the mentality revolved around doing things a certain way, because they had always been done that way. There wasn't a lot of thought given as to why things were done a certain way or impetus to change things. You simply took the traditions that had been handed down to you from the past and repeated them in society. In this way, traditional societies tended to be more stable.

Traditional societies are also characterized by a mythical or enchanted ethos. People in these societies tended to be much more religious, believing that "God explained everything." Religion played a more prominent role in traditional society as a way to explain why things were the way they were.

> ⤷ **EXAMPLE** You were poor because God wanted it that way, or you were part of the nobility because God wanted it that way. This wasn't questioned--it simply existed as such.

Heredity and bloodlines were also very important in traditional society because you were either born a serf or a noble. Status-given, hereditary authority was far more recognized and important in traditional society. Of course, not every traditional society was like this all the time, but this framework describes an ideal type of traditional society, which is a way to conceptualize the idea and use it to think about and study.

> ### 📄 TERM TO KNOW

Tradition
Beliefs, values, practices, and customs that are handed down from generation to generation in society.

2. RATIONALITY

In direct contrast to traditionality in society is rationality. You're likely far more familiar with a rational organization in a rational worldview because it's what dominates society today. **Rationality** is defined as a calculated, practical way to look at the world, that is designed to accomplish tasks most efficiently.

🚩 **HINT**

Efficiency is a major component of rationality.

Rather than religious and mythical thinking, rationality encompasses a more scientific orientation and way to look at the world. In this way, you can say that the rational world is disenchanted--it's less mystical relative to the traditional world.

In the rational world, people use a calculated cost-benefit view to look at the world:

- What are the costs of this action, as opposed to the benefits of this action?
- What am I going to get out of this, as opposed to what I have to give up?

A process in the evolution of human society involved moving from traditional ways of thinking to more rational ways of looking at the world. It was by no means a fast transition or a natural one. Sociologist Max Weber theorized this transition as the **rationalization of society**, which is the replacement of traditional ways of thinking with rational ways of thinking.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Rationality
Calculated, practical, cost-benefit reasoning designed to accomplish tasks efficiently.

Rationalization of Society (Process of, Max Weber)
The movement from traditional ways of thinking, behaving, and feeling, to modern, rational ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

3. BUREAUCRACY

Bureaucracy, or the bureaucratic organizational form, is considered to be the epitome of a rational world view. A bureaucracy is a model for an organization, designed to accomplish tasks the most efficient way possible.

⚙️ **THINK ABOUT IT**

When you hear the word 'bureaucracy,' what do you think of? You might think of the business organization-- the business bureaucracy. You might work in a bureaucracy, or you might have to deal with a bureaucracy, for instance, when you want to obtain a driver's license or passport, and need to go to the DMV. Any kind of government organization is commonly thought of as a bureaucracy.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Bureaucracy

A model for an organization that is designed to accomplish tasks with the maximum efficiency possible.

4. WEBER'S SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF BUREAUCRACY

Sociologist Max Weber identified **six characteristics of bureaucracy**:

- **Specialization**: Industrial capitalism dramatically increased the division of labor such that each person can perform specialized tasks. People don't try to do everything themselves--the division of labor spreads out all of the tasks among all members of society. You might do one thing, and another person might do another.

  Ideally, the more specialized the tasks become, the more efficient you can become, because not everybody has to switch between tasks, etc. Therefore, specialization is a hallmark of bureaucracy.

- **Hierarchy**: Bureaucracies are hierarchically organized, from high to low. They are organized this way to ensure good communication.

  ⤢ EXAMPLE You have a boss, and your boss has a boss, and so on. You can see that there is a high chain of command.

⚙ THINK ABOUT IT

  What if anyone could circumvent the chain of command and simply go directly to the highest boss anytime they wanted? For instance, what if anyone at Microsoft could approach Bill Gates anytime they chose? The organization couldn't function very efficiently that way. Therefore, there is a nested set of hierarchical offices in a bureaucracy.

- **Rules and regulations**: In order to operate efficiently, you can't leave operations to chance--you want to try to control as much as you possibly can. There are many rules and regulations that govern the conduct of people in bureaucracies and those who wish to engage with them.

⚙ THINK ABOUT IT

  Think about a time you've gone to the DMV. You stand in a line, then you walk up to a counter. Sometimes, you might even be required to take a number, to ensure a proper flow of people. Everything is controlled and rule-bound. What do you think would happen if you dared to just walk up to the counter without obeying all of these rules? You might incite a riot. People would protest, "What is this offender doing? He's not following the rules!" The whole operation couldn't function without rules.

- **Technical competence**: The bureaucracy is filled with offices, and there are rules to determine who can fill each office.

- **Impersonality**: In the eyes of a bureaucracy, everyone is treated in the same uniform fashion. It doesn't matter who you are, who you know, what you want or how you might think you're special. Rules come before all else, and the bureaucracy doesn't care if you're having a bad day or if you can't afford to make your payment or if you simply don't have the time to wait in line and go through the whole process. In a bureaucracy, you're going to follow the rules the same way as everyone else; it's governed by the idea of impersonality.

- **Formal, written communication**: A premium is placed on formal, written communication. Rather than face to face, casual communication, the bureaucracy depends on memos, briefs, paperwork, and now, email and digital storage-- basically, any form of written communication.

  ⤳ EXAMPLE When your boss wants to set up a meeting, you would get an email, rather than a question from two cubicles away. Everything is documented: the meeting time, the meeting place, your acceptance of the meeting, etc. Even though you could have simply had a face to face conversation, in a bureaucracy, it would be done through email.

Why is bureaucracy important and relevant to sociologists? It's important because Weber recognized this bureaucratic form as taking over society and transforming it in its image. He called this the process of bureaucratization, where all social life would come to be organized like the bureaucracy.

☁ BRAINSTORM

Can you see the characteristics of bureaucracy in your job? What about the church, the government, the education system or the military? Life is filled with bureaucracy.

Economist Adam Smith developed a famous way to look at the division of labor. Smith constructed an example of the pin-maker to describe the division of labor. He said that one person making pins themselves could make a small amount of pins--for example, 10 pins a day. However, once you bring in somebody else and divide the tasks so that one person is responsible for fashioning the small part of the pin, and yet another person makes the tops of the pin, together they can suddenly make exponentially more pins, and so on.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Weber's Six Characteristics of Bureaucracy
Max Weber argued that the bureaucratic organizational form is characterized by six features: 1) Specialization and Division of Labor; 2) Hierarchical Authority Structures; 3) Rules and Regulations; 4) Technical Competence Guidelines; 5) Impersonality and Personal Indifference; 6) A Standard of Formal, Written Communications.

SUMMARY

Today you learned about society's evolution from **tradition**-based to **rationality**. You also learned about **bureaucracy** as an example of rationality, and **Weber's six characteristics of bureaucracy**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.

TERMS TO KNOW

Bureaucracy
A model for organization that is designed to accomplish tasks with the maximum efficiency possible.

Rationality
Calculated, practical, cost-benefit reasoning designed to accomplish tasks efficiently.

Rationalization of Society (Process of, Max Weber)
The movement from traditional ways of thinking, behaving, and feeling, to modern, rational ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

Tradition
Beliefs, values, practices, and customs that are handed down from generation to generation in society.

Weber's Six Characteristics of Bureaucracy
Max Weber argued that the bureaucratic organizational form is characterized by six features: 1) Specialization and Division of Labor; 2) Hierarchical Authority Structures; 3) Rules and Regulations; 4) Technical Competence Guidelines; 5) Impersonality and Personal Indifference; 6) A Standard of Formal, Written Communications.