

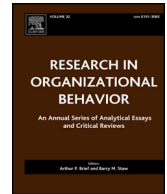


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## Reflexivity: The role of embedded social position and entrepreneurial social skill in processes of field level change

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### ABSTRACT

We examine the micro-foundations of field-level organizational change by analyzing the role of social skill and social position in individuals. Our core argument is that differences in an individual's social skill and in their social position produce different degrees of reflexivity or awareness of existing social arrangements. We demonstrate how the interaction of social skill and social position produce distinct types or categories of reflexivity, each of which contributes to institutional stability or change.

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Understanding the sources of profound organizational change – i.e. the creation of new organizational forms, new modes of production or social and technological innovation – is a fundamental issue for organizational theory. Researchers have consistently moved to increasingly higher levels of analysis in their efforts to explain how change can occur in highly institutionalized settings. Over the past four decades the analytic focus has shifted away from the organization and moved to studying the organizational environment as a fundamental determinant of the direction, pace and content of change. As a result, considerable attention has been devoted to viewing change through the interpretive lens of the sector (Scott & Meyer, 1983), the population (Hannan & Freeman, 1977), the network (DiMaggio, 1991; Powell, White, Koput, & Owen-Smith, 2004) and, increasingly, the organizational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Fligstein, 2013).

Used largely within the context of institutional theory, the organizational field is defined, variously, as “key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) or “organizations that interact frequently and fatefully with each other” (Scott, 1994). A key distinguishing feature of the construct, however, is the phenomenological understanding that the social and cultural environment created by communities of organizations and their ideational expectations of each other is every bit as important in understanding processes of change as the technical environment of material resources (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In counterpoint to most economic based theories of organizational change, institutional theory argues that organizational change is often the result of social pressures to conform to field based norms of legitimacy rather than economic pressures.

Institutional theory, thus, has become highly influential in management theory because it has the ability to explain why and how organizations often change in ways that defy traditional economic explanations (Suddaby, 2013). Early articulations of the theory focused attention on how field norms pressured organizations to adopt changes that produced increasing similarity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). A growing body of empirical evidence, thus, demonstrated that organizations in a common field adopt similar practices, even when those practices compromise efficiency (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983; Haveman, 1993; Westphal, Gulati, & Shortell, 1997).

More recently, however, institutional theory has turned to explaining processes of change by examining how some organizations are able to resist isomorphic pressures (Oliver, 1991; Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002) and engage in non-isomorphic or divergent change. Considerable recent attention has been devoted to describing acts of institutional entrepreneurship that demonstrate how

organizational fields change in ways that defy long-standing normative pressures for conformity (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003; Zilber, 2002, 2007).

The shift from explaining conformity to divergent change has created a logical contradiction for institutional theory (Suddaby, 2010). If the process of institutionalization makes a practice or structure so socially embedded or taken-for-granted that it becomes unquestioned, how can divergent institutional change ever occur? This is the paradox of embedded agency (Seo & Creed, 2002; Leca & Naccache, 2006), which questions the internal coherence of a theory that argues, on one hand, that institutional norms are so totalizing that actors cannot even conceive of opportunities for change, and on the other, that some actors are uniquely able to think beyond the cognitive constraints of institutions. The paradox of embedded agency, thus asks, *if institutional norms and pressures are so cognitively overwhelming and totalizing, where do new ideas or conceptions of change come from?*

Empirical efforts to resolve the question of embedded agency have focused on explanations that occur at the level of the organizational field. Studies have identified certain organizational actors – institutional entrepreneurs – that are less susceptible to institutional pressures to conform because of their size and power (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006) or their structural position as boundary spanners across multiple fields (Leblebici, Salancik, Copay, & King, 1991). Size, power and position within the field, according to these studies, makes some organizations more resistant to the normative, cognitive and regulative pressures of the organizational field.

Field level answers to the problem of embedded agency, however, are not completely satisfying because they violate the inherently phenomenological assumptions of institutional theory (Meyer, 2008). That is, they offer a structural solution to a cognitive problem. The cognitive element of institutional processes, critics observe, has not been well articulated in institutional theory. Rather, it remains implicit or, as Zucker (1983: 5) noted, a “black box” that fails to explain how commonly shared cognitions become taken-for-granted and therefore promote conformity or become disrupted and thereby promote change.

Prevailing explanations of institutional change all imply variations in the cognitive ability of actors to enact or resist normative pressures. A critical but yet unresolved question for neo-institutional accounts of field level change is to understand how some individuals cognitively perceive the social world as contingent and thus amenable to change while others see it as concrete and immutable. That is, *how are some actors able to rise above the cognitive constraints (the ‘iron cage’) of institutions while others are not?*

We address this question in our case study of technological disruption in the French communications

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