"The Transfer of Organizational Management Techniques Across Borders: Combining Neo-Institutional and Comparative Perspectives"

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Abstract

In this paper we propose combining elements from the neo-institutional school on organizations with elements drawn from the comparative world-systemic approach to macroscopic process of social change to study the transfer of organizational management techniques across national boundaries. We first show the limitations of previous research on international transfers. We then discuss the applicability of neo-institutional theory to the study of international transfers and suggest ways it can be modified to deal with cross-national flows. We conclude by putting forth a number of propositions to guide empirical work. We draw on the authors' separate studies on multinationals and their influence on organizational forms in a developing country, and on the worldwide diffusion of scientific management, human relations and structural theories of organization.

INTRODUCTION

The changing nature of world economic leadership, the relative decline of the United States as an industrial power, and the economic success of Japanese firms has renewed the interest in the transfer of organizational forms, practices and techniques across nations. The focus on the Japanese case has contributed to the debate on new forms of work organization, brought back our attention to the organization as a cultural phenomenon, and has generated interest in the contextual, historical, and institutional approaches to explain organizational behavior and organizational change processes. More importantly, one could argue that the success of Japan is a fortunate historical event for the study of transfers between organizations from different countries because it has prompted U.S. researchers (including those outside the field of international business and management) to study the effect of <u>importing</u> (not simply exporting) organizational forms and techniques and on the effect of these foreign forms on their local environment (e.g. Florida and Kenney 1991; Mair et al. 1988; Brown and Reich 1989).

The fact that attention has shifted to the effect foreign organizational forms may have on organizations in the United States and to the study of what practices are easily transferred from Japan to the United States benefits the study of transfers in various ways. First, the unidirectional view of flows of organizational techniques from the U.S. to other nations is no longer dominant. Second, the applicability of U.S. management

techniques in other national environments has ceased being the central preoccupation for U.S. scholars studying international transfers. Third, the focus of attention has expanded to include not only the recipient country and organization but also the sender organization and the society in which it is originally embedded. Thus, the characteristics of the recipient organization or host society are no longer viewed as the only impediments to successful transfers and as a result there is a new interest in the sender organization and its environment. But even though interest has shifted, little has been done to advance frameworks which take such shifts into account. Moreover, organization-or country-specific characteristics should be conceptualized not only as impediments; they may facilitate transfers.

The last decade brought the issues of globalization to the foreground and reframed the older question of cross-national transfers of organizational techniques. We feel that organizational theory has not kept pace with this change. We argue that current approaches in the study of organizations which place greater emphasis on environmental relations and influences, present new avenues for the study of transfer of organizational techniques across borders. We propose to use the neo-institutional theory of organizations as a point of departure in developing a framework for the study of transfers across nations because it provides a way for attending to multiple environments (fields, countries, world system). It is precisely this multiplicity of environments (or layers of social structure), and the greater extent and speed of

interaction in the world today, that make it impossible to ignore the international context. It is becoming increasingly difficult to study organizational change in one country with no reference to processes of change in the rest of the world. Yet even though the neo-institutional perspective proposes a theoretical framework for shifting levels of analysis and provides a rationale for introducing the pattern of relationships among actors, it fails to integrate the cross national context within which transfers take place.

Presently, we incorporate national differences in organizational studies more and more but we continue to ignore and make no explicit reference to ties/relationships between nation-states. We view organizations as interacting within a particular national context or focus our attention on one organization facing differing national environments (Rosenzweig and Singh, 1991) but we still do not incorporate the notion that the countries which organizations inhabit also interact in a global setting. Thus, we now study organizations interacting within a national environment and attend to the influence such an environment has on the organization. We also look at relationships between organizations from two different countries but do not acknowledge and attend to the global context which the two organizations are part of. In other words, we are still not attending to inter-organizational transfers/exchanges between organizations from two different countries or intra-organizational transfers within organizations that cross fields and national boundaries and are embedded in a

world-system environment.

PROBLEMS WITH PAST RESEARCH

Issues concerning the transfer of organizational management techniques across borders have interested researchers in the field of international management for quite sometime. The underlying assumption of much of this work views change as a result of adoption of new ideas, techniques and values. Usually, the ideas, techniques and values are found in organizations belonging to economically successful nations and it is often assumed that these are exported to a lesser developed region of the world. In the majority of cases, the research focus centered on the transfer of U.S. industrial practices to other countries, and the applicability of U.S. management techniques to other national environments (e.g. Boyacigiller and Adler 1991; Doktor et al. 1991; Von Glinow and Teargarden 1988; Adler and Jelinek 1986; Hofstede 1980b, 1987; Kerr et al. 1960; Negandhi 1971, 1974; Negandhi and Prasad 1971).

The bulk of the research discusses the role of multinational corporations (MNCs) in the transfer process. These organizations are viewed as important actors in economic development and as a key agents in the transfer process (e.g. Quinn 1969; Germidis 1977; Bierstaker 1978; Hill and Still 1980; Sagafi-nejad and Belfield 1980; Perlmutter and Sagafi-nejad 1981; Stobaugh and Wells 1984). The development literature, as well as the international management literature, suggest that MNCs are a source of modern management techniques, and an underlying assumption has been that such

techniques--usually denominated "soft technology" (UNCTC 1988)--are imported to host countries and diffused both to the subsidiaries of MNCS and to indigenous organizations (e.g. Vernon, 1972; Kobrin, 1977). Agreement seems to exist on viewing MNCs as carriers of management techniques, but there is little empirical work on the process of transfer, the effect of the transfer on local organizations [1], (Lall 1975, 1980; Lall and Streeten 1977) or the behavior of recipients. It is evident that much of the research on international transfer of technology has focused on intra-organizational transfer activity--the voluntary transfer of technology from headquarters to wholly-owned subsidiaries of MNCs (e.g. Davidson et al. 1974; Vernon and Davidson 1979; Davidson and McFetridge 1985). The involuntary transfers and the inter-organizational transfers have merited little attention (Zander 1991).

The main thrust of the research work emphasized economic factors that affect transfers such as the costs, payments, and pricing associated with the transaction (e.g. Balasubramanyam 1973; Mason 1980; Adler and Graham 1989; Sagafi-negad et al. 1981; Baranson and Harrington 1977; Marton 1986; Reddy and Zhao 1991; Ricks and Martinez 1990; UNCTC 1990, 1983). Initially, this approach did not take into account the social (national, international) context in which the transaction takes place. But

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[1]There are a number of studies which look at the transfer of technology, including management techniques, within the MNC--from headquarters to subsidiaries. See Reddy and Zhao (1990) for a review which mentions the well known works.

given the fact that not all transfers considered economically sound were successful, there was a shift in the research towards constraining characteristics of the host country that brought about the failure. In other words, what is wrong with the recipient was investigated while the role of the sender was often ignored or simplified.

In explaining failures of transfers, researchers have addressed variables characterizing the environment, the sending organization, or the nature of the technology. The environment is usually referred to as "national culture". The national culture was singled out as a major constraining factor that could potentially inhibit a transfer. National culture is either associated with individual values aggregated to the national level (e.g. Hofstede, 1980a), a description of the national political scene, or at times refers to a country's market size.

For example, in a recent article Kedia and Bhagat (1988) posit that it is important to take into account the "constraining influences of cultural factors" when studying transfer of technology across nations. Kedia and Bhagat suggest that two of the four factors they list as affecting transfers[2], organizational culture and societal culture differences, are the major

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[2]Kedia and Bhagat identified various factors affecting the success of transfers: (1)the type of technology (product, process, person embodied), favoring those that capture commitment on part of managers; (2)the ability of the recipient organization to adopt/absorb, emphasizing level of development of host country; (3)the differences in organizational cultures; and (4)differences in societal cultures.

contributors to the success of the transfer. They add that differences in societal culture will affect the effectiveness of transfers most when the nations involved have very different levels of industrialization (i.e., one is industrialized and one is a developing nation). But even though they acknowledge the different levels of industrialization, no mention of the relationship between countries is made and their attention continues to be centered on the recipient (host country and/or organization).

The attempt by Kedia and Bhagat to elaborate a conceptual model of technology transfer across countries highlights some of the problems researchers have encountered when studying this phenomenon. First, the levels of analysis vary from the individual to the national, to the global, and are often mixed. Second, the focus is mostly on the host society, usually defined as a national culture. Third, national culture is most frequently defined as an aggregate of values, attitudes and beliefs based on individual responses. Usually the work by Hofstede (1980a) is utilized when operationalizing societal cultures. In a few studies culture is defined as a result of national politics, but there are no references to the institutional environment (particularly its normative component) and few links are made between the environment and the organizations in the transfer equations. Fourth, even though transfers involve organizations, as well as nations, the organizational level has often been neglected; and therefore few studies have focused on the structure of social relations among organizations as a variable influencing transfers.

We find various limitations in past approaches. First, the way national culture is conceptualized and operationalized. Second, the lack of systematic attention to the organization-environment links for both sender and recipient organizations. Third, the fact that culture is equated with country and limited by national boundaries. And fourth, considering culture only as a constraining factor that interferes with economic logic, instead of also viewing culture as facilitating or shaping transfers.

Furthermore, while there is a recognition of the importance of the culture of the recipient country and to a lesser extent to that of the country in which the transfer originates; the interdependence or connections between the two countries are ignored. The differences among nations (in terms of economic performance, dependence, and industrialization) are rarely addressed or included in proposed frameworks; nor are relations between nations. In addition, little importance is assigned to the time dimension because there is no explicit historical model. This means that the origins and availability of organizational techniques and forms are not explored. The timing of innovations and adoptions is rarely taken into account. Moreover, since world-system positions are so central to the transfer process, the lack of an interpretive historical account makes it nearly impossible to understand how trade patterns, political alliances, industrialization and cultural heritages influence transfers. For example, Evans (1987) argues that the involvement of MNCs, key actors in the transfer process, occurred at different points in

time in Asia and Latin America which resulted in differing roles for the MNCs. Evans points out that unlike in Latin America where MNCs arrived earlier, in East Asia the intervention came at a later period, "when worldwide norms governing relations between Third World states and the transnationals were quite different" (1987:206).

Putting the phenomena in their historical context also helps to understand the complex (and sometimes unexpected) ways in which different institutional factors interact with each other in different national settings and time periods. The complex interaction of multiple layers of social structures (international, national, regional, field-level, organization-level) is also missed if contextual history is absent from the picture.

TRANSFER OF ORGANIZATIONAL TECHNIQUES ACROSS BORDERS

As stated earlier, we propose combining elements from the neo-institutional school on organizations with elements drawn from the comparative world-systemic approach to macroscopic process of social change to study the transfer of organizational techniques across national boundaries. Today a great deal of transfers of organizational techniques take place at an international level and across countries. In fact, flows that cross national boundaries have become increasingly important and so has the need for taking international influences and ties into account.

The neo-institutional perspective provides a theoretical framework for the study of organizations responding to pressures in

their national environments. It puts forth the important concept of organizational field. Organizational fields are "roughly coterminous with the boundaries of industries, professions, or national societies" (Powell and DiMaggio 1991:23). The concept of field emphasizes proximate connections but lacks the national or world-system level of analysis which Scott suggested (1983). At the field (within country context) level we are not able to attend to multiple institutional environments, nor to the interorganizational relations between societies. We argue that in order to attend to processes of change and stability, as well as transfer and diffusion of practices across countries, there is a need to complement institutional theory with a comparative perspective. Table 1 summarizes the elements contributed by each perspective to the study of transfer of organizational techniques across countries.

Table 1: Main Features of the two Perspectives Applicable to the Study of Transfers

	Neo-Institutional Perspective	Comparative Perspective
Approach to the Environment	institutionalized -normative (cultural) -relational (structural)	cross national context -international channels of diffusion competition among nation states
Level of analysis	organizational field	country
Context	within national boundaries	world system: from comparison of two national systems to world-system
Key actors	state professions large firms powerful organized actors	state professions working class intellectual and business elites
Methodology	historical analysis field analysis -structuration of field -network analysis	historical analysis structural analysis comparative analysis -historical interpretation of each case -causal analysis based on a multiplicity of cases
Key questions	What accounts for similarities in organizations within fields and differences across fields?	How do national particularities affect theoretical generalizations about how transfers take place?

1. Defining the Institutional Environment

The neo-institutional approach views the environment as one which is "populated by organizations that have relationships, not simply transactions, and it is the source of normative pressures on organizations and of normative and cognitive constraints on their considerations of alternatives, thereby influencing organizations towards isomorphism" (Westney 1991:82). Organizations experience pressure to adapt and be consistent with the institutional environment; they are assumed to search for legitimacy and recognition, i.e. profits, growth, prestige, and other types of expected performance (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The focus is on the interorganizational level of analysis when attending to organizational change processes, suggesting that "organizational outcomes are affected by the actions at the level of the institutional environment, not by firm-level characteristics alone" (Mezias 1990:451).

The neo-institutional school of organization studies posits that the diffusion and application of organizational ideas and techniques takes place in an institutionalized context (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer and Scott, 1983; Lincoln, 1988; Powell, 1987; Zucker, 1983, 1987). The institutional context refers to "the social and cultural environment of an organization which can shape the structures and influence the functioning of an organization no less decisively than can its technical environment" (Scott, 1983:159). Put in other words, the environment has a normative

(cultural)[3] and a relational (structural) component. Organizations reflect the widespread understanding of social reality and are a function of the relational networks (Meyer and Rowan 1977). According to Scott (1983), three classes of elements are useful for assessing boundaries of organizational environments: network elements, cultural elements and historical elements.

2. Level of Analysis (Fields) and Key Actors (state, professions, big firms)

Neo-Institutional theorists view organizations as actors embedded in inter-organizational networks which affect organizational forms throughout a field. A **field** is defined as "those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983:148). The field approach opens the way for analysis of factors such as "interest configuration rather than isolated interests of focal organizations, conflict configurations rather than conflict between two focal actors, and collective results of organizational interests, strategies, and activities rather than a focus on one organization alone" (Anheier 1986:3-4). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that organizations change or gradually come to resemble other organizations within the field because of institutional pressures (mimetic, normative, coercive).

Both horizontal connections between organizations and vertical linkages are viewed as important but particular attention is payed

[3]Note that neo-institutional theory does not conceptualize the cultural/normative component as an aggregation of individual values to the national level.

to vertical linkages and the requirements established by a hierarchically superior element of the system (DiMaggio, 1986; Tolbert and Zucker 1983). Until recently, much of the empirical work using this perspective has taken place in the public and nonprofit sectors where the state (as regulator) is cited as an important influence on the institutional system. Each national institutional environment has peculiar characteristics and nation-states differ in terms of how much authority they can exercise in a given domain (Scott and Meyer 1983:14-15). The professions are another key actor in institutional environments.

Recently, however, Mezias (1990) applied an institutional approach when examining the adoption of financial reporting practices by Fortune 200 firms, and found that the institutional model added significant explanatory power. More importantly, and pertinent to the present discussion, he concludes that large firms can also influence the institutional environment and should be added to the nation-state and professionals as powerful organizations that participate and contribute to the evolution and change of that environment. Mezias notes that "at times of institutional change, when the content of rational myths is determined or altered, powerful organized actors have important effects" (1990:455). Thus, initially, the state and the professions were identified as key actors in the process of structuration of organizational fields, and later work has added the big firms.

3. Longitudinal Variation

Results of research using an institutional approach also highlight the importance of longitudinal variation (Tolbert and Zucker 1983; Middleton 1989; Mezias 1990). For example, Tolbert and Zucker (1983) in their study of the diffusion of civil service reform with municipalities found that procedures were increasingly adopted because of their growing legitimacy rather than for their ability to solve problems of municipal administration. Initially, adoption of procedures could be predicted by the type of internal problems a municipality had that the reform could solve (responding to efficient and rational actors choice). As the movement spread, factors, such as proximity to another city that had the procedures in place, predicted the likelihood of adoption. Tolbert and Zucker suggest that early and later adoptors responded to differing external environments, the later ones to an environment that already contained the assumption that civil service procedures must be included as a legitimate organizational element in municipal organization.

4. Interorganizational Networks

Organizations are seen as participating in a larger system of interorganizational relations where there is a set of patterned relationships among component parts (Scott 1983; Powell 1987). Research on effects of institutional processes on organizational behavior has centered its attention on the network of contacts among organizations within a field (Galaskiewicz and Burt 1991; Galaskiewicz and Wasserman 1989, DiMaggio 1983). Results of the

work by Galaskiewicz and Wasserman show that social networks are important in determining which actors will be imitated. The later work by Galaskiewicz and Burt provides evidence of contagion by structural equivalence rather than cohesion. That is, actual ties between organizations are not necessary for contagion; actors who occupy similar positions in the inter-organizational network will display similar behavior. Both studies focused on professional communities operating within a national environment and in one historical context.

Other work which focuses on institutional sources of change has looked at the role of interorganizational networks in innovation adoption. For example, Burns and Wholey (1988) in their study of the diffusion of matrix management in a population of hospitals found that adoption was influenced by structural and institutional factors, as well as by the amount of information available. The authors propose that availability of information about matrix management influences diffusion more than normative pressures. Their results in part provide support for Tolbert and Zucker's (1983) finding that over time institutional factors increase in importance. Their findings also suggested that disadoption was affected by the length of time the program had been operating. The longer matrix management was in operation in a hospital, the less likely that hospital would drop it.

Thus, neo-institutional theory makes predictions about the behavior of organizations operating <u>within</u> the same field (i.e. industrial sector, domain) based on the degree of structuration of

the field, the inter-dependence of the organizations operating within it, the presence of coercive (state) or normative (professions) actors, the presence of big firms (powerful organizations), and the level of technological uncertainty and goal ambiguity. It also recognizes the importance of historical trends.

B. Contributions of the Comparative Perspective

A comparative, cross-national perspective solves two kinds of problems associated with the conceptualization of the international diffusion of organizational ideas and techniques. First, organizational change does not only result from within-national conditions. Forces operating beyond national boundaries also have an impact. Second, the international circulation of ideas and techniques faces more barriers (legal, geographical, cultural, linguistic) than within-nation diffusion. The comparative approach also helps to identify distinctive channels or agents of transfer that cross national boundaries and thus facilitate transfers.

Cross-national comparative studies in the social sciences may be undertaken for a variety of reasons. In the field of organizational studies the most common reasons have been: (a) to see if general propositions hold cross-culturally (e.g. Chandler 1990; Dyas and Thanheiser 1976; Hickson et al. 1974); and (b) to find explanations for otherwise obscure or incomprehensible differences observed among organizations operating in different countries (e.g. Glaser 1971; Dore 1973; Maurice et al. 1980; Nath 1968; Negandhi 1983). Comparative studies based on the first reason

in fact undermine the very rationale behind a truly comparative approach because the emphasis is placed on testing to what extent general or universal theories hold in several countries in spite of country-specific conditions or national characteristics. Instead of using a theory of alternatives applicable both to institutional factors and organizational outcomes, a theory of stages is favored with an emphasis on universalistic accounts of historical evidence. The second reason for conducting comparative studies follows a "variation finding" approach so that additional differences (or similarities) in country-specific conditions (especially those related to cultural and value systems) can help the researcher in the quest for an explanation of observed empirical phenomena. It is understood in these studies that while factors such as organizational technology, strategy or competitive position are important, the larger social, political and economic conditions shaping or structuring the environment of organizations also help to explain change in individual organizations.

But there are at least two other important reasons for approaching the study of organizational change from a cross-national comparative perspective. The first reason is that competition, imitation and cooperation among nation-states represents a major engine of organizational change. The Marxist and structural-functional traditions have conceived of modernization (organizational change being a part of the process) as a phenomenon internal to each country or society. Such a framework of analysis ignores the different world-system positions, international

alliances, relative degrees of economic economic and organizational development, and perceptions of threats or opportunities in the international arena of states. In other words, forces operating beyond national boundaries have an impact on organizational change <u>within</u> any given country.

The second additional reason for a comparative approach to organizational change derives from an empirical observation. Most organizational innovations originate in one country, gain institutional legitimacy there, and then spread to other countries in selective ways. The study of such processes of international diffusion necessitates from a comparative perspective so that distinctive channels of transference of ideas and techniques can be established and empirically assessed. Recent studies (Westney 1987; Cole 1985, 1989) exemplify the use of a comparative research strategy for the purpose of studying the international diffusion of certain organizational techniques.

Flows of technology and influences that cross national boundaries have always been of interest to those who study problems of development and industrialization. This group of researchers have focused on the nation-state and its links to the international political economy. A central actor in these discussions has been the multinational corporation (MNC) and its effect on society (Marton 1986; Evans 1981). Evans and Stephens argue that

> development has never taken place in isolated compartments defined by national borders but in the post-World War II period a confluence of secular technological trends and recurrent cyclical patterns has created an exceptionally "internationalized" world. [...] the necessity of taking international influences into account

> when analyzing the development of domestic institutions has increased correspondingly (1988:756).

In other words, forces operating beyond national boundaries have an impact on organizational change <u>within</u> any given country. Recently, those who study development have combined elements from earlier theoretical traditions (dependency, modernization, world system view), resulting in a historical-structural approach that pays greater attention to international ties. This new comparative perspective also focuses on the nation-state as a unit of analysis. The following example illustrates the usefulness of combining both approaches.

<u>Example: Attending to Multiple Environments</u>

A case study conducted by one of the authors (Arias 1992) looked at the transfer of human resources management practices from MNCs to local firms within one industry in a developing nation. One of the questions asked general managers from 39 firms how they establish salaries. The researcher first proceeded to interview all of the managers from the subsidiaries of MNCs (13 U.S. organizations and 12 European), and all of the general managers responded in a similar manner stating that they used "salary surveys". There was variety in types of surveys and in who was included in the surveys, but all used surveys. Most of the managers claimed that they were paying employees according to the going wage in the top quartile of the market. The "market" was constructed by doing surveys which included other subsidiaries of MNCs, both within and outside the industry. The majority of the U.S. firms conducted their own survey, a few used surveys designed

by consulting firms such as Price Waterhouse. U.S. firms said that they used salary surveys because headquarters requested "data" on which to base salary increases. The European firms relied more on outside surveys and often on informal surveys of the national group (German, Swiss, French etc.).

After finishing the interviews with the subsidiaries, the researcher began to interview general managers of local firms. The first response was "we review what the government commissions have set as a minimum salary and pay accordingly." The researcher was surprised but so was the general manager at the fact that such a question would be asked.

As can be deduced from the anecdote above, the subsidiaries of MNCs did not respond to the local ways of defining salaries--they did not follow the minimum wage regulations set by the commission (in most cases they payed higher wages than those established legally). On the other hand, of the 14 local firms, only three participated in surveys and even two of those said that they rarely used them.

It is apparent that the subsidiaries and local firms were responding differently to the same local institutional environment. One could argue that the institutional environment is differentiated: there are different expectations for different types of organizations (Tolbert 1985). But why are there different expectations? And what are the subsidiaries of MNCs responding to?

MNCs have operations in more than one country, are part of one institutional environment from their inception, and their

organizational forms and practices respond in part to that setting. The MNCs expanded mainly in the fifties and sixties, have a history of international experience, and are by now well known world actors whose terrain is the international context. MNCs are world citizens and respond to international regulations and the international institutional environment[4]. In addition, the MNCs enter various nations at different moments and are thus members of multiple institutional environments.

In such a case, the neo-institutional approach would prompt a researcher to begin to focus on the field in which the subsidiary of the MNC is found--study the ties (relational component of the environment) of the organizations one is analyzing, trace some of them to the home country of the MNC and recognize that the subsidiary is operating in two different intersecting fields. At least two countries are involved, the country in which the subsidiary is based and the country of origin of the MNC. One could continue to argue that the environment is differentiated and there are different expectations for the subsidiaries and the local firms but we have not responded to why this may be the case and if it would vary in different countries? The second step would be to focus on the normative (cultural) component of the environment and take into account national differences. Here we suggest two

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[4]Rosenzweig and Singh (1991) mention the possibility of thinking of multinational enterprises (MNEs) as facing a "global environment". However, they discard it as unrealistic because (they add) "the many subsidiaries of an MNE often face the demands of specific local environments. The MNE simultaneously confronts differing national environments (:344).

things: that both recipient and sending countries (home/host countries) be taken into account, and that we use the same framework for defining the normative component.

Adding a comparative perspective and thus attending to multiple country environments as well as the international environment would allow our analysis to continue. If we conceive of organizations as social entities (as well as technical) then we acknowledge how they reflect the values, norms, and traditions of their societies. But which institutional environment do the subsidiaries of MNCs reflect--that of the country of origin or that of the country in which they are located? The subsidiaries are part of organizations (MNCs) that cross country borders. These organizations were founded and still have headquarters in industrialized nations, some of the economically most successful nations in the world. Given the importance of founding, (Stinchcombe 1965; Eisenhardt 1988) a case can be made that it is those socio-legal environments of the home country which affect the MNCs' behavior and structure, even as it goes abroad. One must attend to the process of structuration of the field in the home setting, focusing on the role of the state, professions, and other powerful organized actors in that setting.

Note, however, that a comparative perspective alone is not enough. Using nation-states as units of analysis may prevent us from identifying channels of transfer that span national boundaries. In addition, we need a particular kind of comparative approach emphasizing world-systemic factors, i.e. one that takes

into consideration linkages among nation-states. And we need to supplement this comparative world-systemic perspective with a careful analysis of the professional and organizational networks that cross country boundaries.

It is also possible that a combined perspective would permit a different interpretation of findings regarding Japanese "transplants" in the United States. First, we would not be surprised that the organization (a subsidiary) "does not appear to be a derivate of the environments in which they are embedded" (Florida and Kenney, 1991:382). In fact, a subsidiary is part of an MNC and hence a derivative of an organization that was founded in a different environment. The MNC is originally a product of the institutional environment in which the headquarters (sender organization) was founded. The combined perspective we are proposing may open up the possibility of analyzing the institutional environment in which the headquarters organization was founded and its historical context, as well as the conditions during the period of transfer. In other words, what we propose is to look at both environments through the same lense because we are adding two levels of analysis: the nation-state and the system of nation-states.

A combined perspective may also allow us to reframe the argument regarding the pulls facing the subsidiaries of MNCs (Doz and Prahalad 1981; Prahalad and Doz 1987; Rosenzweig and Singh 1991). These have been termed as issues of national culture versus corporate culture (Schneider, 1988); or tension between national

responsiveness or global integration (Doz et al. 1981; Bartlett and Ghoshal 1989). While it may well be that subsidiaries in some national environments face pressures to achieve isomorphism, one must differentiate between national environments. In some national environments, actors such as the state may have less influence over the powerful MNCs and thus regulatory factors would not influence all organizations in the field equally, minimizing isomorphic pressures. It is also possible that subsidiaries of MNCs do not take characteristics of other local/indigenous organizations because they do not come into contact, have any kind of ties with each other, nor are in the same structural position. Thus, it may not be that they are resisting pressures from national environments because of the pull to intraorganizational consistency (Rosenzweig and Singh 1991). In other national environments these powerful organized actors may face a stronger state or other powerful actors that result in a different situation, possibly isomorphism.

It is evident that there are factors missed without a combined perspective. Some of these are: the role of the state in each of the countries, the relations between nation-states, the different organization and roles of professional groups by country, and the influence of large and powerful firms in different national environments. In sum, while the neo-institutional perspective highlights the role of the state, the professions, and the large firms as actors capable of changing the environment within an organizational field in one country; the comparative perspective permits us to add two levels of analysis which include new agents

and channels of transfer. A comparative perspective invites one to consider the importance of studying change over time and across countries, and revisit the question of early/late adoptors or early/late developers.

CONDUCTING RESEARCH WITH A COMBINED PERSPECTIVE

At this state of our conceptual work we would like to make a few propositions without putting forth an all-encompassing theoretical framework. We are attempting to expand DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) neo-institutional scheme to include two levels of analysis in addition to the organization and the field of organizations, namely, the nation-state and the system of nation-states.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) propose a series of organization-level and field-level hypotheses. The organization-level hypotheses refer to the isomorphic pressures deriving from the dependence on another organization, the centralization of the sources of supply, the means-ends uncertainty, the ambiguity of organizational goals, the reliance on academic credentials to recruit personnel, and the participation of organizational managers in trade and professional associations.

The field-level hypotheses are more pertinent to this discussion. Isomorphism among the organizations in a field will increase with field dependence on a single supply source, the extent of interaction with state agencies, the limitation in the number of alternative organizational models, the relevance of

field-level means-ends or goal ambiguities, the extent of professionalization, and the level of structuration of the field.

We need to generate similar hypotheses for the cross-field and cross-national transfer of ideas and techniques. Transfers from organizations in one country to organizations in another take place in a structured environment which defines the position of the different countries in the world system of nation-states. We can characterize the position of countries as dependent or as leaders. Country positions are given by the relative degrees of economic development, trade patterns, capital investment flows, and economic and political alliances.

Proposition 1

The greater the dependence of a nation-state as a whole on other nation-states, the faster the rate of transfer[5] of ideas and techniques to the dependent nation-state. For example, a country may depend on another for vital resources such as capital, technical know-how, and organizational models. In the case of developing countries, the dependence may be on one or several MNCs.

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[5] The appeal of using the concept of "rate of transfer" derives from its essentially dynamic character. The rate can be negative, zero or positive. It can be large or small in absolute value. It can also be hypothesized to change over time according to certain explanatory variables. One may calculate rates of transfer for each country included in the study and then try to explain differences by reference to country-specific variables or conditions.

Dependent countries, much like dependent organizations, are subject to coercive and normative pressures. Obviously, transfers have a cost, and many countries simply cannot afford certain organizational techniques. But there are several interesting examples of developing countries that engaged in modernization drives, frequently orchestrated by the state and by technocratic elites, and were able to import expensive techniques. The transfer of mass-production and scientific-management techniques to Brazil and Spain during the 1940s and 1950s are good examples of this pattern.

Proposition 2

The lower the level of economic performance of a country, the faster the rate of transfer to organizations in the country. This is a restatement of the "late development effect" hypothesis (see, for instance, Gerschenkron 1962). It is important to differentiate between the poor economic performance of a country as a whole and the situation in which certain industries in a country lag behind the same industry in other countries. Differences in the performance of industries and nations create situations in which normative and mimetic change flourishes because of global competitive pressures. For example, American auto makers imported the techniques associated with just-in-time production as they perceived that their performance was slipping relative to the Japanese competition.

Proposition 3

Cross-national emulation and imitation increases the rate of transfer of organizational techniques. It is important to note that both dependent and leading countries engage in emulation; the former in order to catch up, the latter generally in the struggle to achieve world supremacy. The state is generally a key actor in the process of emulation. By drawing the attention of managers, workers, and the public to the experiences of other countries, the state creates an institutionalized context for the import of ideas and techniques perceived as successful, as means germane to a desirable end such as "national progress" or "national defense against foreign competition or aggression." Thus, the state legitimates the import of techniques. In addition, the state may devote material resources to the import and diffusion of techniques: research institutions, technology and know-how transfer programs, training programs, etc. In countries with public enterprises the state can play not only an intermediary role but a more direct one if state-owned firms are used as test grounds for foreign organizational techniques. Lastly, the state regulation of local firms and subsidiaries of MNCs may have important effects on the rate of transfer of certain techniques, especially those related to areas subject to closer control by the state such as personnel matters and financial reporting procedures.

Proposition 4

The rate of transfer increases with the availability of

channels or agents that cut across national boundaries. A comparative perspective is useful to identify new channels or agents that operate at the international level. In addition, it is useful to show how actors which are central to the neo-institutional approach, such as the state and the professions have an impact beyond national boundaries. The neo-institutional perspective helps to put those channels and agents in their structured context which is an international one. We have referred above to the structuration of the system of nation states from a neo-institutional standpoint, and now we intend to identify and discuss the cross-national channels or agents of transfer.

(a) Professions

Professionals in different countries share worldviews, training, and approaches to organizational problems. The rate of transfer of organizational ideas and techniques will increase if professional groups in different countries develop (or imitate) similar bodies of technical knowledge, and models of training, certification and association. Countries with stronger and more prestigious professional associations will tend to replicate these organizations in other countries, thereby influencing the rate of transfer of ideas and techniques. Of course, not all countries will "converge" into a dominant professional paradigm, and there might be competing paradimgs of professionalism. Ultimately, a comparative approach will yield typologies of countries in terms of the organization of professional groups, which may be used to understand and explain transfers. Moreover, international

convergence in patterns of professionalization is not the only factor facilitating cross-national transfers; the exchange of students, professional experts and executives as part of technical missions providing assistance around the globe also increases the rate of transfer. There are studies showing that professionals from Third World Nations trained in U.S. or European universities bring with them organizational ideas and techniques back to their country of origin. The diffusion of scientific management across the world between 1918 and 1955 owed much to the existence of engineering professional groups (Guillen 1992). Similarly, sociologists, social-psychologists and graduates from business schools promoted the spread of human relations and structural-organizational techniques in the 1950s and the 1960s.

(b) MNCs and International Consulting Firms

Most previous research on transfer has concentrated on the MNC as a cross-national transfer agent. In fact, by focusing on the MNC, authors overlooked other agents or conditions that interact with the role of the MNCs, as we showed in the examples above. MNCs are predominantly from countries that are more successful economically. MNCs tend to be among the oldest companies in the world. These organizations will most likely maintain management techniques in new settings regardless of the influence of the local institutional environment; thereby transferring organizational techniques. In part this may be due to the fact that the normative environment of the home country is predominant because of both the effect of founding and the overwhelming influence of the

environment in the home nation over its MNCs. A smaller, weaker nation-state may be less able to impose regulations. Furthermore, not only is the normative environment of the more economically successful country predominant, but it is likely that even within the host country MNCs have relations with similar organizations and stronger ties to those of the same national origin than to local firms.

It is also likely that the MNCs adopt worldwide standards that minimize the possibility of violating individual country guidelines, attending to the global institutional environment. In other words, upon entering a new and uncertain environment, these organizations replicate rather than innovate. MNCs are powerful and have the ability to set the agenda and influence, ignore, or recreate environments (Mezias 1990; Florida and Kenney 1991). In this case, availability of information on local practices and local state regulations have less of an effect on the practices adopted.

Another possible explanation for MNCs replicating and thus transferring practices is the length of time organizational practices have been in existence in the organization. Thus, for example, subsidiaries of MNCs implement practices coming from the home office which have been in place for years, even decades, and simply do not "disappear." One could argue that subsidiaries are late adoptors but the organization as a whole may well have been an early adoptor of a particular practice in the home institutional environment.

Finally, international consulting firms have a long history of

intermediation in the cross-national transfer of organizational ideas and techniques. But, despite their pervasiveness, international consulting firms do not seem to be equally important in all countries. For example, the Bedaux consulting organization was crucial for the transfer of certain scientific management techniques to countries such as Great Britain and Spain, but its impact was negligible in Germany. The transfer and diffusion of the multidivisional form of organization to Great Britain was greatly facilitated by the consulting activities of McKinsey, but such an intermediary was lacking in Germany although that organizational form also diffused there (Guillen 1992). What these examples suggest is that the role of international consulting firms as intermediaries in the transfer process interacts with other variables, a phenomenon that is yet to be carefully researched.

(c) International Cooperative Organizations

The number of international cooperative organizations has increased in this century. These organizations have varying impact on the international institutional environment. Some propose regulations, standards or codes of conduct but are unable to enforce them. These regulations tend to make certain ideas and techniques obsolete and promote others. Other international organizations function as clearing houses or promote the diffusion of certain ideas and techniques. Examples include the International Conference for Scientific Management and the International Management Institute during the 1920s, the European Productivity Agency during the late 1940s and 1950s, the United Nations Centre

on Transnational Corporations during the 1970s, or the international associations of quality circles described by Cole (1989).

(d) Business Elite Mentalities

Business elites formulate the most general philosophy and goals of firms. The business elite in a country sometimes shares a way of seeing things (a mentality) that is specific to that country and time period. Business elite mentalities may be consistent with organizational ideas and techniques present in other countries, thus providing a rationale and a legitimating basis for the transfer of those ideas and techniques. When managers in one country are looking for organizational ideas or techniques to solve a certain problem, their perceptions and choices as they investigate experiences in other countries will be affected by their mentalities. For example, in Germany during the 1920s the state of mind created by technocratic modernism was conducive to the import of American scientific management techniques in an attempt to improve the competitiveness of German products in the world market. In Spain, a large part of the business elite shared the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, which facilitated the transfer of American ideas about human relations with the purpose of dealing with the problem of rampant industrial conflict and output restriction. In Britain it was the Quaker ethic, Fabian socialism and the ideology of democratic leadership (developed by groups of intellectuals such as the Moot) what facilitated the adoption of human-relations views and techniques (Guillen 1992).

Cross-national research on transfers ought to systematically compare countries in terms of their world-system position, levels of dependence and of performance, and availability of channels or agents of transfer. This kind of approach would allow to identify crucial similarities and differences that account for the observed patterns of transfer or non-transfer as they actually take place over time. Cross national research on transfers should also be done within a framework that allows a shifting of levels of analysis from the organization, to the field, to the national and international level. In addition, this research strategy would overcome the simplification of equating country differences with cultural differences that are mere aggregates of individual attitudes or values. Quite on the contrary, country differences would be defined and operationalized in institutional terms.

CONCLUSION AND AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The last decade brought the issues of globalization to the foreground and reframed the older question of cross-national transfers of organizational techniques. We feel that organizational theory has not kept pace with this change. In an attempt to develop a framework we have used neo-institutional theory as our point of departure because it provides a way of attending to multiple environments (fields, countries, world-system). It is precisely this multiplicity of environments (or layers of social structure), and the greater extent and speed of interaction in the world today, that make it impossible to ignore

the international context. It is becoming increasingly difficult to study organizational change in one country with no reference to processes of change in the rest of the world.

We have discussed the possibility of enriching the neo-institutional framework with insights from the comparative perspective. At this stage we have limited ourselves to putting forth a few rudimentary propositions that hopefully will orient future research towards acknowledging the complexity and shifting character of the context in which organizations find themselves. We propose that this context is essentially structured at the international level.

We feel that a framework or paradigm for cross-national organizational research on transfers will be hard to design with the little empirical knowledge that is available to us at this point in time. In the longer run, we need more empirical studies about organizations in as great a variety of countries as possible. In the meantime one possibility is to review previous studies of organizations in different national settings in order to identify relevant factors and interactions among them.

In recent years organizational theorists have been puzzled by the failure of technology transfer programs, by the decline of entire industrial sectors in the most advanced countries, and by the widely varying degrees to which organizations in different countries are able to incorporate new techniques. Achieving a sound theoretical interpretation of events such as those will be hard without a larger empirical base. We need additional data

because simplifying theories do not help us, and complex theories require an initial huge effort of gathering relevant evidence.

In the case of transfers across countries, additional empirical work will contribute to our understanding of the conditions that facilitate or impede tranfers. For example, increasing understanding of the multiple environments and how they interact with each other may bring us closer to grasping the reasons why organizations adopt certain innovations and not others, and why some organizational practices spread in some nations and not in others.

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