

II SELF EXPLOITATION IN WORKER CO-OPERATIVES

by

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In the course of research at the Co-operative College, for my project on worker Co-operatives, it became clear that self exploitation is one of the main factors contributing to the failure of worker Co-ops, and that this restrains the growth of the worker Co-operative Movement.

The relevant section of the research consisted of nine taped structured interviews with ex-worker Co-operators. The funding was provided by the Plymouth and South Devon Co-operative Society Ltd and the author would like to take this opportunity to thank the Society for their support.

It has long been observed, that one feature of worker Co-operatives has been a rapid turnover of members. That this turnover, which often affects the most committed and energetic members of the Co-operatives, is very damaging to their continuity is well documented. A common result of the loss of these experienced members is not merely the loss of expertise and knowledge, but often the guarantees on the loans which provide much of the Co-operative's finance.

It seems likely that the underlying reason why the most dedicated Co-operators fade quickly is their tendency towards self-exploitation.

From the evidence obtained (set out below) it would seem that self-exploitation is engendered by two factors commonly found in worker Co-operatives:—

(1) Shortage of either working or expansion capital. Because of the lack of suitable capital sources, attempts to substitute labour for both types of capital are endemic among worker Co-operators.

(2) Use of self-exploitation, either consciously or unconsciously, (usually the latter) to obtain status and hence a degree of control within the Co-operative.

Self Exploitation and Status

Discussion of the exploitative pressures exerted by capital deprivation, regularly concentrates on the parallels in this area between other types of small businesses and worker Co-operatives. While the levels of stress engendered by this problem may be similar for both types of operation, in the crucial area of key member loss, the effect on worker Co-operatives is more acute.

The reason for the greater vulnerability of worker Co-operatives is only clear when the control structures of the two types of organisation are

considered. Within the capitalist small firm it is clearly understood that such areas as innovation or technical expertise and experience are the function of a specific individual or individuals within the firm. It is recognised that if that individual or group leave, the firm will almost certainly collapse. To give a crude example, in a partnership consisting of a skilled worker and three unskilled workers, if the skilled worker left, it is obvious that the firm could not continue. No such premise is accepted within most worker Co-operatives. Indeed most worker Co-operatives make active efforts to ensure that critical control functions are shared. In practice such sharing is very hard to achieve, it takes a long time and a lot of effort.

The Vulnerability in Practice

In a number of cases I examined, founder members, who had obviously been the main innovators of a worker Co-operative, left after as short a period as two years. After they left, the remaining members discovered that they carried away with them essential bodies of knowledge and experience, without which the Co-operative found it difficult to continue functioning.

Analysis of case studies, from any period of Co-operative history, suggests that such individuals have a major influence on a Co-operative in its formative period. They acquire a special status which ensures that they are the prime receivers of information and initiators of procedures, regardless of their own or the other members' intentions.

The same factors which engender the self-exploitation in the first place, e.g. lack of capital, necessity to spend potentially productive time form filling to obtain aid, etc. also prevent the transmission of the skills necessary to operate the Co-operative as an efficient economic unit.

For a visitor to suggest, in many worker Co-operatives, that there is a hierarchy or that individuals are competing for status, is to risk a rapid conclusion to the conversation. The sensitivity betrayed by many worker Co-operators on this subject shows the difficulty their organisations have in containing the psychological drives which operate in this area.

Those social sciences which are concerned with the interaction of individuals within groups, have material to offer which could assist worker Co-operatives in understanding the stresses created by the nature of their structure.

A sociologist (following the classic work of Durkheim and Fromm on "anomie") would recognise clearly that, for individuals educated within the value parameters of a capitalist society and culture, the behaviour norms demanded in a worker Co-operative might well be classed as deviant. For instance most worker Co-operatives expect very low levels of aggression and high mutual respect among their members — the exact opposite to the "qualities" needed to succeed in a capitalist institution. When we con-

sider this high level of behaviour expectation, which is common in most worker Co-operatives and how clearly in a capitalist society and culture these expectations conflict with the forces of socialisation which operate both during childhood and adolescence, it is not surprising that the stresses engendered are inevitably of a high order.

To give a practical example — where the achievement expectations of a member, or a minority of members are different from those of the majority of the members, stress will inevitably be created. It is not uncommon for such high stress levels to result in members leaving the Co-operative. This can result in the collapse of the Co-operative.

Reports from Personal Experience

Of the nine people I interviewed seven complained of the frustration caused by differing levels of achievement expectation of these, three said this was their main reason for leaving and of the remainder two said that it had been a major factor in their deciding to leave. Nevertheless six of the nine are now working in either CDAs or other worker Co-operatives.

The following are typical verbatim examples from two interviews:—

“I wanted to work weekends to make more stuff but the others weren’t into it”.

“I joined the Co-op to find a different quality of work, but after two years I was still working excessive hours for less than the social security minimum. The other members did not seem to mind that there seemed to be no prospect of improvement. This caused constant arguments, so when I saw this job advertised (for a CDA worker) I applied, got it and left the Co-op. In fairness, six months after I left they got a local government contract and things have improved considerably”.

Self Exploitation and Motivation

The examples above relate so closely not only to classical sociology but also to such well understood social psychological examples as those set out in the work of Whiting (1960) on the connection between status and the control of resources, and McClelland (1953) on the achievement motive.

Another social psychologist, Brown (1965) says “A society that pins socio-economic status to occupational achievement tends to be uncomfortable with the assignment of status on the basis of ascribed characteristics”.

Worker Co-operatives typically frame their rules and working practices to reverse this situation. They attempt to ascribe equal status to all their members. They also attempt to prevent status being “pinned” to expertise

or socio-economic achievement -- for the individual whom McClelland (1961) would describe as having high achievement motivation and who, for political or moral reasons chooses to work in a "typical" worker Co-operative, this must inevitably result in internal stress and ultimately, conflict with others.

As suggested above, with status acquisition circumscribed by both the rules and wishes of the other members, the Co-operator with high achievement motivation must seek some other way to gain "immediate concrete feedback on his performance". Yet this is an essential component of their psychological equilibrium. Five of the seven ex-Co-operators interviewed, indicated that they wanted the members of their Co-operative to work harder, longer or both. When they could not persuade the other members to this view their reaction was to increase their own effort. In all of the recorded cases, it would appear this brought a degree of praise which seems to have resulted in increased status.

This is clearest in the case of one respondent, a printer, who after volunteering to work all night to complete an order, described his feelings, as "I was on a high for a week, from the way the others built me up ----- I began to put in more hours than any of the others ----- gradually other things dropped to me ----- I began to take the orders and share the work out --- but after a year of it, I was shattered ---- my missis put her foot down and in the end I left." Although this man no longer works within the Movement, his wife claims that "He is just as bad now with his union work!"

Dedication, Self Exploitation, Status

My interpretation is built on the cases studied, plus careful observation of individuals in a number of voluntary organisations, where the same syndrome may operate. The members most dedicated to the success of the Co-operative are those with the greatest tendency towards self-exploitation. This results in the short term in enhanced status and a greater degree of control in the Co-operative. This in turn satisfies the need for "concrete feedback on performance" and reinforces the practice.

In the long term however, the individual or individuals, "bum out" physically and emotionally. At this point any one of a number of pressures, of which family and health are the most common, can be instrumental in forcing the member to leave the Co-operative.

It is extremely difficult for other members to criticise this syndrome, which may well be all that is keeping the Co-operative going. "The work ethic", a concept with a much longer pedigree than "achievement motivation" is well-established even among some worker Co-operators! P.D. Anthony, in "The Ideology of Work" (1977) claims that both the "Protestant Ethic", "The Anarchists and Syndicalists" (p.98-100) and

"Marx" (p.141), reinforce the concept of the 'rightness of the work ethic'.

Conclusion

To sum up, I suggest:—

- (i) there are connections, between the achievement motive, status and the control of resources, and the clear case made by Anthony that this process is reinforced by political and religious doctrine;
- (ii) that self-exploitation is a major contributor to key worker loss and this in its turn can lead to the collapse of worker Co-operatives;
- (iii) a keener appreciation of social science and history might help worker Co-operators to understand the problems they face. Whether they will also give solutions to these problems is, perhaps, less certain.

Bibliography

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Note of the Author

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