

Pluralism in Organizations: Learning from Unconventional Forms of Organizations

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The bureaucratic organization is still regarded as the conventional organizational form, but is ill-suited to an increasingly pluralistic world. Research on the variety of organizational forms has increased dramatically over the past three decades and offers the potential to understand better how pluralism is manifested and managed within organizations. However, this research remains fragmented. The purpose of this paper is to review and synthesize research on unconventional organizations to explore how organizations resolve or attenuate the tensions related to pluralism. Drawing from research in leading management journals, it covers seven distinct literatures: ‘referent organization’, ‘temporary organization’, ‘pluralistic organization’, ‘meta-organization’, ‘bridging organization’, ‘hybrid organization’ and ‘field-configuring event’. For each literature, the authors trace the genealogy of the key concepts and review their distinct insights regarding organizational pluralism. They then synthesize and discuss their collective contributions and conclude with avenues of research for pluralism in organizations.

Introduction

ISO is a piece in a very fundamental mechanism, which is the mechanism of global trade and technology. And as being a part of this mechanism, of this machine, I think ISO has a very fundamental role as an organization that can provide communication to make the interface between different co-chairs and different production systems and structures, in different countries. So maybe you can say ISO is like a modem. (Participant in the development of ISO 26000 standards)

In 2005, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) launched negotiations for an international standard on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Prior to that, ISO had been dedicated to the standardization of mechanical components and technical processes, using a singular scientific/technical rationality (Murphy and Yates 2009). When ISO entered the field of CSR, it had to contend with multiple, competing forms of rationality,

deep-seated antagonisms between powerful actors such as the International Trade Union Confederation, international NGOs and the International Chamber of Commerce, and contentious issues ranging from corruption to child labour. Despite widespread scepticism (Castka and Balzarova 2005; Tamm Hallström 2004, 2005), ISO created a specific organization, the ISO Working Group on Social Responsibility (WGSR), which facilitated the collaboration of over 450 experts from 99 countries and more than 40 international organizations, and, within five years, reached an international consensus and published ISO 26000.

The ISO WGSR is illustrative of a highly pluralist organization (Brès 2013; Helms *et al.* 2012), one which provides a sphere for interaction and consensus-building among diverse sets of actors. In her research on universities, Hardy (1991, p. 131) describes highly pluralistic organizations as comprised of ‘coalitions of actors’, where ‘goals may conflict’ and ‘conflict is normal and legitimate’, but yet ‘collaboration and consensus is possible’. To gain a better

understanding of pluralism, Hardy (1991) believes we need first to question and transform our conventional understanding of organizations, which she refers to as the ‘unitary model’ of organization. This unitary model, based on the bureaucratic form of organization, represents more of an ideal than a reality.

In recent years, scholars have conceptualized a variety of organizational forms that can offer compelling insights into pluralism, but rarely have their findings been synthesized to provide a richer understanding of the phenomenon. In this paper, we propose to integrate diverse literatures on unconventional organizations to obtain a better understanding of pluralism within organizations. Drawing from Hardy’s (1991) insight that organizations based on non-bureaucratic principles must inevitably contend with some degree of pluralism, we take research on unconventional organizational forms as our starting point.

We review literatures whose central constructs challenge the ‘unitary model’ of organization associated with the traditional bureaucracy. We identify and integrate what these have to say about pluralism. By beginning with literatures that take unconventional organizational forms as their objects of study rather than those specifically investigating pluralism, we hope to reveal a wider range of examples of how pluralism is manifested within organizations and draw links between literatures that, although complementary, remain fragmented and disconnected, ultimately for the purpose of extending our understanding of pluralism. We ask: what does research on unconventional organizations tell us about the challenges pluralism poses within organizations and how these challenges may be resolved?

Pluralism in management

Pluralism in Organization and Management Theory (OMT) has garnered steady attention since 2000 (*Academy of Management Review* Vol. 24 No. 4 on change and pluralism; *Academy of Management Journal* Vol. 57 No. 2 on relational pluralism; *Administration & Society* Vol. 47 No. 9 on value pluralism; Denis *et al.* 2007, Eisenhardt 2000; Glynn *et al.* 2000; Lewis 2000). It is often characterized in one of two ways: either as originating from within the organization or as originating from without, from the broader environment. Research that takes the first approach focuses on pluralism’s impacts on organizational structures and processes (Denis *et al.* 2007, 2012; Glynn *et al.* 2000; Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006).

Pluralism is characterized here by ‘multiple objectives, diffuse power, and knowledge-based work processes’ (Denis *et al.* 2007, p. 180). Diffuse power means that, in the absence of a central authority, all constituents can legitimately promote their perspectives. This leads to situations in which ‘reconciliation by fiat is not an option’ (Denis *et al.* 2001, p. 826). Further complicating collaboration is that pluralist organizations tend to deal with ‘knowledge-based work processes’ (Denis *et al.* 2007), understood as a focus on substantive issues as opposed to procedural issues (Simon 1976). These knowledge-based work processes demand agreement on larger conceptual and value-laden matters to a greater extent than the best-practices of procedural issues. As pluralism emanates from the power and objectives of an organization’s constituents, it can be described as ‘internally motivated pluralism’ (Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006).

Research that takes the second approach draws largely on the idea of ‘institutional logics’ and focuses on the broader social context to explain dynamics internal to the organization. Western societies are organized around the central institutions of professions, capitalism, corporations, family, the bureaucratic state, democracy and religion, each with their own institutional logics (Friedland 2009; Friedland and Alford 1991). Institutional logics authorize practices, constitute actors and define status hierarchies. Organizations are said to embody the plurality of logics present in their environments (Pache and Santos 2010; Yu 2013), and they experience tensions when these logics are incompatible (Besharov and Smith 2014). In this perspective, pluralism can be described as ‘externally motivated’ (Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006) because it is carried into organizations from the environment. The two approaches have produced numerous insights. However, there remains little dialogue between them, or even among the literatures that comprise them. This is despite the fact that many of these approaches emerged out of a shared dissatisfaction with the traditional idea of bureaucracy and the assumptions about organizations it promotes.

Rise and fall of theories of traditional bureaucracy

Organization theory initially emerged with an interest in the bureaucratic organizational form as a means to achieve organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Fayol and Taylor, generally credited as the field’s founding fathers, sought to identify best practices based on the ‘rational-bureaucratic’ model. The 1950s saw the appearance of contingency theory,

notably through the seminal works of Joan Woodward (1958) on technology, Burns and Stalker on innovation (1961), the Aston Group on organizations' quantitative structural variables (Donaldson and Luo 2014) and Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) on structural contingency. Contingency theory went beyond the monolithic 'one-size-fits all' view of the organization and proposed that the optimal organizational form depended on the organization's environment. Nonetheless, whether regarded as a single ideal-type or as contingent on the environment, the bureaucratic form remained the prescribed means for achieving the efficiency and effectiveness assumed to be necessary for organizational survival. Following Ashcraft (2001) and others (e.g. Mintzberg 1979; Puranam *et al.* 2014; Rouleau 2007), we characterize the bureaucratic form by its 'means–ends rationality', 'hierarchical and centralized authority' and 'formal and exhaustive rules sustained by a specialized and formal division of tasks'.

Yet, many organizations simply did not fit the bureaucratic model. Cohen *et al.* (1972), hinting at what would later become the hallmarks of pluralism, argued that organizations such as universities could not be rightfully characterized as traditional bureaucracies:

Significant parts of contemporary theories of management introduce mechanisms for control and coordination which assume the existence of well-defined goals and a well-defined technology, as well as substantial participant involvement in the affairs of the organization. Where goals and technology are hazy and participation is fluid, many of the axioms and standard procedures of management collapse. (Cohen *et al.* 1972, p. 2)

They named their alternative model of decision-making the 'garbage can model', the unflattering nomenclature due to what they regarded as an anarchic and 'pathological' (Cohen *et al.* 1972, p. 16) process in comparison with the rational choice model associated with bureaucracy. Also studying universities, Hardy (1991) later highlighted the centrality of pluralism to organizational life and called for a reconsideration of the bureaucratic model. She argued that it was not pluralism, but rather our conventional understanding of organizations, based on the 'unitary model', that was pathological, because it 'provides neither accurate description of how universities operate nor effective prescription' (Hardy 1991, p. 127). She proposed that we embrace a pluralist perspective, which implied that we recognize 'The

organization/system is a coalition; Goals may conflict; Conflict is normal and legitimate; Decision-making may be political; Collaboration and consensus is possible' (Hardy 1991, p. 131). Rather than a phenomenon to be avoided or suppressed, Hardy re-conceptualized pluralism as a perennial part of organizational life, and she urged research on non-bureaucratic organizations.

Scholars interested in a variety of organizational forms have since identified and studied the effects of pluralism. However, they have done so largely independently and without their findings translating into other domains or accumulating to provide a better overall understanding of pluralism. Consequently, this research risks falling into a 'fragmentation trap' (Knudsen 2003). In the next section, we develop a template to study organizational pluralism that can be applied across research traditions. Later in the paper, we apply this template to research on a variety of organizational forms to synthesize their findings and produce general insights on the construct of pluralism.

A template for the study of pluralism in organizations

We propose to investigate how research on pluralism has challenged the traditional model of bureaucratic organization according to three dimensions, which will be used to review and synthesize the 'plurality' of research on organizational forms. The first dimension relates to power and membership. This dimension is the most directly connected to the 'internally motivated pluralism' approach. Findings reveal that pluralist organizations contain coalitions of powerful actors who hold conflicting objectives and do so without overarching authority – what Cohen *et al.* (1972) refer to as 'organized anarchy'. A centralized authority is replaced by coalitions of power (Hardy 1991).

The second dimension relates to organizational missions and objectives. As organizing in the plural means managing participants with divergent interests (Denis *et al.* 2007), organizations that are 'many things to many people' (Kraatz and Block 2008) are faced with the difficult task of seeking legitimacy through the fulfilment of competing expectations (Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006; Kraatz and Block 2008; Yu 2013). As a result, pluralism directly challenges the conventional idea of organizations based on a means–ends rationality, because organizing in the plural involves dealing with substantive issues – what Cohen *et al.* (1972) call 'problematic preferences'.

Table 1. Organizations revisited through the pluralist perspective

Pluralism as ...	Challenge for organizations	Level of analysis	Traditional bureaucracy	Pluralistic organizations
A multiplicity of powers	Membership and power	Coalitions (intra-organizational)	Hierarchy and centralized power	Heterarchy due to existence of powerful coalitions
A multiplicity of preferences	Missions and objectives	Formal organization (organizational)	Clear technologies and outputs encourage means-ends rationality	Unclear technologies and outputs require debate over substantive matters
A multiplicity of logics	Relationship to the environment	Society or industry (supra-organizational)	Embedded in a single logic that dictates coherent rules and norms	Embedded in multiple logics, requiring interactive relationship to negotiate rules

Finally, the third dimension involves the organization's relationship to its environment. Pluralist organizations do not manifest the typical bureaucratic logic: that is, they do not adhere to the dictates of efficiency and instead lack 'formal and exhaustive rules, sustained by a specialized and formal division of tasks' (Ashcraft 2001) oriented toward a predefined task. This results in what Cohen *et al.* (1972) refer to as 'unclear technologies'. One reason why they lack a bureaucratic logic is that their missions are often to resolve value-laden issues of broader import that require complex modes of reasoning, beyond usual professional roles and established routines. Yet, the outputs of these 'unclear technologies' may have field-wide repercussions that do affect the rules and structures that constitute other organizations within the field.

Another way to consider these dimensions is through their level of analysis: multiplicities of powers refers to the coalition level in relation to the competing intra-organizational forces; multiplicities of preferences refers to the organizational level of analysis in relation to the organization's formal mission and key characteristics; and multiplicities of logics refers to the societal or industry level of analysis in relation to the competing social forces acting on the organization. Table 1 summarizes the three multiplicities and the challenges they pose to conventional understanding of organizations.

Organizations may vary in the degrees to which they experience each type of multiplicity, whether alone or in combination. Arguably, all organizations may face multiple powers, preferences or logics, including bureaucracies to some extent. However, if the traditional model of bureaucratic organization assumes that an excess of pluralism leads to chaos, other conceptualizations of organization show, on the contrary, that pluralism may even be leveraged by organizational leaders to meet their objectives. As we

discuss later, the research traditions we review, given that they bring distinct lenses to the study of organizations, also vary in the degrees to which they reveal each type of multiplicity.

The remainder of the paper is structured in five parts. First, in the following section, we discuss the methodology of our literature review. In the two sections that follow, we summarize distinct literatures on organizational forms using our template of the three multiplicities. Fourth, in the discussion section, we synthesize our reviews to contribute to a greater overall understanding of pluralism in organizations. Fifth, we provide concluding remarks and suggest areas for future research.

Methodology

Many scholarly literatures have developed concerning a variety of types of organizations by applying a multitude of conceptual lenses. This posed a challenge to adopting a keyword search strategy to build our pool of articles for this review, leading us to adopt an alternative strategy. We drew on Locke and Golden-Biddle's (1997) concept of 'synthesized coherence', a representation and organization of knowledge that can bring together previously unrelated work from different research programmes.

Our literature review follows five steps, described in the flow diagram shown in Figure 1. First, we built a pool of potentially relevant papers treating new forms of organizations. We looked for more established journals in OMT, drawing on journals featured in the *Financial Times* Research Ranking for Business Schools from 2012 to 2016. We selected research-oriented journals with a generalist scope. Table 2 details this initial list of journals. We conducted an initial search using the EBSCO and ABI Inform Complete databases for papers with

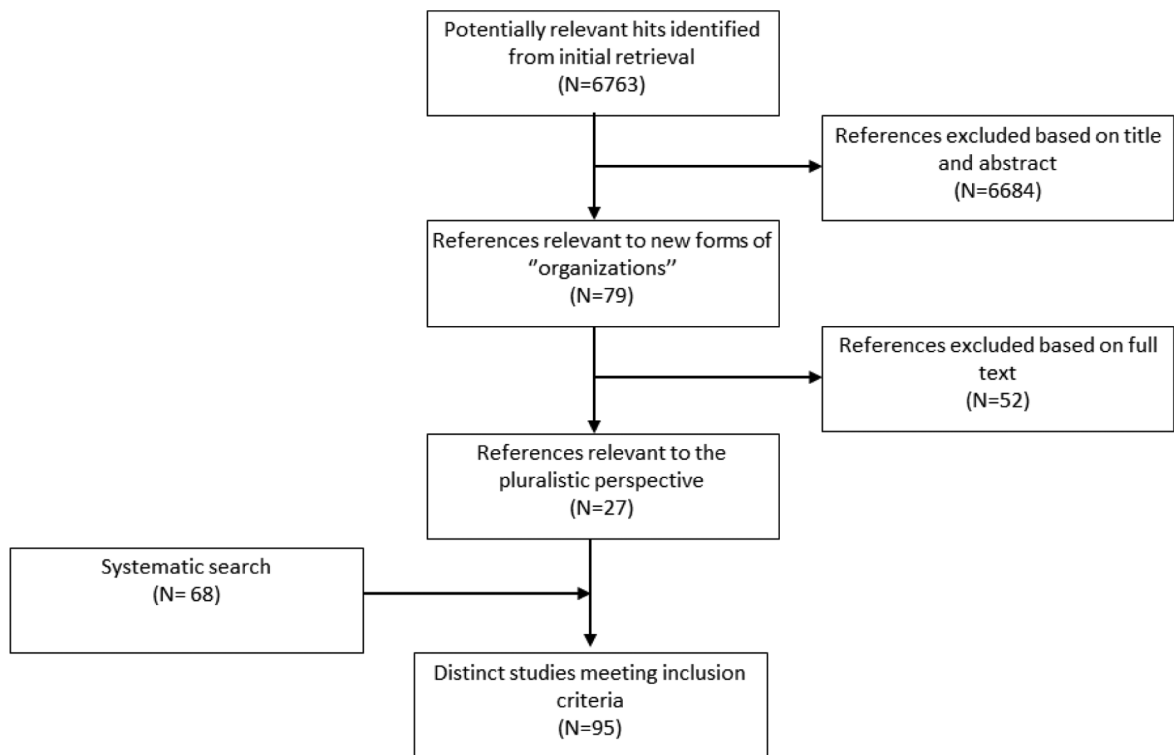


Figure 1. Flow diagram of literature selection

‘organization’ or its compounds in the title and abstract. This resulted in an initial pool of 6763 potentially relevant papers.

Second, this pool of papers was reduced to retain only papers focused on explicitly developing theory on particular forms of organizations published between 2002 and 2016. As we began this review in 2012, ten years (2002–2012) was deemed an appropriate time-frame: long enough to identify the most important conceptualizations, while short enough to build a manageable pool of articles. In the course of developing this project, we updated our review and extended our research up to November 2016. Based on each paper’s title and abstract, we retained only papers explicitly discussing particular novel forms of organizations. As discussed earlier, although we sought papers that challenged the traditional bureaucracy, to be selected, papers were also required to propose or discuss alternative forms of organizations, which entail ‘members, a hierarchy,¹ autonomy, and a

¹Although the pluralist perspective challenges the centralized hierarchy found in traditional bureaucracy, all formal organizations still seek to establish some form of hierarchy, if less centralized, through the creation of formal roles and

constitution’ (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008). The second step reduced the number of papers to 79.

Third, we reduced the list further to papers discussing topics relevant to the pluralist perspective. We searched for ideas of organizations touching on ‘heterarchy’, ‘interactive relationships to their environment’ or pluralisms’ challenges around ‘substantive issues’ as discussed above. We also retained only studies whose concepts of organization appeared in at least three papers in our initial list of journals (Table 2). This third selection was made based on the full text of the papers. It resulted in a list of 27 papers on seven ideas of organizations related to pluralism (see Table 3 for a complete list).

Fourth, we conducted focused searches on the seven concepts of pluralistic organizations to explore their emergence and evolution. We searched the full text of management journals in EBSCO and ABI Inform using the names of key constructs such as ‘referent organization’ or ‘bridging organization’. We cross-checked bibliographies to ensure the

status, according to Ahrne and Brunsson (2005). On this subject, see Gulati *et al.* (2012) for an interesting discussion of statuses and roles management in meta-organizations.

Table 2. Overview of the selected references

Journal	Potentially relevant results	Distinct studies meeting inclusion criteria
FT research-oriented and generalist journals (2002–2012)		
<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>	870	9
<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	886	9
<i>Organization Science</i>	673	9
<i>Organization Studies</i>	1202	9
<i>Human Relations</i>	896	8
<i>Academy of Management Review</i>	803	4
<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>	665	2
<i>Strategic Management Journal</i>	768	1
Additional references		
<i>Journal of Applied Behavioral Science</i>		6
<i>Industry and Innovation</i>		4
<i>California Management Review</i>		4
<i>Academy of Management Annals</i>		3
<i>Book</i>		3
<i>International Journal of Management Reviews</i>		3
<i>Scandinavian Journal of Management</i>		2
<i>Research Policy</i>		2
<i>Conference paper</i>		2
<i>Academy of Management Perspectives</i>		1
<i>Australian Journal of Management</i>		1
<i>Business & Society</i>		1
<i>Business Strategy and the Environment</i>		1
<i>Electronic Business Engineering</i>		1
<i>European Management Review</i>		1
<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>		1
<i>Journal of Creative Behavior</i>		1
<i>Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management</i>		1
<i>International Journal of Managing Projects in Business</i>		1
<i>Leadership & Organization Development Journal</i>		1
<i>MIS Quarterly</i>		1
<i>Organization</i>		1
<i>Research in Organizational Behavior</i>		1
<i>Society</i>		1
<i>Total</i>	6763	95

papers were indeed theoretically connected to our seven concepts. We used the Journal Citation Report (JCR) to make sure that all journals were research-oriented management journals. While reading those references, three books (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Brown 1993; Meyerson *et al.* 1996) and two conference papers (Brown 1989; Van de Ven 1999) appeared important for the genealogy of the seven concepts and were included. This resulted in an additional 68 references outside our initial list (see ‘additional references’ in Table 2). The final list contained 95 studies of organizations relevant to pluralism. Table 3 provides a list of the seven ideas of organizations related to pluralism with the corresponding references.

We found that the seven concepts of organizations could be sorted into two groups. The first group, which we label ‘organization studies’, relates to what

Jarzabkowski and Fenton (2006) describe as ‘internally motivated pluralism’, which focuses on organizational structures and processes. The second group, which we label ‘institutional studies’, relates to what Jarzabkowski and Fenton (2006) describe as ‘externally motivated pluralism’. These papers often focus on the relationship between the institutional environment and organizations.

Figure 2 illustrates the multiplicities identified in each literature. All three multiplicities probably coexist at any given time, but the literatures, because they offer distinct lenses, vary in the degree to which they reveal each type of multiplicity. The organization studies literatures are shown in grey, while the institutional theory literatures are shown in black. Their plotting in the Venn diagram reveals the former’s focus on organizational preferences and the latter’s on

Table 3. Ideas of pluralist organizations in the management literature

Terms and references	Definition
Organization studies	
1. <i>Referent organization</i> Emery and Trist 1965; Trist 1977, 1983; McCann and Selsky 1984; Gray and Hay 1986; Pasquero 1991; Pasmore and Khalsa 1993; Turcotte 1997; Westley and Vredenburg 1997; Turcotte and Pasquero 2001; Terlaak and Gong 2008	'An organization of this type is called a "referent organization" (Trist, 1977), a term developed from the concept of reference groups. Such organizations [...] are of critical importance for domain development. [...] Moreover, they are to be controlled by the stakeholders involved in the domain, not from the outside.' (Trist 1983)
2. <i>Temporary organization</i> Bennis 1965,1969; Goodman and Goodman 1972, 1976; Miles 1977; Lundin and Söderholm 1995; Meyerson <i>et al.</i> 1996; Malone and Laubacher 1999; Bigley and Roberts 2001; Windeler and Sydow 2001; Grabher 2004; Lindkvist 2005; Bechky 2006; Bakker 2010; Bakker <i>et al.</i> 2016; Burke and Morley 2016; Ebers and Maurer 2016; Swärd 2016	'Temporary organizational form itself, which can be defined as a set of organizational actors working together on a complex task over a limited period of time (...) in a temporary system "everyone is temporary, along with the enterprise"'. (Bakker 2010)
3. <i>Pluralistic organization</i> Van de Ven 1999; Lozeau <i>et al.</i> 2002; Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008; Denis <i>et al.</i> 2001, 2007, 2011, 2012; Sillince <i>et al.</i> 2012; Abdallah and Langley 2014; Rezanian and Ouedraogo 2014	'POs are by definition settings in which a multiplicity of actors and groups pursue varying goals. [...] [They are] characterized by fragmented power and multiple objectives. Where reconciliation by fiat is not an option, these opposing forces [environment, organizational objectives, and opportunities] are in constant dynamic tension.' (Denis <i>et al.</i> 2001)
4. <i>Meta-organization</i> Ahrne and Brunsson 2005, 2008; Scheytt <i>et al.</i> 2006; Boström 2006; Reveley and Ville 2010; Bromley and Powell 2012; Gulati <i>et al.</i> 2012; König <i>et al.</i> 2012; Franken and Thomsett 2013; Gawer 2014; Solansky <i>et al.</i> 2014; Murdoch 2015; Berkowitz and Dumez 2016; Toubiana <i>et al.</i> 2016	'Meta-organizations are organizations that have other organizations as their members. The term meta is chosen because much of what the meta-organization does deals with the organizational forms of their members as well as the interaction between them and their identity and status.' (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008)
5. <i>Bridging organization</i> Brown 1989, 1991, 1993; Westley and Vredenburg 1991, 1997; Sharma <i>et al.</i> 1994; Lawrence and Hardy 1999; Reveley and Ville 2010; Arenas <i>et al.</i> 2013; Adobor and McMullen 2014	'Bridging organizations and their constituent networks are shaped by values and visions, their tasks, member diversity, and external threats. [...] Bridging organizations can play a key role in building local organizations, creating horizontal linkages, increasing grassroots influence on policy, and disseminating new visions and organizational innovations.' (Brown 1991, p. 807)
Institutional studies	
6. <i>Hybrid organizations</i> Golden-Biddle and Rao 1997; Glynn 2000; Ashcraft 2001; Zilber 2002; Battilana and Dorado 2010; Jay 2013; Pache and Santos 2013; Battilana and Lee 2014; Doherty <i>et al.</i> 2014; Ebrahim <i>et al.</i> 2014; Battilana <i>et al.</i> 2015; Bruton <i>et al.</i> 2015; Haigh <i>et al.</i> (2015); Mair <i>et al.</i> 2015; Mangen and Brivot 2015; Santos <i>et al.</i> 2015; Bishop and Waring 2016	'Organizations that combine institutional logics in unprecedented ways.' (Battilana and Dorado 2010)
7. <i>Field-configuring event</i> Lampel and Meyer 2008; Meyer <i>et al.</i> 2005; Anand and Jones 2008; Garud 2008; Glynn 2008; McInerney 2008; Oliver and Montgomery 2008; Anand and Watson 2005; Hardy and Maguire 2010; Zilber 2011; Schussler <i>et al.</i> 2013; Citroni 2015; Leca <i>et al.</i> 2015; Schussler <i>et al.</i> 2015; Thiel and Grabher 2015	'FCEs have six defining characteristics, which, for the purpose of this Special Issue, constitute an operational definition: 1 [...] in one location, actors from diverse professional, organizational, and geographical backgrounds. 2 [...] [their] duration is limited, normally running from a few hours to a few days. 3 FCEs provide unstructured opportunities for face-to-face social interaction. 4 FCEs include ceremonial and dramaturgical activities. 5 FCEs are occasions for information exchange and collective sense-making. 6 FCEs generate social and reputational resources that can be deployed elsewhere.' (Lampel and Meyer 2008)

institutional logics. It should be noted that, although we have endeavoured to assign each literature to a given area of the Venn diagram, there remains a good deal of variation in the research of each literature.

Organization studies

In the tradition of organization studies, we include literatures on referent organizations, temporary

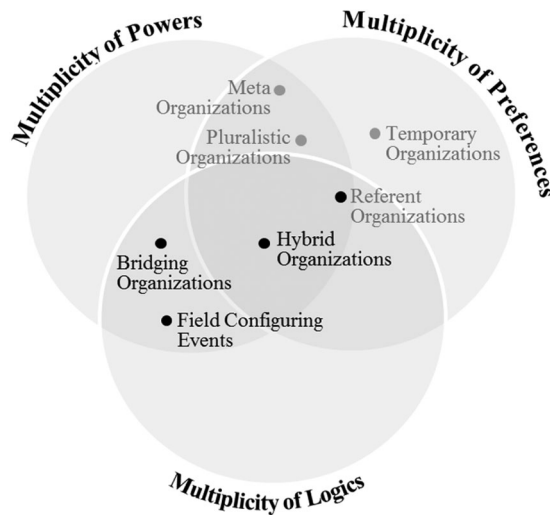


Figure 2. Types of multiplicities evoked by the reviewed literatures

organizations, pluralistic organizations and meta-organizations. We do so because we find that they share significant underlying assumptions. First, all draw explicitly from the work of Herbert Simon and colleagues at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, and explore organizational forms that differ from the classical bureaucracy. Second, all regard the organization as instrumental to bringing about collective action. They prescribe solutions to problems of collective action through organizational structures that enable democratic decision-making and consensus-building. They are therefore motivated by a certain faith in democratic processes to produce consensus. Third, they all associate the emergence of pluralist organizational forms with sweeping historical shifts. Authors situate pluralism within a context of a turbulent social environment and, in some cases, the need to resolve ‘meta-problems’, which impact a variety of actors across social fields and industries, all interconnected and interdependent (Aldrich 1977; McCann and Selsky 1984; Trist 1983).

Referent organization

The first concept to appear in our review is the ‘referent organization’. It was introduced by Trist in 1977 and further clarified in 1983 as an organizational response to what was seen as an increasingly interconnected and turbulent environment. Research moved closer to the question of pluralism at the start of the 1980s, with the observation that organizations were facing new types of problems described as ‘meta-problems’:

Complex societies in fast-changing environments give rise to sets or systems of problems (meta-problems) rather than discrete problems. [...] a set of problems, or societal problem area, which constitutes a domain of common concern for its members [...] The issues involved are too extensive and too many-sided to be coped with by any single organization, however large. (Trist 1983, pp. 269–270)

Meta-problems, such as environmental pollution (Turcotte and Pasquero 2001), drugs and unemployment, were viewed as sources of turbulence for organizations, which were often ill-equipped to address these large-scale social issues (McCann and Selsky 1984; Trist 1983). Emery and Trist (1965) believed that the more turbulent the environment, the greater the diversity in the organizations called to cooperate. If Trist (1983) spoke more in terms of complexity than of pluralism,² he nonetheless denounced the bureaucratic form as inadequate for the resolution of meta-problems and even argued that it is prone to further heightening them. In the same vein, researchers sought to replace the bureaucratic organization with a new type, capable of linking societal projects with local contexts (Pasquero 1991).

Pluralism is conceptualized primarily as a multiplicity of preferences in this literature. Influenced by Kurt Lewin and Wilfred Bion’s work on veteran group therapy after World War II (Pasmore and Khalsa 1993), Trist believed in collective action, democratic processes, trust, empowerment and the self-regulation of groups. Developing means of achieving collaboration despite competing preferences remains at the heart of the referent organization (McCann and Selsky 1984; Pasmore and Khalsa 1993; Pasquero 1991; Trist 1983). Out of concern for meta-problems, Trist suggested a new level of organizational analysis, namely the inter-organizational domain: ‘an organizational population [...] engages with a set of problems, or societal problem area, which constitutes a domain of common concern for its members’ (Trist 1983, p. 270). Here, ‘referent organizations’ are meant to provide infrastructures that support the development and regulation of such domains, and ultimately allow collective action to tackle ‘meta-problems’.

²Trist acknowledged, nonetheless, the importance of pluralism in organization: ‘Recognition of internal differentiation led the problem of integration being explored in a new way: namely, as negotiation within a pluralistic internal organizational society rather than simply as bureaucratic control of an essentially homogeneous structure’ (Trist 1977, p. 162).

However, multiplicities of powers and logics do appear in more recent works, largely as obstacles to collaboration. These studies shed light on how 'hyper-turbulent' environments may smother the capacities of referent organizations to foster collective action (McCann and Selsky 1984), on the power struggles inherent to referent organizations (Gray and Hay 1986) and on the limited level of consensus that results (Pasquero 1991; Turcotte and Pasquero 2001). Nonetheless, the belief that collective action may be fostered by organizations specifically designed for the task has had an important impact on the literature on collaboration (Gray 1985; Gray and Hay 1986; Gray and Wood 1991). In addition, even when they do not explicitly refer to referent organizations, many authors interested in pluralistic settings still use the notion of 'inter-organizational domain' introduced by this literature as a focus for research (e.g., see Contu and Girei 2014; Lalor and Hickey 2014).

Temporary organization

With two recent reviews (Bakker 2010; Burke and Morley 2016) and a related special issue (Bakker *et al.* 2016), temporary organizations are currently receiving considerable interest from the research community. Researchers of temporary organizations reject the bureaucratic model of organizations by virtue of the increasing importance of professional workers in modern societies (Bakker 2010; Bennis 1965). According to a recent review in this journal (Bakker 2010), Miles (1977) introduced the idea of a 'temporary organizational system' in 1964, although most authors cite Bennis (1965) and Goodman and Goodman (1972, 1976) as the initiators of the concept of the 'temporary organization'. Temporary organizations are described as a new and increasingly prevalent phenomenon. Bennis (1969) even believes the rapid pace of technological change is bringing about a 'temporary society' characterized by the ephemeral nature of most, if not all, social interactions. Goodman and Goodman (1976) describe the emergence of temporary organizations as a result of the multiplication of 'turbulent fields' (Emery and Trist 1965) in 'post-industrial society' (Vickers 1965).

This research stream is influenced by behavioural theory, in particular the work of Cyert and March (1963), and by human resource management (Bakker 2010). Important attributes of temporary organizations are their pre-determined life-spans, or 'institutional termination' (Lundin and Söderholm 1995); their generally well-defined objectives (Bakker *et al.*

2016; Lindkvist 2005); and their participatory leadership (Bennis 1969; Meyerson *et al.* 1996). Temporary organizations emphasize the challenges arising from the ephemeral nature of social relations in such organizations: how to build trust quickly between experts to solve complex, unfamiliar and critical tasks, under strict time and resource constraints (Goodman and Goodman 1976; Lundin and Söderholm 1995)?

Pluralism is conceptualized as a multiplicity of preferences in temporary organizations, characterized by members who are regularly entering and exiting. Trust has been consistently discussed as a way to overcome the challenges of competing preferences (Meyerson *et al.* 1996; Swärd 2016). Researchers originally insisted on the relative dis-embeddedness of temporary organizations (Bennis 1965; Goodman and Goodman 1976) and on their capacities to quickly enable the formation of social bonds and trust between their members through 'swift trust' (Meyerson *et al.* 1996). As opposed to 'normal trust', swift trust can be defined as 'a unique form of relating that is capable of managing issues of vulnerability, uncertainty, risk, and expectations' (Meyerson *et al.* 1996, p. 167). Contrary to normal trust, which is built over time through mutually fruitful collaboration, swift trust is given, a priori, according to the social roles and statuses of participants and is to be confirmed over the course of the collaboration. Recent works insist on 'reciprocal norms' in the construction of trust (Ebers and Maurer 2016; Swärd 2016).

More recent research is considering the importance of social context to the functioning of temporary organizations (Windeler and Sydow 2001). Bechky (2006) argues that temporary organizations are embedded in their institutional contexts and are 'in fact organized around enduring structured role systems'. Others insist on the importance of ties and professional networks outside temporary organizations (Grabher 2004), notably through the idea of 'communities of practice' (Lindkvist 2005).

An important contribution regarding management in pluralist settings has to do with the idea that pulling together actors from different contexts to work under time constraints can actually be an asset for collaboration, in how this structure encourages participants to maintain an open mind on organizational issues and a balance of power (Burke and Morley 2016). As temporally bounded organizing can occur in all forms of organizations (for instance through project teams), this literature also provides information on the possible benefits of combining permanent and

temporally bounded organizational structures in pluralistic settings (Bakker *et al.* 2016).

Pluralistic organization

Although the term ‘pluralistic organization’ has been used occasionally in discussions of pluralism (e.g. Van de Ven 1999), this idea was formally conceptualized in a seminal paper by Denis *et al.* (2001). The scope of that paper is organizational, but it refers briefly to Løwendahl and Revang’s (1998) work on the impact of postmodern societies on strategy theories to explain the growing importance of pluralism for organizations. As is the case for temporary organizations, pluralism is described here as germane to modern organizations:

[S]ituations [of pluralism] are becoming increasingly common as organizations in many industries enter into various forms of collaborative arrangements, as the workforce becomes increasingly diversified, as internal markets, matrixes and networks penetrate organizational structures, and as knowledge workers play an increasingly important economic role. (Denis *et al.* 2001, p. 809)

Knowledge workers and professionals have the power to maintain and advance their distinct agendas within organizations (Sillince *et al.* 2012). In pursuit of their interests and adhering to distinct perceptual frames, these actors can disrupt formal, bureaucratic authority and impose ‘collegial expectations about democratic governance’ (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008, p. 1397). Studies of pluralistic organizations often examine hospitals (Denis *et al.* 2001, 2007, 2011; Lozeau *et al.* 2002) and academic organizations (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008; Sillince *et al.* 2012). Drawing on the garbage-can theory (Cohen *et al.* 1972) and on the idea of ‘professional organizations’ (Mintzberg 1979), these authors believe that most large-scale organizations can, to a degree, be considered pluralistic (Denis *et al.* 2012).

Pluralism is conceptualized primarily at the intersection of a multiplicity of preferences and powers in this literature. Power disparities emerge here primarily in discussions about how leaders navigate competing preferences to achieve organizational goals. Arguably, the main achievement of this stream of research is to specify the conditions under which collective leadership emerges in such organizations (Denis *et al.* 2012). Collective leadership is cyclical, fragile and proceeds ‘by fits and starts’ (Denis *et al.* 2001, p. 810). This has led to a processual view

of change in pluralist organizations where different forms of power alternate (Lawrence *et al.* 2012; Rezanian and Ouedraogo 2014). Another interesting contribution from studies of pluralistic organizations is their discussion of less transparent modes of decision-making: actors, particularly leaders, may exploit others’ inattention, leverage the protections offered by their formal positions (Denis *et al.* 2001) and use a ‘strategic ambiguity’ (Abdallah and Langley 2014; Sillince *et al.* 2012) to pursue their agendas, suggesting a role for power in overcoming competing preferences. Later work underlines how pluralism may lead to ‘organizational pathology’, through ‘escalating indecision’, an ingrained inability to make decisions (Denis *et al.* 2007, 2011), or ‘organizational schizophrenia’ when ambiguity is misused (Abdallah and Langley 2014). Work on pluralistic organizations has had an important impact not only on the study of leadership (Denis *et al.* 2012), but also on strategizing (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2006; Sillince *et al.* 2012).

Meta-organizations

The notion of ‘meta-organizations’ was first coined by Ahrne and Brunsson (2005) and further developed in a book on the topic (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008). It was also the subject of a recent review (Berkowitz and Dumez 2016). As the authors indicate, since *Organizations*, the seminal book by March and Simon (1958), organizational studies have focused mostly on ‘individual-based organizations’, while organizations with organizations as members (i.e. ‘meta-organizations’) have been largely ignored, despite their key role in the regulation of globalization (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005, 2008; Scheytt *et al.* 2006). It is argued that such ‘organizations constitute the most important factor of all behind globalization, both historically and in today’s society’ (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008, p. 150). As a means of ‘collective global action’ (Berkowitz and Dumez 2016), meta-organizations are regarded as capable of reducing environmental complexity (Solansky *et al.* 2014; Toubiana *et al.* 2016) in creating ‘decided order’ (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005, 2008; Ahrne *et al.* 2016). Most studies of meta-organizations focus on organizations with strong mandates to organize their fields, such as organizations developing regulations (Boström 2006; Murdoch 2015; Scheytt *et al.* 2006) or industry associations (König *et al.* 2012; Reveley and Ville 2010).

Meta-organizations are conceptualized primarily as a multiplicity of preferences: it is argued that

having organizations, rather than individuals, as members aggravates experienced tensions. This is because constituent organizations have their own formal missions, organizational identity and internal tensions as a result of multiple preferences. Constituent organizations are also likely to be more diverse and heterogeneous than individuals. Meta-organizations often have field mandates and seek monopolies on their chosen topic areas (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005, 2008), which they may obtain if they attract sufficiently large numbers of members (Reveley and Ville 2010). This requires them to be inclusive in their memberships. However, given the independence of members, achieving consensus – the ideal on which decision-making processes are often based (König *et al.* 2012) – becomes ever more difficult (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Gawer 2014). Consequently, scholars note the importance of ambiguity in the missions and objectives of meta-organizations as well as in their outputs, which often take the form of voluntary standards or recommendations instead of directives (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008).

Arguably the most important contribution of this literature pertains to membership management, which is where issues related to multiplicities of power enter into the discussion (Ahrne *et al.* 2016). Gulati *et al.* (2012)³ propose a model of membership management based on the combination of two elements: first, the ‘permeability of boundaries’, i.e. openness of membership; and second, ‘stratification’, defined as the degree of hierarchical differentiation of roles whereby actors are accorded differing levels of authority (Gawer 2014; Gulati *et al.* 2012). Research shows that membership needs to be diverse and include both powerful actors with ‘market authority’ and less powerful actors with ‘moral authority,’ equally vested with similar levels of formal power, for the organization to gain credibility and legitimacy (Boström 2006). Membership also needs to be dynamic, with status and responsibility quickly passing between members (König *et al.* 2012). There is consensus that status and recognition represent ‘currency’ for members to gain authority within meta-organizations (Scheytt *et al.* 2006) and that they also serve as benefits of membership in helping to raise the professional status of members outside the

³Although, curiously, Gulati *et al.* (2012) do not explicitly refer to Ahrne and Brunsson (2005), we agree with most authors who implicitly or explicitly (i.e. Berkowitz and Dumez 2016; Toubiana *et al.* 2016) consider the work of Gulati *et al.* (2012) to be part of the discussion on meta-organizations.

organization (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005, 2008). This literature draws a form of ‘club pluralism’, where a plurality of members all share similar benefits and statuses associated with the meta-organization.

Institutional studies (IS)

The second research tradition under review is institutional studies. The literatures included in this section have been influenced by the seminal works of Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Meyer and Rowan (1977). In contrast to the organization studies literatures discussed above, institutional studies take a less instrumental view of organizations; they reject models of individuals or organizations as highly rational or those in which organizational survival is predicated on efficiency or effectiveness. Instead, they conceptualize organizations as institutionalized forms, reproduced as a function of their legitimacy. Moreover, whereas interest in pluralism in organization studies emerged as part of a scholarly project to help resolve meta-problems, it emerged in institutional theory as a solution to a theoretical impasse created by earlier institutional accounts.

In their zeal to challenge rational actor models, institutional theorists did not immediately discuss pluralism. Scholars interested in institutional change, an area of research that would later embrace notions of pluralism, began by developing diffusion models based on legitimacy (e.g. Hirsch 1986; Tolbert and Zucker 1983) that were nearly devoid of agency. The 1991 volume entitled *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Powell and DiMaggio 1991) contained important papers (DiMaggio 1991; Friedland and Alford 1991) that suggested the existence of pluralism at the societal level by arguing that societies are composed of central institutions, each with their own logics. Thornton and Ocasio (1999, p. 803) would later define institutional logics as ‘supraorganizational patterns, both symbolic and material, that order reality and provide meaning to actions and structure conflict’. They introduced notions of incommensurability, paradox and contention, which researchers appropriated to discuss agency and change (e.g. Dacin *et al.* 2002; Ruef and Scott 1998; Seo and Creed 2002; Thornton 1999, 2001, 2002; Van Gestel and Hillebrand 2011).

However, it should be noted, that these early theories still did not discuss pluralism at the organizational level. Organizations were conceptualized as embodiments of whatever single logic dominated

their environments at the given time (e.g. Thornton 2001; Thornton and Ocasio 1999). This suggested that, if organizational pluralism did exist, it did so only as a transitory state, while organizations shifted to reflect a new dominant field-level logic. Nonetheless, these theories offered a solution to the oft-discussed ‘paradox of embedded agency’ created by earlier diffusion models: they suggested that while actors may be conditioned by their institutions, the conditioning need not be complete because competing models for organizing do exist.

Bridging organizations

The term ‘bridging organization’ was first mentioned in a 1989 conference paper (Brown 1989), which was published two years later (Brown 1991).⁴ Initially, the idea of bridging organizations was meant to have a specific focus on the local implementation of global policies (Brown 1991; Sharma *et al.* 1994; Westley and Vredenburg 1991) in the wake of the 1987 Brundtland report, which popularized the term ‘sustainable development’. The essence of bridging organizations is to gather actors into what are often referred to as ‘island organizations’ in order to build new institutions (Sharma *et al.* 1994; Westley and Vredenburg 1991, 1997). Brown’s (1991, p. 810) central belief is that ‘that sustainable development is at the base an institutional problem’, that is, a problem which requires new ‘structures, customs, values, that enable all the people of a society to improve their quality of life in ways that are sustainable and just’.

Pluralism is conceptualized as multiplicities of powers and logics, resulting from cultural diversity in local contexts. Boundary organizations, often NGOs, are designed to move field actors from conflict to collaboration (Arenas *et al.* 2013; Brown 1993) despite ‘traditional positions of opposition’, ‘resource and authority restraints’, ‘ideological or cultural constraints’ or ‘legal barriers’ (Westley and Vredenburg 1991, p. 84). Another related challenge has to do with actors’ ‘back-home’ commitments (Sharma *et al.* 1994; Westley and Vredenburg 1991): bridging organizations must also facilitate the efforts of their members

to persuade their home organizations upon their return.

One of the major contributions of research on bridging organizations is to link intra-organizational tensions to pluralism in the external environment and hence to offer an outside-in view on organizational pluralism. It provides insights into how the field, at least partially, shapes bridging organizations in terms of goals and structures: the bridging organization’s orientation towards social change makes it a likely target for attack or cooptation by central players endowed with resources and power, such that the closer to the centre of the organizational field the bridging organization, the more likely it is to promote stability and maintain hierarchical relationships (Lawrence and Hardy 1999). Research also reveals that bridging organizations often operate within ‘corridors of indifference’ (Westley and Vredenburg 1991, p. 86), which provide the organizations room to manoeuvre without provoking responses from powerful actors. Such organizations should present themselves as neutral third parties (Lawrence and Hardy 1999). They do so by providing all participants with benefits, a say in decisions (Adobor and McMullen 2014), and through a morally credible leadership that cultivates personal relationships (Brown 1993; McMullen and Adobor 2011). On top of its contribution to OMT, this research also impacted mainstream approaches to international development during the 1990s because it challenged the binary view of development as occurring either through government planning or through ‘laissez-faire’ policies (Brown 1991; Sharma *et al.* 1994; Westley and Vredenburg 1991). Bridging organizations currently resonate with authors working on sustainability-related issues in both management journals (Stafford *et al.* 2000) and leading environmental journals (e.g. see Biggs *et al.* 2010; Trimble and Berkes 2013).

Hybrid organizations

The next set of papers relates to the concept of hybrid organizations. Research on hybrid organizations first appeared in the early 2000s, when calls for a more finely grained analysis led to a conceptualization of individuals – rather than organizations alone – as ‘carriers’ of logics (Dacin *et al.* 2002; Stryker 2000). Initially drawing from the organizational identity literature (Albert and Whetten 1985), hybrid organizations were referred to as having ‘Janus-faced’ (Golden-Biddle and Rao 1997) or hybrid organizational identities (Glynn 2000). Hybrid organizations

⁴Early papers in our selection (Brown 1991; Westley and Vredenburg 1991, 1997) explicitly acknowledge the commonalities between this concept and that of the ‘referent organization’ (Trist 1983), although they regard the latter as overly centralized and structured (Westley and Vredenburg 1997).

represent a particular type of pluralistic organization: they embody incompatible, possibly even oppositional, institutional logics, which apply to core features of the organizations' missions and objectives, setting the stage for intense internal conflict (Besharov and Smith 2014). The major part of this literature focuses on social enterprises, which are organizations with both social and commercial missions (for reviews, see Battilana and Lee 2014; Doherty *et al.* 2014), but hybrid organizations may theoretically embody any two logics (e.g. Bruton *et al.* 2015; Zilber 2002).

Pluralism in this literature has largely been conceptualized at the intersection of a multiplicity of preferences and logics. Organizations embedded in two institutional logics may experience internal conflict and 'mission drift', as their missions change to manifest the other of their internalized logics (Battilana and Dorado 2010) or as the missions oscillate between them (Jay 2013). Research reveals two approaches to structuring hybrid organizations to mitigate the risk of internal conflict and mission drift: the integrated and differentiated approaches. The integrated approach relies on the creation of strong and entirely unique organizational identities: a 'tabula rasa' approach may be used whereby individuals with relatively little domain-relevant experience – and hence embedded in a few other professional logics – are hired, trained and socialized into the unique ways of their organization (Battilana and Dorado 2010). They may be managed using unique, organization-specific performance metrics (Mair *et al.* 2015) and incentive systems (Battilana and Lee 2014; Ebrahim *et al.* 2014). In contrast, the differentiated approach finds organizations hiring employees deeply embedded in the two prevailing logics but maintaining the employees in separate departments (Battilana *et al.* 2015). Each department may serve a different pool of clients (Santos *et al.* 2015) and be evaluated using performance metrics consistent with its associated logic (Battilana and Lee 2014; Ebrahim *et al.* 2014; Pache and Santos 2013).

The least discussed form of pluralism in this literature is that of multiplicities of power, despite the centrality of conflict to many studies on hybrid organizations. Scholars have generally focused on consensus-building rather than the uses and consequences of power during conflict, but some exceptions exist. Ashcraft (2001), explains that leaders may manage or even suppress episodes of conflict using strategies of 'organized dissonance', which include humour, coercion and a host of other tactics

that discourage organizational members from voicing dissent. Moreover, upper management may have less influence than generally expected if we regard each logic as associated with a separate coalition and power centre within the organization (Mangen and Brivot 2015). Accordingly, organizational structures of hybrid organizations may not be entirely products of top-down design, but the result of the bottom-up accumulation of truces between coalitions (Bishop and Waring 2016).

Field-configuring events

The concept of 'field-configuring events' was first coined by Meyer *et al.* (2005) and further developed in a 2008 special issue on the topic in the *Journal of Management Studies*. Originally, Meyer *et al.* (2005, p. 467) defined field-configuring events as 'settings where people from diverse social organizations assemble temporarily, with the conscious, collective intent to construct an organizational field', but later research expanded the notion to reflect institutionalists' interest in field reproduction and change as well. Field-configuring events are temporary, often recurring, organizations that afford a plurality of actors opportunities to interact. They are often organized by field-level organizations, such as standards bodies and industry or professional associations, or even as informal groupings of interested stakeholders (Rao 1994).⁵ They may be as short-lived as awards ceremonies (Anand and Jones 2008; Anand and Watson 2004), conferences and trade shows (Garud 2008; Oliver and Montgomery 2008; Zilber 2011), or as long-lived as the planning process of an Olympic games (Glynn 2008; Thiel and Grabher 2015). Field-configuring events are attended by a plurality of actors and are 'arenas in which networks are constructed, business cards are exchanged, reputations are advanced, deals are struck, news is shared, accomplishments are recognized, standards are set, and dominant designs are selected' (Lampel and Meyer 2008, p. 1026).

Research on field-configuring events has been particularly fruitful in revealing how stable fields may emerge despite a multiplicity of logics. Field-configuring events can favour the creation or reproduction of dominant institutional logics by affecting three important attributes of a field: relational systems; cognitive maps; and the rules by which the

⁵Although Rao (1994) does not use the term 'field-configuring event', his paper is frequently cited in later research on the topic.

field is to operate. First, relational systems refer to both network ties and the distribution of status within a field. Field-configuring events may confer status through, for example, award ceremonies (Anand and Jones 2008; Anand and Watson 2004) and enable the creation of new ties because they bring actors into proximity who may not otherwise meet (Garud 2008; Hardy and Maguire 2010). Second, field-configuring events may affect fields by helping to construct shared cognitive maps. By bringing field members into close proximity, these events foster sense-making because key issues may be collectively identified and meaning constructed (Garud 2008; Hardy and Maguire 2010; McInerney 2008; Oliver and Montgomery 2008). Third, field-configuring events can be granted strong mandates to create the rules by which the field is to operate (Lampel and Meyer 2008).

It has been argued that an openness to a diversity of logics contributes to the novelty and change generated by field-configuring events (Schussler *et al.* 2013, 2015). While the confluence of diverse logics may lead to conflict, bringing conflicts to the surface, rather than suppressing them, may help foster change and strengthen the mandate of field-configuring events within their fields (Leca *et al.* 2015). However, even events purporting similar goals may differ in the amount of voice they give participants: Citroni (2015) explains that events can range from ‘workshop’ style formats to pre-packaged experiences. While the latter can generate media attention, the former may lead to more profound reconfigurations of networks and shared understandings (Citroni 2015). Moreover, open membership does not guarantee change, because, as actors and interests multiply, participants have fewer opportunities to interact and build trust (Schussler *et al.* 2013). As a consequence, Schussler *et al.* (2013) argue that membership should be capped, even for events as large and complex as climate summits.

In contrast, power disparities can prevent change and lead to field reproduction. Research suggests that the legitimacy of field-configuring events is increased when membership is extended to all acknowledged members of the field, but change may be thwarted if elite actors succeed in reproducing the power structures of the field within the events (Hardy and Maguire 2010). Doing so may allow them to promote and reproduce collective identities that serve their particular interests (Zilber 2011). Moreover, peripheral actors may be relegated to secondary spaces (Hardy and Maguire 2010), but even there, elites may set the agenda for discussions (Zilber 2011).

Discussion

In a statement about how to advance research on pluralism, Hardy (1991) argued that our preoccupation with bureaucratic organizations has led to the prevalence of a ‘unitary model of organization’ in which pluralism is considered abnormal and problematic. This has hindered recognition and understanding of pluralism in organizations. She urged for greater research to unearth the many ways in which pluralism is manifested and managed within organizations. To synthesize the relevant literatures on organizational forms, we began by developing three dimensions of pluralism: the multiplicities of powers, preferences and logics. In this section, we draw out the implications of these multiplicities for our understanding of how pluralism is manifested and managed within organizations. To organize our discussion, we distinguish between factors that heighten tensions caused by each type of multiplicity and the means employed to resolve them that we identified in our review.

Multiplicities of power

Multiple powers in an organization combined with the absence of a central authority is one way to describe organizational pluralism. The studies reviewed here expand our understanding of the challenges that arise when ‘reconciliation by fiat is not an option’ (Denis *et al.* 2001). First, they reveal the fluidity of organizational membership. Studies on ‘temporary organizations’ and ‘meta-organizations’ reveal the permeability of organizational boundaries whereby members enter and exit more easily than in traditional bureaucracies. Organizations in pluralist settings often need to attract a large number and great variety of members to gain legitimacy and influence over their chosen domains (Reveley and Ville 2010). Yet the fluidity of organizational membership creates tensions: the equilibrium of power is constantly shifting as interested actors come and go, and coalitions form and re-form.

Tensions also arise because organizations in our review are often defined as ‘arenas’ situated at the nexus of multiple institutional orders. Organizational members generally act to further ‘back-home commitments’ (Sharma *et al.* 1994; Westley and Vredenburg 1991) because their main affiliations lie with other organizations, and they must convince and gain the support of their peers upon their return. Members thus often have an ‘agenda’ that is not necessarily aligned with that of the organization. This situation

activates antagonisms entrenched in the field, particularly when organizations pose a threat to institutional elites and give marginal actors heightened expectations. It is interesting to note that, despite the diversity of organizations studied, a lack of adequate resources was often mentioned. Struggles over limited resources exacerbate pre-existing antagonisms and ideological or cultural differences (Westley and Vredenburg 1991, p. 84). A lack of resources also raises the issue of control and incentives. Yet, our review also suggests how some of these tensions may be mitigated.

First, scholars generally show a strong faith in the capacity and willingness of organizational members to overcome their differences and work together for the greater good, generally according to democratic ideals and consensus-based approaches to decision-making. They believe that members will achieve more collectively than individually because ‘professional’ or ‘expert’ members bring different but complementary sets of skills to an organization (Bennis 1965; Denis *et al.* 2012). Therefore, pluralist organizations seek to appear as neutral forums (Lawrence and Hardy 1999) or ‘third-parties’ (Westley and Vredenburg 1991) where members ideally set aside their differences and work with others, despite potentially large differences in power. Leaders must also set the stage for such consensus-building by creating spaces for interaction at all levels of the organizational hierarchy (Battilana *et al.* 2015) or inspiring trust (McMullen and Adobor 2011).

But other research suggests that democratic or consensus-based approaches may lead to general agreements of little import (Turcotte and Pasquero 2001) and render organizations structurally ineffective through ‘escalating indecision’ (Denis *et al.* 2011; Schussler *et al.* 2013), so that, ultimately, leaders must make the final decisions as conflicts move up the structural hierarchy (Battilana *et al.* 2015; Santos *et al.* 2015). Inclusive and democratic philosophies may also simply mask hidden applications of power. For example, even among organizations that aim for inclusiveness, such inclusiveness may be largely ritual, and decision-making authority may still rest with elites (Zilber 2011). Similarly, even among organizations that genuinely support consensus-based approaches to decision-making, organizational leaders may have to resort to exercising power in covert – rather than transparent – ways, in order to advance their agendas in pluralist settings (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Ashcraft 2001; Denis *et al.* 2001; Sillince *et al.* 2012; Westley and Vredenburg 1997).

Second, interesting insights emerge regarding incentivization. Pluralistic organizations may develop novel performance metrics and incentive systems (Battilana and Lee 2014; Ebrahim *et al.* 2014) to balance the influence of competing coalitions. Pluralistic organizations also often offer members the unique opportunity to acquire field-level recognition. Scheytt *et al.* (2006) go as far as to present mutual recognition as the ‘currency’ for authority in ‘meta-organizations’. Research indicates that social recognition can be channelled through boundary management – i.e. defining who is inside and outside the organization – and status management (Gulati *et al.* 2012). In fields still at a formative stage, participants in field-configuring events can define the fields’ prevailing logics (McInerney 2008) and boundaries (Oliver and Montgomery 2008), which then do directly affect the distribution of resources and power among field members.

Multiplicities of preferences

Pluralism may also be defined as a multiplicity of preferences. The existence of multiple preferences implies that organizations are many things to many people, such that they may even be described as ‘Janus-faced’ (Golden-Biddle and Rao 1997). As a result, defining missions and formal structures in pluralist organizations is a source of tension and is more problematic than in traditional bureaucracies. A first cause of internal tensions has to do with the very purpose of these organizations in the first place. Authors in this review agree that normative missions with social implications will attract actors with different preferences. This is especially the case when missions target ‘meta-problems’ (Emery and Trist 1965), such as poverty alleviation (Battilana and Dorado 2010; Brown 1991; Sharma *et al.* 1994), biodiversity (Westley and Vredenburg 1991, 1997) or changes to health care (Denis *et al.* 2001) and education (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008; Sillince *et al.* 2012). Organizations may also be different things at different times, such that the coexistence of multiple preferences can impact the continuity of organizations’ missions and cause ‘mission drift’ (Battilana *et al.* 2015; Santos *et al.* 2015). The missions of pluralist organizations may reveal a certain degree of discontinuity (Trist 1983, p. 275) as they oscillate between or recombine the logics that constitute the organizations (Jay 2013).

The literature cites a number of ways that these tensions may be managed. Scholars argue that multiple

preferences may be managed by finding or defining a basis for consensus among members. Scholars of referent organizations, pluralistic organizations and bridging organizations propose the development of broad, encompassing ‘grand causes’ that call on higher-order bases of legitimacy or shared values (Brown 1991) to reconcile different preferences. Organizational missions defined in such terms include literally saving the world (Trist 1983, p. 167), avoiding the ‘collapse of society’ (McCann and Selsky 1984), promoting sustainable development (Sharma *et al.* 1994) or harnessing globalization (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008). Similarly, given their interest in the construction of identity, institutional scholars argue that organizations should construct unique organizational identities that help forge strong bonds between organizations and their members and among members themselves (Battilana and Dorado 2010; Haigh *et al.* 2015; Jay 2013; Mair *et al.* 2015; Zilber 2011).

Meanwhile, other scholars insist less on the grandeur of organizational missions than on their ambiguity. Research finds that the alignment of multiple preferences is always fragile and temporary (Denis *et al.* 2001), formal agreements remain superficial (Turcotte and Pasquero 2001) and decoupling occurs between global agreements and local implementation (Bromley and Powell 2012). Consequently, scholars argue for the importance of ‘strategic ambiguity’ (Sillince *et al.* 2012), which suggests a role for rhetoric to bridge divergent preferences. In ‘meta-organizations’, such ambiguity can also be used to provide different constituencies with the impression that their objectives are central to the organization. The members may themselves be complicit in creating such ambiguity: when members identify strongly with their organizations, they may engage in ‘organizational dissonance’ to avoid ‘rocking the boat’ when faced with contradictions (Ashcraft 2001). As shown by literature on temporary organizations, alignment can also paradoxically happen when it is agreed in advance that an organization is to have a limited lifespan.

Multiplicities of logics

Our review also touches on the institutional logics that legitimate power and inform preferences. The papers reviewed generally regard tensions within organizations as products of larger collective institutional change projects, and according to a centre/periphery dichotomy: studies often draw lines between central actors, who strive for institutional maintenance, and

peripheral actors, who strive for institutional change. For example, authors discuss the relationship between grassroots activists and policy-makers (Brown 1991; Sharma *et al.* 1994), between global and local actors in research on ‘meta-organizations’, and between the propensity of actors to employ hierarchical or egalitarian modes of organizing, according to their positions at the centre or periphery of their field, respectively (Lawrence and Hardy 1999). At a more cognitive level, tension emerges from multiple logics because actors may not share the same representations and value systems, which hinders cooperation and collaboration.

The literature suggests a number of ways in which the tensions that arise from a multiplicity of logics may be managed. First, some scholars suggest that organizations may themselves become vehicles to attenuate environmental complexity and bring about contexts conducive to rational choice. For example, research on ‘referent organizations’ and ‘meta-organizations’ reveals a faith in the ability of organizations to ‘scale up’ collective action and incorporate all relevant parties interested in an issue, helping to create order out of disorder. Literature on meta-organizations even proposes to keep pace with increasingly complex, interconnected and ‘hyper-turbulent’ environments (McCann and Selsky 1984) through the creation of ‘meta-meta organizations’ (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008).

Second, the literature reveals the importance of trust in creating bridges across the chasms that separate individuals adhering to different logics. In contexts such as temporary organizations where time is limited, the professional roles assumed by each actor and their reputations can enable colleagues to develop ‘swift trust’, which serves as the starting point for deeper collaboration. Similarly, during field-configuring events, which are also characterized by time constraints, trust can develop over the course of multiple events through repeated interactions and during events specifically designed to allow actors to engage deeply with one another (Schussler *et al.* 2013). In hybrid organizations, ‘spaces of negotiation’, such as regularly scheduled meetings and job shadowing perform the same trust-building function at all levels of the organization (Battilana *et al.* 2015). These studies reveal the importance of maintaining a continuity of membership and providing opportunities for interaction to facilitate the development of trust.

Third, at the organizational level, our review emphasizes the importance of building new and

distinctive organizational identities. Literature on 'hybrid organizations' reveals that organizational members, who are conceptualized as carriers of institutional logics, may set aside their differences if they identify with their organizations. Rather than attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, resonant organizational identities allow organizational members to rise above the fray of competing logics within the organization (Battilana and Dorado 2010; Jay 2013), as well as between organizations to balance competing expectations imposed by external stakeholders (Kraatz and Block 2008). Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) make a similar point in their discussion when they speak of 'meta-organizations' providing a 'second name' to their constituents: they argue that organizations can have a strong hold on the identities of their constituents when they regard their participation in the organization with pride.

Conclusion

Our review synthesized research on a variety of organizational forms with the purpose of shedding light on how pluralism is manifested and managed within organizations. We structured our review around three multiplicities of pluralism. Our reading of the papers revealed that the research evolved from an early focus on multiplicities of preferences to include multiplicities of powers and then logics. Institutional scholars were particularly influential in the focus on logics, because they situated the other types of multiplicities in the broader context and conceptualized organizational members as institutional carriers, rather than as rational actors.

We found a similar evolution in the beliefs about the capacity of organizations to act rationally. Research on 'referent organizations' and 'bridging organizations' in the 1980s and 1990s tended to regard organizations as instruments for collective action, because they foster collaboration and enable rational decision-making. Early works were highly normative and expressed a scholarly project to encourage the large-scale collective action deemed necessary to resolve major social and environmental problems. However, later work – with the noticeable exception of 'meta-organizations' – tempered this faith in organizations as instruments of change. By questioning organizations' capacity to achieve grand results, later work provides a more nuanced understanding of pluralism within organizations.

Research agenda

In closing, we propose four main avenues for future research on pluralism. The first avenue is related to the forms of power available to and exercised by organizational leaders to manage pluralism. Our review casts light on the importance of hidden forms of power. Terms such as inattention (Denis *et al.* 2001), ambiguity (Sillince *et al.* 2012) and indifference (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Westley and Vredenburg 1991) suggest that not all issues need activate or amplify the distinctions that underlie pluralism. We argue that, while any issue can emerge as controversial, many issues that have the potential to do so do not. Why not? Studies suggest that leaders can suppress brewing protest or release tensions in benign ways (Ashcraft 2001; Bechky 2006) or may use rhetoric to transform meanings (Sillince *et al.* 2012). As a result, perhaps we can flip pluralism on its head: rather than regard instances of conflict as inevitable and the norm in pluralistic settings, we may look at them as the exceptions that overwhelmed efforts at containment. Leaders may be actively preventing conflicts that we never see and study. Much more work is needed to understand how leaders do so, and insights on hidden forms of power open a very exciting avenue.

The second avenue for research regards how leaders can manipulate incentives to achieve organizational goals. This suggestion is connected to research at the intersection of the three multiplicities. Our review emphasizes the importance of intangible rewards, mostly in the form of increased status or recognition. Research has yet to explore how such rewards can be managed and attributed to achieve organizational objectives. We believe the idea of 'social capital' can be helpful to conceptualize this social currency, particularly when combined with network theory (e.g. Ingram and Torfason 2010; Starkey *et al.* 2000). Oliver and Montgomery (2008) employed network analytic techniques to visualize the sense-making process and revealed that sense-making cohered around powerful actors. Conceivably, managers may influence the process by altering the balance of power between actors. For example, they may strategically advocate egalitarian principles to empower or disempower selected members. What are the mechanisms and practices for creating, managing and distributing 'social currency' in pluralist organizations?

The third avenue for research arises from the previous two and is the role of ethics in pluralist organizations, a topic seldom discussed in the literature on pluralism. If informal practices are the rule of the

day in pluralistic organizations, leaders must regularly make trade-offs and employ tactics unnecessary in more formalized settings. The issue of ethics becomes particularly important in relation to pluralist organizations because the practices we point to in the previous paragraphs suggest subversion and manipulation. Exploiting inattention and ambiguity, particularly when these are fostered by the leaders themselves, robs organizational members of opportunities to express their preferences. Yet, the organizations studied commonly strive to bring about a degree of environmental change for the greater good, but under what circumstances and to what degree is manipulation acceptable? While one may attempt to justify manipulation by the desired ends, when do the means begin to outweigh them?

The fourth avenue for research stems from our framework of multiplicities. In this review, we discussed organizational pluralism in terms of three multiplicities: a multiplicity of powers; a multiplicity of preferences; and a multiplicity of logics. This framework was instrumental in finding points of intersection between otherwise unrelated ideas of organizations. We encourage future research to move beyond a monolithic conceptualization of pluralism to gain a richer understanding of the phenomenon and further develop this framework. Multiplicities can be explored individually as well as in combination. The literatures that we reviewed already provide direction on this point: Figure 2 illustrates where the literatures are situated in our framework. For instance, the pluralistic organizations literature informs our understanding at the intersection of multiple powers and preferences. Moreover, the multiplicities are best thought of as matters of degree, where the strength of each in shaping the different type of organizational pluralism varies from one context to another. Much more research is required.

Pluralism challenges our understandings of organizations, and it is only likely to increase with time. We urge for greater specificity when discussing the types, sources, consequences and means of resolving pluralism. We hope that, by laying a groundwork, our review will contribute to an understanding of pluralism as not a threat to be expelled from or isolated within parts of organizations, but rather as a mundane – and manageable – attribute of organizational life.

Our review joins recent studies that revisit the very concept of the organization. Despite the shortfalls of the traditional bureaucracy, organizations remain critical tools for collective action (King *et al.* 2010).

Recent studies are blurring the boundary between organizations and non-organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011; Ahrne *et al.* 2016), to the point that organizations may be conceptualized as fluid characteristics of social collectives defined by their ‘organizational-ity’ (Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015). These studies provide compelling new insights into the very nature of organizations, with the potential of furthering understanding of organizational pluralism.

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