



RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING MODEL WITH RESPECT TO LEVEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE WITHIN AN ORGANIZATION AND LEVEL OF ISOMORPHISM BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 02nd March, 2017
Received in revised form
14th April, 2017
Accepted 07th May, 2017
Published online 16th June, 2017

Key Words:

Institutionalization,
Isomorphism,
Organizational Culture,
Organizational Learning.

ABSTRACT

Institutionalization is mainly concerned with the reasons for the changes in organizations that occur due to pressures of the environment, as the theory presumes that organizations can not just act rationally to follow their interests, but that they also have to take the expectations of the institutional environment into consideration. As organizational interaction and adaptation to environment happens, organizations develop distinct forms, and processes and strategies. The model proposed in the paper is to understand how organizational learning develops in an organization using one of the most established frameworks, the one by Crossan, Lane and White (1999). This framework proposes that organizational learning occurs through four processes (intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing) and in the model of this paper, this framework will be used to integrate the elements of isomorphism and culture into a factorial design to understand organizational learning processes. The model is introduced to understand organizational learning patterns under various degrees of organizational culture and institutional isomorphism, however, it is not saying that one learning method is superior to another, it just proposes a model to predict which learning procedure occurs under what conditions.

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INTRODUCTION

Institutionalization is an organizational theory which explains the interaction between the organizations and the environment they operate in. Institutionalization is the process which translates an organization's code of conduct, mission, policies, vision, and strategic plans into action plans applicable to the daily activities of its employees. Institutional theory aims at integrating fundamental values and objectives into the organization's culture and structure as it focuses on the deeper and more resilient aspects of social structure. It considers the processes by which structures, including schemes, rules, norms, and routines become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior. (Scott, 2004) *"Institutions are social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience. They are composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life. Institutions are transmitted by various types of carriers, including symbolic systems, relational systems, routines, and artifacts."*

Institutions operate at different levels of jurisdiction, from the world system to localized interpersonal relationships. Institutions by definition connote stability but are subject to change processes, both incremental and discontinuous..." (Scott, 1995)

There are two main trends in institutional theory, Old Institutionalism and New Institutionalism. The study of institutions has been a topic of academic research for many years. One of the first and most important theorizations was by the German economist and social theorist Max Weber, who focused on the organizational structure (i.e. bureaucracy) within society and the institutionalization created by the iron cage that organizational bureaucracies create. The iron cage is a term used by Weber for the increased rationalization inherent in social life, particularly in Western capitalist societies. Weber claims that the iron cage traps individuals in systems based purely on efficiency, rational calculation and control by the bureaucratization of social order. This view, called the old institutionalism, focused on analyzing formal institutions of the government and the state. With the behavioral revolution, new perspectives appeared such as positivism, rational choice theory, and behaviourism and the focus shifted to analyzing the individual rather than the institutions. Institutionalism

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experienced a significant revival with the paper published by Meyer and Rowan in 1977.

Theoretical Background of New Institutionalization and Isomorphism

Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that organizations incorporate societally-rationalized procedures to achieve legitimacy, independent of the efficiency of the practices. Their main argument is that the organization form is driven by 'institutional myths,' in an environment, rather than because of the necessity of those forms for more effective organizational outcomes. As opposed to the idea of the rational organization, the authors favor of an idea of 'rationalized institutional elements.' They argue that organizations adopt practices or routines in order to achieve increased legitimacy and to increase survival, but that their adoption of these practices are not connected to an increase in efficiency. The authors offer the following propositions:

- As rationalized institutional rules emerge in work activity, formal organizations form and expand by applying these rules as structural elements.
- The more modernized the society, the more extended the rationalized institutional structure and the greater the number of institutions applying the rules.
- Organizations that incorporate legitimated and rationalized elements in their formal structures maximize their legitimacy and thus increase their resources and survival capabilities.
- Because attempts to control and coordinate activities in institutionalized organizations lead to conflicts and loss of legitimacy, elements of structure are separated from activities and from each other.
- The more an organization's structure is made up of institutionalized myths, the more it maintains confidence, satisfaction, and good faith, both internally and externally.
- Institutionalized organizations seek to minimize inspection and evaluation by both internal managers and external members.

Weber had argued that rational order had become an iron cage in which humanity was locked due to the power and efficiency of bureaucracy. The revised formulation of institutionalism proposed in the above paper caused a significant shift in institutional analysis and the research that followed became known as "new" institutionalism. Another reformulation occurred when, building on the work of Meyer and Rowan, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued that the iron cage metaphor is making organizations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient as the bureaucracy is continuing to grow and organizations are becoming increasingly homogeneous. Powell and DiMaggio (1991) define a new perspective, which is new institutionalism, rejecting the rational-actor models of classical economics. This organizational theory focuses on cultural explanations of social and organizational phenomena by recognizing the influence of institutions on human behavior through rules, norms, and other frameworks. An important contribution of new institutionalism was to add a cognitive element to the previous theories that assumed that institutions can either influence individuals to maximize benefits or to act out of obligation of what one is supposed to do. This new perspective adds that, instead of acting under rules or based on duty, individuals also act

because of emotions. Individuals make certain choices not because of fear of punishment or attempting to adapt, neither out of some sort of social obligation, but instead, individuals make certain choices because they can conceive of no alternative. New institutionalism was born as a reaction to the behavioral revolution by viewing institutions more generally as social constructs and by taking into account the effect that institutions have on individuals. New institutionalism is a theory that focuses on developing a sociological view of institutions, on the way they interact and the way they affect society, and it views institutions outside the limited views of economics. DiMaggio and Powell argue that institutions have become similar across organizations even though they evolved in different ways and have studied how institutions shape the behavior of agents (i.e. people, organizations, governments) (1983). This is isomorphism. Isomorphism is a "constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions." (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) Isomorphism is the drive toward similarity and the authors argue that there are two types of isomorphism, competitive and institutional. Institutional isomorphism is different from competitive isomorphism because the changes serve to enhance the internal efficiency of organizations. Although competition may exist between organizations, the primary goal should be to establish efficiency within an individual organization as well as in the relations between organizations in the same field. The goal of institutional isomorphic change is to establish similarities between organizations, rather than establish competition between organizations. They propose that, rather than being managed in a purely rational way, organisations take on forms, and thus act in ways, that come to resemble similar organisations in alike contexts. They call this process institutional isomorphism and argue that are three mechanisms behind institutional isomorphic change:

Coercive isomorphism is the pressure from other organizations that the organization is connected to or dependent on and by cultural expectations from society, which might be government institutions or financial reporting requirements. Large corporations can have similar impact on their subsidiaries.

Mimetic isomorphism is the degree to which organizations model themselves on other organizations, which they think are more legitimate or more successful. Uncertainty encourages imitation as organizational models spread through employee migration or by consulting firms. These organizations model themselves after similar organizations that may be more legitimate and successful, expecting that the implemented changes enhance their legitimacy and thus improve the conditions of the organization to other organizations. Coercive isomorphism feels external pressures to implement changes within its institutions, whereas mimetic isomorphism encourages changes within its organizations, in order to make its practices more effective.

Normative isomorphism is the pressure which is brought about by professions, i.e. people with similar educational backgrounds tend to approach problems in similar ways and socialization at work reinforces these conformities. Inter-organizational networks establish norms that push organizations to adopt similar procedures and rules. Norms developed during education enter in organizations and job transfers between firms also encourages isomorphism.

The similarities caused by these processes allow firms to interact with each other more easily and to build legitimacy among organizations. This is different from coercive isomorphism because normative pressures are felt from within an organization, to establish not only employment standards, but also value standards. In this sense it is more similar to mimetic isomorphism, but mimetic isomorphism seeks improve itself by modeling its own organization after another. Normative isomorphism then is primarily driven by professional pressures to establish legitimacy of the individuals that organizations employ rather than the structure or practices of organizations. Scott (1995) states that, in order to survive, organizations must conform to the rules and belief systems prevailing in the environment (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983 and Meyer and Rowan, 1977) as institutional isomorphism will attain the organisation legitimacy. For example, multinational corporations operating in different countries with varying institutional environments will face diverse pressures in foreign and home institutional environments. Non-governmental organisations (NGO's) and social organizations can also be susceptible to isomorphic pressures. As efforts to achieve rationality with uncertainty and constraint lead to homogeneity of structure (institutional isomorphism), organizational structure, which arises from the rules of efficiency in the marketplace, comes to arise from the institutional constraints imposed by the state and the professions. Organizational level predictors of isomorphic change are:

- The more dependent on an organization is on another organization, the more similar it will become.
- The greater the centralization of resource supply, the more the organization will change to resemble the organizations it is dependent upon.
- The more uncertainty, the more an organization will model its structure after successful organizations.
- The more ambiguous the goals, the more an organization will mimic a successful organization to establish legitimacy.
- The greater the reliance in using academic credentials to choose staff, the greater will be the similarity to other organizations. Also the greater the participation of members in professional organizations, to more similar the organizations will be.

The Position of the Paper

Institutionalization is mainly concerned with the reasons of changes in the organizations that occur due to pressures of the environment, i.e. governments and some professional organizations. This theory presumes that organizations can not just act rationally to follow their interests, but that also have to take the expectations of the institutional environment into consideration and these expectations sometimes can work against the best interests of the organizations. As organizational interaction and adaptation to environment happens, organizations develop distinct forms, and processes and strategies. For example, Zucker (1977) considers institutionalization as a tool which provides social stability to gain legitimacy and conformity. DiMaggio and Powell (1983), see institutionalization as a way of adapting to the environment. All research shows that institutionalization is a process which has a wide influence on every aspect of organizations, i.e. structure, decisions, behaviors and performance.

Based on the literature review, Apaydin and Coskun summarize the dimensions of institutionalization as below (2008):

Accountability: Accountability, one of the important dimensions of institutionalization, includes transparency, which is responsibility of the organizations from its and workers' activities, and social responsibility (Rieley and Clarkson, 2001). Legitimacy theory proposes that organizations take the societal values into consideration, since it is the society that provides legitimacy. Organizations which fail to be legitimate may encounter severe problems endangering their survival (Laufer, 2003). Accountability is what makes organizations legitimate and transparency requires recording and flowing of the information information about the activities of organizations to the related parties accurately, completely, and in an unbiased way.

Formalization: Formalization is about developing guidelines of operating procedures and roles of members of the organization and it enhances coordination within an organization. Organizational formalization is the extent to which work activities are defined formally by administrative rules, policies and procedures and it helps to organize the functions in an organization (Baligh *et al*, 1996). By formalization process, organizations gain stability, control, and coordination as these are the main purposes of institutionalization. Formalization is related to shaping the structure of organizations and thus affects the performance of the organization.

Professionalism: Professionalism is defined as employing more professionals in the administration, developing an organizational climate in which professionals are supported, and becoming a member of professional organizations in the industry. By professionalism, organizations enhance their capacity, become more reliable, and thus become more adaptable to the environment. As organizations become more professionalized, the loyalty and commitment of the employers increase since they perceive the organizations as fair. Furthermore, organizations can easily follow the processes of other organizations due to high level of professionalism, as organizations can have better relationship with the environment. Professionalism makes coordination easier and brings stability to the organizations, as professionals have more knowledge and can adapt better applications in the industry. They also provide better communication with the other organizations (Baligh *et al*, 1996).

Consistency: Consistency is perceived as a critical component of institutionalization as it provides reliability to organizations. It is defined as keeping the promises, making the mission, strategy, tactics, and activities congruent, and being similar with the other organizations in the same industry (Baligh *et al*, 1996). Isomorphism, which suggests that organizations in the same industry look alike, occurs due to consistency. It is important for organizations to have consistency, as it brings credibility because organizations become more likely to do more business with other organizations and achieve higher levels of performance.

Cultural Strength: Organizational culture consists of shared beliefs, values, and assumptions. Research shows that a strong organizational culture enhances strategy implementation, organizational change, and positive images of the organization

in the clients' eyes. Because shared values are internalized, they can apply to a broad range of appropriate behavioral responses and they maintain the organization as a bound unit and provide it with a distinct identity, which in fact is realization of institutionalization. Organizational culture is the behavior of humans within an organization and the meaning that people attach to those behaviors. Ravasi and Schultz (2006) state that organizational culture is a set of shared mental assumptions that guide interpretation and action in organizations by defining appropriate behavior for various situations. Culture includes the organization's vision, values, norms, systems, symbols, language, assumptions, beliefs, habit, etc and affects employees' identification with an organization. Organizational culture affects the way people and groups interact with each other, with clients, and with other organizations. The idea of viewing organizations as cultures is a relatively recent phenomenon. Until the 1980's, organizations were simply thought of as rational means to coordinate and control a group of people, but today it has been accepted that each organization has a unique character beyond its structural characteristics. Organizational culture refers to a system of shared meaning held by members that distinguishes the organization from other organizations, since organizations often have very different cultures. Organizational theorists recognize the important role that culture plays, since culture acts as a uniting force among members of an organization and provides them with a sense of identity. Culture can be among the greatest that an organization possesses and can give an organization a competitive advantage over competition.

An Organizational Learning Framework

Organizational learning is the process of creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge within an organization. Organizational learning is a transfer process of knowledge among people, with the purpose of institutionalization. An organization improves over time as it gains experience and improves as much as it is able to create knowledge. Knowledge is a very broad concept which covers any information that an organization possesses. An organization is a good learner when it is able to retain this knowledge and spread it through its various divisions. In the recent years, several theoretical models of organizational learning have been developed. One of the most well-known models is by Crossan, Lane and White (1999), who believe that organizational learning occurs through four processes (intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing) and in two ways: from the individual to the organization (feed forward) and from the organization to the individual (feedback). The model lies integrates the two routes of learning: from the individual to the organization and from the organization to the individual. The framework of four processes is as follows:

- Intuiting occurs when individuals recognize patterns in their own past or present experiences and identify their potential use in their current work environment. This process can be seen as a collective unconscious process.
- Interpreting is the process through which individuals verbalize or put into action their own insights and ideas. Symbols and jargon is often used to help individuals interpret and share their intuitions with others. As the interpretation process moves beyond the individual and the ideas become embraced by the group, integration occurs, as we see below.

- Integrating is the collective development of a shared understanding of new ideas and of how to put them into action. When new ways of thinking and acting are recurrent and have a sufficiently significant impact on organizational action, the changes become institutionalized, as we see below.
- Institutionalization "is the process of embedding learning that has occurred by individuals and groups into the institutions of the organization including systems, structures, procedures, and strategy" (Crossan & Bedrow, 2003).

The Model

In the model, proposed to understand how organizational learning develops in an organization, this above framework will be used to integrate the elements of isomorphism and culture into a factor analysis to analyze organizational learning processes. As discussed above, institutional theorists claim that the institutional environment can strongly influence the development of formal structures in an organization. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) conclude that the net effect of institutional pressures is to increase the homogeneity of organizational structures in an institutional environment and that organizations adopt similar structures as a result of three types of pressures. Coercive pressures come from legal authority or influence from organizations they are dependent upon, mimetic pressures to imitate successful forms arise during high uncertainty, and normative pressures come from the similar attitudes and approaches of professional groups and associations brought into the firm through hiring practices. Isomorphism, which leads to homogeneity, increases under the below conditions:

- The greater the dependence on a single source, the higher the level of isomorphism.
- The more interaction with the institutional environment, the more the isomorphism.
- The fewer the number of organizational models, the quicker the isomorphism.
- The more uncertainty or ambiguity, the greater the rate of isomorphism.
- The more professionalism in the field, the more isomorphism.

As explained further above, cultural strength indicates how widely organizational culture is shared and how strongly it is held by the members of the organizations. Organizational culture provides the employees a system of norms and behaviors within an organization and as such, makes it more possible for employees to act in accordance with the objectives of the organization when they share a similar set of values. An organization has a strong culture if the core values are intensely held and widely shared. Strong culture functions as a mechanism of control where processes and products are less tractable. There are many dimensions or characteristics of organizational culture that have been defined. A research by Chatman and Jehn (1994) identified seven primary characteristics that define an organization's culture:

- **Innovation and risk taking:** The degree to which employees are encouraged to be innovative and take risks.

- **Detail orientation:** The degree to which employees are executed to exhibit precision analysis and attention to detail.
- **Outcome orientation:** The degree to which management focuses on results or outcomes rather than on the techniques and processes used to achieve those outcomes.
- **People orientation:** The degree to which management decisions take into consideration the effect of outcomes on people within the organization.
- **Team orientation:** The degree to which work activities are organized around teams rather than individuals.
- **Easygoingness:** The degree which people are aggressive and competitive rather than easy going.
- **Stability:** The degree to which organizational activities emphasize maintaining the status quo in contrast to growth.

If we combine the level of culture (weak vs. strong) in an organization with the level of isomorphism, which is the similarity between organizations (low vs. high), the below model of how organizational learning occurs under different dimensions can be proposed.

		Level of Culture	
		Weak	Strong
Similarity between Organizations	Low	Intiuting	Interpreting
	High	Integrating	Institutionalizing

Intiuting is the main learning process that occurs in an organization when the culture is weak and the level of isomorphism is low. Intiuting takes place mostly at the individual level and it is defined as “the preconscious recognition of the pattern and/or possibilities inherent in a personal stream of experience” (Crossan et al., 1999). This might happen in the case of a start-up company in a relatively unexplored field, with few players in the industry. Interpreting is the main learning process that occurs in an organization when the culture is strong, but the level of isomorphism between organizations is low, so that there is not much outside influence. Interpreting can occur at the individual and group levels and is defined as “the explaining through words and/or actions, of an insight or idea to one's self and to others” (Crossan et al., 1999). Compared to intiuting, in interpreting, there is more influence among group members due to the presence of a strong culture and a more interactive learning pattern. This happens in the case of a big, established company with a strong culture, but in an industry that has a few major players, so there is not much outside environment influence. Integrating is the main learning process that occurs in an organization when the culture is weak, but the level of isomorphism between organizations is high, so that there is high outside influence. Integrating is defined as “the process of developing shared understanding and of taking coordinated action” (Crossan et al., 1999). This type of learning can be seen in the case of an organization with many players in the industry to be influenced from, but the organization does not yet have a strong embedded culture, i.e. newly established company.

In this case, knowledge has to be mostly gathered from outside environment and then integrated to the organization. Finally, institutionalizing is the main learning process that occurs in an organization when both the culture is strong and the level of isomorphism between organizations is high. Institutionalizing is “the process of embedding learning that has occurred by individuals and groups into the organization and it includes systems, structures, procedures and strategy” (Crossan et al., 1999). Knowledge institutionalization contributes to build competitive advantage by learning from inside as well as outside. And the company embeds this knowledge into the practice within the organization with efficient information flows, for example in an old-player in an industry with major established players.

Conclusion

Institutionalization is the process where an organization's code of conduct, mission, policies, vision, and strategy become incorporated into the daily activities of its officers and other employees. Institutionalization occurs when the culture of an organization becomes so well established that it is understood by people inside and outside of the organization. It aims at integrating fundamental values and objectives into the organization's culture and structure. Organizational culture is a system of shared meaning held by members that distinguishes the organization from other organizations. The origin of culture as affecting an employee's attitude and behavior can be traced back to the notion of institutionalization. When an organization becomes institutionalized, it takes on a life of its own, apart from its founders, managers or employees. Sony, Gillette, McDonald's and Disney are some examples of organizations that have become valued for themselves, not merely for the goods or services they produce. Institutionalization produces common understandings among members about what is appropriate and fundamentally meaningful behavior in an organization. When an organization becomes institutional, shared meanings become evident to its members, the same as when a strong organizational culture is evident. Crossan, Lane and White (1999) explain that “institutionalizing is the process of ensuring that routinized actions occur.” Institutionalization is the process that distinguishes organizational learning from individual and group learning as it is through this process that ideas are transformed into institutions of the organization. This implies that there is a deliberate effort to root knowledge at the organizational level so that it may persist and be repeated in the future with regularity and become recognized as an institution. Institutionalization shows the extent to which norms, decisions and beliefs are becoming incorporated into the normal, ongoing activities of the organization. In this paper, a model has been introduced to understand organizational learning patterns under various degrees of organizational culture and institutional isomorphism. This is in no way saying that one learning method is superior to another, it just proposes a model to predict which learning procedure most likely occurs under what conditions.

Further Discussion

It must be noted that, if literature is analyzed, there are many disadvantages of the establishment of a strong culture within an organization. The culture of an organization can become a liability by acting as a barrier to change, a barrier to diversity, and a barrier to a merger or acquisition with another

organization. Institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) is criticized that though essential to fostering stability and permanence, because they end up producing rigidity and resistance to change, institutionalization processes do not produce long-term efficiency. There are many disadvantages of institutionalization mentioned in literature. One consequence of institutionalization is the increased predictability of behavior in organizations. The shared expectations that define institutionalized structures and shape their behaviors create pressure for conformity and therefore can limit alternative courses of action. Since institutionalized processes and procedures are resistant to change, they impose a limitation on an organization's flexibility and adaptability. (Zucker, 1977) It is argued that institutionalization often occurs when powerful organizations influence dependent organizations to adapt their structure or it can occur through professionalizing, such as when other interest groups seek to influence organizations. In both cases, organizations, in time, are led to take a normative, uniform form. The process of institutionalization can be understood by these processes of high levels of conflict in the early stages and of reflecting the relative power of interested parties, which requires careful consideration of the nature of such power relationships.

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