Waiting and Rejection: An Organizational Perspective

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'Cooling out' rejected applicants

Ann-Mari Sellerberg

ABSTRACT. Time spent waiting is frequently regarded as time wasted, and therefore as something to be avoided or at least minimized. In this article, however, waiting is viewed from an organizational perspective: delay and waiting are seen as integral to the strategic functioning of organizations, and to their handling of individual requests. Various kinds of waiting or intended organizational delays are described in terms of their contribution to 'cooling out'. Waiting as cooling out means that waiting pacifies those frustrated (or possibly frustrated) by the organization. The analysis also addresses various manifestations of the social dialogue between the organization and the rejected, including those cases where waiting does not have a cooling out effect. KEY WORDS applicant; cooling out; organization; rejection; time; waiting

Introduction

Sociological interest in waiting has usually been directed at the individual doing the waiting. Schwartz (1974), who has analysed waiting in depth, begins his article 'Waiting, exchange and power' with a discussion of how much time is lost; time spent waiting is seen as time wasted. Waiting is often viewed as irrational, uneconomic (Geissler, 2001, 2002) and problematic, the assumption being that queues should be cut and therefore that decisions should be made faster. In this

article, however, waiting is viewed from an organizational perspective; delay and waiting may be integral to the strategic functioning of organizations and to their handling of individual requests.

When considering how organizations function, it is natural to turn to Weber's (1958) analysis of bureaucracy, in which administrative efficiency and speed are generally held to be essential. In his article on waiting in relation to the centrality of speed in modern organizations, Schwartz (1978) writes:

> The precondition of bureaucratisation, as we may recall from Weber's (1958) discussion of the subject, is the qualitative and quantitative increase in tasks; its functional advantage, the speed and efficiency with which it performs them. Now, if speed and efficiency are calculated by equations containing terms for time, as they obviously must, then the temporal dimension must be central to the description and analysis of bureaucracy. (p. 3)

This ensuing analysis raises an alternative perspective. Waiting is not seen as a problem or a symptom of inefficiency for organizations but as a phenomenon that may generate positive consequences by its mere existence.

An organization must deal with applications from individuals requesting something specific. These applications usually come from outside the organization but occasionally from within. Applicants might be patients attending a primary healthcare centre, people applying for a job, or a group of employees demanding that their workplace not be 'rationalized'; that is, applicants may be customers, employees, vendors or shareholders, for example. Here, the blanket term 'applicants' is used for all. Commonly, there are more requests than the organization can approve, or there are single requests for more than the organization can possibly provide. Therefore, the organization has to turn down applicants or reject at least some of these requests. It is in that context that waiting for answers, and the reactions to the waiting itself, may be important. Delay, and the waiting that results, can be seen as a valuable practice for an organization.

Method and Data

The present analysis is based on data from a variety of organizations. The theories of the social psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1951), and of the sociologist, Erving Goffman (1952), are employed when analysing various kinds of organizational delay using empirical studies. Material drawn from empirical studies (Sellerberg, 1998, 2004); a study conducted several decades ago on waiting in conjunction with abortion applications (Sellerberg, 1976); various kinds of waiting-for health services (Sjöström, 1992; Wästerfors, 1998), for promotion at the Swedish royal court in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Persson, 1999), for approval of applications for social security payments, and for approval of immigrants' residence permits in Sweden, are illustrations of this theoretical analysis rather than

in-depth investigations of empirical cases, and Goffman's idea of 'cooling out' is extended and applied to organizational practices (Goffman, 1952). The illustrations serve to illuminate this more general phenomenon.

Delay and Waits: Organizational Strategies

Organizations must be able to produce rejections on something of a routine basis, and in a manner that deflects disappointment and anger. In large businesses, there are often special 'complaint' departments to help customers who are disappointed with defective goods or poor service. However, a rejection is apt to touch a more personal nerve than shoddy products and services, hence calling for more sensitive handling. The applicants' wishes – and their subsequent acceptance or rejection – are frequently an extremely personal matter. The examples reviewed in this article include such sensitive issues as abortion, continued compulsory institutional care, access to doctors, and the question of cessation of care for severely disabled or sick persons. Application and rejection form a recurring element in social organizations, and normally there are no particular departments or institutions whose job it is to handle applicants' disappointment. Instead, managing rejection is a necessary part of the routines within the organization. Delay may function as an organizational strategy.

Rejection leading to lasting disappointment – and futile commitment – is a problem with unfortunate ramifications, both for the organization and for the applicants. Ball (1976) points out that failure is endemic to social organizations and social life. At the same time, scant attention has been paid to failure. Rejections such as not getting the job or the grant, or being laid off all constitute different kinds of failure. How does the organization that 'causes' the failure deal with the feelings of disappointment, anger and so on? Ball differentiates between two basic approaches in the way organizations handle these issues: 'degradation' and 'cooling out'. 'Where degradation leads to identity destruction, cooling out leads to identity maintenance cum alteration and adjustment' (Ball, 1976: 727).

Theoretical Background: The Work of Lewin and Goffman

The following analysis of various types of waiting draws primarily on Lewin's (1951) and Goffman's (1952) perspectives, in one sense combining the two. Starting with Lewin, the discussion focuses on how applicants' intentions may fare when they encounter delay and waiting. Goffman has provided underpinnings for the arguments pertaining to the ways in which organizations are, in one way or another, obliged to deal with rejected applicants.

Clearly there is one thing common to all forms of delay: it has a direct effect on those who are waiting. Lewin goes on to prove, by means of experiments on forgotten intentions and on the resumption of interrupted activities, that any intention could be described as an antenatal tension state that exerts pressure on an individual to carry out the intention. Lewin writes that 'the need-tension is a primary fact: if sufficiently intensive, and the occasion is delayed, it leads to premature beginning of the consummatory action' (Lewin, 1951: 152). Various kinds of 'substitute consummation' may come about (Lewin, 1951: 132). Lewin speaks of *pars pro toto consummation.* In waiting, the 'consummatory' action goes in the direction of the original goal but comes to a halt somewhere along the line. Thus, organizational waiting – in the direction of the goal – may give rise to premature and partial intention fulfilment and occasional tension elimination. From Lewin's perspective, delay may perform positive functions within the framework of an organization. For example, waiting tends, under certain conditions, to 'water down' the intensity of applicants' wishes. In consequence, the applicant may become 'cooled out', a term taken from Goffman's (1952) classic work.

Goffman's 'cooling out' referred to con artists handling their 'mark', but the basic idea remains relevant: anyone who is going to be rejected must be handled or cooled out in various ways, including the 'defeat' of their intentions and commitment. Goffman asks what happens when we are forced to reconcile ourselves to our fate, when our plans are 'put on ice'. There is a certain drama in Goffman's account of how cooling out works, or indeed does not work. The person or organization that is doing the cooling out has to deal with the disappointed applicant. Goffman suggests that cooling out occurs when applicants are deprived of a central role and an important element in their self-understanding is damaged. An example he gives is when we are deprived of our image of ourselves as clever as we discover that we have been cheated. Consolation can be made easier in a number of ways. One, according to Goffman, consists in our being given a second chance, granted the opportunity to appeal. This also provides a second opportunity for consolation, one that allows cooled out individuals to explode, to give vent to their anger by writing appeals. Goffman points out that people who are aware that they have been cheated are not in fact the only ones to be cooled out. The process is widespread. It is always the case that aspirations, reasonable and unreasonable alike, go unfulfilled. Certain kinds of measures and routines – generally ones taken for granted – enable organizations to manage rejected applicants. One of these systems is waiting. In the present context, waiting at the behest of organizations is thus regarded as a means that works to cool out applicants, as an instrument for dealing with the experience of rejection.

Various Types of Waiting

An individual applies to an organization with a particular object in mind, and the request is approved or denied in a decision taken by the organization. The organization then has to manage its relations with the applicant. Of particular interest in this context is the delay, in its many forms, and especially the cooling-out, or potentially provoking, tendencies associated with each type of delay. This article discusses various kinds of waiting, using a typology that reflects different elements: waiting with some degree of ego investment, waiting alone, waiting with supporters and waiting with other applicants and possible competitors.

Decision-making in cases where people have submitted applications is based on different principles, criteria or rationales. Such decisions have a *discretionary* character (is the applicant the most qualified, the most needy, the most promising, and so on?). In such cases, the discretionary nature of the decision affects the self-worth and 'ego' of the applicant: if rejected, an applicant may be divested of a central role that is important to his or her self-esteem. In other decisions, the applicant's ego is not of primary importance; that is, central aspects of the applicant are not subject to assessment. The different types of waiting thus vary from the dispassionate, e.g. the 'first-come, first-served' wait of the applicant who sends off a coupon for a free fleece blanket, to the more indefinite and passionate, e.g. the 'wait for a verdict' of the academic applicant whose life's work is being assessed for an appointment. The first types of waiting are of a comparatively dispassionate kind and are not, therefore, the main focus of this article.

Another important dimension is whether a person waits alone or with others. In the latter case, additional subdivisions may be made: the applicant may be waiting along with other applicants who may be potential competitors; or he or she may have various types of supporters – family, friends, fans, lawyers and so on. 'With others' may, of course, refer to a number of dissimilar situations, such as being physically present or not, but it may also signify that the waiting group is in touch in some way. In other words, waiting 'with others' may last for extensive periods of time without requiring simultaneous presence anywhere.

Even when considering applicants' disappointment in first-come, first-served decisions, it is useful to differentiate between those who wait alone and those who have a group of supporters – family or friends. Similarly, it matters whether the applicant is physically present or not. Åkerström (1997) describes a situation where 'applicants', in this case patients, were present and experienced delays which, for spatial and organizational reasons, led to great irritation. Instead of cooling out, there are certain conditions in which a wait can 'heat up'; where an applicant waits in the company of others, they may serve as 'cheerleaders'. An organization obliged to cope with delay as a matter of course can introduce signals and activities that mitigate the frustrations of waiting, particularly in cases where applicants are physically present.

High-involvement Decisions

The focus of this article is waiting for verdicts pertaining to ego rejections. This kind of waiting seems to undermine applicants' resolve as well as intent. After an overview, the discussion moves to various factors in waiting that mollify or annoy applicants. Finally, factors that deflect an applicant's initial purpose in approaching an organization are presented.

Both in first-come, first-served decisions and in discretionary verdicts based on qualifications or needs, rejection must be managed by means of routines integrated into the organization. With high-ego involvement this is, of course, particularly essential. A number of studies indicate how rejection is dealt with by means of neutral bureaucratic attitudes and by expressive demonstrations of the organization's neutrality. Tola Jonsson (1997) has analysed the treatment of applications for social security payments. For the applicant, the organization's ideology manifests itself in various ways – qualifications, not people, are judged, demanding careful evaluation. The people who do this are busy; indeed they have to be, since it would be suspicious if they had time on their hands. Discretion may be signalled by delay, and waiting.

On examining discretionary decisions by an organization, paradoxical elements are often discovered. The more legitimate and well-founded a decision appears, the more a rejection can be expected to wound the applicant's ego: 'I applied for the post; I thought my qualifications were sufficient, but someone impartial and competent decided that I was not as good as the competition.' A warranted rejection may cool out the applicant because its legitimacy is based on an unbiased judgement but, on the other hand, it throws up particular obstacles to 'saving face' and preserving the applicant's self-esteem.

A university administrator who was interviewed about delays remarked that in her department they viewed delays as, in a sense, useful time. They deliberately let cases drag on, saying that they needed to 'mature', with the result that they would be resolved by other, 'external' circumstances; in effect 'they solve themselves', my informant suggested. The case simply ceased to be a case. For the organization, there is a definite advantage to stalling. Lewin's experiments on what happens to people's intentions as they wait are crucial. Intentions experienced while in a state of tension – 'I want' or 'I must have' – do not simply evaporate when people obtain what they want; they may also peter out 'along the way'. Motivation may be snuffed out both by having to wait and by various things that occur while waiting.[1] The university administrator felt that even tricky problems facing the university became less dramatic after a delay. In general, thanks to waiting, applicants become far less preoccupied with their case.

As Goffman (1952) shows, consolation is an artful practice in which the 'cooler' defines the situation for the 'mark' in a way that makes it easier for him or her to accept the inevitable and quietly go home. Garot (2004) describes a

housing office subsidising rents for needy clients. When denied subsidy, appli-
cants' responses ranged from acceptance with stunned surprise to fury with
tears. Garot (2004) refers to officials who adopt the 'you're still on the list' line
of argument before clients. Keeping the idea of a waiting list in play had two
uses: if a client's condition changed, that change could be allowed (or believed)
to affect the outcome, while the period of waiting might 'wash out' or dilute the
intensity of the client's desire.

Waiting: Rejected and Alone

An initial illustration is drawn from applicants waiting for abortion, under
earlier legislation in Sweden. A previous study (Sellerberg, 1976) examined the
opinions of politicians and experts on the different routines surrounding appli-
cations for abortion under the old Swedish abortion law, which was in force until
1975. That study examined the interaction between the women's wishes and the
system of rules then in place. The old abortion law included rules that assured a
delay: a woman first had to consult two doctors, obtaining a certificate from
both, and she had to see a welfare officer. Crucially, these appointments were at
intervals that inevitably caused a delay. In government commissions of inquiry
from both the 1940s and the 1970s, one finds descriptions of women who
wanted abortions, many of whom seemed to be in a state of total desperation at
first: 'I *must* have an abortion.' Often their mental state altered by degrees
(SOU, 1944). Lewin would presumably have viewed the sequence of 'wait and
visit – visit again – wait – visit again' as a significant subversion of intention.
The women's attitude shifted towards acceptance: 'So be it.' The drive, the
energy behind their initial impulse dwindled to nothing. True, seeking an abor-
tion is undeniably a special type of application, frequently marked by great
ambivalence; yet both the commissions of inquiry emphasized delay as some-
thing both important and favourable. The 1944 government commission pre-
sented the following argument:

> Perhaps the most important task for the welfare officer is to get the applicants to
> view him or her as a friend, a personal support, who will take time to listen to their
> worries. As the current welfare officer system has amply demonstrated, this is the
> core of their work. Applicants return time and again to the consulting sessions,
> seizing the opportunity to talk through their problems, a sympathetic ear breaking
> the isolation in which so many of them live. Welfare officers have here a golden
> opportunity to help untangle their clients' difficulties, to steady them emotionally,
> and to talk them through the hopeless desperation that is so characteristic of this
> stage of pregnancy. All depends on their first contact with the client; *for once they
> have won time by getting her to postpone the decision to abort, the welfare officers
> have done more than half the job*. (SOU, 1944: 173)

The commissions of inquiry on abortion thus appeared to be well aware of the significance of waiting.

One ingredient in waiting may consist of a movement between authorities, experts and 'stations'. Following Goffman (1952), Miller and Robinson (1994) have seen a number of out-placement services offered to workers as a structural arrangement for cooling out. The workers frequently move from one of several 'stations' to the next, in an active process of waiting.

Another example of an organizational cooling out process illustrates what might be termed a 'don't you believe it' reaction. The following example illustrates how futile waiting can lead to a rejection of what was once ardently desired. The illustration is taken from Bengt Sjöström's (1992) doctoral thesis 'Kliniken Tar Över Dårskapen [The Clinic Takes Over The Lunacy]'. Sjöström presents excerpts from the medical notes of a man who spent more than 50 years in an asylum. His wait was long and open-ended. The applicant had originally wanted to escape to a very different social context: he wanted to go home. Nils Andersson, a miner born in 1872, was admitted to St Maria's Hospital in Helsingborg on 16 November 1901. Initially, there is very little in Andersson's medical notes. Then, in January 1908:

> Andersson hung back in the exercise yard and contrived to get over the fence. Retaken in Teckomatorp and returned.

> July 31, 1909: Today managed, with the help of another patient, Bergmark, to jump over the railings of the exercise yard. However was soon returned.

> 1910: Andersson has not recently had the opportunity to flee, although he appears resolutely set upon doing so. (Sjöström, 1992: 81–82)

For the first 10 years, Andersson's objective is quite clear: escape from St Maria's Hospital. After a long wait – a full 19 years later – we find another, very brief, note. In the summer and autumn, for the first time, he was permitted to spend extended periods outside, so he took long walks, returning from the woods with berries for the staff. The doctors asked him if he would attempt to escape if he was moved to an open section. He answered, convincingly, 'Don't you believe it' (the demotic Swedish expression was 'Åh i hondan'). His initial intention was extinguished. Andersson spent a total of 51 years at St Maria's, going berry-picking as long as he was able. In different terminology, he would be described as institutionalized. The important point here, however, is that the wish that he had addressed to the institution was eventually turned into its virtual opposite.

Today's organizations probably find that life is easier if the applicants' waiting does not take place in situ, before their very eyes, in face-to-face contact. In past ages, waiting was more likely to take place on the spot. Once individuals had made their way to the organization, they stayed put, but travel and communication

now allow for waiting at a distance. One example is described in a historical dissertation on the Swedish royal court (Persson, 1999). In the seventeenth century, at the royal court of Sweden, aspirants waited – day in, day out – in ante-chambers and corridors. Waiting for preferment, office and the like invariably demanded their physical presence. They waited for an opportunity to put themselves forward for a post, stationing themselves along the route the king would take through the palace when processing to dinner, for example. Here there were really only two steps: the first, as the king hurried past, was to exchange a few words with him and then be allowed to present the request; the second was to obtain notification that the request had been granted (Persson, 1999).

From the perspective of the court, the organization, there is a practical advantage in having people available for quick appointment. It was merely a matter of choosing among those who littered the ante-chambers. Among the waiting applicants, there was a creeping self-selection. Some of them were simply, and literally, cooled out by the extreme boredom of waiting in the court's corridors; some encountered other people and events which resulted in their wishes fading; those who hung on might be cooled out (and cast down) when they saw 'the better sort', such as ambassadors, being wafted past, never having to wait; similarly, they might also feel socially 'squashed' – and thus cooled out – when others around them enjoyed the king's favour and had their requests granted (Persson, 1999).

Waiting with Supporters

However, waiting does not always have a cooling out effect. Readers of Charles Dickens are familiar with fictional examples of entire extended families waiting for the outcome of protracted legal battles, of individuals neglecting opportunities to make something of their lives, and of the dispute being passed onto new generations (*Bleak House*). Everyone is drawn into circumlocution (*Little Dorrit*). In such conditions, the intensity of applicants' engagement may actually increase.

Unless waiting is capably handled by an organization, it may engender and disseminate rumours, increasing the interest of others in an applicant's plight. A keen group is naturally more problematic for an organization to handle than a dissatisfied individual. A group revolving around a rejected applicant has its own agenda; people in the applicant's surroundings become involved in the waiting process. The application and its progress are thus open to interpretation by the applicant's immediate friends and families. Wästerfors (1998) writes of hope and acceptance in the care of the brain-damaged, and of the situation when a patient's prospects for improvement are slim. Those relatives who have waited with the patient are forced to choose their strategy: acceptance of the judgement, which would mean rejection of further treatment towards recovery and

abandonment of their hope that the patient will have a better existence, or the nourishment of their hopes and wishes. In the case of brain-damaged patients, this dilemma was frequently examined by a group: the waiting family. The mere fact that there are several people who discuss the outcome of the organization's decision is significant. They talk to the point where the outcome seems believable or not: it is a case of permanent brain damage, or there is a possibility of improvement. In Wästerfors' example, groups waited with the patient for the outcome and groups interpreted the 'rejection' accordingly. Those who did not accept were, in Wästerfors' study, termed 'unrealistic' by the medical staff. In these cases the organization can contribute by providing family guidance, frequently with the explicit aim of getting relatives to accept the organization's decision (Wästerfors, 1998).

Waiting with Other Applicants

There appears to be awareness within organizations that in certain situations an applicant's rejection may be problematic, creating continued commitment on the applicant's part. Under these circumstances, the organization may use various symbolic indicators to give the applicant the impression that the rejection, the negative decision, is legitimate. The organization may, for example, 'direct the goals' of several people waiting together to ensure their acceptance of a negative decision. This is a form of directed occupation used on those waiting in groups, usually termed 'anchoring work'. A company might, for instance, anchor a decision to lay off a number of its employees. A political organization may deflect political proposals from local, 'grassroots' members through group work. Waiting can be programmed and filled with activities. Group work under the supervision of a representative of the organization is a waiting activity typical of cooling out (Sellerberg, 1998, 2004).

What is then needed may actually be misleading cooling out signals *à la* Goffman; for example, the applicants are told that their applications are being dealt with, or 'high-status medical staff' show themselves at the door to the examination room. Åkerström (1997) notes that the accident and emergency staff set out to cool out patients using such methods during the wait. Patients are moved around, even if there is no practical reason for it. They are put in examination rooms, or perhaps on stretchers in the corridors, although they could equally well have remained seated in the waiting room. They are given a sense of approaching their goal, a sense that things are in motion. It is this strategy that Goffman (1980) termed 'stalling'. With many individuals all waiting together, aware of each other's existence, the organization can clearly signal 'there are many of you to deal with'. This can both mollify and provoke, since applicants experience open competition.

In the face of unpopular decisions, it is possible to arrange meetings of those about to be rejected and fill the waiting time by dividing the participants into small discussion groups. Here they can 'explode', as Goffman puts it, and express their anger at the decision, but in an ineffectual form. Group work thus provides 'explosion opportunities'. It also offers the organization an opportunity to issue working material and to have designated discussion leaders cool out the discontents, taking the sting out of rejections that might have led to problems for the organization. An example concerns dedicated consumers who had laboured to build up various consumer activities but were then faced with their organization's insistence that they become more 'commercially oriented'. Following an inquiry among consumers, a conference ran over several days and was aimed at 'anchoring' a different approach. Discussion materials were distributed among those consumers who were initially averse to the new proposals, and discussion leaders circulated from one group room to another (Sellerberg, 1998, 2004). A redirection of intentions went on for several days before joint decisions were made.

Conclusion

Waiting may be conceived as what Gasparini (2004) terms an 'in-between situation', an interstice of everyday life. Interstice of everyday life alludes to in-between situations as well as to experiences that are apparently overlooked but that have important consequences, which are rarely grasped as such. Gasparini stresses the central importance of these in-between situations in society's mode of functioning. In that sense, of course, 'in-between situations' is a misleading designation.

Waiting is a typical in-between situation, and different kinds should be distinguished. There are festive delays when people line the streets waiting for royalty, for a carnival procession or for a pop concert. As Gasparini (1995) has pointed out, and as was observed earlier, waiting may have several favourable dimensions, containing an element of excitement and/or hope (Åkerström, 1997). The variations in approaches to waiting are enormous. We may wait in the spirit of happy anticipation. We may wait in dread. There is waiting in waiting: we wait amongst other patients for an expected (and feared) diagnosis; the small waiting room is thrown into perspective by the momentous wait for the verdict. It is all understood in any number of ways according to how well the applicant knows what is going on 'behind the scenes' in the organization. An organization may take pains to direct its waiting situations and fill them with appropriate content. Knowledge of the different factors in waiting often appears to be an unspoken skill mastered by organizations' administrators.

This article has reviewed delays which are apt to be regarded as self-evident

and natural, beginning with the type that involves people waiting for a probable change in status in a broad sense: the woman who, in the days of the old abortion law, saw herself as going from pregnant to not pregnant; the inmate in the early-twentieth-century mental asylum who was initially wholly bent on escaping; the 'client' who waited years for promotion to ambassador or something similar, but who finally gave up; and the applicants for the longed-for professor's chair who waited several years for their applications to be considered. Assuming that those who wait are often subjected to an organizational cooling out, waiting serves such ends.

On some occasions, however, there is no cooling out, and an applicant's determination merely grows, perhaps drawing ever-more engaged people into the circle. Several rejected applicants can together resist attempts at cooling out, becoming more and more committed to the case instead. And then there are the 'die-hards' and 'crack-pots', the individual applicants who steadfastly refuse to be cooled out, who often act alone and who, it seems, call down a wide variety of names on themselves.

In 'Manifest and Latent Functions' in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949), Robert Merton wrote about the unintended consequences of social phenomena, focusing – as others have done before and since – on the effects of different social reforms. The present discussion, however, is not concerned with the unintended consequences of goal-oriented social reforms, but with the manner in which unheeded social phenomena affect an organization, in this instance applicants waiting for decisions from an organization. The focus is shifted to the self-evident, to routines embedded in the system. Delay is seen as something that simply occurs, which in some instances is useful for an organization.

From a Weberian perspective, it is easy to focus on the efficacy and speed of handling the case, and the application of formal rules. One analytical approach is to concentrate on how bureaucracy circumvents formal structure, how people act informally to make the system run efficiently. As shown here, this article's focus is rather to draw attention to phenomena and routines that 'simply are' (Gasparini, 1995) and point to the importance of analysing empirically disregarded phenomena. Depending on the circumstances, these phenomena may have any number of effects. A feeling for contextual variation is needed to analyse things that are taken for granted. Time is by no means a healer of all wounds; for example, at times waiting dampens and distracts but at times it provokes particular irritation. Is there implicit organizational knowledge, and use, of such contextual variations?

The fact that cooling out systems do not always run smoothly must also be emphasized. A state of limbo is just as much a part of the system's functioning as unconcern or resentment on the part of the applicant. A university administrator interviewed in conjunction with this article stated that certain cases involved people who were unofficially termed 'nut cases', ones who do not accept rejec-

tion. In her account, many of the 'nut cases' had moved beyond their original intention, say a wish for a particular post, preferring to enlarge on circumstances they saw as foolish, unjust, etc. in subsequent correspondence. The processes described in this article are thus far from examples in a social-control analysis; they also embrace 'involvement freaks' (Goffman, 1952) and even the middle position, when applicants accept their rejection to a certain extent.

Individuals' applications are accepted or rejected by organizations. Delay prior to a decision may encourage both commitment and lack of interest. In one sense, the waiting situation is thus characterized by duality: the applicant should remain motivated and yet be prepared for rejection during the wait. Commitment remains important throughout, for organizations demand interested applicants. Perhaps both commitment and lack of interest are elements in society's rejection machinery. Are not, for example, the various projects that supposedly prepare people for the transition from unemployment to work a kind of waiting, a limbo between recognition and rejection by the labour market? In this way, waiting constitutes an attempt to solve an ever-present structural problem in society: rejection, and how people are to 'take' rejection while retaining an appropriate degree of commitment.

Note

1. It is when 'external' circumstances intervene that the rejection of applicants may be solved 'prematurely'. In some cases, a wait is a state in suspended near-isolation, virtually unaffected by external events and processes. This is clear from a dossier containing interviews with immigrants to Sweden, who were waiting for treatment for post-traumatic stress. They did nothing but wait, often without being able to communicate with others in the new country. They said their whole lives consisted of waiting for decisions. No substitute dilution of intention happened here. In some of the ensuing cases, however, waiting is seen to become an important ingredient in the rejection process. (The interviews were conducted by Henrik Loodin, a PhD student at the Sociological Department, Lund University.)

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