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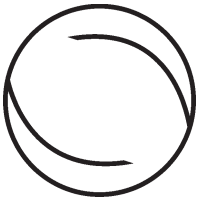


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Institutional Entrepreneurship as Embedded Agency: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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We are delighted to introduce this special issue of *Organization Studies*, the purpose of which is to develop a deeper understanding of the concept of institutional entrepreneurship and to offer new avenues for future research. This concept has been attracting considerable attention in recent years, as was reflected in the record number of papers that were submitted – the largest number that this journal has received for any of its special issues to date. As a result, the selection process has been stringent and we are very pleased to present the eight articles in this special issue, all of which survived the demanding review process. Each of these articles contributes important insights to our understanding of institutional entrepreneurship and, collectively, they provide an important benchmark for subsequent research on this phenomenon. In different ways, they explore how actors shape emerging institutions and transform existing ones despite the complexities and path dependences that are involved. In doing so, they shed considerable light on how institutional entrepreneurship processes shape – or fail to shape – the world in which we live and work

The term institutional entrepreneurship refers to the ‘activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones’ (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004: 657). The term is most closely associated with DiMaggio (1988: 14), who argued that ‘new institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources see in them an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly’. These actors – institutional entrepreneurs – ‘create a whole new system of meaning that ties the functioning of disparate sets of institutions together’ (Garud, Jain and Kumaraswamy, 2002). Institutional entrepreneurship is therefore a concept that reintroduces agency, interests and power into institutional analyses of organizations. It thus offers promise to researchers seeking to bridge what have come to be called the ‘old’ and ‘new’ institutionalisms in organizational analysis (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996).

We preface these papers with some of our own observations on institutional entrepreneurship stemming from its paradoxical nature. Research on institutions has tended to emphasize how organizational processes are shaped by institutional forces that reinforce continuity and reward conformity. In contrast, the literature on entrepreneurship tends to emphasize how organizational processes

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and institutions themselves are shaped by creative entrepreneurial forces that bring about change. The juxtaposition of these contradictory forces into a single concept generates a promising tension – one that opens up avenues for inquiry into how processes associated with continuity and change unfold, and, how such unfolding processes can be influenced strategically.

Accordingly, we first discuss the two core concepts underpinning the focus of this special issue, institutions and entrepreneurship, paying particular attention to how they emphasize aspects of social life that are seemingly at odds with one another. We then show how the apparent contradictions that arise when these concepts are combined into ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ relate to the paradox of embedded agency. In one way or another, embedded agency preoccupies all our contributors as they seek to address the challenges of change in institutional fields. Finally, we conclude with an overview of the articles, drawing attention to how they deal with various aspects of the paradox.

Overview

One way to understand the concept of institutional entrepreneurship is to review the two different streams of literature that underpin it – institutions and entrepreneurship. We, therefore, provide here an abbreviated description of these literatures – one intended to be indicative rather than exhaustive in nature.

Institutions

Institutions are commonly defined as ‘rules, norms, and beliefs that describe reality for the organization, explaining what is and is not, what can be acted upon and what cannot’ (Hoffman, 1999: 351). As taken-for-granted, culturally embedded understandings, they specify and justify social arrangements and behaviors, both formal and informal. Institutions can thus be usefully viewed as performance scripts that provide ‘stable designs for chronically repeated activity sequences,’ deviations from which are counteracted by sanctions or are costly in some manner (Jepperson, 1991: 145).

Organizations exist in an environment of institutions that exert some degree of pressure on them; institutional environments are ‘characterized by the elaboration of rules and requirements to which individual organizations must conform if they are to receive support and legitimacy’ (Scott, 1995:132). Institutions constrain behavior as a result of processes associated with three institutional pillars: the regulative, which guides action through coercion and threat of formal sanction; the normative, which guides action through norms of acceptability, morality and ethics; and the cognitive, which guides action through the very categories and frames by which actors know and interpret their world (Scott, 1995).

Institutional arrangements are fundamental to understanding organization because of the ways in which they tend to be reproduced without much reflection in practice (Langer and Newman, 1979), become taken for granted (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), and create path dependencies (David, 1985; Arthur, 1988). As

a result, organizational scholars, whether adopting economic, sociological, or cognitive perspectives, have traditionally focused on the critical role that institutions play in providing continuity and stability in organizational processes.

Among institutional economists, for instance, the appearance and maintenance of institutional arrangements are explained in terms of economizing on transaction costs (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1985). According to this perspective, institutional arrangements function to reduce uncertainty and to mitigate opportunistic behavior such that transaction costs associated with negotiating, monitoring and enforcing contracts between boundedly rational actors are reduced. Institutional arrangements, in turn, tend to reproduce – rather than change – existing social arrangements.

Sociological perspectives on institutional theory emphasize how institutional arrangements confer legitimacy, which is ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ (Suchman, 1995: 574). As a result, some actions within a particular institutional field come to be seen as legitimate (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and may even be ‘prescribed’, making it difficult for actors to deviate from them.

Literature on cognitive processes views actors as interpreters of ambiguous symbols and constructors of meaning. Thus mutually understood schemas, mental models, frames, and rules of typification channel the sense-making activities of individuals, who are caught in webs of significance of their own making (Geertz, 1973). Actors engage in organizing as a ‘consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviors,’ thereby translating ‘ongoing interdependent actions into sensible sequences that generate sensible outcomes’ (Weick, 1979: 3). With this view, institutions – shared cognitive frames – give meaning to inherently equivocal informational inputs by directing sense-making processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Moreover, the shared nature of these cognitive frames makes it difficult to stray far from them in either thought or deed.

In sum, the institutional literature, whether it focuses on economics, sociology or cognition, has largely focused on explaining the stability and persistence of institutions as well as isomorphic change in fields. More recently, however, there has been interest in how non-isomorphic change can be explained using an institutional lens (Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott, 2002), as well as what is the nature of the ‘institutional work’ needed to create, maintain, transform or disrupt institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Hardy and Maguire, 2007). Associated with this has also been an emphasis on processes of contestation and struggle within and over institutional fields (Garud and Rappa, 1994; Maguire and Hardy, 2006), which are viewed as political arenas in which power relations are maintained or transformed (Clemens and Cook, 1999; Lounsbury and Ventresca, 2003).

Entrepreneurship

To understand the critical role that entrepreneurship plays in the functioning of the modern economy, one need only refer to insights offered by Schumpeter (1942) or Kirzner (1997). For Schumpeter, entrepreneurship is an engine of

economic growth with the introduction of new technologies and the consequent potential for obsolescence serving to discipline firms in their struggle to survive perennial gales of creative destruction. The disruptions generated by creative destruction are exploited by individuals who are alert enough to exploit the opportunities that arise (Kirzner, 1997; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000).

From a sociological perspective, change associated with entrepreneurship implies deviations from some norm (Garud and Karnøe, 2001). Consequently, it is unlikely that entrepreneurial outcomes and processes will be readily embraced by actors committed to existing ways of doing things in a particular field. To be successful, then, entrepreneurial efforts have to gain legitimacy, an undertaking that is made more difficult as many social groups with heterogeneous interests are involved (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). Indeed, as novel outcomes from entrepreneurial efforts spread, more diverse social groups will be affected and possibly mobilized, and, in the process, new legitimacy battles will be spawned.

Lachmann's work (e.g. 1986) highlights the active creation rather than the mere discovery of entrepreneurial opportunities, and it is here that literature from cognitive psychology sheds light. Cognitive psychology notes that the genesis of novelty is frequently driven by 'bisociation', the intermingling of seemingly unrelated ideas from different knowledge domains (Koestler, 1964), and is facilitated by metaphors and analogies (Gentner, 1989, Tsoukas, 1991). Indeed, just as new technological artifacts may emerge from recombination of material resources, new insights may also emerge from recombination of intellectual resources, a process in which outcomes are indeterminate (Usher, 1954). As products of recombination, new ideas have to overcome problems of legitimacy that arise when categories are crossed (Zuckerman, 1999).

Common to all these perspectives on entrepreneurship is an appreciation that the emergence of novelty is not an easy or predictable process as it is ripe with politics and ongoing negotiation. What may appear to be new and valuable to one social group may seem threatening to another. Thus, as with institutional theory, the literature on entrepreneurship has also had to come to grips with issues of agency, interests and power, but it has approached these from the perspective of change rather than continuity.

Institutions and Entrepreneurship

Work on institutions has, then, traditionally focused on continuity although it increasingly acknowledges the importance of change. In contrast, the work on entrepreneurship has focused on change even as it acknowledges that change is difficult to accomplish. The juxtaposing of institutional and entrepreneurial forces into a single concept, institutional entrepreneurship, thus offers considerable promise for understanding how and why certain novel organizing solutions – new practices or new organizational forms, for example – come into existence and become well established over time.

Separately, each body of literature faces the limitations associated with the longstanding 'structure–agency' debate. Privileging structure over agency leads to causally deterministic models wherein some features of the social world

become reified and ‘structure’ others, voiding agency and creativity from humans, which, in the extreme, are assumed to be automaton-like processors of objective information rather than interpreters of intrinsically ambiguous symbolic inputs. In assuming that structures frustrate and, in the extreme, render agency by individual actors impossible, this work explains stasis and continuity; but it is less equipped to deal with change. Theories that privilege agency, on the other hand, often promote heroic models of actors and have been criticized for being ahistorical, decontextualized and universalistic. Moreover, by emphasizing intentionality, such theories give little attention to unintended consequences of action, which are important components of the reproduction of institutions.

Researchers from a wide range of disciplines have attempted to address these issues by offering theoretical perspectives that combine structure and agency in some form of mutuality constitutive duality. Giddens’s (1984) work on ‘structuration’ and Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of ‘habitus’ are, perhaps, the most well known (for a discussion, see Mutch [2007] in this issue). According to these researchers, structure is both the medium and outcome of social practices: instead of being in opposition, structure and agency presuppose each other and are mutually constitutive (Sewell, 1992).

The Paradox of Embedded Agency

Within institutional theory, this broader structure–agency debate is often referred to as the paradox of embedded agency (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Sewell, 1992; Holm, 1995; Seo and Creed, 2002). The theoretical puzzle is as follows: if actors are embedded in an institutional field and subject to regulative, normative and cognitive processes that structure their cognitions, define their interests and produce their identities (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Clemens and Cook, 1999), how are they able to envision new practices and then subsequently get others to adopt them? Dominant actors in a given field may have the power to force change but often lack the motivation; while peripheral players may have the incentive to create and champion new practices, but often lack the power to change institutions (Maguire, 2007, forthcoming).

One answer to this puzzle lies in conceptualizing agency as being distributed within the structures that actors themselves have created (Garud and Karnøe, 2003). Consequently, embedding structures do not simply generate constraints on agency but, instead, provide a platform for the unfolding of entrepreneurial activities. According to this view, actors are knowledgeable agents with a capacity to reflect and act in ways other than those prescribed by taken-for-granted social rules and technological artifacts (Schutz, 1973; Blumer, 1969; Giddens, 1984; Garud and Karnøe, 2003; Mutch [2007] in this issue). Agency is ‘the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal–relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations’ (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 970). Conceptualized in this way, institutional structures do not necessarily constrain agency but, instead, may

also serve as the fabric to be used for the unfolding of entrepreneurial activities.

Institutional entrepreneurship not only involves the 'capacity to imagine alternative possibilities', it also requires the ability 'to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment' if existing institutions are to be transformed (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 963). To qualify as institutional entrepreneurs, individuals must break with existing rules and practices associated with the dominant institutional logic(s) *and* institutionalize the alternative rules, practices or logics they are championing (Garud and Karnøe, 2001; Battilana, 2006). Thus strategies must be developed (Lawrence, 1999) to embed change in fields populated by diverse organizations, many of whom are invested in, committed to, and advantaged by existing structural arrangements. It is not surprising, therefore, that institutional entrepreneurship is viewed as an intensely political process (Fligstein, 1997; Seo and Creed, 2002; Garud et al. 2002).

Efforts at theorizing struggles over institutional arrangements have generated interest in the linguistic and symbolic aspects of power where the focus is on the meanings that humans attribute to a situation which, in turn, influences how they act in relation to it. Lukes (1974) focused on the power of meaning when he introduced his notion of a third dimension of power (Levy and Scully [2007] in this issue); an unobtrusive form of power (Hardy, 1985) to create particular meanings for desired outcomes (Pettigrew, 1979). In the context of institutional theory, the relationship between power and meaning has been addressed through the concept of 'translation' (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996; Creed, Scully & Austin, 2002; Zilber, 2002; 2006), which is premised on the idea that the meaning of practices are negotiated locally (Lounsbury and Crumley [2007] in this issue); with practices becoming institutionalized as meanings become shared and taken for granted across the wider field (see Zilber [2007] in this issue). This work challenges the idea that new practices are transmitted intact and unproblematically and, instead, emphasizes negotiations 'between various parties, and the reshaping of what is finally being transmitted' (Zilber, 2006: 283).

Efforts at shaping institutions will not go uncontested, and, therefore, these attempts can easily go awry (Garud et al. 2002). Consequently, institutional entrepreneurs must be skilled actors (see Perkmann and Spicer [2007] in this issue) who can draw on existing cultural and linguistic materials to narrate and theorize change in ways that give other social groups reasons to cooperate (Colomy, 1998; Fligstein, 2001a; Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings, 2002; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Child, Lu and Tsai [2007] in this issue). To this end, institutional entrepreneurs use 'framing' strategically (Khan, Munir and Willmott [2007] in this issue), articulating their change projects in particular ways to 'define the grievances and interests of aggrieved constituencies, diagnose causes, assign blame, provide solutions, and enable collective attribution processes to operate' (Snow and Benford, 1992: 150). Through particular frames, new practices can be justified as indispensable, valid, and appropriate (Rao, 1998). This, in turn, can help mobilize wide ranging coalitions of diverse groups and to generate the collective action necessary to secure support for and acceptance of institutional change (Fligstein, 2001; Wijen and Ansari [2007] in this issue).

An Introduction to the Papers in the Special Issue

The papers in this special issue explore in greater depth the major challenges facing institutional entrepreneurs that derive from the paradox of embedded agency. We briefly summarize the papers in the remainder of this introductory essay.

Does institutional entrepreneurship reveal a ‘strategic face of power’? Levy and Scully argue that it does. They begin by drawing from Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony to characterize institutional fields in terms of three inter-laced dimensions – material, discursive, and organizational – and as being, at best, contingently stabilized. They develop their framework further by casting institutional entrepreneurs as ‘Modern Princes’ – collective agents who organize and strategize counter-hegemonic challenges. From their Gramscian perspective, strategy can be fruitfully viewed as the mode of action by which institutional entrepreneurs engage with field structures in each of the three dimensions. They illustrate their framework by applying it to the field of HIV/AIDS drugs and insightfully analyze struggles over treatment availability and accessibility within North America and internationally.

Where do new practices come from? The article by Lounsbury & Crumley argues that the traditional literature has tended to ignore this question and the concept of ‘institutional entrepreneur’ has not necessarily helped in this regard since it tends to emphasize the role of powerful actors such as the state and professions in establishing new practices. In order to examine how new practices emerge from spatially dispersed, heterogeneous activity by actors with varying kinds and levels of resources, these authors explore the creation of active money management practice in the US mutual fund industry. Combining institutional insights with those from the practice literature, they develop a process model of new practice creation that presents a more distributed notion of institutional entrepreneurship in which actors are distributed across multiple dimensions including space, status, and time but, at the same time, united by shared cultural beliefs that help define the field.

What is the role of powerful actors in bringing about change? Child, Lu and Tsai’s study of the development of China’s environmental protection system sheds some light on this question. They show that the state was the primary institutional entrepreneur in a relatively ‘top down’ process, despite the fact that the field was, in many respects, unstructured with issues, field boundaries, roles and functions of actors being continuously redefined. The ability of such actors to conceive of new ideas may stem from their access to other fields or different experiences in less privileged parts of the field. In China, for example, the development of the environmental protection system coincided with the rise of international environmental concerns, meaning that actors in China learned from international experience and received international aid. In addition, changes were occurring with economic reforms that facilitated administrative decentralization. Thus a number of other institutional fields had an influence on the development of practices in this particular field.

What is the role of discourse in institutional entrepreneurship? The article by Zilber uses a study of a high-tech conference held in Israel after the 2000

dot.com crash to examine how a shared story of the crisis that reinforced the established institutional order was constructed. At the same time, the same actors were telling separate 'counter-stories' calling for changes in the institutional order. Institutional entrepreneurship thus emerges from a complex process in which both collaboration and contestation were evident. Stories were both the medium of and a resource for institutional entrepreneurship; used to protect vested interests in the current institutional order and to bring about change. In this way, the study emphasizes the complexity and duality of institutional entrepreneurship, involving simultaneous efforts at maintaining and disrupting the institutional order.

What are the unintended consequences of institutional entrepreneurship? Khan et al. explore these questions in their study of a project to de-institutionalize child labor in the world's largest football manufacturing cluster in Sialkot, Pakistan. They find that 'success' in eliminating child labor came at a high price, especially for the women stitchers, the majority of whom dropped out of the workforce, often plunging their families into abject poverty. In the 'post-colonial' setting of Sialkot, the values of the West were unquestioningly privileged in framing, interpreting and addressing the issue of child labor. This investment of power in discourses is what they feel institutional theorists should focus upon. In other words, it is not the imposition of a particular 'moral' or 'ethical' template per se that is most important. Rather it is the 'taken for grantedness of this moral necessity' that requires examination from institutional theorists. The implication is for institutional theorists to pay particular attention to the operation of power in instances of institutional entrepreneurship.

How do new institutional arrangements emerge in the face of the difficulties associated with organizing collective action? Wijen and Ansari point out that these particular challenges are often overlooked in the literature on institutional change and entrepreneurship. To fill this gap, they introduce regime theory from international relations and show how its theoretical insights can be usefully combined with findings in the literatures on institutional entrepreneurship and inter-organizational collaboration. They develop a framework for understanding institutional change in fields where actors face collective action challenges, and identify several drivers of 'collective' institutional entrepreneurship. To illustrate the utility of their framework, they apply it to one of the most conspicuous – and important – collective action challenges of our times, global climate policy, highlighting how key drivers contributed to the emergence and entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol.

What is the nature of the various activities undertaken by institutional entrepreneurs, and are different skills associated with them? The paper by Perkmann and Spicer addresses these questions with a study of the emergence and diffusion of the 'Euroregion', a new organizational form for coordinating policies by local authorities situated close to European borders. The authors identify three distinct types of projects in which institutional entrepreneurs engage – interactional, technical and cultural – as well as the different skills associated with each. Their case study suggests a temporal pattern in the importance and predominance of one type of project as compared to the others, with the implication that the skills necessary for successful institutional entrepreneurship change over the course of a

given institutionalization project. The authors also note that institutional entrepreneurs can embed their innovations more widely by switching their efforts from local to broader fields as the institutionalization project evolves.

How is it that some actors escape the constraints of their institutional environment to become the instigators of change? The article by Mutch explores this issue from a critical realist perspective by drawing on the work of Margaret Archer, 2003, which shows how individuals are reflexive in a range of different ways. Mutch suggests that one particular form of reflexivity – that of the ‘autonomous reflexive’ who reflects in relative isolation from the concerns of other actors – is more likely to lead actors to experience conflict with surrounding structures and, therefore, to develop ideas and seek opportunities for change. These ideas are applied to a study of an institutional entrepreneur who transferred practices from outside the field to develop a new managerial system for public houses in the UK, showing how this particular form of reflexivity led the institutional entrepreneur to collide with existing structures and pursue change.

Each paper is far richer than the brief summaries that we have offered in this introductory essay. Individually and collectively, they draw attention to an exciting research agenda that opens up when we explore the notion of institutional entrepreneurship.

Note

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