Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 10 (2011) 36–42

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

4th & 5th UK Social Networks Conference

Distinguishing between political brokerage & political entrepreneurship

Dimitrios Christopoulos[a]*, Karin Ingold[b]

[a] *Department of Politics, UWE-Bristol, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK.*
[b] *Institute for Environmental Decisions, ETH Zurich, Universitätsstr. 22, Zürich, CH-8092, Switzerland*

Elsevier use only: Received date here; revised date here; accepted date here

Abstract

How can we distinguish between political brokers and political entrepreneurs within political space? Examining the role of individual agents, we can identify a number of definitional weaknesses in the entrepreneurship and leadership literature. This leads us to consider the agency determinants of broadly defined exceptional actors. We argue that accounts of exceptional agency have to incorporate information on the psychology, behaviour and relational environment of actors. However, we recognise that collecting complete data on agents is most often not feasible. Since relational data strongly reflect the choices and behaviour actors have been making we concentrate here on the distinction between brokers and entrepreneurs in relational space. Within relational social science however, brokerage has been often confounded with entrepreneurship. Our aim here is to decouple the underlying assumptions and operationalise this distinction in Social Network Analysis (SNA).

Keywords: Policy change; political entrepreneur; broker; social network analysis; centrality

1. Agency in perspective

This article addresses an issue intrinsic to most accounts of political agency: how to identify exceptionality. Going beyond the debates on structure and agency (Giddens, 1979) or those of micro-macro analysis, we tackle here the substantive topic of the role of agency in bringing about policy change. In that context we first examine the limitations of and advances in the literature on policy entrepreneurs and policy brokers. Entrepreneurs and brokers have an instrumental impact on policy change (see Mintrom & Norman, 2009); but we claim it should be differentiated among them in policy process analysis. The aim of this paper is to develop conceptual and empirical guidelines to recognize their distinctive position in policy networks as well as identify the elements of that distinctiveness.

Our definition of exceptionality captures the propensity of agents to act, their preferences, the institutions that constrain them and the networks that enable them. And since political action in advanced capitalist democracies is often collective, we also examine the role of belief systems within collective decision making structures. To

* Corresponding author. Tel.: UK-1179566261.
E-mail address: dc.christopoulos@uwe.ac.uk.

doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.01.006

understand the actions of agents that are presumed exceptional a mere description of their decision making is not adequate. To comprehend these actors we have to contextualize them in their personal and professional relational networks. Management of their networks as a resource is vital to their success. A valid research framework should consider specific actions as relatively exceptional and individual actors as having the potential for exceptional behavior. Action and psychological predisposition need to be clearly differentiated. Furthermore an actor's relational context can provide us with information about the constraints and opportunities available to them. In that respect exceptional political behavior is evident when certain actors transcend agency constraints that inhibit most other actors. After a critical examination of the social science literature we propose a synthesis of theoretical viewpoints that incorporate a relational perspective. Through our earlier work on exceptional agency (Christopoulos, 2006 and forthcoming), explaining policy outputs (Ingold, 2007, 2008 and forthcoming) and brokerage (Christopoulos & Quaglia, 2009) we conclude that the field is undertheorised and often misspecified.

To determine the role of exceptional agency (henceforth EA) in political action we first make a critical review of the literature on political entrepreneurship (henceforth PE) and brokerage in broadly defined political economy and political science. This leads us to a review of the constraints and opportunities for political agency with specific reference to the heuristic use of policy networks and the growing literature on advocacy coalitions. An assessment of power relations within social network analysis literature allows us to conclude that there are advantages to integrating formal network analysis into an explanation of the impact of political agency. Space constrains us to a cursory look at a number of related key issues such as the role of brokerage in EA, the impact of culture on political motivation, or issues related to the wider structure and agency debate (see Giddens, 1979; Bourdieu, 1977 & 1986; or Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In the following section we look at past attempts to define political entrepreneurship (PE) and brokerage which have demonstrated a number of theoretical weaknesses. We proceed by tying a definition of exceptional agency with a set of suggestions for operationalising research on exceptional political actors. We conclude with a call for broadening the theoretical framework and sharpening of methodological tools when examining policy making processes.

2. Political entrepreneurship

Political entrepreneurship (PE) offers an intuitive interpretation of exceptional behavior but is burdened with conflicting and inconsistent definitions which ignore that PE would invariably be the composite outcome of a multitude of causes. Furthermore, there is lack of consideration for the success of agents due to random chance or indeed adequate attention to the causes of failure. To resolve some of the theoretical incongruity we consider political entrepreneurship as a manifestation of exceptional agency.

The idealized portrayal of PEs is as consummate strategists (Salisbury, 1969), while often entrepreneurial actors are assumed to act as flexible opportunists (Kingdon, 1995). However, opportunism could be a suboptimal behaviour in politics due to the nature of the electoral cycle and the reputation element of political capital. Our reservations with the literature are due to frequent instances where PE is employed as a character trait that supposedly describes the actor, but it is often better at describing the act. PE also often confounds actors as agents with acts as events. Furthermore there is an assumption that entrepreneurship is a binary state, which disregards the incremental and temporal nature of this behavioural concept as an actor attribute. In other words there is a failure to account for the degree to which an actor is exhibiting entrepreneurial behaviour, while agent effectiveness cannot be assumed to be uniform in time.

In table 1 we consider all variable categories that can be incorporated in a model of agent behaviour. We are particularly concerned here with the research effort and feasibility in collecting data in each of the data categories. It should be apparent that although psychological predispositions are highly desirable, deploying psychometric evaluations of all actors in a policy environment is unfeasible (For considerations of psychological predispositions see Krackhardt & Kilduff (2008) and Kalish & Robins (2006)). Similarly outlining the policy preferences of each actor is very research intensive. On the other hand mapping-out the policy environment and collecting information on transactions and attempts at influence can be seen as a feasible research strategy that would partly reflect the preferences of agents (Weible, 2005; Ingold, 2008).