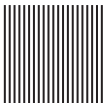


# Agency and Institutions: The Enabling Role of Individuals' Social Position

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**Abstract.** *Although early neo-institutional studies did not explicitly tackle the issue of agency, more recent studies about institutional entrepreneurship have brought it to the forefront. Institutional entrepreneurship has been presented as a promising way to account for institutional change endogenously. However, this notion faces the paradox of embedded agency. To overcome this paradox, it is necessary to explain under what conditions actors are enabled to act as institutional entrepreneurs. Some neo-institutional theorists have already addressed this issue. Their studies focus mainly on the organizational and organizational field levels of analysis. In this paper, I aim to complement their work by examining under what conditions individuals are more likely to engage in institutional entrepreneurship. By doing so, I take into account the individual level of analysis that neo-institutional theorists often tend to neglect. Relying on Bourdieu's conceptualization of fields, I propose that individuals' social position is a key variable in understanding how they are enabled to act as institutional entrepreneurs despite institutional pressures.* **Key words.** *Bourdieu; divergent organizational change; human agency; institutional entrepreneurship; social position.*



The importance and endurance of the agency versus structure debate in social sciences is indicated by the number of different names it goes by: person versus situation, strategic choice versus environmental determinism, and voluntarism versus determinism. This debate is directly related to the assumptions made by organization scholars about human nature (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Astley and Van de Ven, 1983). In organization



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studies, as in any other discipline of social sciences, assumptions about human nature are central, since human life is essentially the subject and object of inquiry.

Early neo-institutional studies contributed to the agency versus structure debate by suggesting that patterns of action and organization were shaped by institutions rather than solely by instrumental calculations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). These studies emphasized ways in which institutions constrained organizational structures and activities, and thereby explained the convergence of organizational practices within the same institutional environment. They proposed that individuals' behaviours were determined by the need for them to be regarded as legitimate in their institutional environment. It was implicitly assumed that individuals and organizations always tend to comply, at least in appearance, with the institutional pressures to which they are subject. In fact, neo-institutional theorists did not explicitly address the issue of human and organizational agency in these early studies. They began addressing it when they tackled the explanation of the phenomenon of institutional change.

Since the late 1980s, neo-institutional theorists have highlighted the role that organizations and/or individuals play in institutional change. To do so, many of them (e.g. DiMaggio, 1988; Holm, 1995; Fligstein, 1997; Rao, 1998; Beckert, 1999; Garud et al., 2002; Maguire et al., 2004) have relied on the notion of institutional entrepreneurship, which incorporates the role of interests and active agency in neo-institutional theory. Institutional entrepreneurs are actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who mobilize resources to create new institutions or transform the existing ones (DiMaggio, 1988). Institutional entrepreneurship has been presented as a promising way to account for institutional change endogenously, although this notion is also a source of controversy among neo-institutional theorists. The controversy revolves around the ability of actors, who are supposed to be institutionally embedded, to distance themselves from institutional pressures and to act strategically. How can organizations or individuals innovate if their beliefs and actions are all determined by the very institutional environment they wish to change?

This question alludes to the 'paradox of embedded agency' (Holm, 1995; Seo and Creed, 2002). To uncover the roots of this theoretical paradox, it is necessary to understand the dialectical nature of the relationship between institutions and human agency. Institutions do not merely constrain human agency; they are first and foremost the product of human agency (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). As explained by Berger and Luckmann (1967: 60), it is important to keep in mind that the objectivity of the institutional world is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity. Before being 'objectivated' (i.e. experienced as an objective reality) by human beings, institutions are produced by them. Human beings tend to believe that institutions have always been there because



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most often those who are constrained by institutions, and those who initially created these institutions, are not the same.

The paradox of embedded agency stems from the fact that neo-institutional theorists have barely tackled the issue of human agency. They have tended to neglect the individual level of analysis, concentrating instead on the organizational and societal levels of analysis. As stated by Friedland and Alford (1991), an adequate social theory must work at all three levels of analysis (i.e. the individual, the organizational and the societal levels of analysis). These three levels of analysis are nested. Individual, organizational and institutional dynamics are interrelated. Organizations and institutions specify progressively higher levels of constraint, as well as opportunity for individual actions (Friedland and Alford, 1991). Reciprocally, individual actions shape organizations and institutions. New institutionalists too often regard attempts at analysing the role played by individuals in institutional phenomena as reductionist approaches. It is for this reason that they are struggling with the paradox of embedded agency. To overcome this paradox and thereby set up foundations for a theory of institutional entrepreneurship, it is necessary to link the individual level of analysis back to the organizational and societal ones. The objective of this approach is to explain under what conditions individuals are enabled to act as institutional entrepreneurs.

Researchers have already identified a number of field and organizational-level conditions that are conducive to institutional entrepreneurship. I propose to complement their work by examining the role of individual-level conditions in the occurrence of institutional entrepreneurship. Specifically, I concentrate on the role of individuals' social position in the occurrence of institutional entrepreneurship. Individuals' social position may be a key enabling condition for institutional entrepreneurship insofar as it relates individuals to the structural context in which they are embedded. Other individual-level conditions, such as psychological factors, may affect institutional entrepreneurship but analysing their role without accounting for the fact that individuals are embedded in a social position corresponds to the trap of methodological individualism and, thereby, is in contradiction with the premises of neo-institutional theory. As the impact of other individual factors on the occurrence of institutional entrepreneurship is mediated by individuals' social position, it is necessary to analyse the impact of individuals' social position first and foremost.

Over the last decade, various neo-institutional scholars (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Hirsch and Lounsbury, 1997; Schmidt, 1997; Oakes et al., 1998; Lounsbury and Ventresca, 2003) have proposed to use the work of Bourdieu to conceptualize the interactions that exist between individuals or organizations and the institutional context in which they are embedded. The notions of 'habitus' and 'field' are central to Bourdieu's work. The notion of 'habitus', defined as a system of temporally durable dispositions, embodied unconsciously and predisposed to function as



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frameworks that generate and regulate practices and ideas (Bourdieu, 1977), has been criticized for being ambiguous (DiMaggio, 1979) and for leaving almost no room for agency, and thereby for social change (Sewell, 1992; Fowler, 1997; Boyer, 2003; Mutch, 2003).

Instead of using the notion of *habitus*,<sup>1</sup> I propose to build on Bourdieu's conceptualization of fields to explain how individuals' social position may enable them to act as institutional entrepreneurs despite institutional pressures. According to Bourdieu (1990), fields are structured systems of social positions within which struggles take place over resources, stakes, and access. He regards individuals as 'agents', who are 'socially constituted as active and acting in the field under consideration by the fact that they possess the necessary properties to be effective, to produce effects' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 107). Depending on their social position in the field, agents have both a different 'point of view' about the field and a different access to resources in the field (Bourdieu, 1988). As a result, they may be more or less likely to produce effects in the field under consideration. For this reason, I propose that individuals' social position is a key variable in understanding how they are enabled to act as institutional entrepreneurs despite institutional pressures. In this paper, my objective is to develop empirically testable propositions highlighting the enabling role of individuals' social position in institutional entrepreneurship. To do so, I develop a model that highlights how individuals' social position affects the likelihood for them to behave as institutional entrepreneurs in a given organizational field, which encompasses 'those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 148).

The analysis of institutional entrepreneurship at the individual level is possible in organization studies because organizations correspond to one type of setting in which individuals may act as institutional entrepreneurs. It is the case when individuals conduct divergent organizational changes (i.e. changes that break with the dominant institutional logic in a given organizational field). Institutional logics are taken-for-granted social prescriptions that guide behaviour of actors in fields. They represent a field's shared understandings of what goals to pursue and how to pursue them (Scott, 1987, 1994). Although most fields may contain multiple institutional logics (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999; Schneiberg, 2002; Seo and Creed, 2002), one institutional logic tends to hold a dominant position in a field (Dobbin, 1994; Schneiberg, 2002; Reay and Hinings, 2005). The key question, then, is how individuals' social position affects the likelihood for them to conduct divergent organizational changes (i.e. changes that break with the dominant institutional logic in the field). Individuals who conduct such changes can be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs.

This paper comprises three sections. First, I explain why individuals can be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs in some instances and, relying on Bourdieu's conceptualization of fields, I emphasize why



individuals' social position must be taken into account to explain institutional entrepreneurship. Then, I develop a model predicting the impact that individuals' social position has on the likelihood for them to conduct divergent organizational change (i.e. to act as institutional entrepreneurs). I conclude by discussing the theoretical contributions and potential managerial implications of this model.

## **Institutional Entrepreneurship and Individuals' Social Position**

### ***Individuals as Institutional Entrepreneurs***

Over the last decade, neo-institutional theorists have paid an increasing amount of attention to explaining institutional change (Dacin et al., 2002). Institutional entrepreneurship has progressively emerged as a promising explanation for such changes. Most studies about institutional entrepreneurship rely on DiMaggio's (1988) definition of institutional entrepreneurs:

New institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources (*institutional entrepreneurs*) see in them an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly. (DiMaggio, 1988: 14; emphasis in original)

Institutional entrepreneurs can be either organizations—or groups of organizations—(e.g. Garud et al., 2002; Greenwood et al., 2002) or individuals—or groups of individuals—(e.g. Fligstein, 1997; Maguire et al., 2004). However, very few studies look at individuals acting as institutional entrepreneurs. For this reason, they do not tackle the paradox of embedded human agency. Human agency refers to individuals' ability to intentionally pursue interest and to have some effect on the social world, altering the rules or the distribution of resources (Scott, 2001). All individuals who display some degree of agency do not qualify as institutional entrepreneurs. Only individuals who somehow break with the rules and practices associated with the dominant institutional logic(s) and thereby develop alternative rules and practices can be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs. Such a definition of individuals acting as institutional entrepreneurs leaves at least three questions unanswered: (1) must individuals be willing to change their institutional environment to be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs?; (2) must they take an active part in the implementation of changes that break with the dominant institutional logic(s)?; and, finally, (3) if they take an active part, how far do they have to go in the implementation to qualify as institutional entrepreneurs?

Individuals may not be willing to change their institutional environment, they may not even be aware of the fact that they are contributing to changing their institutional environment; however, they may break with the dominant institutional logic(s), and thereby act as institutional entrepreneurs. If they do not necessarily have to be aware of the role that they play, individuals must actively take part in the implementation of changes that break with the dominant logic(s) and thereby promote alternative



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practices to be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs. By doing so, they contribute to the institutionalization of alternative practices. These practices do not have to become institutionalized for individuals to be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs. In other terms, individuals do not have to be successful in institutionalizing new practices to qualify as institutional entrepreneurs. Individuals who undertake divergent organizational changes fulfil the criteria to be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs.

Since it is possible to study institutional entrepreneurship at the individual level by analysing attempts at conducting divergent organizational changes, one can tackle the paradox of embedded human agency. To do so, it is necessary to explore under what conditions individuals are more likely to conduct divergent organizational change (i.e. to engage in institutional entrepreneurship).

### ***Field-Level and Organizational-Level Enabling Conditions***

Some neo-institutional theorists have already proposed guidelines to overcome the paradox of embedded agency. They have conducted studies that account for the fact that institutional entrepreneurs are often ushered onto the stage by enabling conditions (Strang and Sine, 2002). Two categories that have so far received a great deal of attention are market and institutional conditions, and organizational characteristics.

Some scholars (e.g. Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Lawrence, 1999; Seo and Creed, 2002; Dorado, 2005) have paid particular attention to the environmental context in which institutional entrepreneurs are embedded. They have explained why and how market and institutional conditions may be conducive to action within a given organizational field. It has been shown that both the degree of heterogeneity of the organizational field (Sewell, 1992; Whittington, 1992; Clemens and Cook, 1999; D'Aunno et al., 2000; Seo and Creed, 2002) and its degree of institutionalization (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996) may affect actors' agency and thereby affect institutional entrepreneurship. Other scholars (e.g. Leblebici et al., 1991; Kraatz and Zajac, 1996; Rao et al., 2000; Garud et al., 2002; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006) have taken into account the impact that organizational characteristics may have on the likelihood for this organization to engage in institutional entrepreneurship, such as the position of a given organization in its organizational field. What is striking is that most of these studies concentrate on the organizational and organizational field levels of analysis. They hardly account for the individual level of analysis. The question of knowing how individuals are enabled to conduct divergent organizational change (i.e. to act as institutional entrepreneurs) remains largely unanswered.

### ***Individuals' Social Position: An Individual-Level Enabling Condition***

Relying on the existing literature about institutional entrepreneurship, one can now say that certain organizational field and organizational



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characteristics are conducive to institutional entrepreneurship. However all individuals are not equally likely to conduct divergent organizational change (i.e. to act as institutional entrepreneurs) even when they are embedded in the same environment (Clemens and Cook, 1999). The likelihood for them to act as institutional entrepreneurs is a function of their willingness to act as such and of their ability to do so.

Individuals' willingness and ability to act vary from one individual to another. To act as institutional entrepreneurs, individuals must have an interest in doing so and they must have enough resources to do so, as stated in the definition of institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988). Their willingness to act is dependent on their interest, while their ability to act is partly determined by the resources that they hold or to which they have access (Lawrence, 1999). In addition, individuals' ability to conduct divergent organizational change in their organization is also determined by what Greenwood and Hinings (1996: 1035) call the organizational 'pattern of value commitments', namely the extent to which the different organizational groups are committed to the prevailing institutional arrangements. In a given organization, when all organizational groups are committed to the prevailing institutional arrangements, conducting divergent organizational change is particularly difficult. In contrast, when some or all organizational groups are opposed to the prevailing institutional arrangements, conducting divergent organizational change becomes easier.

Building on Bourdieu's conceptualization of fields, I propose that individuals' social position in a given field is a key variable to understanding how they are enabled to act as institutional entrepreneurs despite institutional pressures. According to Bourdieu (1990), fields are structured systems of social positions within which struggles take place between individuals over resources, stakes, and access. He regards individuals as 'agents' as opposed to 'biological individuals, actors or subjects' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 107) to convey that they are both socially constituted as active and acting on their own in the field. Dealing with the importance of agents' social position in a given field, Bourdieu (1994: 28) states that agents' social position determines their point of view about the field, that is, their perception of the field, the stands that they take in the struggles to maintain the status quo or transform the field, and their access to resources. Thus, depending on their social position in the field, agents may, on the one hand, be more or less willing to transform the field, and on the other hand, more or less able to do so.

Some studies (e.g. Dorado, 2005; Maguire et al., 2004) have started exploring the impact that individuals' or organizations' social position has on the likelihood for them to act as institutional entrepreneurs. Dorado (2005: 397) proposes that actors' 'social position', namely 'their position in the structure of social networks', which correspond to the set of persons to whom they are directly linked (Aldrich, 1999), affects their





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perception of their organizational field, and thereby their likelihood to behave as institutional entrepreneurs. Studying institutional entrepreneurship in the field of HIV/AIDS treatment advocacy in Canada, Maguire et al. (2004) suggest that institutional entrepreneurs in emerging organizational fields tend to be actors whose 'subject positions' (Foucault, 1972) provide them with both legitimacy in the eyes of diverse stakeholders, and the ability to bridge those stakeholders, enabling institutional entrepreneurs to access dispersed sets of resources. In their study, the notion of 'subject position' refers to formal position and to all the socially constructed and legitimated identities available in a field.

To complement these studies, and to more systematically analyse the enabling role of individuals' social position, it is necessary to rely on a more precise definition of individuals' social position in a given organizational field. Individuals are embedded in organizations and social groups, both of which are embedded in organizational fields. Social groups transcend organizational boundaries. Professional and occupational groups are examples of such social groups. Depending on the field under study, other types of social groups may play a key role. For example, in France, where degrees are highly valued, there is a clear distinction between the alumni group of the highly respected French schools, *grandes écoles*, and others (Bourdieu, 1989; Manzoni and Barsoux, 2004). Individuals' social position in a given organizational field is determined by their position in this organizational field, on the one hand, and by their position in their organization, on the other hand.

Social groups' membership together with organizational membership contributes to determining individuals' position in the organizational field. Organizational fields, which correspond to a 'recognized area of social life', comprise 'key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 148). They encompass a variety of individuals, social groups and organizations. Just like fields in Bourdieu's definition, organizational fields can be regarded as structured systems of social positions, composed of dominant and dominated agents who attempt to usurp, exclude and establish monopoly over the mechanisms of the field reproduction and the type of power effective in it (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In other terms, they are political arenas (Brint and Karabel, 1991). In a given organizational field, any dominant institution and the set of templates, rules and practices with which it is associated imply different access to, and control over, key resources and decision processes within this organizational field (i.e. within the organizations and social groups that are embedded in this organizational field). For this reason, one can argue that existing institutional arrangements are a source of power for some people and not for others in a given organizational field, depending on the organization and social group(s) to which they belong.





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Building on Fligstein's (1997) and Hensmans' (2003) work, one can use a rhetoric of 'incumbent–challenger' relations to make sense of the complexity of strategic conduct in organizational fields. Incumbents are individuals who belong to organizations and/or social group(s) that are favoured by the existing institutional arrangements, which constitute a source of power for them. They are in a privileged situation. It is generally in their interest to maintain the institutional *status quo*. For this reason, they are likely to use their position of power to buttress the existing institutional arrangements (Covaleski and Dirsmith, 1988). In contrast, challengers belong to organizations and/or social group(s) that are less favoured by the existing institutional arrangements. For this reason, they are more likely to be dissatisfied with them and to try to modify them. Thus, depending on whether they occupy an incumbent or a challenger position in a given organizational field [i.e. depending on their organizational and their social group(s) memberships], individuals are likely to have different incentives regarding the transformation or the maintenance of existing institutional arrangements. Similarly, they may benefit from different access to key resources. Incumbents are likely to have access to more resources than challengers.

Individuals' social position is not only determined by their position in the organizational field, but also by their position in their organization. Depending on their formal position in organizational hierarchy and on their informal position in organizational networks, individuals are likely to be more or less willing to conduct divergent organizational change and more or less able to do so. Finally, individuals are not only situated in space, but they are also situated in time. To comprehensively account for individuals' social position, it is necessary to account for the fact that it is not constant. It changes over time. Individuals may change position within their organization and/or within the organizational field. For this reason, to analyse the impact that individuals' social position has on the likelihood for them to conduct divergent organizational change (i.e. to act as institutional entrepreneurs), it is also necessary to analyse the impact of changes in individuals' social position.

In the next section, I develop propositions about the impact of individuals' position in their organizational field, individuals' position in their organization and changes in individuals' position on the likelihood for them to conduct divergent organizational change, that is, to act as institutional entrepreneurs.

## **The Impact of Individuals' Social Position**

### ***The Impact of Individuals' Position in the Organizational Field***

The status of both the organization and the social group(s) to which individuals belong indicates whether they are in an incumbent or in a challenger position within the organizational field and thereby is likely to



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have an impact on individuals' willingness and ability to conduct divergent organizational change (i.e. to act as institutional entrepreneurs).

**Organization's Status** Other than organizational performance whose influence on the likelihood of occurrence of divergent organizational change has been largely theorized (Oliver, 1992) and tested (e.g. Miller and Friesen, 1980; Tushman and Romanelli, 1985), organizational status may have a key impact on individuals' likelihood to conduct divergent organizational changes. Status refers to a ranking of a social entity in terms of the values of a social system (Nicholson, 1995). In this case, it corresponds to the ranking of a given organization in terms of the values of the organizational field in which it is embedded. We know that the susceptibility of organizations to institutional pressures within a given organizational field varies with the status of those organizations (Podolny, 1993; Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001).

To assess the impact that organizations' status differences have on the likelihood for organizational members to conduct divergent organizational change, it is necessary to make a distinction between lower and higher status organizations. In a historical study about the US commercial radio broadcasting industry, Leblebici et al. (1991) have shown how institutional change can be initiated by the actions of deviant organizations that have a lower status. Analysing the evolution of the US broadcasting industry between 1920 and 1965, they found that most new practices were introduced by the less central organizations that were lower status organizations, such as 'shady traders, small independent stations, renegade record producers, weaker networks, or enterprising advertising agencies' (Leblebici et al., 1991: 358). In contrast, higher status organizations mobilized resources to maintain the *status quo*. Even though organizations are the unit of analysis of this study, one cannot deny the fact that changes were introduced by organizational members of the different lower status organizations. Similarly, other studies (Haveman and Rao, 1997; Palmer and Barber, 2001; Kraatz and Moore, 2002) have shown that peripheral organizations that happen to be lower status organizations most of the time are more likely to conduct divergent changes.

There are several reasons for these organizational behaviour differences when it comes to conducting divergent changes. Lower status organizations are less well-embedded in the organizational field compared to higher status organizations and they have little to lose by social deviance, insofar as they are less privileged by the existing dominant institutional arrangements. In other terms, individuals who belong to lower status organizations are in a challenger position in comparison with individuals who belong to higher status organizations in a given organizational field. For this reason, in lower status organizations, organizational members are more likely to be willing to transform the existing institutional arrangements. In addition, they can more legitimately raise



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and promote alternative practices corresponding to new emerging institutions in their organization because it is not privileged by the existing dominant institutional arrangements. In other terms, the 'pattern of value commitments' (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996: 1036) (i.e. the extent to which organizational members are committed to the prevailing institutional arrangements) facilitates the development and the implementation of divergent organizational change. Thus, I propose the following:

Proposition 1: Individuals who are in lower status organizations within a given organizational field are more likely to conduct divergent organizational change than individuals who are in higher status organizations

**Social Groups' Status** Individuals' position in a given organizational field is also partly determined by the status of the social group(s) to which they belong. Depending on the field under consideration, different types of social groups may exist and may benefit from different status. As underlined by Lawrence (2004), in organizational fields, interaction rituals among group members and across groups structure the relationships among field members. Interaction rituals that are dictated by the dominant logic(s) in the field correspond to 'routinized interactions between two or more actors that are vested with some symbolic significance' (Lawrence, 2004: 118). They contribute to establishing a status hierarchy among social groups. Individuals who belong to higher status social groups most often benefit from the prevailing institutional arrangements, which reinforce their dominance over individuals who belong to lower status social groups. In other terms, they benefit from an incumbent position in the organizational field. For example, in multi-professionalized organizational fields, different professions have different status. Abbott (1988) has described how dominant professions establish jurisdictions surrounded by subordinate, less powerful professions. Similarly, Starr (1982) has shown that professionals may play highly conservative parts to defend their traditional privileges and autonomy. In the same vein, Ferlie et al. (2005) have shown that the non-spread of certain medical innovations across the National Health Service in the UK is due to the existence of strong professional boundaries between doctors, who are the higher status professionals, and other health professionals. In this case, some doctors use their power to maintain the status quo. In contrast to individuals who belong to higher status social groups, individuals who belong to lower status social groups are less favoured by the prevailing institutional arrangements. For this reason, they have more incentives to try and modify them. Thus, I propose the following:

Proposition 2: Individuals who belong to lower status social groups within a given organizational field are more likely to conduct divergent organizational change than individuals who belong to higher status social groups

The problem is that, because they are less advantaged by the existing institutional arrangements, individuals who belong to lower status social



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groups are likely to have difficulties accessing the key resources necessary for conducting divergent organizational change (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). The question is whether their position in their organization may enable them to overcome these difficulties.

### ***The Impact of Individuals' Position in Their Organization***

Individuals' position in their organization is determined by the informal position that they occupy in organizational networks, and by the formal position that they occupy in organizational hierarchy.

**Individuals' Informal Position in Organizational Networks** Unlike individuals who belong to higher status social groups, the prevailing institutional arrangements do not give much power in their organization to individuals who belong to lower status social groups. Despite their willingness to conduct divergent organizational change, these individuals may lack resources to engage in divergent organizational change. In addition, individuals who belong to higher status social groups may use their power to block change, so that they must be engaged in the change process for it to succeed (Ferlie et al., 2005). Not having access to key resources and not controlling key decision processes in their organization, individuals who belong to lower status social groups may not have the ability to conduct divergent organizational change despite their dissatisfaction with the existing arrangements. This lack of resources may deter them from conducting divergent organizational change, insofar as individuals seldom make decisions without considering their access to resources (Stevenson and Greenberg, 2000). However, their position in intra-organizational networks may enable them to overcome this difficulty.

Some studies (e.g. Valley and Thompson, 1998) have explored the influence of intra-organizational networks on the adoption of organizational changes. Analysing the tension between management's power to prescribe organizational structure and employees' resistance in a metropolitan newspaper undergoing a change in organizational structure, Valley and Thompson (1998) showed that the employees' degree of resistance to change was partly determined by their position in intra-organizational networks. This finding suggests that certain types of ties may contribute to undermine people's resistance to organizational change. It may be that, depending on their position in intra-organizational networks, individuals belonging to lower status social groups are able to undermine the resistance to divergent organizational change of individuals belonging to higher status social groups. Specifically, among individuals who belong to lower status social groups, those who have strong ties with individuals belonging to higher status social groups in their organization may rely on those ties to conduct divergent organizational changes. The strength of tie is a combination of 'the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie' (Granovetter, 1973: 1361). Strong ties promote trust and reciprocity and facilitate the transfer



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of private information and critical resources (Gulati et al., 2002). Individuals who belong to lower status social groups may rely on strong ties with individuals who belong to higher status social groups to undermine their potential resistance and to gain access to the key resources that they need to conduct divergent organizational change. Knowing that they can mobilize these ties and having strong incentives to conduct divergent organizational change (see Proposition 2), individuals who belong to lower status social groups are more likely to try and conduct divergent organizational change. Thus, I propose the following:

Proposition 3: Individuals who belong to lower status social groups are more likely to conduct divergent organizational change when they have strong ties with individuals belonging to higher status social groups

**Individuals' Formal Position in Organizational Hierarchy** Individuals who are lower in the organizational hierarchy do not have enough legitimacy to conduct divergent organizational change. In addition, they may not be able to access the resources that are necessary for conducting divergent organizational change. In contrast, individuals who occupy higher hierarchical positions are more able to conduct divergent organizational change (Tushman and Romanelli, 1985). The stream of research about top management teams in the strategy literature has highlighted the key role of top managers in organizational change. Some studies (Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1996) have shown that top management succession and demography have an impact on organizational changes. When it comes to conducting divergent organizational change, the role of top managers is likely to be even more important. Examining the impact of executive migration on institutional change among liberal arts colleges during the 1970s and 1980s, Kraatz and Moore (2002) have shown that executives were influential in bringing about divergent change in taken-for-granted practices in a highly institutionalized context. Executives' influence played a key role in the adoption of professional programs in liberal arts colleges. Such adoption was definitely a divergent organizational change insofar as it broke with the taken-for-granted model of liberal art colleges that were thought of 'as small, private, independent, undergraduate, residential institutions in education in the humanities and social sciences' (Kraatz and Moore, 2002: 127).

Individuals who occupy higher hierarchical positions can rely on the authority associated with their position to impose divergent organizational changes, even though such changes break with the norms that all other organizations in the field use. Because of their position, individuals who are higher in the organizational hierarchy are also more likely to have access to key resources that may be useful for conducting divergent organizational change. Finally, because they are the ones who are responsible for making strategic decisions, individuals who are higher in the organizational hierarchy know a lot about both their organization and its



environment. Such knowledge of their organization's environment may facilitate the identification of new emerging models of organization that break with the dominant institutional logic in the field. Such awareness of alternative models of organization is likely to trigger their reflective capacity (i.e. the capacity to distance oneself from the dominant institutional arrangements and to make judgment about them) (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Seo and Creed, 2002; Sewell, 1992). In other terms, they are less likely to see the prevailing institutional arrangements as taken-for-granted. Thus, I propose the following:

Proposition 4: The higher in the organizational hierarchy individuals are, the more likely they are to conduct divergent organizational change

### ***The Impact of Changes in Individuals' Social Position***

Individuals' social position in a given organizational field is not constant. It changes over time. There are various types of changes that may occur. Individuals may change position within the organizational field and/or within their organization. Changes in organizational field position correspond to changes in organizational membership and/or social groups' membership. Depending on the status of the new organization and/or social group(s) to which they belong, individuals will be more or less likely to conduct divergent organizational change (see Propositions 1 and 2). Changes in organizational position correspond to changes in individuals' informal and/or formal organizational position. Depending on whether their new position enables them to establish more ties with individuals who belong to higher status social groups and on whether it is higher or lower in organizational hierarchy, individuals will be more or less likely to conduct divergent organizational change (see Propositions 3 and 4). Although the cited propositions indirectly deal with the potential consequences of changes in position within the organizational field and the organization, two important dimensions of such changes have not yet been considered. First, at the organizational field level, to account for changes in position, it is necessary to take into account individuals' level of inter-organizational mobility (i.e. the number of different organizations in which they worked). Second, at the organizational level, one important dimension of change in position has to do with individuals' duration of tenure in a position.

**Individuals' Inter-Organizational Mobility** The study conducted by Kraatz and Moore (2002) about the impact of executive migration on the adoption of professional programs in liberal arts colleges has contributed to highlighting the role of inter-organizational mobility in the development and implementation of divergent organizational changes. Defining executive migration as the flow of top administrators between organizations and fields, they have shown that, as a result of their past experience, immigrant executives often imported new and very different conceptions from the taken-for-granted model of liberal arts colleges. Similarly,





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studying the importation of the practice of diversity management from the US to Denmark, Boxenbaum and Battilana (2005) have found that inter-organizational mobility was an important enabling condition for institutional entrepreneurship. The two individuals who initiated the importation of diversity management to Denmark, where it broke with the dominant model of human resources management, had previously worked in a number of different international organizations within which they were exposed to the practice of diversity management.

Individuals whose inter-organizational mobility has been higher have been exposed to more different organizational contexts. As a result, they are less likely to take-for-granted the functioning of their current organization. Meanwhile, they are more likely to be aware of the existing opportunities for action in their organizational field. For example, they are more likely to be aware of the existence of heterogeneous institutional arrangements across their organizational field, if there are any. Such awareness is likely to trigger their reflective capacity (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Seo and Creed, 2002; Sewell, 1992). In other terms, they are less likely to see the prevailing institutional arrangements as taken-for-granted. As a result, they are more likely to conduct divergent organizational change. Thus, I propose the following:

Proposition 5: The higher individuals' inter-organizational mobility has been, the more likely they are to conduct divergent organizational change

**Duration of Individuals' Tenure in a Formal Organizational Position** Hambrick and Fukutomi (1991) have suggested that change is curvilinearly related to tenure in a given formal organizational position (i.e. it is greatest at intermediate lengths of tenure, after the ability to implement change has increased but before the inclination to initiate change has declined). This curvilinear relationship is particularly likely to be observed in the case of divergent organizational change. To convince other organizational members to abandon practices that are widely accepted and used not only in their organization, but also throughout the organizational field, managers must be regarded as legitimate by other organizational members. In addition, they need to have a good knowledge of their organization to overcome the obstacles that they may encounter while conducting divergent organizational change. Managers with longer tenure in their position usually have built up more legitimacy in the eyes of both their subordinates and their superiors and have a better knowledge of the specificities of their organization (Huber et al., 1993). Therefore, longer tenure appears to be positively related to the ability to conduct divergent organizational change. However, it has also been shown that longer tenure in a position is negatively associated with the inclination to initiate change (Gabarro, 1987; Miller, 1991). This phenomenon is likely to be even more exacerbated in the case of divergent organizational change. Managers who are new to a position bring a fresh perspective to their task. As a result, they are more likely to break with the norms that





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are associated with their task and the task of their subordinates. This tendency declines over time as managers become more inclined to accept the organization in the form it has become. Therefore, longer tenure appears to be negatively related to the willingness to conduct divergent organizational change. Taking into account the two lines of reasoning, I propose the following:

Proposition 6: Individuals who are at intermediate duration of tenure in their formal organizational position are more likely to conduct divergent organizational change

## Discussion

The model that I developed in this paper (Figure 1) highlights how individuals' social position may enable them to conduct divergent organizational change (i.e. to act as institutional entrepreneurs) despite institutional pressures. Bourdieu's conceptualization of fields highlights the importance of individuals' social position in understanding how they behave. I have explained how individuals' social position influences their perception of the field that shapes the stands that they take in the field's struggles as well as their access to resources. Relying on this analysis, I was able to develop propositions linking individuals' social position characteristics and the likelihood for them to conduct divergent organizational change (i.e. to act as institutional entrepreneurs). Far from focusing only on the analysis of the objective structures of the field, I have analysed the impact that individuals' social position has on their perception of the field (Bourdieu, 1988) and highlighted how this perception may shape their actions when it comes to either transforming or preserving the objective structures of the field. In contrast with Bourdieu's theoretical framework, I did not use the notion of 'habitus' to mediate between structure and individual activity. Instead, I focused on how individuals' social position might both constrain them to comply with dominant institutional arrangements and enable them to break with these arrangements.

The focus on individuals' social position contributes to the development of neo-institutional theory by linking the individual level of analysis back to the organizational and organizational field ones. Of course, such an approach does not imply that individuals' actions are the only sources of institutional change. I agree with Jepperson (1991) when he states that successful influence attempts by a delimited agent, carrying a specific interest, represent only one category of possible social change explanations. Institutional change processes are complex processes, in which different types of forces and agents are involved. However, individual change agents' actions, which have so far received scant attention, correspond to one type of force that might affect the institutional order.

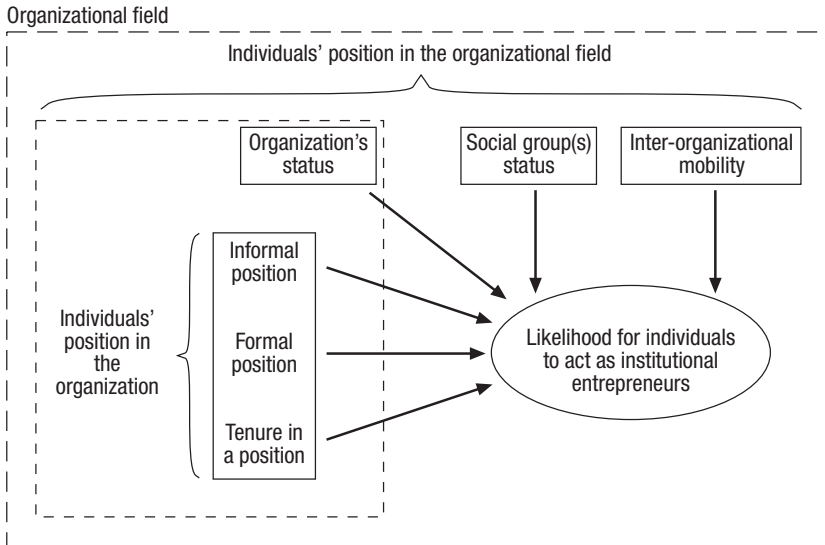
To comprehensively account for institutional change processes, it is necessary to rely on a multi-level approach that aims at capturing the interactions that exist between the different levels of analysis. Actors, be



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**Figure 1.** Impact of individuals' social position in a given organizational field on the likelihood for them to act as institutional entrepreneurs



they organizations or individuals, are both constrained and enabled by their institutional environment (Sewell, 1992). In other terms, the nature of institutional processes is both isomorphic and constitutive (Strang and Sine, 2002). Multi-level research, taking into account the individual, organizational and organizational field levels of analysis, has been suggested as a promising avenue of research for studies dealing with institutional change and thereby aiming to account for the dual nature of institutional processes (Occasio, 2002; Palmer and Biggart, 2002; Strang and Sine, 2002). However, there has been little work carried out in this direction (Reay and Hinings, 2005). One reason for this may be that the relevant temporal and spatial dimensions for studying variation in institutions and individual actions are not the same.

The study of variation in institutions requires a longer temporal frame than the study of variation in individual actions. Similarly, the relevant spatial extent over which activities can be organized is wider for institutions than it is for individuals (Friedland and Alford, 1991). The focus on divergent organizational change is a good means to overcome the latter obstacle. Divergent organizational changes participate in the institutionalization of a new logic at the organizational field level; however, individuals conduct them within the boundary of their organization. Similarly, the focus on divergent organizational changes helps to overcome the former problem that is related to the inadequacy of the relevant temporal frames for the study of institutions and individual actions, insofar as divergent organizational change occurs through shorter periods



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of time than institutional change. Therefore, the focus on divergent organizational change is a methodological device that renders multi-level research feasible within the theoretical framework of neo-institutional theory. Relying on the notion of divergent organizational change, the model presented in this paper establishes connections across levels of analysis and thereby contributes to accounting for the ongoing interactions that exist between these different levels.

From a theoretical perspective, the model also participates in the development of the body of research about institutional entrepreneurship by highlighting the enabling role of individuals' social position. Researchers have already identified field-level and organizational-level enabling conditions for institutional entrepreneurship to occur. I complement their work by highlighting the impact of an individual-level condition on the likelihood of occurrence of institutional entrepreneurship. The focus on the enabling role of individuals' social position provides new guidelines for overcoming the paradox of embedded human agency. Overcoming this paradox is crucial because it is a prerequisite to setting up the foundations for a theory of institutional entrepreneurship that corresponds to the theory of action of neo-institutional theory. In the introduction of their famous book *New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) called for the development of such a theory of action. The lack of an explicit and coherent theory of action is at the core of neo-institutional theory's weakness when it comes to explaining change because it does not make clear the role of actors and action in the creation, diffusion, and stabilization of institutions (Christensen et al., 1997). As suggested by Hirsch and Lounsbury (1997), uncertainty about actors' agency raises serious questions about how macro-level institutional phenomena change. Human agency, in particular, is a key issue. The problem of neo-institutional theory is that it offers organizational-level and organizational field-level explanations for phenomena that implicitly involve individual behaviour without providing a basis for the construction of a theory of individual behaviour. By offering guidelines to overcome the paradox of embedded human agency, the model developed in this paper contributes to setting up micro-foundations for the development of such a theory of individual behaviour within the theoretical framework of neo-institutional theory.

The propositions developed here now need to be empirically tested. Testing the model in different empirical contexts will enable researchers to draw comparison across these contexts. It may be that the impact of individuals' social position on their likelihood to conduct divergent organizational change is not the same depending on the characteristics of the organizational field under study. In particular, it may vary depending on the degree of maturity of the organizational field, namely the extent to which the field represents relatively well-structured configurations of actors (be they organizations or individuals) that are aware of their



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involvement in a common enterprise, and among which there are identifiable patterns of interaction such as domination, subordination, conflict and cooperation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

The empirical test of the model is all the more worth conducting as it has some key managerial and policy implications. In particular, it helps to identify those individuals who are more likely to be leaders in conducting organizational changes that challenge well-established, traditional models and practices. Such identification may be crucial. In any society, one can see organizations that go on using institutionalized practices even though they are permanently failing. To break this vicious circle, it is necessary to know how to change institutionalized practices. One possible source of change (among others) is the action of individuals acting as institutional entrepreneurs. For this reason, it is important to be able to identify individuals who are more likely to act as such. When chief executive officers (CEOs) want to implement changes that break with the existing institutions in a field, they need to identify the people on whom they can rely to locally initiate these changes. Similarly, when governments want to implement major public reforms, they need to identify the people on whom they can rely to locally initiate major public reforms. Highlighting the profile of individuals who are more likely to act as institutional entrepreneurs will help CEOs or government to identify the people on whom they can rely locally when they need to implement major changes that break with institutionalized practices.

## Conclusion

Among the indicators of progress of neo-institutional theory over the last 15 years that Scott (2001) considers, agency occupies a prominent position. The model presented in this paper further examines the issue of agency in neo-institutional theory. Relying on Bourdieu's conceptualization of fields, it provides new guidelines to overcome the paradox of embedded human agency. By doing so, it contributes to setting up micro-foundations for the development of a theory of institutional entrepreneurship. The development of this theory is all the more important because it will render neo-institutional theory more actionable by explaining how, in some situations, individuals may shape institutions. Far from being reductionist, this approach aims at accounting more comprehensively for institutional change phenomena by exploring the interactions that exist between the different levels of analysis.

Bringing the individual level of analysis back into neo-institutional theory opens up new paths of research about institutional entrepreneurship. Individual factors other than individuals' social position may also be conducive to institutional entrepreneurship. Future research may explore the impact that psychological factors have on the likelihood for individuals to act as institutional entrepreneurs. This line of inquiry, although promising, is very demanding because it requires researchers to control for the



impact of other identified enabling conditions to avoid the trap of methodological individualism. One way to avoid this trap is to examine the role of psychological factors in relation with individuals' social position. Such an approach will more comprehensively account for individual-level enabling conditions for institutional entrepreneurship.

## Notes

I would like to thank Thomas D'Aunno, Albert David, Michel Ehrenhard, Mattia Gilmartin, Royston Greenwood, Herminia Ibarra, Bernard Leca, Metin Sengul, Andrea Simon, Jean-Claude Thoenig, Participants at the Sub Theme 15 (Institutional change and the transformation of public organizations) at the European Group of Organization Studies, Colloquium, 30 June to 2 July 2005, Berlin, Germany and three anonymous reviewers provided helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

- 1 Even though I do not use the notion of habitus in the frame of this paper, I remain faithful to Bourdieu's conceptualization of fields by considering that individuals' subjective representation of the field is influenced by the position that they occupy in the field (Bourdieu, 1988). Far from adopting a purely objectivist approach about fields, I take into account the influence that the fields' objective structures have on individuals' subjective representations of the field, on the one hand. On the other hand, I propose to account for how individuals' subjective representations of the field may shape their actions when it comes to either transforming or preserving the objective structures of the field.

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