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## Fundamentals

This section of the paper will apply institutional theory as an analytical approach to the case text of formal collaboration between non-profit organizations. First of all, it will attempt to shed some light on what core elements of institutional theory are applied on the case text. Furthermore, it will analyze the case text with the goal of reviewing what institutional theory allows us to explicate about non

profit organizations' choice to formally collaborate. In trying to understand why or why not non profit organizations collaborate in more formal settings Guo & Acar (2005) utilize institutional theory. Their starting point is of Meyer & Rowan and their description of institutional theory "*an organization's life chances are significantly improved by organizational demonstrations of conformity to the norms and social expectations of the institutional environment* (Guo & Acar, 2005)

The case text argues that most non-profit organizations are heavily dependent on the government for funding and are subject to its regulatory demands. Here the first element of institutional theory is applied, as Oliver (1990) argues, the more heavily dependent an organization is on a single institution the less likely it is to be able to resist the pressure exerted by this institution. As the case text progresses it presents another basic element of institutional theory. As presented by Hall and Taylor (1996) institutions can affect the behavior of organizations in different ways. Acar and Guo apply the calculus approach rooted in the new institutionalisms, with very strong bonds to the approach of Rational choice institutionalism (RCI) as they argue that the construction of formal collaborations might be due to an increased cost efficiency. "The development of government

incentives for nonprofit collaboration as a means to cut costs, reduce duplication of efforts, and integrate services apparently is on the rise (Guo & Acar, 2005).”

However, the main application of institutional theory in the case text in regard to the role of the government comes in the form of a coercive isomorphism. The concept introduced by DiMaggio and Powell (2000) attempts to illustrate how organizations change as they face both formal and informal pressure from other organizations on which they are dependent. The case text has multiple mentions of formal pressure exerted by governments on non-profit organizations that could affect the way in which it would structure itself, such as: *“To obtain government funds, applicants must demonstrate their commitment to sharing organizational resources or formal coordination of services with other service providers and are often required to file joint grant applications (Guo & Acar, 2005)”*. They even utilize the concept of coercive isomorphism as construction for their hypothesis, suggesting that

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if non-profit organizations receive government funding they become subject to the pressure and thereby increase their chances to create formal collaboration ties with other non-profit organizations.

The case text proceeds by looking at the institutional effects on industry level. Here it argues that specific industries such as health and education and research might have tendencies to structure their organization differently even though they are subject to the same external pressure, *“... these studies provide some evidence that health and education and research industries might differ from other industries in the likelihood of collaboration...”*. To examine this industry level perspective the case text applies to the concept of cultural approach from Hall and Taylor, which stipulates that the rationality of action is bounded by the individual's worldview, routines or familiar patterns (Hall, P. y Taylor, 1996). This is combined with the logical institutional element of institutional theory from Lounsbury and Boxenbaum (2016) arguing that different organizations hold different institutional logics and weigh them differently, thereby reacting differently to external pressures. In the case text this is exemplified by the health and education and research industries but applied for testing in all sampled industries in the study.

As the previous section has gone through the elements of institutional theory applied by the authors of the case text, the following will attempt to analyze the case text through institutional theory and thereby state what the theory allows us to explicate about the case text.

The presented possibility of non-profit organizations creating more formal collaboration bonds with other non-profit organizations due to a possible reduction in costs and increase in efficiency, has its roots in rational choice institutionalism and the calculus approach. By applying this approach to the question of formal collaborations between non-profit organizations we are able to study the possibility of a financial motive for collaboration. Even though the case text does not quantitatively analyze data representing possible financial motives, one could put forward the idea that new circumstances and external pressures are causing organizations to increase their formal collaboration efforts. As the authors of the case text themselves describe “... *more nonprofits have begun to consider formalized collaboration in response to the changing resource and institutional environments in the past decade* (Guo & Acar, 2005).” Consequently, the application of the calculus approach and rational choice institutionalism allows for the possible explanation that formal collaboration between non-profit organizations is a rational financial efficiency process caused by external pressures. In our case text these would most often be government pressures as previously stated that most non-profit organizations depend solely or at least mostly on governments for funding.

As non-profit organizations are so dependent on the government, they are in particular vulnerable to any new regulation requirements or rules regarding their existence or conduct etc. These are mostly all determined by a government agency and can change rapidly. Consequently, non-profit organizations can be forced to change and adapt rather quickly, in the process perhaps seeing it necessary to create formal collaborations. To best analyze this process, we turn to the concept of Dimaggio and Powell (2000), coercive isomorphism. By applying this theoretical element, the case text attempts to build a hypothesis. This states that government dependent non-profit organizations will increase their formal collaboration to ensure their survival. Consequently, as coercive isomorphism describes, the institutional pressure forces some non-profit organizations to establish formal collaboration bonds, “*a considerable number of interorganizational relations are mandated by law* (Guo & Acar, 2005)”. However, not only does the application of this theory allow the case text to discuss this possibility. The case text attempts to validate the theoretical argument quantitatively, by testing for a correlation between receiving government funding (compared to not) and the amount of formal collaboration ties. “*Confirming our prediction that an organization characterized by the existence of lower diversity of government funding sources is more likely to develop formal types of collaborative activities than an organization characterized by the absence of*

*any government funding source... (Guo & Acar, 2005)*” As the case text finds a correlation between these two elements, not only does this institutional theory analysis present a possible explanation, but also a statistical correlation to further investigate.

However, even though the previously described concepts from institutional theory have considerable explanatory power in relation to collaboration between non-profit organizations, there are also limitations. Most importantly the case text points out relatively big differences between sectors, which might face the same external pressures. Nevertheless, we can utilize another concept from institutional theory, institutional logic from Lounsbury and Boxenbaum (2016), and cultural approach (Hall, P. y Taylor, 1996). By applying these concepts from institutional theory, the case text is able to analyze the formal collaboration between non-profit organizations from the inside, examine how different non-profit organizations might react to external pressure. For instance, the theory application in the case text allows us to build a hypothesis of possible power structures within particular industries, which has norms that might be more resistant to build formal collaborations with others: “... studies suggest that in organizations such as hospitals and universities, power lies primarily with a large group of employees trained as professionals. ... are socialized to believe that their work should not be changed by anyone other than their own professional bodies. This makes it difficult for

*them to enter into partnerships with those from other occupational groups, especially if they are from other organizations. (Guo & Acar, 2005)*” Through the statistical model built in the case text, a correlation between having fewer formal collaborations and being an organization within the industries of social services, health or research, becomes apparent. Consequently, by applying the cultural approach and the institutional logics from institutional theory, the case text is able to explain a correlation that could be further investigated to search for a possible causation element.

## **Juxtaposition**

Since the case is very broad, Acar and Guo (2005) identify different aspects of collaboration between non-profit organizations and take them on separately using different theories. When applying resource dependency theory, the case text investigates if organizations with greater resource scarcity will be more likely to develop formal types of collaborative activities. This part of the paper will outline which insights on collaboration between non-profit organizations are provided

by resource dependency theory as presented by Jeffrey Pfeffer in the section called ‘Resources, Allies and the new golden rule’ from the 1993 book ‘Managing with Power: Politics and Influence in Organizations’. Firstly, which aspects of resource dependency theory (RD) are used in the case text is outlined, along with insights about the collaborative behavior of non-profit organizations. Following, it will be explained what the findings of RD add to the insights gained from institutional theory in the case text. Finally, it will be discussed what the case would lose, and gain had it solely applied RD theory.

RD considers the acquisition and use of resources to be central in explaining how organizations behave and develop; resources are key to holding power: *“Power is vested in us by the dependence of others and that dependence is a function of how much others need what we control, as well as how many alternative sources for that resource there are”* (Pfeffer, 1993, page 71). RD provides a cohesive argumentation about generating power out of resources to explain why non-profit organizations would be inclined to collaborate formally. Having power is crucial for the survival of the organization and very useful for achieving goals; considering the case is about non-profit organizations, Acar and Guo assume that they strive to gain power and influence to validate their very existence. When an organization chooses to collaborate formally with other stakeholders, an RD perspective suggests that the collaboration will give the organization access to resources to a degree that justifies the cost of less operating autonomy. These resources can be almost anything, but

generally formal collaborations result in a more predictable future and steady access to critical resources such as knowledge and funds (Acar, Guo 2005, page 345). Formal collaboration allows for stronger control of critical resources than informal collaboration, and this is valuable since RD posits that simply having access to or generating resources is not power in itself, but that having control of those resources is the defining factor (Pfeffer 1993, page 68).

By providing multiple examples, Pfeffer argues that resources can be created out of something that existing stakeholders have under-utilized or be derived from influence in different places: It follows that non-profit organizations can improve the power derived from their resources by collaborating with others. Like Pfeffer's example of the parks commissioner Robert Moses, non-profit organizations will gain power simply by having influence on other organizations' workings and inside knowledge in areas that might seem unrelated but accumulated will provide circumstances

that can result in power.

Apart from power helping the overall goal of the organization, acquiring resources is also at the individual level of interest within the organization. Studies in other fields suggest that employees who bring in resources to their organization generally have higher salaries and good-will at their work place. The notion of an employee gaining personally by acquiring resources through agreeing to formal collaboration provides further motivation for the organization to seek formal collaboration: *“These effects [bringing in grants and contracts] held even when numerous other determinants of salaries were controlled, which indicates that the ability to bring in resources provides an independent and important source of power”* (Pfeffer 1993, page 76).

Acar and Guo expect the reasoning within RD to be especially fitting for non-profit organizations with relatively scarce resources: *“Given their greater resource scarcity, smaller organizations might be more inclined to give up their autonomy and develop formal types of collaborative activities to gain better access to critical resources”* (Guo & Acar 2005, page 346). The case expects the relationship between control over critical resources and loss of operating autonomy as explained above to be more in favor of control over resources than for organizations with more power (Acar, Guo 2005, page 346).

The section of the case text focusing on resources and power adds a different understanding to the perspectives of relations to government and industry of operation presented with institutional theory. The search for financial resources is covered in the case text by looking at funding from institutions through institutional theory; applying RD adds a broader definition of useful resources which provides more reasons why non-profit organizations would choose to collaborate formally.

Apart from taking knowledge, facilities, and power over resources into account, RD considers the organization a more responsive and engaging actor than institutional theory: Organizations are not formed by society and environment but by the competition for power with other actors. Also viewing non-profit organizations as independent actors is important since the case text seeks to explain behavior around collaboration in general terms.

However, had Acar and Guo only relied on RD theory approaches for their research, the identification of pressures associated with acquiring funding from government programs would not have been possible. RD does not provide a full explanation as to why the relationship between formal collaboration and sources of government funding takes a U-shape: The deeper understanding of the implications of the institutional reality, that non-profit organizations are part of, is provided

by thinking along the lines of institutional theory. On the other hand, the findings of Acar and Guo about how cultural structures and norms within the organization shapes collaboration patterns could also be described through RD by replacing the notion of legal and normative environment by power over resources. The example provided is about how institutional theory would argue that trained professionals such as doctors work against formal collaboration with other professions because they are socialized to oppose outsiders from interfering (Guo & Acar 2005, page 348). RD would argue that the doctors oppose formal collaboration of this kind because they would lose power over resources. Taking doctors as an example, their training consists of crucial knowledge, their surgeon skills are difficult to replace, they have large autonomy in terms of allocation of resources (prescribing medicine, planning treatment, operations ect.). Doctors have a privileged standing controlling and embodying all of the mentioned resources, and RD would argue that the trained professionals would not gain from formal collaboration but lose autonomy. However, the results of the research show that these expectations towards collaboration patterns are only justified for education- and social services organizations and not health. Institutional theory's notions of norms and behavior seem to offer a more fitting explanation to why the powerful groups of for instance professors and doctors influence their organizations differently than the rationale of RD theory.

Overall, RD theory supplies important insights to non-profit organizations' collaborative behavior because it has a broad understanding of crucial resources, what power consists of and views the organization as active and reactive to its environment. On the other hand, the RD approach can downplay the meaning of institutional structures. Additionally, viewing organizations and its employees strictly from an RD perspective can result in alternative explanations such as the impact of normative environments to be overlooked.

## **Perspective**

The foregoing sections have unfolded the application of institutional theory and resource dependency theory in regard to the collaboration among nonprofit organizations (Guo, C., & Acar, M., 2005). The case seeks to explore the environmental and contextual factors associated with an organization's choice of collaboration forms (Guo, C., & Acar, M., 2005). To further enhance the understanding of the board linking factor and the organizational age factor respectively, this section will introduce a new theoretical perspective in the form of network theory. The theory is accounted for in "Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness" (1985) by Mark Granovetter and "Social structure and competition in interfirm networks: The paradox of



embeddedness” (1997) by Brian Uzzi. Over- and under-socialized approaches will be accounted for, leading to Granovetter’s concept of embeddedness which will be applied to the case. Furthermore, the paradox of embeddedness described by Uzzi will deepen the understanding of the explanatory power of embeddedness. In sum, the implementation of network theory will provide explanations to otherwise unanswered factors of the case.

Granovetter examines the question of how behavior and institutions are affected by social relations (Granovetter, M., 1985, p. 481). He argues that economists have either analyzed this through an under- or over socialized approach. Classical and neoclassical economists represent the under socialized approach, claiming that competition determines the terms of trade in a way that individual traders cannot manipulate. If traders encounter difficult relationships, characterized by mistrust and malfeasance, they can simply move on to trade with other traders that are willing to trade on market terms (Granovetter, M., 1985, p. 484). According to this reasoning, social relations are irrelevant, as collaboration is driven solely by common economic interests and actors’ relationship is based only on the economic gains of the collaboration. Regarding the collaboration among nonprofit organizations, it could be argued that this approach would favor informal collaboration, since it focuses on utility maximization.

Conversely, the over socialized approach is represented by functionalist and structural sociologists, who argue that individuals are mechanically controlled by the norms and values in society. Once we know an individual’s social class or labor market sector, we will also know their behavior, as they are so well socialized and will behave according to the norms and values of their social status (Granovetter, M., 1985, p. 486). This means that the ongoing social relations are irrelevant, as the

approach assumes that once an individual is affected, their norms and values will not change, and thus efficient collaboration will be facilitated. If this approach was applied to the case, it could be argued to favor formal collaboration among organizations, as it emphasizes the collaborative effectiveness of knowing people’s values and behavior, which allows organizations to have joint collaborative ventures without the need for ongoing social relations.

Granovetter differs from both approaches as he argues that they neglect people’s social relationships and networks. According to Granovetter, most behavior is closely embedded in networks of

interpersonal relations and that such an argument avoids the extremes of under- and over-socialized views of human action (Granovetter, M., 1985, p. 504). His argument of embeddedness aligns with the findings in the case of collaboration among nonprofit organizations. The case text consistently predicts that the more linkages an organization has with other nonprofits through its board, the more likely it is to develop formal types of collaborative activities. Granovetter's agreeance with this finding is apparent as he calls it "a well-known fact" that many firms, small and large, are linked by interlocking directorates so that relationships among directors of firms are many and densely knit (Granovetter, M., 1985, p. 495). This proves network theory's explanatory power regarding board linkages in the case, since board linkages between nonprofit organizations creates potential partners for closely knit collaboration, essentially leading to formal collaboration (Guo, C., & Acar, M., 2005).

The effect of organizational age can also be explained by the concept of embeddedness. The case predicted that an older organization is more likely to develop formal types of collaborative activities. Results found that there is a positive correlation between an older organization and its likelihood to develop formal types of collaboration. The explanation from the case emphasizes the fact that a larger depth of networks and connections is likely to come over time and therefore older organizations are likely to create more deeply connected collaborations (Guo, C., & Acar, M., 2005). The concept of embeddedness can provide an altering explanation. In relation to the concept of trust in economic activities, embeddedness holds that there is an economic motivation to be trustworthy when there is a continuing relationship (Ellersgaard, 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that there is a form of economic security in a continuing collaborative relationship (formal collaboration), compared to occasional collaborations with differing organizations (informal collaboration).

Though Granovetter's argument of embeddedness can be applied to the case text, it is important to highlight that it rests upon *trustworthy* relationships and networks. Granovetter also emphasizes that there is a common misconception that people's social relationships *always* lead them to trust one another (Granovetter, 2011). Trust in collaborative economic actions depends on the social relationships of an organization. These relations are necessary as explained by the concept of

embeddedness; however, they are not sufficient. Strong social relations may actually leave an organization more exposed, as the gain of malfeasance increases when the levels of trust increase (Granovetter, M., 1985, p. 491). In relation to the case text, this argument would favor more informal collaborations of nonprofit organizations, characterized by arm's length ties in order to decrease the vulnerability of the organizations.

Brian Uzzi elaborates on how embeddedness can go from an asset to a liability through three conditions (Uzzi, 1997, p. 57). The first condition is an unforeseeable exit of a core network player. In relation to the case text, this means an unexpected loss of core formal collaboration with another organization, would cause a sudden decrease to resource flows as formal collaborations typically constitute a large part of an organization's resources. For this reason, organizations with deeply embedded formal collaborations are more dependent on each network tie and will suffer more if they lose a network tie.

The second condition is the fact that institutional forces can "rationalize" markets and thereby eliminate the importance of social ties (Uzzi, 1997, p. 58). Uzzi argues that it *"...places firms that are highly invested in networks at a higher risk of failure than market-oriented firms because the social relationships that created and supported competitive advantages no longer exist,"* (Uzzi, 1997, p. 58). Applying this to the case, one could argue that informal collaborations among organizations are more desirable as they focus on short term profits employing a mindset of "numbers buying" rather than "relationship buying". In this way, their network ties are short-lived and compromised to specific transactions, which leaves them less vulnerable and more adaptable to changes in the market.

The third condition results from over embeddedness (Uzzi, 1997, p. 58). When all firms in a network are connected through embedded ties, the amount of new information that can be attained is limited. This is because there are few or no links to outside organizations who could potentially contribute with innovative ideas. In this way, organizations with only strong social ties and formal collaboration

can get insulated in their own network. Relating this to the case text, a general argument could be made that encapsulates all three conditions. Organizations must consider the strength of their

network ties. According to the embeddedness argument mentioned earlier, having strong network ties provides a sense of security for an organization. However, the three conditions provided emphasize that this might be a false security. According to the conditions, organizations should favor weaker network ties and more informal collaboration. It is through an organization's weak ties that it can gain access to new information and alliances, whilst remaining economically secure and prepared for exogenous shocks. Still, one must acknowledge that collaborations through weak ties require time to be executed and will probably not offer the unity needed for collective action (Ellersgaard, 2021).

In essence, network theory prescribes that an organization cannot rely solely on weak ties with informal collaboration or strong embedded ties with formal collaboration. Organizations should arguably have a mix of both ties and then prioritize one form of tie more depending on the environment and market that the organization resides within. Acar and Guo posit that the likelihood of developing formal types of collaborations, as opposed to informal types of collaborations is associated with the network effect (Guo, C., & Acar, M., 2005, p. 345). However, their study of the network effect only accounts for board linkages. This section has applied a more comprehensive understanding of network theory to the case, with arguments for and against formal types of collaborations.

## **Evaluation**

RD theory as developed by Pfeffer and Salancik is an open system- and natural model and has an ecological level of analysis. Open systems models predict that an interchange between the organization and its environment is an essential underlying factor. This descriptive priority of interchange with the environment emerges in RD theory through the assumptions of resources not only within the organization but in institutional environments and reciprocal dependencies with other organizations. This aligns with the theory being a natural model as well; the organization is made up of participants who have individual interests but all gain resources from perpetuating the organization. RD identifies increasing and maintaining power for survival as the purpose of the organization and core explanation for organizational behavior. Within the idea of the organization striving for more power is the assumption about loss aversion (Pfeffer 1993, page 72). The idea is that redistributing resources within the organization will generate negative feedback and the organization will therefore

seek to secure new resources from the environment. This assumption is key to explaining behavior that diverts from a logical response to the environment or an organizational setup that has become less efficient over time. In general, the broad definition of what resources are gives RD an approach that explains behavior at an individual and institutional level. The core motivation is seen as creating, gaining or controlling more or new resources because they can be transferred into power over any given environment or other organization (Pfeffer 1993, page 92). The idea of organizational politics within RD is along the lines of power dynamics as proposed by Niccolo Machiavelli in his work called *The Prince*.

RD expects the organization to behave resource-maximizing when engaging with its environment because acquiring incremental resources is better than redistributing resources within the organization due to loss aversion. Furthermore, the nature of the organization and institutional environment accommodates many different kinds of resources that can be utilized for power which is necessary for the survival of the organization.

Much like resource dependency theory, institutional theory is an open system- and natural model. It also works from the ecologist's perspective of organizations that challenges the ideas from transaction costs theory and contingency theory, which argues that organizations can easily change their fundamental structural features (Scott & Davis, 2016). In this sense, institutional theory is generally connected to descriptive priorities of organizations of relatively stable, where change is hard and dangerous. Furthermore, when change does occur it is rarely internally decided or constructed, but more likely as a result of external pressures from the wider environment in which the organization functions (Scott & Davis, 2016). Even though RD theory and Institutional theory share some basis in model and descriptive priorities, they do differ in several aspects as well. Institutional theory expands the ecological environmental aspects from a pure economic and competitive angle to prioritize the regulative, normative, and cultural forces present to best describe and explain how organizations are born, change and fail (Scott & Davis, 2016). Without diving deep into the different strains and interrelations within the institutionalist school of organizational theory, Scott W 2016 argues that there are broadly speaking three different approaches, all having different descriptive priorities. Very generalized, economists and political science scholars tend to prioritize regulatory elements, such as laws, rules, the state, and sanctions. Sociologists prioritize normative elements, such as appropriateness and binding expectations. Lastly, anthropologists prioritize cultural-cognitive elements, such as common beliefs and shared logics of action (Scott & Davis, 2016)

The descriptive prioritizes of institutional theory mentioned previously do foster prescriptive priorities. Since there is such a variety of descriptive priorities within institutional theory itself, it is impossible to perfectly generalize one prescriptive priority. However, it can be argued that Institutional theory's attempt to break free from the previously dominating perspective from the rational system model does foster a prescriptive priority of culture, meant in its broadest sense. An Institutional approach would most certainly foster a very culture (regulative, normative, cognitive culture) based analysis and possibly also creation of an organization. There could furthermore be a case for critical caution when looking through Institutional perspectives on organizations. As organizations can quickly become a non-actor which is bounced around by its environment. This can result in removing all agency from an organization and in the real world fostering an idea of organizations (which often are motivated by ideas and passion, not money), as hopeless if they are in a non-friendly environment. From a theoretical perspective, there is also some critical caution to be taken, especially in the form of explanatory power of outliers. Institutionalism can struggle massively to explain why some organizations behave very differently from each other, even though they might face very similar environmental conditions.

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