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PERFORMANCE ON INSTITUTIONALIZATION
IN SIMULATED ORGANIZATIONS"

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**SHARED HISTORY OR SHARED CULTURE? THE EFFECTS OF TIME, CULTURE, AND
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Two explanations for the emergence of institutionalized norms in new organizations were tested with data from 25 simulated organizations composed of managers from 11 countries. The results supported the hypothesis that new organizations import ready-made organizational elements from the institutional environment. But there were strong differences between cultural groups on measures of institutionalization.

Humans create societies that in turn confront them as objective facts. This basic paradox, "that man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 61) is central to all recent work on institutionalization in organizations. Institutional effects are sufficiently complex, however, to have engendered contrasting theoretical traditions. There are two rather different explanations for the emergence of institutionalized norms in new organizations, for example (cf. Scott, 1987).

The first explanation builds on the work of Selznick (1949; 1957) and Berger and Luckmann (1967) in emphasizing the importance of a shared history to the development and transmission of taken-for-granted norms (e.g., Zucker, 1977). From this perspective, organizational norms may be endogenous to particular organizations, part of unique organizational cultures (cf. Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985). Actions repeated over time are assigned similar meanings by the self and others, and thus a shared definition of social reality is created.

The second explanation places less emphasis on the process of institutionalization and more on the wide availability of institutionalized elements, ready at hand for anyone involved in constructing a new organization. This explanation can be dated to Meyer and Rowan (1977) who argued that new organizations could be expected to replicate existing rationalized myths: "the building blocks for organizations come to be littered around the societal landscape; it takes only a little entrepreneurial energy to assemble them into a structure"

(Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 345). From this perspective, the puzzle is not to account for the emergence of unique organizational cultures, but to explain why organizations in general are so similar (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Organizational homogeneity, it is argued, derives from the accessibility of rationalized myths concerning how organizations should be structured and managed. Institutional norms in modern societies are not developed de novo each time an organization is born. Instead, existing norms, taken-for-granted by everyone living in organizational societies, are routinely implemented when new organizations are born (cf. Stinchcombe, 1965).

One of the important questions that the Meyer and Rowan argument fails to address is whether there are cultural differences in modern bureaucratic societies with respect to institutional norms. Implicit in their argument is the idea that modern societies are distinctively different from traditional societies in that "folkways and traditions and customs give way to laws, rules, and regulations" (Scott, 1987, p. 498). But there has been no attempt within institutional theory to differentiate between different types of modern societies, despite research showing that "deep-seated managerial assumptions are strongly shaped by national cultures and appear quite insensitive to the more transient culture of organizations" (Laurent, 1986, p. 95).

The research described in this paper investigated the conditions under which institutionalized beliefs and practices emerged in competitive organizational environments. The research utilized the MARKSTRAT competitive marketing simulation (Larreche & Gatignon, 1977)

that has proven to be a useful tool for studying strategic decision-making (e.g., Hogarth & Makridakis, 1981; Walsh, Henderson, & Deighton, 1988). The aim was to build on previous laboratory work on institutionalization (e.g., Weick & Gilfillan, 1971; Zucker, 1977), but in a context that achieved greater ecological validity. By simulating the complexity of actual organizations, we hoped to significantly extend our understanding of institutional processes beyond the deliberately minimal organizations characteristic of previous experimental work.

Hypotheses

Based on the above discussion, a set of competitive hypotheses were developed to examine the relative importance of the two explanations for the emergence of institutionalized norms in new organizations. One explanation emphasizes the importance of shared interaction over time for the construction of a taken-for-granted social reality. The other explanation emphasizes the instantaneous institutionalization that occurs in new organizations in modern societies in which rationalized myths provide ready-made recipes for reality construction. We also explored the hypothesis that not all modern cultures were alike with respect to the acceptance of institutionalized norms.

The first hypothesis tests the basic assumption of the interaction explanation for institutionalization: that the more organizational members personally interact in the context of common problems, the greater the degree of institutionalization.

Hypothesis 1. In a new organization with stable membership institutionalization will increase over time.

From the Meyer and Rowan perspective, of course, shared interaction has little to do with institutionalization, because all members of modern societies have access to rationalized myths. From this perspective, the null version of the first hypothesis should be supported: shared interaction should not lead to an increase in institutionalization over time.

The second hypothesis directly tests the culture-free version of institutional theory implicit in Meyer and Rowan (1977). From this perspective, institutional elements are available to members of modern rationalized societies. The possibility of significant differences between the institutionalizing propensities of different cultural groups is neglected. In contrast to this culture-free assumption, cross-cultural research suggests that managers from different cultures perceive differently such important institutional elements as authority, formalization, and hierarchy (Laurent, 1983).

Hypothesis 2. The degree of institutionalization in organizations depends on the cultural origins of the members.

One of the innovations of the present research is its examination of institutional effects in a competitive market environment. Institutional theory and research has concerned itself almost exclusively with non-market organizations such as schools and municipalities. The theory has been that these kinds of public sector organizations decouple institutionalized elements from efficiency considerations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, pp. 356-357). Performance feedback, in other words, is not

expected to influence institutional elements. An alternative view, however, is that "institutional arguments need not be formulated in opposition to rational or efficiency arguments" (Scott, 1987, p. 509). Especially in a competitive environment, negative performance feedback might be expected to undermine taken-for-granted procedures, whereas positive feedback might be expected to validate existing norms.

A third possibility is that negative feedback will reinforce existing institutions, as suggested by the threat-rigidity literature (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981), and the escalation of commitment literature (Staw & Ross, 1987).

Hypothesis 3. Performance feedback will significantly affect subsequent institutionalization.

Method

Subjects. Subjects consisted of 106 managers from 25 different firms attending executive development programs at a European management institute. The average age was 41 and 11 European countries were represented. Three of the subjects were female.

Unit of analysis. The unit of analysis for this research was the simulated MARKSTRAT organization into which subjects were assigned. These 25 organizations can be classified as follows: 10 culturally mixed organizations, containing predominantly Northern Europeans (Britains, Scandinavians, Dutch, etc.) from a variety of companies; 5 German language organizations, containing all Germans from a large German industrial company; and 10 French language organizations containing

predominantly Latin Europeans (French, Italians, Spaniards) from a variety of companies.

Procedure. The hypotheses were tested in 25 temporary organizations created for the purpose of competing in the MARKSTRAT marketing strategy simulation (Larreche & Gatignon, 1977). The simulation involved up to eight decision periods lasting two-and-a-half hours each. At the beginning of each period firms received the results of the previous period. Each simulation continued for at least six periods, with informal organizational meetings frequently taking place outside the regular decision periods.

Each firm competed with four others in an industry consisting of five market segments. Decisions involved how to market at least two consumer durables, and whether to diversify into another industry that emerged in the course of the simulation (see Cook, 1988, for more details of MARKSTRAT as a research tool).

Measures

Questionnaires were distributed to all subjects after the second and fifth decision periods, with response rates of 91.5% and 95% respectively. The means of the individual responses were taken to obtain organizational level data.

Dependent variable: Institutionalization. Following Zucker (1977), the degree of institutionalization was assessed by measuring (on 7 point scales) a number of other variables that were expected to vary directly with institutionalization. First, it was expected that increasing institutionalization would increase the taken-for-grantedness of

organizational procedures, thus making it more difficult for organizational members to imagine ways to improve effectiveness. Subjects were asked to indicate whether or not there were some obvious ways in which their MARKSTRAT organization could be run more effectively.

Second, increasing institutionalization was expected to increase the perceived ease of decision making, as subjects became more certain of organizational judgments. Subjects were asked to indicate how difficult or easy it was for their organizations to make decisions.

Third, increasing institutionalization was predicted to increase agreement among organizational members concerning the causes of performance, as members came to share increasingly taken-for-granted perceptions concerning the nature of the environment with which they were interacting. Subjects were asked to indicate how much agreement there had been in the organization about the causes of market share results during the last decision period, with end points labelled: "Everybody stuck to a differnt opinion," and "All members agreed."

Fourth, it was expected (to paraphrase Zucker, 1977, p. 737) that the more institutionalized, the more subjects would feel normatively constrained to agree with the organization's decisions. This normative pressure was measured by asking subjects whether they had felt they should agree with the organization's decisions during the previous session

Fifth, increasing institutionalization was expected to be correlated with increasing role specialization, as emphasized by Berger and Luckmann

(1967). Subjects were asked to indicate approximately how specialized the members of the MARKSTRAT organization were.

Finally, an important aspect of institutionalization is the taken-for-grantedness of authority relations. The more institutionalized the organization, the more difficult it becomes to challenge the existing order of things, as has been documented by ethnomethodologists such as Garfinkel (1967). Subjects were asked to estimate how easy it would be to challenge the decision making power of the dominant members of the organization.

Independent variables. Three independent variables were hypothesized to influence the degree of institutionalization. First, interaction over time was predicted to lead to increasing institutionalization. Consequently, data were collected early in the simulation (after the second decision period) and late in the simulation (after the fifth decision period). The time variable was coded into two categories: early and late.

Second, cultural origin was coded into three categories corresponding to the three main groups: German, mixed Northern European, and Latin European.

Third, performance was operationalized as the net marketing contribution from the most recent decision period divided by the net marketing contribution from the period immediately preceding it. This measure was positive for firms that improved their performance relative to the previous time period, and negative for firms that decreased their performance relative to the previous time period.

Analysis. The data were analyzed within a general linear model framework, with time, culture, and performance as independent variables.

Results

Did the results support the first hypothesis, which stated that interaction between organizational members over time increases institutionalization? The answer, as Table 1 shows, is generally negative. Time had a significant effect on only one aspect of institutionalization, role specialization. As predicted by the hypothesis, over time more group members adopted specialized roles ($F=10.86$, $p<.01$). On the other five measures of institutionalization, however, interaction between organizational members over time had no effect.

The second hypothesis predicted significant differences between cultural groups. This hypothesis was strongly supported. On five out of six measures of institutionalization, cultural differences had strongly significant effects. As Table 1 shows, cultural groups differed significantly with respect to: degree of role specialization ($F=6.32$, $p<.01$), the degree to which the power of dominant members could be challenged ($F=23.95$, $p<.01$), ease of decision making ($F=3.97$, $p<.05$), pressure to agree with group decisions ($F=137.16$, $p<.01$), and perceptions of organizational effectiveness ($F=8.86$, $p<.01$).

Insert Table 1 about here

An examination of the group means indicates that the Latin European organizations were significantly different from the other two groups on several measures of institutionalization. As Table 2 shows, members of the Latin organizations, relative to members of the other two types of organizations, were less inclined to take organizational effectiveness for granted, experienced less pressure to agree with group decisions, and found it easier to challenge established power.

Insert Table 2 about here

The German group, relative to the other two groups of organizations, were significantly more inclined to place group members in specialized roles. There are two alternative explanations for this significant difference: the nature of German culture in general, or the shared organizational history in the German company to which all the German managers belonged. The shared organizational history explanation is consistent with the significant effects of shared interaction across all cultural groups on role specialization.

The third hypothesis suggested that performance feedback should significantly affect institutionalization. Surprisingly, this hypothesis was only weakly supported. As Table 1 shows, performance feedback had a significant effect on only one measure of institutionalization. The more negative the feedback, the harder it was for organizational members to challenge the decision making power of the dominant members ($F=5.99$, $p<.05$). Apparently, bad news simply reinforced

existing institutionalized power: the regression coefficient was significant in the negative direction.

A question can be raised concerning the interpretation of these results. Were the dependent variables highly correlated with each other, or were they measuring different aspects of institutionalization? Table 3 shows that only four of the fifteen correlations between the dependent variables were significant. The two variables that measured power relations in the organizations were significantly correlated. In general, groups which took power relations for granted also experienced pressure to agree to group decisions ($r=.55$, $p<.01$). The overall measure of taken-for-grantedness with organizational procedures was also correlated with three other aspects of institutionalization. Organizations that found it hard to imagine ways to increase effectiveness also tended to have more people in specialized roles ($r=.35$, $p<.05$), found it easier to make decisions ($r=.28$, $p<.05$), and exerted more pressure to go along with group decisions ($r=.51$, $p<.01$).

Insert Table 3 about here

In summary, the strongest and most pervasive factor influencing the degree of institutionalization in newly formed organizations was the cultural origins of the members. In comparison to these strong effects shared organizational history and performance feedback each affected only single measures of institutionalization.

Discussion

This paper has addressed the issue of whether institutionalization develops through shared history within the organization or whether institutional elements are simply adopted ready-made from those available in the organizational environment. The results support the adoption of ready-made elements hypothesis rather than the shared history hypothesis. There was little evidence of increasing institutionalization over time in the simulated organizations.

Further, institutional norms were surprisingly immune to feedback of performance, consistent with a borrowing-from-the environment explanation for the origin of institutional elements (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The one significant finding, that poor performance reinforced existing power relationships, is compatible with research indicating pervasive irrationality in response to negative feedback (Staw & Ross, 1987; Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). This result is especially noteworthy considering both the highly competitive nature of the simulated environment, and the competitive proclivities of the subjects, all of whom were managers from companies in the private sector. Overall, then, these results lend support to the emphasis within institutional theory on the origins of organizational elements in the institutionalized environment.

However, the strong and pervasive effects of culture on institutionalization indicate that the institutional environment of modern societies is not homogenous. There were strongly significant differences between Latin and Northern organizations on such central

aspects of institutionalization as the taken-for-grantedness of authority relations. These cultural differences are consistent with previous research showing that Latin managers, compared to managers from Northern cultures, perceive authority, status, and power as attached, not to institutional elements such as offices or functions, but to individuals (Laurent, 1986).

Although institutional theory has recently been tested outside of North America (Carroll, Goodstein, & Gyenes, 1988), thus expanding the scope of the empirical results, explicitly cross-cultural research has been neglected. Future research should investigate whether pervasive cultural differences with regard to institutionalization persist across modern societies. The present paper also points to the necessity of distinguishing unambiguously between company effects and cultural effects on institutionalization.

One of the taken-for-granted assumptions of institutional theory is that humans create societies that then confront them as objective facts. The present research suggests that such objective facts may be culture specific. The objectivity of the manager from Berlin, for example, may strike his Parisian counterpart as mere caprice.

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Table 1

F VALUES OF TIME, CULTURE, AND PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables			Total Model (incl. within-effects)
	Time	Culture	Perf. Feedback	
	F (1,23)	F (2,23)	F (1,23)	
Effectiveness	0.79	8.86***	0.08	1.83*
Dec Making Ease	0.60	3.97**	0.31	4.22***
Cause Agreement	0.57	0.61	0.13	1.30
Norm Pressure	0.01	137.16***	0.61	13.05***
Specialization	10.86***	6.32***	1.74	3.44***
Power	1.21	23.95***	5.99**	6.05***

* p < 0.10
 ** p < 0.05
 *** p < 0.01

Table 2

MEANS (STANDARD DEVIATIONS) FOR DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Dependent Variables	Categorical Independent Variables				
	Culture			Time	
	Latin	Mixed	German	Early	Late
Effectiveness	3.0** (0.7)	3.7* (0.9)	4.3* (1.0)	3.4 (1.0)	3.7 (1.0)
Dec Making Ease	4.3 (0.8)	4.7* (1.0)	4.2* (0.6)	4.6 (0.7)	4.4 (1.0)
Cause Agreement	5.6 (0.8)	5.8 (0.8)	5.5 (0.4)	5.8 (0.8)	5.5 (0.6)
Norm Pressure	1.8** (0.5)	4.6* (1.2)	5.1* (0.6)	3.6 (1.7)	3.7 (1.8)
Specialization	2.5* (1.3)	2.3* (1.0)	3.4** (1.4)	2.0 (0.8)	3.2 (1.3)
Power	2.6** (0.7)	3.3** (0.8)	3.7** (0.8)	3.1 (0.9)	3.1 (0.9)

The asterisks refer to the results of comparisons of means using Tukey's studentized range test, with alpha = 0.05.

** The mean of this group is significantly different from each of the two other groups.

* The mean of this group is significantly different from only one of the two other groups, namely the one whose mean is most different from it.

Table 3
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Dependent Variables	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6
Y1: Effectiveness	1.00	0.28*	0.23	0.51**	0.35*	0.17
Y2: Dec Making Ease		1.00	0.20	0.15	0.00	-0.08
Y3: Cause Agreement			1.00	0.14	-0.20	-0.09
Y4: Norm Pressure				1.00	0.04	0.55**
Y5: Specialization					1.00	0.08
Y6: Power						1.00

* p < 0.05

** p < 0.01

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