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CAREERS, ORGANIZATION SIZE, AND SUCCESSION

LOUIS KRIESBERG

ABSTRACT

The analysis is based upon data from a national study of heads of public health and mental health programs at the state and local levels. Consistent with Grusky's findings, heads of large public health and of large mental health departments at the *state* level tend to have shorter tenure than heads of small departments. Although the positions are filled by political appointment, the professional requirements are sufficiently important that the mechanisms discussed by Grusky can operate. Furthermore, the kind of career line, itinerant or home guard, also is relevant; this helps explain the findings that at the *local* level length of tenure is not inversely related to organization size.

Grusky has presented evidence that "frequency of administrative succession at the top is directly related to size of firm."¹ Data collected in a recent National Opinion Research Center study make it possible to test this generalization for another kind of organization and occupational category and with different measures of organizational size and succession.² The NORC study was concerned with the relations between public health and mental health personnel and programs at the state and local level. The respondents were: (1) heads of state public health departments and heads of state community and/or institutional mental health programs, (2) heads of local (city, county, or regional) public health departments and heads of local mental health departments or centers, and (3) other state officials responsible for special public health, community-based mental health, and hospital-based mental health programs; these other state officials will not be considered in this research note.

¹ Oscar Grusky, "Corporate Size, Bureaucratization, and Managerial Succession," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXVII (November, 1961), 269.

² Louis Kriesberg, "Mental Health and Public Health Personnel and Programs: Their Relations in the Fifty States" (National Opinion Research Center, Report No. 83, 1962), see Vol. II, Appendix A, for a description of the selection of respondents. The original study was sponsored by the Professional Services Branch, National Institute of Mental Health, conducted under a contract with the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health. I want to thank Seymour War-kov for his comments on reading this paper.

Each respondent was asked how many persons he had under his direction and the number of years he has been in his present position. For the state and local heads, the number of persons under the respondent's direction is probably a good approximate measure of the size of the organization which he heads and will be used as such here. Grusky used the twenty-six largest and the twenty-seven smallest firms of the *Fortune* list of the five hundred largest corporations as his large and small firms. As a measure of succession, the number of years an official has been in his present position will be used here. Grusky used information showing whether or not there had been a change in the incumbents of key job titles in a ten-year period. Grusky's data pertain to top managers in large private firms; the data presented here refer to public officials in state and local public health and mental health departments.

Despite these differences in method and in organization and occupation being studied, the results among state public health and mental health heads are similar to those reported by Grusky. Heads of large public health or of large mental health departments tend to have been in their present position for a shorter period of time than are heads of small departments (see Table 1).

It might be argued that the tenure of the heads of these state programs or departments is affected by partisan politics and that in states with changing political party leadership tenure will be shorter; changing

political leadership is more likely in urban states and they are also the ones which have large public health and mental health programs. As a measure of political party stability we may use the extent of single-party domination of the state legislature. Using this measure, it is true that in states with single-party-dominated legislatures, tenure of heads of these departments or programs is somewhat longer than in other states. Furthermore, mental health heads

in large public health and mental health agencies than in small ones. The fact that we find this in the case of public officials who are trained in public health and mental health professions argues for the importance of organizational size as a determinant of the rate of succession of leadership. But additional considerations must be introduced to explain how this relationship functions. Apparently, the professional requirements for the public offices being con-

TABLE 1
TENURE AND SIZE OF STATE ORGANIZATION

TENURE	STATE ORGANIZATION SIZE			
	Public Health		Mental Health	
	Under 500 Persons	500 or More Persons	Under 500 Persons	500 or More Persons
Per cent less than five years . . .	34	44	36	60
Per cent five-nine years	17	39	28	30
Per cent ten or more years	49	17	36	10
Total per cent	100	100	100	100
No. of cases	24	18	36	37

TABLE 2
TENURE, SIZE OF STATE ORGANIZATION, AND SINGLE-PARTY DOMINATION OF STATE LEGISLATURE (PER CENT WITH TEN OR MORE YEARS TENURE)

PARTY COMPOSITION OF STATE LEGISLATURE*	STATE ORGANIZATION SIZE			
	Public Health		Mental Health	
	Under 500 Persons	500 or More Persons	Under 500 Persons	500 or More Persons
Single party dominant	56 (9)	14 (7)	42 (17)	15 (13)
No single party dominant	46 (13)	18 (11)	31 (16)	5 (21)

* Two states, with non-partisan elections, are omitted.

have fewer persons under their direction in states which have a single party dominating the legislature than do those in other states; but this is not true for heads of public health departments. In any case, holding party domination of the legislature constant, there is still clearly longer tenure in small departments than in large departments or programs (see Table 2).³

Thus far the evidence is remarkably consistent with the findings of management succession in large corporations; tenure is shorter, and presumably turnover is higher

³ Holding constant the respondents' age does not change the relationship between organization size and tenure.

sidered here are sufficiently important that political appointment of the heads does not vitiate the relevance of organizational size as a determinant of the rate of succession. In this case, then, professionalization is a requisite for the operation of the mechanisms described by Grusky.

Another implication follows. The kind of professional career line which the heads of these departments tend to exhibit may also be relevant. Hughes has pointed out the importance of the "itinerant" and the "home-guard" career lines: "The home-guard are the people who make their careers with little or no itineracy; the itinerants progress by moving from one place or

institution to another."⁴ Perhaps the larger departments are particularly likely to recruit itinerants—persons who have national reputations and who then continue to advance by moving to other places or institutions. If this is the case, the character of the career line meshes with the organizational requirements and they complement each other.

There is one kind of data collected in the NORC study which supports these interpretations. The officials were asked what they considered to be their major professional field. Most of the public health officials answered, "public health," and most of the mental health officials answered, "psychiatry"; but there were others who answered "administration." Let us assume

mental health "administrators" have shorter tenure than non-administrators. Although some of the percentages are based upon few cases, it appears that this pattern persists if we hold organizational size constant in the case of public health departments, but not in the case of mental health programs and departments (see Table 3). There is, then, some indirect evidence that type of career line is relevant for explaining leadership succession.

Although the evidence concerning the relevance of career line is hardly overwhelming, the preceding discussion should prepare us for another set of findings. Among local public health officials, there is no relationship between organization size and tenure, and among local mental health

TABLE 3
TENURE, SIZE OF STATE ORGANIZATION, AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTIFICATION
(PER CENT WITH TEN OR MORE YEARS TENURE)

PROFESSIONAL IDENTIFICATION	STATE ORGANIZATION SIZE			
	Public Health		Mental Health	
	Under 500 Persons	500 or More Persons	Under 500 Persons	500 or More Persons
Administrator.....	20 (5)	.. (4)	22 (9)	15 (20)
Non-administrators.....	58 (19)	21 (14)	41 (27)	6 (17)

that those who said administration are somewhat more likely to be itinerants—they are identifying themselves in terms of skills which are particularly transferable. Although this professional identification has other meanings, the analytical results are at least consistent with the inference being made. We find that heads of large mental health programs are more likely to say that their major professional field is administration than are heads of small mental health programs; there is no relationship in the case of public health officials and departments.⁵ We also find that public health and

heads, the relationship appears to be inverse from what we have seen at the state level; now tenure is somewhat longer in large organizations (see Table 4).⁶

We may conjecture that heads of local public health and mental health programs and departments are less likely to have itinerant careers than are heads of state departments or programs. Presumably, local heads are more likely than state ones to build up their local programs rather than move up in a bureaucratic ladder or move from one institution to another. There is some evidence that supports this interpretation. There is a tendency at least for local

⁴ Everett Cherrington Hughes, "The Making of a Physician," *Human Organization*, XIV (Winter, 1955), 21-25; reprinted in E. C. Hughes, *Men and Their Work* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958), p. 129. For an analysis of the itinerant career line of city-managers, see George K. Floro, "Continuity in City-Manager Careers," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXI (November, 1955), 240-46.

⁵ Large mental health programs are more likely to be institutional or combined institutional and community mental health programs, rather than only community mental health programs.

⁶ Holding constant the officials' age does not change the patterns.

public health heads to have longer tenures than their state level counterparts; for example, among local public health heads, 42 per cent have been in their present position for ten or more years; among the state public health heads, 35 per cent have had such a long tenure. Furthermore, fewer local heads give "administration" as their professional identification than do state heads. Thus, 21 per cent of the state heads of public health and 40 per cent of the state heads of mental health say "administration" is their major professional field; while 12 per cent of the local public health and 5 per cent of the local mental health heads say "administration." Again, as among state heads, local heads who consider adminis-

tration their major professional field appear to be more likely to have short tenure in their present job compared to those who give another professional identification.⁷

persons a "large" organization. Perhaps, when organizations are so small the mechanisms by which organization size affects rate of succession are no longer operative. There is one bit of evidence from the NORC study which supports the interpretation that the differences in career pattern between state and local levels rather than the differences in organization size account for the lack of relationship between organization size and tenure at the local level.

The local mental health heads are a heterogeneous category in terms of the kinds of organizations they direct. A few are heads of government bureaus or departments of mental health; the others are

TABLE 4
TENURE AND SIZE OF LOCAL ORGANIZATION

TENURE	LOCAL ORGANIZATION SIZE*			
	Public Health		Mental Health	
	Under 30 Persons	30 or More Persons	Under 30 Persons	30 or More Persons
Per cent less than five years . . .	43	31	56	47
Per cent five-nine years	11	29	27	18
Per cent ten or more years . . .	46	40	17	35
Total per cent	100	100	100	100
No. of cases	(35)	(77)	(97)	(17)

* In the original study there are 240 local mental health and public health respondents; but 14 respondents who are not heads of departments or programs are excluded from this analysis.

tration their major professional field appear to be more likely to have short tenure in their present job compared to those who give another professional identification.⁷

It might be argued that the lack of relationship between organization size and tenure at the local level is due to the small size of all the organizations being considered; after all, we are calling thirty or more

⁷ The number of "administrators" is very small; therefore, the findings must be interpreted cautiously. The percentage of each category of heads who have been in their present position for less than five years is as follows (the number of cases upon which the percentage is based is in parentheses): among local public health heads who are administrators, 67 per cent (6); among those who are not administrators, 54 per cent (108); among local mental health heads who are administrators, 54 per cent (13); and among those who are not administrators, 32 per cent (99).

directors of mental health clinics or centers—some of which are associated with medical schools. We find that among the heads of government agencies, there is a tendency for heads of large organizations to have shorter tenure than do heads of small organizations (three out of four heads of organizations with thirty or more persons have been in their present position less than two years compared to one out of nine heads of small organizations; none of the heads of local government mental health agencies have been in their present position for ten or more years). Apparently, the itinerant career pattern is more typical of heads of government agencies than of directors of mental health centers or clinics. It is among the directors of such centers that we find a tendency for heads of large

organizations to have longer tenure than heads of small organizations.⁸

In conclusion, this secondary analysis indicates that the rate of succession among heads of organizations is directly related to organization size in at least certain public agencies as well as in private corporations. The analysis also suggests a possible modification of the explanation of this relationship based upon the assumptions that "greater size necessitates increased bureaucratization and this, in turn, increases the likelihood that succession will be rationally treated by being routinized."⁹ Perhaps the career patterns of the occupants of such leadership positions also affects the rate of succession. In certain kinds of organizations or industries, such personnel may be more or less likely to expect to move about in order to advance and to think this is appropriate.¹⁰ It might be conjectured, and I feel that such conjecture would be sup-

⁸ Although I do not have data concerning this possibility, it is likely that at least some of the directors are founders of the clinics or centers. In a study of small firms it was found that presidents who are founders of the company tend to have longer tenure than non-founders (see Donald B. Trow, "Executive Succession in Small Companies," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, VI [September, 1961], 228-39).

⁹ Grusky, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

ported by research, that where turnover is high the incumbents tend to develop career patterns which are consistent with that reality. Nevertheless, insofar as factors in addition to size of organization in which employment occurs affects the likelihood of itinerant careers, then this variable may have some independent effect upon rates of succession. It is not difficult to list many variables which may affect the likelihood that an occupation develops an itinerant pattern: the number of organizations in which the members of the occupation can be employed; the competition for their services; the stability of the organizations in which they are employed; the range of alternative employment; and the ease of establishing one's own organization.

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¹⁰ Of course, successors may come from within the organization as well as from outside. In kinds of organizations in which successors are likely to be insiders, of course, the relevance of itinerant career lines would be less; but these would obviously also be organizations in which the heads did not follow itinerant careers. For an analysis of inside and outside successors among school superintendents, see Richard O. Carlson, "Succession and Performance among School Superintendents," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, VI (September, 1961), 210-27.