



Contribution à un dictionnaire / une
encyclopédie

2014

Accepted
version

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How to cite

BALSIGER, Jörg. Logic of appropriateness. In: Encyclopedia Britannica. [s.l.] : [s.n.], 2014.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:34402>

Logic of appropriateness

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To cite this article: Balsiger, Jörg (2014), Logic of Appropriateness, *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Available at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1937900/logic-of-appropriateness>

Logic of appropriateness, a view of action that involves the matching of situations, roles, and rules.

The logic of appropriateness defines a basis for decision making biased toward what social norms deem right rather than what cost-benefit calculations consider best. Behaviour in a specific situation is said to follow from the rules that govern the appropriate course of action for a given role or identity. The rules that determine appropriateness are institutionalized in social practices and sustained over time through learning. The logic of appropriateness can provide an organization with institutional order, stability, and predictability. At the same time, it may run counter to democratic principles by implying the substitution of tacit understanding for collective deliberation. The term was coined by organization theorists James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, but the concept has long been an important theme in social theory.

The logic of appropriateness is commonly distinguished from the logic of consequences. The latter evokes self-interested rational actors with fixed preferences and identities whose behaviour is determined by the calculation of expected returns from alternative choices. Although the two logics are usually presented in mutually exclusive terms, they can also be understood as opposite poles of a single continuum. In the face of uncertainty and complexity, the analysis of a specific situation on the basis of experience, expert knowledge, or intuition, and using criteria of similarity, difference, analogy, and metaphor, may yield a variety of appropriate alternatives. Yet the choice among these may involve an assessment of the likelihood of different consequences and the costs and benefits of expected outcomes. Even in such situations, however, prevailing norms, beliefs, routines, procedures, roles, organizational forms, or technologies are assumed to force cognitive shortcuts. The reason is that the capabilities of attention, interpretation, evidence validation, and memory management are seen as imperfect.

The two perspectives of action have different political implications. The logic of appropriateness presumes that members of a polity follow rules because they are perceived as natural, valid, and legitimate. Rules may be replaced or modified over time through processes of selection and adaptation. This outlook emphasizes the notion of political community and its

definition of accepted social relations, as well as acknowledged roles such as citizen, bureaucrat, elected politician, or court official. In contrast, the consequentialist logic stresses individual self-interest and views political order as an aggregation of rational actor preferences through processes of bargaining, negotiation, and coalition formation.

Even though the logic of appropriateness is an important factor for the effective functioning of large organizations and political orders, it is associated with inefficiency, rigidity, and incrementalism. In contemporary democracies, rules provide procedural and substantive fairness and protect individuals from the power of authorities and resource-rich actors. In an increasingly complicated institutionalized environment, however, the scope of action based on tacit understanding increases, as do the political opportunities of individuals with economic or intellectual resources.