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Streams of inconsistent institutional influences: Middle managers as carriers of multiple identities

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ABSTRACT

Conceiving institutional effects as occurring within the boundaries of predefined institutional environments, spaces or fields leaves little leeway for understanding transnational phenomena of interaction, competition and overlapping jurisdiction of ideas, norms and regulations of multiple origin. I propose here the metaphor of intersecting institutional streams, which influence social actors due to their different origin, strength and fluidity. Thanks to a new understanding of the interaction between roles, institutionalized identities and the self, I refer to individuals not as cultural and institutional dopes, but as able, in varying degrees, to participate in multiple cultural traditions and to maintain distinctive and inconsistent action frames. I collected quantitative information on 418 Italian middle managers, working for local and international firms in Italy, and qualitative information on 113 of them. The majority in international firms enacted Anglo-Saxon identities, and more so in US and British firms; hybridizations occurred with positively perceived aspects of Italian institutions. The majority in Italian firms enacted a traditional Italian identity. Enactment was dependent on characteristics of the role (hierarchical level, international interconnectedness) and on the degree of identification with the international firm's culture. The latter was spurred by the global integrated use of HRM practices.

KEYWORDS

institutional streams ▪ institutional theory ▪ international HRM practices ▪ international management ▪ multiple identities

Recent contributions to institutional literature have called for an 'integrative perspective' which should combine the capacity to explain both the transnational diffusion of standard management practices and the enduring specificity of such practices due to their embeddedness in highly local/national contexts (Geppert et al., 2003). The call is for a going beyond the either/or of the convergence/divergence dichotomy (Tempel & Walgenbach, 2006), and for a more balanced perspective which doesn't assume that 'societal effects are always the dominant ones' (Mueller, 1994: 422).

A promising way of tackling this issue is to consider social spaces at the intersection of different institutional fields, 'areas of overlap and confluence between institutional spheres' (Scott, 2001: 188), which offer actors opportunities for critical distance and strategic manipulation, and are particularly conducive to the creation of new organizational forms through 'bricolage' (Campbell, 1997), or through the choice and recombination of institutional rules of multiple origin (Clemens & Cook, 1999).

In order to identify such generative potential of intersecting institutional spheres, attention should be directed towards phenomena inherently multivocal and contested across contexts. Such a phenomenon concerns, for example, the M-form (Whittington & Mayer, 2000), but also institutionalized managerial identities (Stewart et al., 1994; Koot, 2004). These, considered as a set of assumptions, value-laden elements and cognitions, are both a traditional avenue for studying cross-cultural differences and hence local specificity (Hofstede, 1980; Laurent, 1983; Trompenaars, 1993) and, at the same time, an 'awkward territory with multiple interfaces, stakeholders and flows of influence' (Jeffcutt, 2004: 1) which has become increasingly transnational.

I present here the results of a study in which I accepted the call for an integrative approach, exploring how actors react to and enact multiple institutional jurisdictions when national, local and transnational social systems overlap. I investigated identities, role expectations and interaction patterns of middle managers at the intersection of their national business system (NBS; Morgan et al., 2001) and of the global institutional fields of multinational companies (Rosenzweig & Singh, 1991; Mueller, 1994). The study concentrates on middle managers belonging to the same NBS, the Italian, but exposed to the demands, constraints and choices (Stewart, 1976, 1982) typical of international firms.

I show here how and why these middle managers are affected by local, national and transnational institutional effects with regard to the understanding and enactment of their role. I explain why some subsidiary managers in international firms enact an identity which is more in tune with local expectations and why others develop an identity which is in line with

transnational institutional expectations. Highly specific parent-country regulative, normative and mimetic effects from the headquarters of the multinational firms interact with both highly specific, local-country and transnational institutional effects to define the hybridized work domains and identities of the investigated middle managers. In this work I show both the emergence of an Anglo-Saxonized transnational professional domain of HRM and the coexistence of different transnational social spaces according to characteristics of the NBS of the headquarters' locations.

Institutional theory at the interstices: Beyond levels of analysis

Globalization is a process which exposes social actors to a wide array of interactions and institutional influences, that intermingle in defining the identities and cognitive resources actors can have access to, in order to pursue their objectives and to be integrated in their social contexts. In the tension between the local and the global, the local cannot be conceived as autonomous anymore; the local has a meaning as a domain in which various influences converge and assume a specific, maybe unique, configuration (Hannerz, 2001). Continuous transformation is the probable outcome of the 'constant state of tension between convergence and divergence' (Smith & Meiksins, 1995: 255). National culture, the NBS or institutions related to a specific organizational field, are only one of different, potential identity-strands, and among them, opposite cultural and institutional templates can coexist. What is relevant are not the levels of analysis, but the appropriateness of these elements in order to explain the emergence of different identities and behaviours.

In order to tackle this issue, I consider here institutional influences as streams in which actors in specific contexts are dipped in to various degrees. The metaphor of the stream is better suited than those of environment, space or field to help grasp conceptually the above discussed phenomena related to globalization – we can think of the confluence and blending of streams, but not of the confluence and blending of institutional environments or of organizational fields.

Streams of institutional influence can be inherently normative, cognitive and/or regulative, and their source can be very close to the actors involved (e.g. for micro-institutions and for the features of a NBS in which the action context may be embedded) or very distant (e.g. for the features of the NBS of a foreign multinational firm, or for the norms of a global professional community). The streams are of various fluidity, depending on

a series of factors. Streams made of ideas are very fluid and can easily pass national borders (Hannan et al., 1995; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), while the transfer of regulations may represent a more contested terrain (Henisz et al., 2005) and norms tend to stick more to the context in which they evolved and need to pass through some kind of socialization process (Selznick, 1949). Institutional streams may also have different strengths. Those which combine cognitive, normative and coercive elements could be stronger than streams which rely on only one of these contents (Munir, 2002). Streams that have their origin in countries displaying a more central position in the global economic context may be stronger than those generating in less central economies due to 'dominance effects' (Smith & Meiksins, 1995).

The actors themselves are equipped with different sets of capabilities and resources to sustain their efforts to float on these currents or even to change their direction, either by building dams to protect their vested interest or by channelling two or more currents into a 'hybrid' one. The resources are their skills and personalities, but also the roles and the identities they have access to. Some actors may be submerged by the strength of some currents, and become 'lost in translation' (the title of a recent movie on globalization by Sofia Coppola) and losers in the globalization game, some other may even be in a position to consider national identity as an object of reflexivity and actively and creatively construct it as a symbolic resource (Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003).

I follow here DiMaggio (1997: 268), portraying the capacity of individuals 'to participate in multiple cultural traditions, even when those traditions contain inconsistent elements', and 'to maintain distinctive and inconsistent action frames'. I consider managers at the intersection of multiple social systems as possible bearers of multiple institutionalized identities. I acknowledge that such intersections can produce purposeful agency which attempts to alter the regulative conditions in which it is embedded, for example, the phenomenon of institutional entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, I consider reflexivity as variable and affected both by the cognitive and emotional limitations of individual actors within the networks of their daily co-operations and by the normative and emotional processes of identification to which they are subject. Therefore, I focus on the ecology of institutionalized identities, produced by processes of overlapping and intersection.

Such a viewpoint is offered by Elsbach's (2002) treatment of micro-institutions, whose conceptualization I use to interpret institutions at the actors' level, regardless of levels of analysis. As taken-for-granted beliefs micro-institutions are shared norms, rules and cognitions, negotiated in the networks of interacting actors, where processes of individual adaptation, emotional identification, cognitive manipulation and social influence all interact in defining stability and change.

Elsbach's (2002) conception of micro-institutions helps us to ground a clear distinction between the concepts of role, identity and self. Institutionalized identities are something different than roles. They can be considered taken-for-granted value institutions, and represent a cognitive, normative and emotional antecedent of specific role enactments. Roles can be considered as resources (Baker & Faulkner, 1991), but only insofar as institutionalized identities exist, to which social actors can refer to, in order to negotiate their effective role enactment (see for a similar conception, Alexander, 1977; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Institutionalized identities get emotionally attached to the self and need to be redefined by the person if the role requires a different identity for successfully dealing in it. Nevertheless, as emotionally patterned institutions, identities are also different from the self, which represents the perceived unity of the individual, and deeply held cultural values, which affect unconsciously that very perception. Individuals selectively assume attitudes from the global without giving up their local identities (Freeman, 2003); they are an original assembly of different cultural currents that they have crossed (Kallinikos, 2003).

Figure 1 presents a summary of the previous arguments. The relationships between the self, the roles, which actors can occupy, and the identities they can enact, is influenced by variably institutionalized streams of ideas, norms, rules and regulations, as conceptualized by institutional theory, as well as by deeply held values typical of national cultures, conceived within the cross-cultural perspective as a programming of the mind. The influence of national culture, as passed down through early socialization and its relationship with the formation of personality (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), should be stronger and the imprint more difficult to change, but at the same time more restricted to the relationship between personality, its resources and the self, which is considered as the reflective personality of the individual. Therefore, in Figure 1 the self is only analytically separated by personality and deeply held values, in order to better distinguish between conscious and unconscious processes, which have too often been confused in cross-cultural and institutional literature.

Individuals negotiate the daily roles, variously incorporate them into their selves, and the very formation of their selves is influenced by the roles occupied. But individuals also use available institutionalized identities as symbols, in order to support the negotiation of roles in daily interactions. Such identities, as value institutions, are not neutral but are also emotionally attached to the self, so that, even if we can conceive of individuals as carrying multiple identities variously attached to their selves, the extent to which they can indeed switch from one role to the next depends on their cognitive and emotional resources. Moreover, the identities social actors can

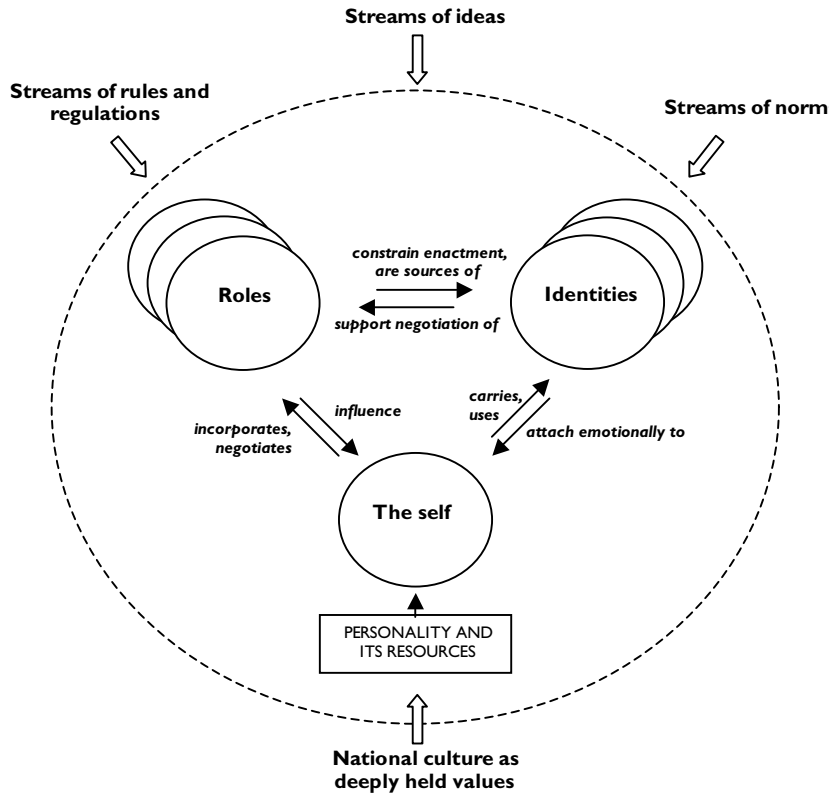

Figure 1 The self, identities and roles within institutional and cultural streams

enact depend on the roles they occupy. Role expectations can powerfully constrain or hinder the enactment of certain identities, but new roles, exposing actors to novel interaction partners and expectations, can also be sources for discovering the existence of previously unknown identities or for defining new hybrid ones – 'changes in *interaction* may precipitate changes in *interpretation*' (Campbell, 1997: 17, emphasis in original).

In the present study I focus my attention on the relationship between identities and roles as influenced by streams of institutional contents. The impact of personality and deeply held values have not been taken into consideration.

Before presenting the research design I portray the institutionalized identities and the streams of institutional influence taken into consideration in order to explain the investigated middle managers' understanding of their own work and the identities enacted by them.

Identities and streams of institutional influence

Identities with which to identify and/or to use for their daily interactions are offered to managers by different sources. Such identities can be societal institutions with varying degrees of territorial sway or intraorganizational, micro-institutions of local to transnational jurisdiction.

In the first case, managerial identities are considered as societal institutions (Stewart et al., 1994; Delmestri & Walgenbach, 2005). Management has diverse meanings, carries different constraints and is a distinct vehicle for action in different countries (Livian & Burgoyne, 1997; Sparrow & Hiltrop, 1997). Bournois and Livian (1997) have shown that European middle managers share some common understandings but differ in the way they are bounded and supported by the institutionalization of their role. Depending on institutional effects deriving from the education system, the system of industrial relations, and from specific normative expectations, the professional identity of the middle managers and their legitimacy, are based on either the capacity to personally solve technical problems (specifically German and Italian) or to demonstrate more managerial-like competencies (specifically British), whose identity is based on an idea of management as a mysterious mastery supported by the necessary personality traits and social skills. Moreover, in Italian and German firms, career paths tend to be chimney-like, that is, limited to single functional areas, while the Anglo-Saxon institutionalization of management, as a social art performed by talented individuals, goes hand in hand with the institution of formal inter-functional career paths, the necessity to distinguish early on managerial high potentials to be assigned to a 'talent pool' and the development of methods to perform this task (such as Assessment Centres run by trained psychologists). In other words, the specific institutionalization of management in the Anglo-Saxon world is likely to co-evolve with the development of formal HRM instruments and with the professionalization of HR departments (Baron et al., 1986). To the contrary, potential managers in Italy are usually discovered by their immediate superiors and appointed following their suggestion; technical problem solving plays a dominant role in the selection process both in Italy and in Germany.

In the second case we confront the paradox of institutionalized managerial identities as intraorganizational *and* transnational institutions – 'inter-societal/intra-firm' using Mueller's words (1994: 418). Multinational firms are carriers of societal institutions which have their origins in the country of the headquarters' location (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Kostova & Roth, 2002). But multinational firms can also carry transnational (or even global) institutions (Strang & Meyer, 1993; Djelic, 1998). Transnational institutions

are those which are valid beyond the national boundaries of a specific state and also beyond the institutional space of multinational firms which have their headquarters in the same state. Transnational institutions exist if more than one multinational firm incorporates an element whose legitimacy only derives from its very adoption in the intraorganizational field. Such incorporated and globalized institutional elements, regardless of their historical origin, lose their foundation in specific societal fields and become transnational.

Almond and colleagues (2003) show how societal-level institutions are carried cross-nationally by the practices of international firms. They discovered that most US international firms, following the headquarters' blueprint, make use of internal labour markets for their managerial talent, attracting graduates for long, fast-track, internal interfunctional careers, developing them through mentoring, career planning, early exposure to managerial responsibility and possibilities for overseas assignments. They identified a 'distinctly Anglo-Saxon variant' of HRM practices supporting internal labour markets for large companies in Great Britain and the United States.

Gooderham et al. (1998) illustrate that affiliates of US-American multinationals, while showing some adaptation, are partly immune from the specific national contexts in which they operate, and point to the innovative role which they could play becoming agents of HRM change.

The research design

The research design is aimed at understanding the impact of diverse institutional effects (local, national, transnational) and interaction patterns on the way roles are enacted by Italian middle managers in different contexts. I want to understand if local and transnational institutional effects, with regard to the understanding and enactment of their role by these middle managers exist and why. What could the reasons be for local managers in international firms to enact an identity more in tune with either local or transnational institutional expectations?

The point of departure is a survey of 418 Italian middle managers working in Italy for local (19 firms/144 questionnaires) and international companies (22 Anglo-Saxon firms/158 questionnaires, and 31 non-Anglo-Saxon firms/116 questionnaires). The 72 firms had their headquarters located in the US, Italy, France, Germany, UK, Japan, Holland, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, and Austria; most of the Italian companies were multinationals or active on international markets. The sample was selected with the aim to include a high variety of industries and, for the non-Anglo-Saxon

groups of international firms, a high variety of firms from different countries, as this group also functioned as a control group. I considered middle managers, those managers with direct responsibility over subordinates, but I avoided including general managers. The quantitative survey questionnaire was designed by transforming the interview guideline used by Stewart et al. (1994) accordingly (see Arduini & Delmestri, 2005). I use the survey data for selecting managers with different profiles to be involved in the qualitative analysis that I present here.

The qualitative study is based on information on 113 managers. I added three open questions to the survey questionnaire which 52 managers answered (26 from Anglo-Saxon firms, 20 from non-Anglo-Saxon international firms, and six from Italian firms). Then 61 interviews (32 to managers of Anglo-Saxon firms, 20 to managers of non-Anglo-Saxon international firms, and nine to managers of Italian firms) were conducted, for which I adapted the Stewart et al. (1994) interview guideline.

The latter was used for measuring the independent variables derived from the theory, that is, the scope of international contacts required by the job, the presence and significance for the respondent of HRM practices (selection, evaluation, interfunctional careers, management education, mentoring-coaching programmes, diversity policies, individual reward systems), the perception of organizational and national culture, the identification with the different cultures to which respondents were and had been exposed, the career paths, the education and the nationality of previous employers. I also interviewed eight HR managers in order to obtain background information on their firms, their firms' history, and their HRM practices. I stopped interviewing HR managers as soon as I reached a situation of theoretical saturation.

For data reduction, codification and analysis, looking for both factual and value statements, I followed Miles and Huberman (1984). I grouped the responses according to each manager's quantitative managerial profile. The managerial profile was calculated using our survey data through an index intended to order the managers from the most Anglo-Saxon to the most Italian in orientation. The index is based on the face validity of the survey questions, each derived from previous extensive qualitative research and tested during the interview rounds (see for details, Arduini & Delmestri, 2005). Respondents were then sorted and managers classified in the following profiles: *Italian+*, those with the most Italian conception and enactment of the role, that is, those present in the first quartile; *Italian*, immediately below the median; *Anglo-Saxon*, immediately above the median; *Anglo-Saxon+*, those with the most Anglo-Saxon conception and enactment of the role, that is, those present in the last quartile. I also defined sub-groups in

the analysis considering whether the manager had already held a position in an Anglo-Saxon firm previous to the present appointment.

Theoretical expectations were derived by applying the theory presented in the previous section and by referring it to the specific contexts of the Italian NBS and the subsidiaries of Anglo-Saxon and non-Anglo-Saxon international firms. In particular, with regard to the Italian NBS, one should consider the points of relevance for the research question at hand discussed below (for an extensive treatment of the Italian NBS, see Ranci, 1987; Gagliardi & Turner, 1993; and Delmestri, 2002).

In Italy, trust relations are institutionalized as informal personal relations supported by local and regional cultural traditions (Regini, 1997; Delmestri, 1998, 2002), formal regulations tend to be weak (Ranci, 1987) and the family remains an important 'structuring' idea (Gagliardi & Turner, 1993). Therefore, while for instance in the United States HR managers were able to pursue a professional agenda successfully, in Italy a weak professional status of their role prevails and the occupational field is contested by lawyers and former state officials (Sparrow & Hiltrop, 1997). Moreover, the position of Italy within the international division of labour is considered to be relatively marginal (Paci, 1982). These aspects considered, one could expect the influence of Italian norms, ideas and rules to be salient mainly for managers working for Italian firms, while managers working for international firms may experience streams of stronger institutional influences wrapped into more coherent packages of cognitive, normative and regulative/coercive elements.

For the US-American corporate field the influence can be considered as relatively straightforward. US-international firms rely on both explicit and implicit emphasis on corporate culture, tend to centralize and formalize practices and, building on the dominant position of the USA within the global economy, tend to allow their subsidiaries the autonomy which is deemed sufficient to adapt them to local conditions (Edwards & Ferner, 2002).

For the non-Anglo-Saxon corporate fields the influence is more complex. Non-Anglo-Saxon international firms export their corporate culture and impose management practices to a lesser extent because they lack the support of an internationally relevant HRM professional field, which is strongly influenced by Anglo-Saxon practices (Almond et al., 2003). Non-Anglo-Saxon international firms are carriers of institutions of mixed origin: on the one hand they may carry practices and attitudes from their NBS (Harzing & Sorge, 2003), and on the other hand they carry global HR management practices (Gooderham et al., 1999), supported by the global US-dominated field of HR consultants and managers. According to Almond and colleagues (2003: 7) 'the gap between US and other MNCs appears to

have narrowed in recent years as a result of imitation of American practice'. Also according to other authors (Ferner & Quintanilla, 1998; Ferner et al., 2001; Tempel, 2001), continental European firms have adopted Anglo-Saxon HRM practices in the process of internationalization.

Triggers of non-local role enactment: Job characteristics, identification, HRM practices, and career experiences

In the survey data I found that, regardless of the fact that all of the studied managers shared the same nationality (Italian), and the same place of work (Italy), their attitudes, beliefs and role enactments ranged from traditional Italian ones, which emphasize impersonal technical mastery, to Anglo-Saxon ones, which lay emphasis on social interpersonal skills based on personal style. Managers working for international firms, and especially for Anglo-Saxon firms, tended to display an Anglo-Saxon conception of management, while those working for Italian firms displayed an Italian conception of management, regardless of whether they had or had not previously held positions in Anglo-Saxon firms. Nevertheless, a considerable minority of managers working in Italian firms espoused an Anglo-Saxon conception of management, and at the same time a sizeable minority of managers working for Anglo-Saxon firms espoused an Italian conception (see Figure 2).

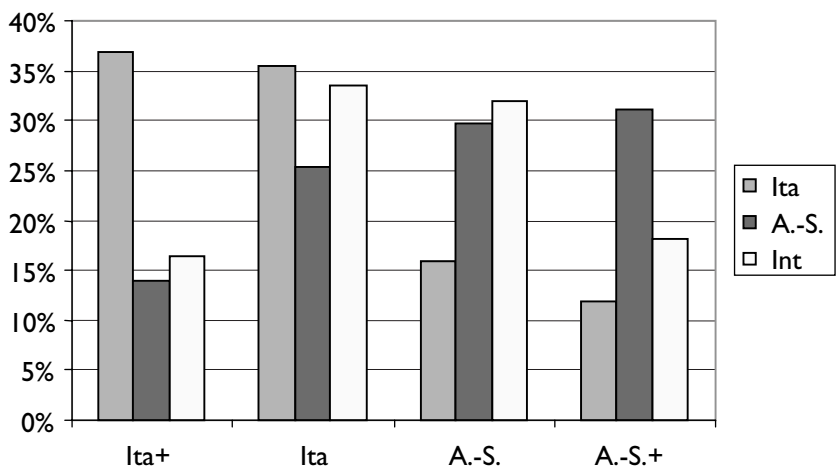

Figure 2 Italian managers displaying distinct profiles according to firm nationality (*N* = 418)

Why do the majority of Italian managers working for international firms espouse an Anglo-Saxon conception of management? For instance (all interview excerpts have been translated from the Italian),

> Ineffective managerial behaviour is to work in a technical way. A coach is the one who helps to get results.
>
> (Manager 213)

> I am not an expert buyer, I have to lead a team; that's why the climate here is good. My employees feel autonomous and not controlled in what they do: but I expect results! Interpersonal relationships are important. The next occupant of my position will be a person who has spent all of his career as a buyer and the people below are worried that he will not play the role of manager. My people got used to a chief who dealt with the managerial part and with the relationships with the other offices.
>
> (Manager 221)

And, conversely, why do a minority of them still espouse an Italian conception? In Figure 3, I show the emerging theoretical model for explaining the enactment of an Anglo-Saxon profile by Italian managers, and discuss its limits, specifically in relation to the understanding of the Italian profile.

From the survey data, not surprisingly, it emerged that hierarchical level explained the enactment of an Anglo-Saxon profile (Arduini & Delmestri, 2005) – already Katz and Kahn (1966) demonstrated that technical skills are important mainly for lower-level jobs. Our qualitative data show, additionally, that in Anglo-Saxon firms the extent of contacts that managers have with foreign colleagues (both locally and internationally) and especially with colleagues from the headquarters, is a trigger for their Anglo-Saxon role enactment. The intensity of contacts depended on the position of the subsidiary within the corporate network (for instance in an Italian subsidiary, which played the role of the European headquarters, the US-influence was particularly evident). All of the managers enacting an Anglo-Saxon role had extensive contacts with foreign colleagues, but half of the managers enacting an Italian role had few international contacts. Therefore having extensive contacts with foreign colleagues seems a necessary but not sufficient condition for Italian managers working for an Anglo-Saxon firm in Italy to enact an Anglo-Saxon role. The possible causal explanations of this relation can be seen both in the availability of role models and in the necessity to deal with diverse and distant colleagues. The following interview quotation exemplifies this:

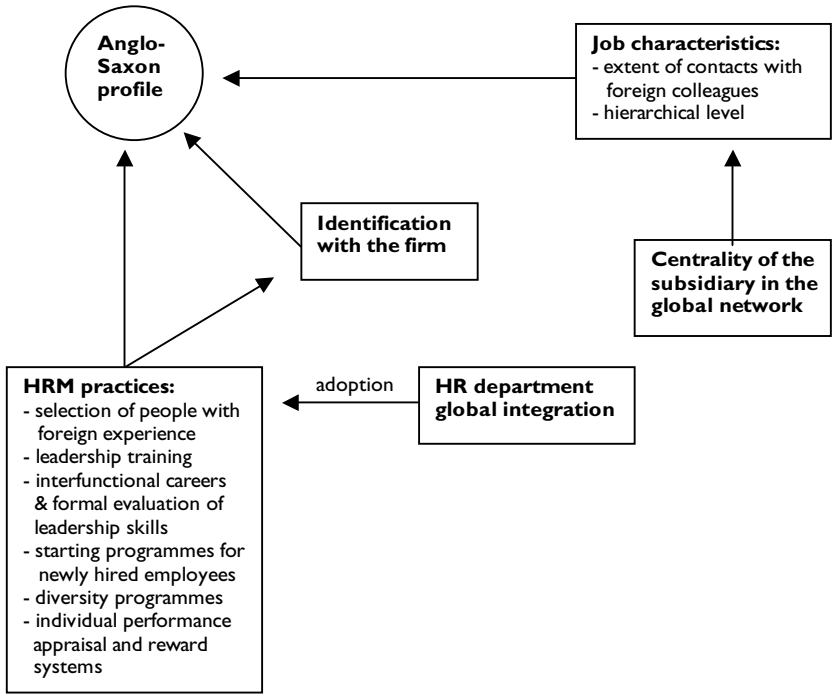

Figure 3 Factors explaining Anglo-Saxon role enactment by managers in Anglo-Saxon firms

> Every day I have contacts with other groups abroad in order to understand how I can avoid duplicating activities. I have come to understand that the world is different from what you would expect. It's necessary to review your own way of thinking and there are no fixed standpoints. I worked on a project with 12 different nationalities! It is therefore easier now to understand the points of view of other people and to learn how to get out of trouble in situations alien to what you are accustomed.
>
> (Manager 214)

Through our interview questions I tried to understand whether the respondents had developed an identification with the firm, its corporate culture, and/or the culture of the headquarters' location (US or British in our sample). Through increasingly open and direct questions I arrived at the point where I could ask which of the two cultures (the Italian or the US/British) was 'better', a kind of politically incorrect question, but nobody challenged its legitimacy (see for examples, Box 1).

Box 1 Identification with the Anglo-Saxon culture by managers in Anglo-Saxon firms

'It is right to preserve your identity, you shouldn't denaturalize it for the sake of the company, but . . . after so much time it becomes your way of being' (Manager 228)

'I had the constant feeling not to have the technical knowledge required for what I was going to manage, which is a bad feeling at first. But I never tried to acquire technical knowledge. I never tried to do their jobs, to substitute myself for the people who, thanks to their technical knowledge, did help me. At the beginning I had a feeling of inadequacy. What is important is to know how to define objectives, to push them, take the right decisions at the right time. And the fun is precisely to move into areas that you do not know' (M. 216)

'If you want to become a top manager you have to Americanize yourself because the risk is that you are unable to communicate. I have been influenced in a conscious way, because, as I know the American culture, I decided to voluntarily adopt behaviours which are typical of this culture, and also in an unconscious way because one is embedded in such a deep way that sometimes one uses English words instead of Italian ones' (M. 219)

'American culture is better if you conceive it as decentralization and a higher responsibility and greater autonomy for people. I prefer the idea that the boss is at the service of the employees, what I consider to be American culture, because everybody helps the others and I know where I am going' (M. 215)

'Surely American culture has something more, diversity, which needs to be supported' (M. 218)

All of the managers who enacted a highly Anglo-Saxon role ('Anglo-Saxon+' in Figure 2) identified themselves with the Anglo-Saxon corporate/national culture and two out of four of the managers who enacted a more moderate Anglo-Saxon role ('Anglo-Saxon' in Figure 2) didn't identify. But only one-third of the managers enacting an Italian role identified themselves with Italian institutionalized practices, preferring them over the Anglo-Saxon ones; in other words, two-thirds identified themselves with Anglo-Saxon institutions, although they displayed an Italian profile. This testifies to a wider reach of Anglo-Saxon corporate institutions. Our small amount of data on managers working for Italian firms but who had previously held positions in British or US-American firms (seven written answers to open questions) underscore this supposition. Respondents consider themselves as having been positively influenced by their experience in a foreign firm and emphasize aspects such as consensual and open organizational culture (four), open and lateral information flows and respectful cooperation (four), team work (three), results-orientation, competition and motivation (three), effective working methods (two), meritocracy in transparent career

decisions and performance appraisal (two), well-grounded management education (two) and others.

Corporate institutions and US-American or British institutions were not perceived as different entities, something which is different from what I discovered in non-Anglo-Saxon international firms, where corporate institutions and the institutions of the headquarters' location were mostly perceived as distinct. In most cases Italian practices were depicted in negative terms as characterized by formalism, high reliance on hierarchical power relations and lacking in method (see for examples, Box 2) – with this negative portrayal supporting identification with Anglo-Saxon institutions. Nevertheless, in various other cases the identification with the British or US-American institutions was hybridized by the inclusion of elements of the Italian institutional context, which were conceived as positive and supporting effectiveness, such as creativity, lack of formalism, a more thorough approach, or warmer interpersonal relations.

Identification with the firm was also spurred by the adoption, on the side of the subsidiary, of an extensive array of HRM practices. These practices were either directly 'downloaded', both in figurative and literal terms, from the corresponding HR office at the headquarters, or from global best practices data bases, or were more proactively adapted to local conditions. According to one HR manager nowadays the pendulum of centralization/decentralization in her firm had swung towards tempered centralization (80 percent global and 20 percent local content). The only Anglo-Saxon firm in our sample, whose mean managers' profile was Italian (in terms of Figure 2), had according to its HR Director, a decentralized HR

Box 2 Negative perception of the Italian culture by managers working for Anglo-Saxon firms

'Here there are no rigid hierarchies as in Italy' (Manager 228)

'Italian culture is characterized by an old style leadership: "I am the boss, you are the worker". The advantage of the Americans is that they are more direct, less Macchiavellian' (M. 0)

'In comparison to Italian firms, here there is great freedom in management by objectives, there is more space of manoeuvre' (M. 213)

'The company is more open to contacts at different levels. It is easy to have contacts with the Vice President, a thing which does not exist in Italian firms' (M. 214)

'The place is very dynamic so that hierarchy is not so present: at work we call each other by first names [informal in Italian]. In Italian firms (like FIAT) you cannot find all this dynamism and the hierarchy, sometimes, is perceived as a burden by the people' (M. 216)

policy, where the Italian branch was expected to freely define its HRM practices. Interestingly, the only Italian firm in our sample whose mean managers' profile was Anglo-Saxon (in terms of Figure 2) had 'stolen' all of its leading team of HR managers and specialists directly from a well-known US-American corporation.

Three-quarters of the managers whose previous international experience (be it study, travel, internships, work) concurred in their selection, enacted Anglo-Saxon roles. The purposeful selection of individuals who already have, in various contexts, relevant cross-cultural and interpersonal experiences, seems also to be a specific Anglo-Saxon practice, which was not as evident in the other international firms. All of the managers, except one, enacting an Anglo-Saxon role have had the possibility to attend leadership courses, most of the time also abroad. Three-quarters of the managers enacting an Italian role have not had this possibility. All of the managers who, newly hired, were supported by an introductory starting programme, and/or by mentors or coaches, enacted an Anglo-Saxon role, while all of those who have not had this possibility enacted an Italian role. All of the women who highlighted the importance of diversity programmes for their own career enacted Anglo-Saxon roles. However, individual performance appraisal and reward systems are so widespread in Anglo-Saxon firms that managers emphasizing their importance enact both Anglo-Saxon and Italian roles.

I would now like to examine the reasons why managers working for non-Anglo-Saxon international firms assumed an intermediate position between managers working for Italian and those working for Anglo-Saxon firms, and the underlying grounds for either Anglo-Saxon or Italian role-enactment. The complexity of the emerging theoretical relations is in this case higher (see Figure 4).

Apart from identification with Anglo-Saxon and Italian institutionalized identities for these managers it was also relevant to identify with the institutions of the respective headquarters (whether German, French, or Dutch) or with a set of institutions perceived as being transnational/global and often understood as very close to the Anglo-Saxon one. When such institutions were perceived as being transnational, they were considered as having a better balance between business and human relations than the US-American ones in particular.

Although previous experience in a British or US firm does not necessarily lead to the enactment of an Anglo-Saxon role, it only increases the probability for this to happen, it adds to the probability that a manager espouses at least from an ideal point of view an Anglo-Saxon conception of management as grounded in the ability to manage people from a social rather

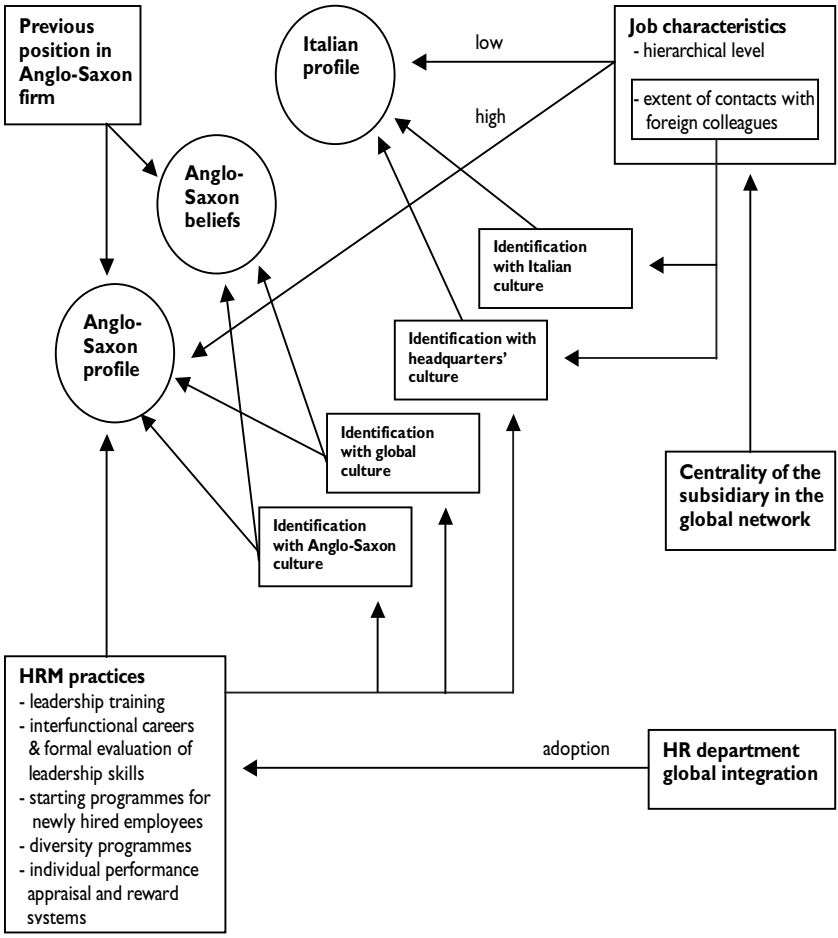

Figure 4 Factors explaining role enactment by managers in non-Anglo-Saxon international firms

than from a technical point of view. Consider, for instance, the following quotations from two managers employed by two different Japanese firms, who enacting an Italian role espoused Anglo-Saxon beliefs, and had had extensive experience in two other US-American firms:

> The behaviour which I more clearly remember and that, I think, has most influenced me, regards the assessment of each single individual. This assessment was usually not addressed to the group but to the individual, who was not only evaluated in terms of his present qualities but also with regard to his future possibilities. In this regard the following

> principles were important: 1. every individual knowledge or skill has to be measured and certified in order to be recognized, 2. all individual efforts to improve oneself are also a vehicle to improve one's own position within the firm, 3. every decision must at due time lead to results, otherwise it gets radically changed.
>
> (M. 269)

> This firm is very Italian, it is international only on paper! There is a lack of managerial culture. I still have the folders of courses I attended in my previous experiences. The American culture means centrality of the client, flat structures, attention devoted to people, which are considered as capital, strongly analytical. On the negative side of the coin you have the slogans, the ceremony, it's pompous. The American model is surely seductive: you see clearly what the vision and the mission are for the whole company.
>
> (M. 274)

As for Anglo-Saxon firms, also for non-Anglo-Saxon international firms the extent of contacts that managers have to have with foreign colleagues is a trigger for their Anglo-Saxon role enactment and the intensity of these contacts depends on the position of the subsidiary within the corporate network. All of the managers enacting an Anglo-Saxon role had extensive contacts with foreign colleagues, and half of the managers enacting an Italian role had extensive international contacts. For the latter in particular, contact with foreign colleagues was a trigger for identification with the headquarters' culture:

> To work for a German firm like this offers only advantages, even though one might dislike multinationals, but this is a human multinational; the Italian culture is not autonomous or thorough enough, although it is more local. I have been very influenced by the German culture. It is a culture which profits the most, but in a correct way, all the resources it has access to.
>
> (M. 311)

But contact with foreign colleagues was also a trigger for recognizing that the headquarters' culture was not dissimilar from the Italian one. Both cases led to the enactment of an Italian role, and in both cases the reason was that with regard to the either technical or social emphasis of managerial legitimacy these cultures did not differ from the Italian one.

A similar result regards the impact of the adoption of HRM practices. As for the case of Anglo-Saxon firms, the adoption of these practices (leadership training, interfunctional careers, formal skills evaluation, mentoring programmes, diversity programmes and individual performance appraisal and reward systems), eased the enactment of an Anglo-Saxon role. This testifies to the dominant position of Anglo-Saxon practices and ideas within the professional field of HR managers worldwide. Nevertheless, the cultural specific design of certain practices (like management education provided at the headquarters by local trainers and managers and specific programmes for newly hired employees) led, in some cases, to a higher identification with the headquarters' institutionalized practices.

Discussion

In the quantitative part of this study I found that 50 percent of the Italian middle managers working for international firms enacted their roles following Anglo-Saxon institutions, and 61 percent of those working for US and British firms. However, 72 percent of the middle managers working for Italian firms enacted a traditional Italian role, even if most Italian firms were either multinationals or operating internationally. Therefore, this study supports both the divergence and convergence perspectives.

I found in our qualitative data that characteristics of the role, such as hierarchical level and international interconnectedness, affected the identities enacted by these managers. In particular the importance of the interconnectedness of the managers studied with holders of Anglo-Saxon identities, as a trigger for identification, supports Campbell's (1997) emphasis on the role of interactions as the basis for the institutionalization of interpretive frameworks.

The degree of identification with the practices carried out by the international firms also affected roles and identities. Identification was spurred by the international integrated use of HRM systems, especially leadership courses, individual performance appraisal and reward systems, interfunctional careers, formal evaluation of managerial potential and competences, training, mentoring and coaching programmes for newly hired employees and diversity programmes for female managers. In Anglo-Saxon firms identification with intraorganizational institutions was more widespread and intraorganizational and national institutions were considered as equivalent; some managers hybridized their identification with the Anglo-Saxon practices by incorporating positively perceived aspects of Italian ones.

In the other international firms the situation was more complex and identification occurred in several directions. Managers identifying with their local Italian practices, which were considered better than those of headquarters, tended to enact traditional identities. Managers identifying with the practices of the headquarters, where those practices (German, French) were similar to the Italian ones, with regard to the institutionalization of managerial identities, also enacted traditional Italian roles. The other middle managers identified either directly with Anglo-Saxon practices, which they had had the possibility to experience in previous positions, or with the firm's intra-organizational institutions, which they perceived and openly defined as being transnational or global, and as such, separate from both the headquarters' and the local practices, but close to Anglo-Saxon ones; all of these managers enacted Anglo-Saxon identities.

The theoretical framework presented above (see Figure 1) helps to shed light on the reasons why managers with previous experience in an Anglo-Saxon or international firm enacted an Italian identity when they came to work for Italian firms, or for firms where an Italian environment prevailed. The enacting of an Anglo-Saxon or Italian identity does not depend exclusively on the middle manager's choice, it is a process which is negotiated with all the other counter roles involved, superiors, peers and subordinates. Thus, as managers try to delegate technical problems to their subordinates, they may be defying the institutionalized identity/definition of a successful manager. As their colleagues deny the Anglo-Saxon identity in their interactions, managers seeking to create the most socially desirable identity for themselves will adjust behaviour accordingly.

To sum up, the majority of Italian managers working for international firms espoused an Anglo-Saxon conception of management when:

a) their roles implied extensive international contacts, a situation that in turn required them to be more skilled in managing and integrating others' skills, resources and diverse mentalities than to demonstrate technical mastery in a specialized field;
b) the institutions prevalent in the firm, supported by the purposeful use of HRM practices of Anglo-Saxon origin, allowed these managers to identify either in the headquarters' practices or in what were perceived as transnational/global practices, considered 'better' than those of both the Italian and the headquarters.

The group of Italian managers in international firms who on the contrary espoused an Italian conception of management did so when the above conditions were not met, and when either the contacts they had with

foreign colleagues from the headquarters and other subsidiaries, or the HRM practices to which they were exposed, reinforced their primarily Italian conception of management. This happened mostly when the NBS of the headquarters' location, such as Germany and France, was perceived as being similar to the Italian one.

The group of managers working for non-Anglo-Saxon international firms generally assumed an intermediate position between the group of managers working for Italian firms and those working for Anglo-Saxon firms, because in some cases the identification with the headquarters' practices did not entail an identification with an Anglo-Saxon conception of management. Although some non-Anglo-Saxon international firms had developed a corporate culture perceived as global (mostly close to what were perceived as US-American principles) and leading to Anglo-Saxon role enactments and beliefs, other firms maintained a more localized corporate culture, close to the practices of the headquarters' location.

Therefore the results seem to suggest that Anglo-Saxon values, beliefs and practices have a stronger triggering power than practices from other NBSs towards the enactment of roles emphasizing the managerial and de-emphasizing the technical, towards the enactment of managerial roles that search for their legitimation more in the mastery of interpersonal processes of teamwork, motivation, negotiation and problem solving, than in technically grounded decision-making. And the results seem also to suggest that the Anglo-Saxon conception of management is very seductive and overruns other conceptions when individuals, socialized in other cultures, happen to be exposed to it in some systematic way (job design, HRM practices) – I use the term seductive instead of attractive because of its purposeful and strategic use within Anglo-Saxon firms in order to attract and retain talents. Particularly in the Italian sample, the encounter with these foreign values and institutions had the effect of giving the managers a point of reference from which they could criticize what they perceived as being the negative aspects of their own national institutionalized practices. It is particularly evident when reading the interview notes of the managers who had experienced different institutional settings during their career, moving from Italian to international firms of various nationalities, that their exposure to different streams of institutional elements induced them to assume a more insightful posture. The latter allowed them, with varying degrees of reflexivity, to construct, in a kind of bricolage, their own professional identity or even to maintain multiple professional identities to be applied in different contexts. Many of our respondents could be straightforwardly considered as bearers of multiple national identities. This is not to deny that the influence of corporate culture and HRM practices can also have a more subtle subconscious influence, based on seduction and

positive social reinforcements during daily interactions, but the general impression I derived from the interviews, also in the cases of highest identification, was that of a relative awareness of the differences, the aims and the relative validity of the practices to which the respondents were exposed to. In the study deeply held values seem to play a less prominent role than cognitive and regulative micro-value institutions.

The modular constitution of modern humans justifies situations in which practices and the enactment of identities get acceptance and obtain legitimacy, not because of their adherence to the local national culture, but because of their non-compliance. Anglo-Saxon institutional elements and also elements of other NBSs such as the German, French, Dutch, or the alleged global culture, helped individuals to design identities in opposition to Italian practices for reasons of generational and gender confrontation. US-American identities developed, for some Italian managers, as a way to define a better position in struggles against the 'old managers' who enacted mainly Italian roles. Women particularly appreciated these new identities and the HRM practices on diversity, as resources to be used against a male dominated 'old' Italian managerial culture.

Conclusions

This study shows that local, national and transnational institutional effects coexist in defining the identities of middle managers, and that an 'integrative perspective' (Geppert et al., 2003) to the study of institutional change is the most promising alternative. Moreover, generalizing the implication of these results, foundational ideas of institutional theory, like isomorphism and legitimacy, should be conceived in novel terms. In a globalized and interconnected world isomorphism should be regarded as a problem. If in such a context a more robust conception of institutional effects is obtained through the use of the metaphor of streams, then the empirical discovery of islands of isomorphism should be regarded as the result of the prevalence of one stream over the others. The focus of attention should be directed towards explaining how that island could be isolated from processes of blending and hybridization. Legitimacy should also be regarded in more dynamic and complex terms. The attainment of legitimacy could be considered as a provisional state where taken-for-grantedness emerges as a balancing act out of a dialectical synthesis of inconsistent streams of institutional influence (Sorge, 1991). Making isomorphism and legitimacy problems more than assumptions could help institutional theory advance towards explaining institutional change without necessarily recurring to the *deus ex machina* of institutional

entrepreneurship – an unbalance in the equilibrium reached between different institutional streams could generate institutional change more as a result of an ecological process than of a rational attempt by some powerful actors.

The limitations of the present research could be avenues for future studies. I did not here take into consideration the relationship between deeply held cultural values, personality, the self and the enactment of different identities. A study which would try to combine a cross-cultural approach with the institutional approach presented here would be most welcomed. In particular it would be interesting to study whether personality characteristics such as self monitoring, already shown to be related to higher adaptability to different contexts (Kilduff & Day, 1994), would also facilitate the switching between different institutionalized identities. Future studies should also focus more attention on the emergence and generative mechanisms of global culture (Berson et al., 2004; Erez & Gati, 2004), and should devote particular attention to the seductive power of Anglo-Saxon HRM practices in other national contexts. I studied the effects of Anglo-Saxon institutions in Italy, a country which could be considered as having lower status in terms of the position within the global economy than the United States, and also as being relatively culturally similar. It would be interesting to study whether the identified relationships also apply in countries of similar international status, like for instance Germany or Japan – 'Japanization or Germanization' are processes recognized in the literature (Smith & Meiksins, 1995: 258), while Italianization, apart from referrals to the idea of a Third Italy (Hall & Soskice, 2001), has never been heard of – or in countries which could be considered more culturally distant to the USA, like for instance China or India, or African countries (Almond et al., 2005).

Finally, I would like to revert to the usual suggestions which cross-cultural literature addresses to managers. I maintain that for expatriate managers the question should not be how to best adapt 'to local cultural conditions' (Newmann & Nollen, 1996), but how to best hybridize global institutions, which they are bearers of, and local culture – Javidan et al. (2006: 84–5), reflecting on the results of the GLOBE study, insist that 'Executives need to tell the host employees about their own culture' and that they 'should educate the employees' on their approach to leadership, in order to 'create a collective learning journey that can be enriching, educational, and productive for both sides'. What I add to the views of Javidan and colleagues is that expatriate managers should also try to read the multi-faceted nature of any local culture, which in the modern world is always connected to the global, and not assume uniformity. Managers should try to detect opposite cultural streams which disconfirm stereotypical definitions. And they should reflect whether the values and practices which their firm is

carrying could not constitute a valid identification resource for employees who are struggling against traditional role definitions – the negative correlation between cultural values and cultural practices in the GLOBE study by House and colleagues (2004) points in the same direction.

Considering that Romans do not always behave as Romans, I suggest that the proverb 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do', should be turned into 'When in Venice, do as the Romans: wear a carnival mask!'

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