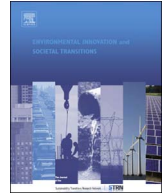




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Original Research Paper

Intermediacy and the diffusion of grassroots innovations: The case of cohousing in the United States.

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ABSTRACT

Grassroots innovations (GIs) diffuse by three pathways: replication, up-scaling, and translation. To date, a small body of research illustrates that niche-to-regime translation occurs under conditions of intermediacy: when a niche shares some, but not all, properties of a regime it prefigures. There has been less focus on the dynamics of niche replication and up-scaling, and the conditions that encourage these diffusion pathways. Drawing from interviews with the founders of cohousing initiatives in the United States, this paper offers in-depth accounts of replication and up-scaling, revealing how niche leaders and local project founders have positioned their projects as meaningful and practical to individuals with economic and social commitments to the mainstream. These results emphasize the interpretive nature of the diffusion of GIs while also problematizing the concept of intermediacy. A more nuanced understanding of these niche diffusion pathways will inform subsequent research on GIs, including additional subcategories of replication and up-scaling.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, the field of sustainability transitions has explored how the trajectories of socio-technical regimes change as a consequence of both exogenous landscape pressure and the emergence of ‘niche’ alternatives that serve societal functions parallel to the incumbent regime (Rip and Kemp, 1998; Geels 2002, 2004). How niches form, endure, and emerge (or fail to emerge) in the socio-technical mainstream has occupied an important corner of the broad transitions literature since its inception (e.g. Kemp et al., 1998).

In the last decade the concept of grassroots innovations (GIs)—niches sustained by the ideological commitment of local actors—has matured into a relevant subcategory of the broader transitions literature (Seyfang and Smith 2007; see Hossain (2016) for a recent review). This paper frames *cohousing* as a grassroots innovation and interrogates processes of niche replication and up-scaling amidst selection pressure from an incumbent housing production regime. While cohousing exists in countries around the world, this paper attempts to hold constant the regime context in which cohousing is framed by focusing exclusively upon the cohousing movement in the United States (US).

Cohousing is a residential development model that clusters private dwelling units around collectively -owned and -managed spaces. Residents lead both the development process and daily management of the community. The collaborative nature of cohousing addresses several social and environmental dilemmas at once, and may serve as an innovation that policy makers at multiple scales can employ to address issues like climate change, housing affordability, and social isolation in cities.

This paper uses the case of cohousing to detail processes of niche replication and up-scaling. Prior research on GIs has emphasized the importance of ‘intermediacy’ in processes of niche-to-regime translation: Paradoxically, niche projects that share some properties

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of the regime they prefigure are better able to directly influence changes in that regime than ‘radical’ niche projects (Smith, 2007; Boyer, 2015). This intermediate status emerges over time, as the boundaries between niche and regime dissolve, and actors position themselves in both domains (Boyer, 2014).

While processes of replication and up-scaling have received relatively less attention in the GI literature, growth in the number of local projects and the number of constituents at those projects logically increase the circulation and reapplication of local knowledge as well as opportunities for translation, and thus, regime change (Schot and Geels, 2008). Through interviews with project founders and supporting evidence from key texts of the cohousing movement, this paper offers evidence for the interpretive nature of niche replication and up-scaling, reaffirming the importance of intermediacy as a phenomenon in GI research while offering contours for its application.

The US cohousing movement represents a sort of “pragmatic utopia” by articulating a socio-environmental critique that does not preclude its residents working in- and associating with- individuals and institutions of the mainstream (Sargisson, 2012). This paper illustrates how leaders of the cohousing movement use this pragmatism strategically, as a means to the movement’s diffusion. In this sense, findings here complement existing scholarship that documents the importance of pragmatic positioning in processes of niche-to-regime translation (Smedby and Quitzau, 2016; Boyer, 2015, 2014, 2013).

The paper progresses as follows: Section Two situates discussions of niche diffusion in the broader transitions and GI literature. Section Three offers historical background on cohousing, contrasting it with an incumbent housing production regime in the US. Section Four discusses research methods. Section five elaborates on findings. Section six discusses theoretical and practical implications, with concluding thoughts in section seven.

2. Literature review

Transitions literature understands socio-technical niches at two levels: (1) as individual “local projects”; and (2) as a broad network of local projects united by similar objectives, models, and organizations, also known as the “global niche”. Geels and Raven (2006, 378) describe a cyclical learning process that takes place between local projects and a global niche whereby new knowledge is applied by individuals at local projects, and then disseminated by the global niche through conferences, workshops, written materials, and other forms of communication. Communication among various projects, often through intermediary actors and institutions, promotes a self-reinforcing technological trajectory that can grow to challenge a dominant socio-technical regime.

Socio-technical regimes (regimes) are mutually reinforcing regulations, knowledge systems, cultural symbols, physical structures and technology, and markets that favor certain activities easier than others (Kemp et al., 1998). Niches—explain Smith and Raven (2012)—*shield*, *nurture*, and *empower* path-breaking innovations from the selection pressures of a regime. This protection offers time and space for actors to experiment with immature innovations. The nature and origin of protective space varies. Niches can be forged actively, for example as the consequence of a strategic investment (Kemp et al., 1998) or as part of government-sponsored transition experiments (Kemp et al., 2007; Loorbach et al., 2015). Niches can also emerge passively, originating as a hobby for the elite (Geels, 2005), an accident of geographic isolation (Ornetzeder and Rohracher, 2013), or as GIs that emerge to address social need and/or as a reflection of the ideological commitment of actors in civil society (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Smith, 2007, 2006).

In the case of GIs, the commitment of local actors serves as the ‘protection’ for innovative activities, independent of an initiative’s ability to generate profit. As such, GIs confront existential obstacles that market- and institution-based niches do not. For example, GIs are more prone to activist burnout and must draw from a more diverse resource base than niche projects supported by corporate or government budgets (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012).

2.1. Diffusion pathways for grassroots innovations

Despite these challenges, recent research has observed three routes by which GIs diffuse: (1) replication; (2) up-scaling; and (3) translation (See Fig. 1; Seyfang, 2010; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Ornetzeder and Rohracher, 2013; Boyer, 2015; Gorissen et al., 2016; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016).

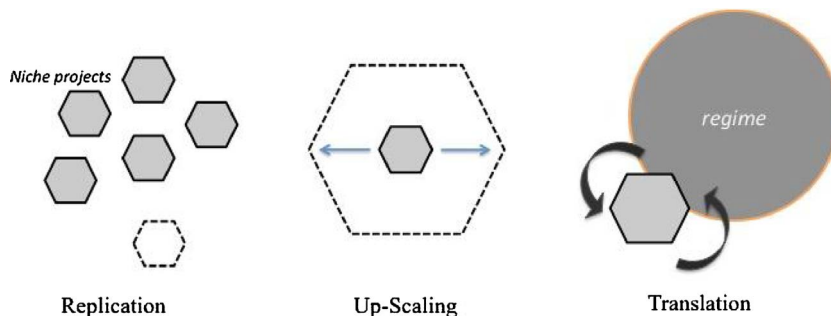


Fig. 1. Grassroots innovations diffuse through pathways of replication, up-scaling, and translation. Replication involves the expansion in the number of local initiatives; up-scaling involves growth in the constituent population at local initiatives; translation involves an exchange in practices and values between niche and regime.

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