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The Standardization of
organizational forms as a
cropping-up process

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Abstract: In this article a model is developed for explaining homogeneity and heterogeneity of forms among organizations. The model is particularly apt for explaining the following type of situation: when homogeneity arises simultaneously among organizations without contact with one another or lacking a common transmitter; when knowledge of possible organizational forms is not a scarce resource; when new forms are invented locally rather than resulting from the imitation of others; and when no fundamental common quality seems to characterize the organizations that adopt similar forms. The model is based on empirical studies of organizational reforms.

Introduction

Large modern organizations tend to have fairly elaborate forms, i.e. formal structures, procedures and ideologies which are presented externally and internally as characteristics of the organization in question. Typically forms are not unique for one organization but are shared by many. There are often complex patterns of homogeneity and heterogeneity of forms among organizations. Organizations that are different in many respects may still have very similar forms, and otherwise similar organizations may have different forms. There is often little homogeneity over time: many organizations tend to change forms at a high rate. Homogeneity and heterogeneity of organizational forms may be explained in several ways.

Organizations may differ in forms because they are undertaking different kinds of operations or because they are working in different environments. But there can also be striking similarities in forms among organizations with very different kinds of operations or working in seemingly different environments. Similar forms have been observed in organizations involved in quite different kinds of production (Woodward, 1965). Organizations in different fields may adopt similar forms: for instance, private organizations have adopted many of the forms of public organizations such as budgeting and strategic planning, while public organizations have borrowed from the private sector. And fashions in organizational form spread rapidly among large companies located in different countries (Mintzberg, 1979; Abrahamsson, 1993).

These similarities may arise because organizations in fact encounter similar environments and problems, and have found similar ways of handling them (Thompson, 1967). For instance, if employees generally form stronger beliefs and claims as to their own individuality (Thomas et al, 1987), this may lead many organizations to invent similar, more decentralized forms. Or if a growing number of people begin to see themselves as customers rather than citizens in relation to public organizations, then these organizations may start to adopt forms similar to those in private companies.

This kind of explanation builds on the assumption that forms are important to the organization's operations and its ability to solve practical problems. But the relation between organizational form and organizational activities is often weak (Weick, 1969; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The "de-coupling" of form and operations opens the way for other ways of explaning forms. A key argument in institutional theories of organization is that organizational forms are determined to a large extent by widespread norms and ideas about which organizational forms are natural, correct or desirable (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Powell and diMaggio, 1991).

Common norms and ideas constitute a major impetus to standardization; they create similarities in a great many different organizations, even in those in quite different types of production but which operate within the same culture or in the same field (diMaggio and Powell, 1983).

But the presence of common conceptions is not enough to explain homogeneity in organizational forms. There is no guarantee that all organizations adhering to common conceptions will have similar forms. There is often a combination of homogeneity and heterogeneity within a single culture or an organizational field: even if many organizations introduce a fashionable form, others do not. So the argument that organizations follow common norms about what is a good organization, cannot fully explain organizational forms. We need to explain the homogeneity as well as the heterogeneity that can occur among organizations that are subject to similar conceptions. One way of discovering such explanations is to look into the standardization processes whereby general conceptions are transformed into local organizational forms.

In this article I will argue that standardization processes are likely to be different under different kinds of ideas and norms. I will particularly pay attention to what I will call informal norms. Such norms are sometimes assumed to give rise to homogeneity via a process of diffusion. I will argue that under some circumstances a model of diffusion is not very useful for explaining homogeneity. As an alternative I will present a "cropping-up model" of standardization.

In the next subsection I will examine various kinds of ideas and norms; I will look at a diffusion model and consider its limitations. In the third subsection I will present the basic concepts underlying a "cropping-up model", namely forms, reforms and organizational discourse. In the fourth subsection I describe how organizational forms are determined by the interaction between general discourse and local reform cycles. Finally I will discuss the way local reforms may affect the norms expressed in the general

discourse.

Standardization processes

Various conceptions about appropriate organizational forms are likely to affect organizations in different ways. Some of the conceptions have a constitutive character, i.e. they are necessary ingredients if something is to be considered as an organization at all or as a particular type of organization. For instance, it is hard to make people believe that an entity is a real organization if there is no accounting system and no responsible person at the top; likewise a "real" company must have owners, or an association must have members.

Constitutive conceptions are contingent on the construction of organizations. They are relevant only when people consider something to be an organization or a special type of organization, but in such considerations these conceptions are a necessary ingredient. Constitutive features are similar in all organizations, or at least in all organizations of a specific kind, but it still needs to be explained why certain activities or entities come to be considered as organizations, or as organizations of a different type than they were before. The argument thus far makes it easy to explain why a school that comes to be regarded as an organization will acquire a local leadership and a local accounting system, but it does not explain why it came to be regarded as an organization to start with. Such processes seem to be little studied.

Other conceptions regarding appropriate organizational form are expressed in formal rules combined with sanctions. These may be part of the legal system or of professional codes. For instance, organizations of different types in different countries must have specific forms of accounting.

Formal rules create homogeneity through various mechanisms of coercion (diMaggio and Powell, 1983), such as imposition, authorization

or inducement (Scott, 1991). Heterogeneity results from variation stipulated in the rules themselves, or from non-compliance on the part of certain organizations.

But there are also norms of a less formal kind regarding appropriate organizational forms, which have no links, or much weaker ones, with the state or professional codes and are combined with weaker or more ambiguous sanctions. Examples are the ideas for particular organizational forms that appear as fashions in the organizational world - such as the matrix organization, total quality management or service-orientation. Other examples are ideas initiated or reinforced by business schools, such as budgeting or human resource management techniques.

Informal norms are neither a necessary part of constituting the organization; nor can they be forced upon it. There is no guarantee that they will always be known to local actors who are able to influence organizational form, or that these actors will accept them. And yet they affect many organizations and help to create similarities between them. The exact result of this influence depends on the processes involved. It is processes by which informal norms produce homogeneity and heterogeneity that will be discussed in this article.

A possible candidate for use in analysing these processes is a standard one in social research, namely a diffusion model. Information about new ideas, things or practices is disseminated to ever more distant places, and this diffusion produces increasing homogeneity among such social entities as have the attributes to render them susceptible.

A diffusion model

Diffusion is a standard concept in the social sciences for explaining homogeneity (Strang and Meyer, 1993). The term diffusion is often used to describe the end result of a process - the existence of similar forms and

practices at different places at a certain point in time. But the term is sometimes also understood as a description of a process whereby these similarities arise. Something diffuses from a centre to a periphery. The process is somewhat similar to the process of contagion or infection (March, 1981): organizations or other entities in close contact with the centre of contagion or with other infected entities are likely to become infected themselves, that is they are likely to adopt whatever it is that is being diffused. Unlike an infection however, the "subject" of the diffusion cannot spread by itself - it must be actively adopted by some actor (Malinowski, 1927; Latour, 1986). Knowledge is often assumed to be a crucial scarce resource: before one has come into contact with others, one does not know of the new entity being diffused, and cannot therefore adopt it. The diffusion process is thus a process in which actors learn from others.

Diffusion processes may well explain how some informal norms about organizational form are adopted by organizations, thus producing homogeneity in their forms. For example, representatives of different organizations may meet one another and learn about each other's forms, after which they may try to introduce them into their own organizations. Professionals employed in organizations attend professional meetings and can be "infected" in this way. Management and leadership are increasingly coming to be regarded as professional skills, which can mean that managers - those who formally make decisions about organizational forms - meet each other in a similar way.

The individual organization may also be infected indirectly by a carrier or transmitter, the equivalent of the rat or mosquito in the transmission of disease. Management consultants, for instance, may spread the same form to one organization after another as they move among them offering their services. Many organizations can be infected at the same time by listening to the same experts at conferences.

The basic micro-process whereby organizations adopt the form

that is being diffused is sometimes referred to in terms of imitation, i.e. people in one organization try to imitate what is being said about the forms in other organizations, either by representatives of these organizations or by other people (Westney, 1987). The imitation may be far from perfect - it could perhaps be described as a translation of the general idea adapted to local circumstances (Malinowski, 1927; Latour, 1986) or as a local edition of the general idea (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996).

Over time the process of diffusion produces increasing homogeneity. But the model also explains heterogeneity among organizations. Like the similarities, differences among organizations are dependent on time, distance and susceptibility. During the process there are differences between the organizations: some, which have not (yet) been infected, differ from those which have; organizations with a limited contact network are less likely to be infected early or even at all. Some differences may persist because certain organizations are immune - perhaps they have internal characteristics which make them less apt to adopt a specific form, such as not being competent, rich or willing enough. They may be conservative and resistant to change. Or - if there is some connection between forms and operations - they may have a type of operation and a local environment that do not fit the new form.

The diffusion model is based on a physical metaphor. Contact with specific others who possess some particular knowledge is a key explanatory element. Traditionally the model has been used in explaining fairly slow processes whereby new practices in agriculture, for instance, spread to distant places (Smith et al., 1927).

Limited applicability

In some cases the diffusion model described above may provide a good way of describing the emergence of homogeneity in organizational forms. In

others, it is less useful. It is less useful for explaining homogeneity which arises without any contact between similar organizations or contact with a common transmitter, or when knowledge is not a scarce resource. It is less useful when widespread knowledge of a certain form, or even its popularity, does not result in much homogeneity, i.e. when a form that is popular and fashionable in the public discussion is not actually installed in many local organizations. The diffusion model is also less useful when the micro process is one not of imitation but rather of innovation, i.e. when individual organizations introduce forms which no other organization has yet tried, or they invent a new form, and still they end up with forms that are similar to those of other organizations. Nor is the diffusion model very useful when organizations seem to lack any stable quality that could explain whether or not they are susceptible, - for instance when heterogeneous organizations have very similar operations and local environments, or when a certain organization resists a popular form at one point and, at another, is quick to adopt some other very similar form.

An empirical case in which the diffusion model seems to be of little use is provided by the changing forms adopted in Swedish municipalities over the last few decades. In the public debate new ideas about organizational form have popped up at intervals of a few years (Johansson and Johnsson, 1994). The public debate was familiar to municipal managers (Fernler, 1996) and it can be assumed that they learnt about the new ideas at about the same time. A new form was often adopted by many municipalities during the short period when the form in question was popular in the public discussion (Johansson and Johnsson, 1994); most adopting organizations had no other organization to imitate. However, most forms were taken up by a minority of the municipalities only: the extent to which municipalities adopted any one specific fashionable form varied between 6 and 70 per cent (Johansson and Johnsson, 1995). Further, it was difficult to find any strong correlation between the forms adopted and

any specific qualitites of the municipalities concerned, such as size or the political party that was in power (ibid.). Some of the new forms arose at about the same time in other countries, in the public discussion as well as in municipalities there (Hood, 1991; Reichard, 1995). Some forms at least seem to have been invented in several municipalities at about the same time (Fernler, 1996).

In order to explain such processes we need a model which differs in several respects from the model of diffusion. The one we require should be able to explain homogeneity arising by other processes than imitation among different organizations without contact with one another or any common transmitter. It should be possible to use the model for explaining not only homogeneity but also heterogeneity, i.e. why some organizations do not adopt a particular common form. All in all the model should explain something that could be called "cropping up" as opposed to diffusion, that is to say the scattered and seemingly random appearance of similar forms in many, but far from all, organizations at the same time. In the next subsection I will describe a version of such a cropping-up model.

A cropping-up model of organizational forms

The model to be outlined below contains three basic components: organizational forms, reforms and discourse. The model contains specific assumptions on the nature and dynamics of these components. It is based on the assumption that, fundamentally, organizational forms are not things or practices, like the items often described as spreading in the diffusion model; rather, they are presentations. They must therefore follow the rules for how we can talk about organizations. The reform processes through which these forms are introduced require even closer adaption to these rules. They also require attempts at implementing this talk in practice - attempts which are often time-consuming and frustrating. The common

component that makes homogeneity possible is assumed to be a broad societal discourse on organizations. Here some forms are more popular or fashionable than others. But popularity or fashion do not necessarily lead to homogeneity. Very popular fashions in the discourse may not be reflected in a high degree of homogeneity in organizational forms (just as a *haute couture* fashion may not be reflected in very many people's way of dressing). The model will describe the mechanisms whereby popular forms are, or are not, translated into local forms.

Organizational forms

Organizational forms are part of the way organizations are presented to the external world or to their own members by authorized people such as managers. Organizational structures are often displayed in organization charts, while procedures appear in documents containing rules and ideology in established and documented policies. These written sources are normally confirmed by oral presentations from management and by labels for denoting entities, practices or ideas. The forms are presented as descriptions of the way the organization actually works, or the way it will be working in the near future. The forms also tend to be highly rationalized, being typically presented as means to legitimate ends or as solutions to important problems; or at least rationalizations are readily available upon request (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

The forms may also be reflected in certain matching practices, but the extent to which practices are affected by the forms differs from one form, organization or practice to another, as well as over time. As noted in the introduction above, forms and operations often do not match very well. Practice tends to be less affected, or differently affected, by the form than the presentations suggest. And the efficacy of the forms in achieving the ends and solutions presented tends to be weaker, rarer and more uncertain than

described in standard rationalizations (March and Olsen, 1989, Ch 5).

So if we adopt the basic distinction between organizational talk and action (Brunsson, 1989), then we can assign organizational forms to "talk". Just as there are norms and rules for action that restrict our freedom to act, so there are norms for talk that restrict the way we can talk, at least if we are to be believed or taken seriously (Brunsson, 1995). In the model it is assumed that this is true of talk about organizations, and thus of organizational forms. Organizations cannot then be presented in any way; the presentation must be adapted to conceptions as to what an organization can and should be. The forms must be such as are regarded as possible organizational forms; they should be adapted to what people consider good or at least acceptable. In addition, they should be understandable: excessively complex or ambiguous forms are not likely to be understood.

Reforms

The processes whereby new forms are launched will be referred to below as reforms. Reforms as defined here consist of two basic activities: attempts at convincing people that the new forms should be installed, and attempts at getting them implemented. Studies of many such reforms in a variety of organizations (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993) revealed a certain pattern, which will be used here for formulating assumptions about the reform component in the model.

The extensiveness and intensity of talk differed as between existing forms and new ones. Reforms required much more mobilization and talk than existing forms. Typically reforms produced a lot of elaborate talk about the forms-to-be, and a good deal of rationalizing argument. Reforms were well adapted to general, aesthetic norms of talk, such as those referring to logic, consistency and clarity. Reforms were also adapted to what was generally considered a good organization. They

promised major improvements in how the organization functioned.

The reforms, at least at the outset, were described as a set of simple, general and seemingly highly sensible, not to say beautiful, principles; for instance, the organizations were to become more goal-oriented, everybody's tasks should be clearer and should not overlap with those of others, everyone's freedom to act efficiently should be increased, better planning and evaluation processes should be installed, etc. The principles contained elements which were popular and not controversial at the time of their introduction, such as decentralization or management by objectives. The situation before implementation of the reform was described in a less favourable way: it was said to be complicated, tasks were unclear, there were inefficiencies, a lack of local freedom etc.

In sum, it seemed that reforms not only produced more talk than existing forms, but they also followed the norms for talk more closely. This can be explained by the fact that reforms are future-oriented and intentional. The way we can talk about existing forms may be limited to some extent not only by the rules for talk, but also by practice. It may be necessary to adapt talk somewhat to what people actually do, in particular if the talk is directed at the doers themselves. Reforms, on the other hand, can be more easily adapted to the norms exclusively for talk, since they are not meant to reflect current practices. Reforms include descriptions of practice: their implementation and their effect on practice is the standard argument in their favour. But this practice is still in the future, and can thus easily be adapted to the new forms instead of the other way round. But reforms not only can but must be well adapted to norms for talk about organizations. Reforms contain intentions; the forms presented are those we intend, and they are to lead to the effects we intend. The norms regarding the intentions which we can present are generally stricter than those applying to our presentations; for instance, we may admit to bad results but we are less likely to say that we intended them. This may be true of reforms as well: we may

present current organizational forms as less than perfect, but it is more difficult not to intend to be as near to perfect as possible.

It is not being claimed that all empirical reforms are like those described here, but the model includes this type of reform. It will be assumed that organizations are attracted by such reforms, which are much more beautiful than possible presentations of today's practice. Most reform proposals will prevail over the defence of most old forms. But it is still assumed that there is one major obstacle to reforms, namely previous reforms.

Reforms are supposed to be implemented, i.e. the principles of the reform should be turned into detailed instructions and should affect organizational behaviour and even results; and this takes time. It is hard to argue for a new reform until the previous one has been given a serious try, particularly if the reforms concern the same activities.

However, this obstacle is only temporary. When the new forms have become existing forms, they will be less attractive, and a new form will easily look more attractive. And a new reform does not necessarily have to wait for the full implementation, and even less for the results, of the old reform; the old reform can become relatively unattractive much earlier. This is because implementation is assumed to be an important threat to reforms. When the beautiful principles are turned into more detailed instructions and are adapted to the special practical conditions of the specific organization, the new forms easily become less beautiful and more like the old forms, thus losing much of their attraction. Their promises do not seem to become fulfilled. The new forms may also become more controversial. Further, principles adapted to norms for talk are not necessarily practically feasible or favourable. This may become obvious long before the reform is considered fully implemented, or, even more, before it has given rise to any intended effects on daily practice. So, after a serious attempt at implementation, the reform can come into disrepute and easily become

interrupted by a new reform (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993, Ch. 3).

When reform processes look as described here and when there is no lack of new reform ideas, a specific pattern of reform can be established. A reform starts when the previous reform has been in the process of implementation long enough, and it ends when its own implementation has been under way for a while. The organization is almost continuously in the throes of some stage of a reform, but reforms can only be launched at intervals.

The assumption of implementation as a threat to reform and the resulting pattern of reform also reflected the empirical situation in the reforms studied. Reforms easily prevailed over older forms, often over those still being implemented. A common way of ending a reform was to start a new reform. In some large organizations reforms were a standard, recurring activity. Major reforms occurred often but not constantly-typically at intervals of a few years. A study of the 125-year history of one large organization showed that major reorganizations took place at intervals of three to fifteen years, with the intervals shrinking more recently (Brunsson et al, 1989).

Although reforms easily win over existing forms, a specific reform proposal may meet competition from other reform proposals, also containing attractive principles. Such a competition is likely to be won by reforms which on a more detailed level have a better fit to norms for talk about intended forms, and for which more favourable and less critical arguments are accessible. Such norms and arguments are largely produced and reproduced on another arena than the individual organization - in a general public discourse.

Organizational discourse

It is not only people in individual organizations who talk about the present

and future forms in their own case; there is also a more general discourse in modern society about these things. Organizational forms in general are a popular topic in higher education where it touches on organizations, as well as among the relevant commentators - not least in business magazines and management books - and among those involved in helping organizations to reform such as management consultants (Alvarez, 1991). Although the discourse varies somewhat among organizational fields and countries, much of it is very general, treating large groups of organizations as though they were in need of the same forms. The discourse is to a large extent international, i.e. national borders are not thought to be important and much of the discussion takes place across such borders. Organizational problems and solutions are both discussed (Furusten, 1995). The discourse produces ideas and norms about possible and desirable organizational forms.

Although the forms discussed are likely to be based on some common basic conceptions of organizations, they differ as to more detailed aspects. All forms discussed may build on the presumption that organizations should be controlled from the top, but they may differ widely as to what form is the best one for bringing this about.

In this discourse only a limited set of ideas can be attended to at a time. Ideas attended to are more or less controversial and the level of controversy may change over time. Ideas can also differ in their level of abstraction. Sometimes highly specific organizational forms are proposed as the "right" ones. Zero-based budgeting may be an example. In other instances the suggested forms are of a more principled and abstract character, more in the nature of slogans than recipes. "Back to basics" - concentrating on the "core" business - and decentralization are cases in point. At an even higher level of abstraction the discourse may concern problems but no specific solutions, there may be a large measure of agreement in identifying the important and urgent problems, without any suggestion about specific

forms that might provide a solution. The attention to problems varies just as much as the attention to solutions. In the seventies the lack of internal democracy in organizations was a popular problem; later, inadequate customer orientation and cost-efficiency were among the problems in vogue.

Knowledge of this general discourse is not "outside" the organizations; people working in managing and reforming organizations are aware of the discourse and may even take part in it. In the cropping-up model, unlike the diffusion model, it will not be assumed that knowledge is a scarce resource. Rather, it is assumed that people interested in organizational issues will very quickly hear about any new arguments, regardless of where they originated: they will all be reported widely in the media.

This kind of discourse is thus added to our model. We assume that a set of organizations is connected to a common discourse. The discourse provides norms and arguments regarding acceptable or good organizational forms, about forms that should be striven for and problems that require solution. In addition people participating in the discourse may have an authority that can be referred to in arguing for reforms in the right direction. The norms and arguments in the discourse help explain which reforms are selected by individual organizations; they may serve as an important inspiration for reformers when they design a new reform, and they can determine which of several reform proposals is accepted by an organization.

The discourse evolves continually. New ideas are attended to, others become uninteresting. A basic mechanism for changes in attention may be a focus on novelty - when no further descriptions and arguments can be added to the discourse there is not much to discuss and attention can be directed towards a new idea.

Some ideas go from being generally agreed upon to becoming

highly controversial, others go in the opposite direction or keep a fairly stable degree of controversy. Some ideas finally even become generally viewed as bad ones. One direction in the development of the discourse is towards greater specification, i.e. abstract principles are given a more detailed, concrete content; problems are given solutions, or concrete cases are quoted in which principles are said to have been transformed into practice. Another direction is towards more conflict, as counter-arguments are proposed. These two tendencies may be interrelated, as in the reform processes in individual organizations described above, such that more specification produces more controversy. Specification and controversy may be replaced by new abstract ideas or by compromise, and perhaps by abstraction again.

Model dynamics

The cropping-up model is thus based on specific assumptions regarding organizational forms, local reforms and a general discourse. Organizational forms are ways of talking about organizations. Reforms, the presentation of new forms and attempts at implementing them, have to be adapted to the norms for talk about organizations, and particularly to talk about organizational intentions. Some of these norms are provided by a general and continually evolving discourse about organizational forms. But the connection with talk and discourse means that reforms are apt to lead to disappointment when it comes to implementation: good talk in a general way does not necessarily correspond to good or even possible local practice. Moreover, what is generally good may not be good for the individual organization. This leads to recurring reforms under a continually changing discourse.

This provides a setting for certain dynamics. At every moment we have a set of organizations ripe for reform: those which have gone

sufficiently far in implementing previously popular forms to create frustration and an interest in new forms. At every such moment all these organizations face the same discourse with a specific set of more or less controversial and more or less specific ideas attended to.

From the discourse it is possible to collect ideas about and find arguments and support for forms currently attended to there. Reform proposals in the direction of fairly uncontroversial forms attended to will have an advantage over reform proposals in other directions. The levels of attention and controversy affect not only the forms which organizations choose, but also to some extent the area (e.g. organizational structure or budget procedure) in which they reform, since not all areas are necessarily attended to or have sparked uncontroversial ideas at every point in time. Since the discourse is continually evolving - creating new ideas, new controversies and new specifications- the set of organizations that reform during the next period will not introduce the same set of forms.

Such processes would explain both homogeneity and heterogeneity among organizations. The explanation refers to no other characteristic of the individual organization apart from the timing of its reform cycles. Organizational reforms are similar in organizations reforming at the same time, and different in organizations reformed at different times.

If the implementation processes differ somewhat in length in different organizations, perhaps due to some random external variables, organizations which have simultaneously started on a certain reform will not be ripe for a new reform quite at the same time. It is then slightly less likely that these organizations choose the same reform as the others in the second round. This makes for variation over time as regards the organizations which any specific organization is likely to resemble. In other words it impedes any order among organizations on a cohort basis, and confirms a picture of great variability and randomness.

The model explains how popular ideas in the general discourse are translated into local organizational forms. It also demonstrates why popular forms are not necessarily very common in organizations: they are only adopted by organizations which happen to be ripe for reform in the period when the forms are popular.

Processes producing homogeneity

The processes whereby forms are transferred from the general discourse into the local organization should also be specified. One process can be called adoption. In models of diffusion (as well as in my description of these models above) the term adoption generally refers to the result of a process. In our present model adoption instead describes a specific process whereby the local organization takes over a form described in the discourse.

Another possible process is invention, whereby a form is constructed locally. If the uncontroversial ideas of the discourse are fairly abstract and do not specify any particular forms, the individual organization has to invent its own. But even if the ideas are abstract, they may contain problems and conceptions about the present situation or about organizations in general which are specific enough to make most reformers in most organizations come to very similar conclusions regarding what form to introduce.. The forms are invented locally, but are still very similar. There is a parallel here with certain inventions and discoveries in science: oxygen, for example, was discovered by at least two scientists simultaneously (Kuhn, 1962). Similarities arising from inventions are particularly likely when there is a strong consensus in identifying the important problems, but no specific solutions are agreed upon.

Organization members may well at first see their own invented form as something unique, only to learn later that it is in fact quite common. In this case they may perceive themselves as the first to introduce

it, and perhaps develop a theory about how they have influenced other organizations. When such forms enter the general discourse they have to be generalized to some extent. The more detailed talk of the individual local organizations may vary somewhat, but can still lend itself to a common description at the discourse level.

In the adoption case reformers argue for the same relatively specific forms as those attended to in the discourse. Even though the forms are more specific than in the invention case, they are seldom so specific that they cannot be slightly differently interpreted and adapted to local conditions and taste, just as in the case of diffusion. This again allows some scope for somewhat different local versions, without disturbing the impression that the local reform ideas are in fact the same as those being generally discussed.

The adoption process may follow different paths. It may be a process of inspiration, in which local reformers gather their ideas from the general discourse. Or it may be a process of labelling (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988), in which reformers adapt their ideas (whatever their source), and their talk about their ideas to the forms in the general discourse. Inspiration often involves a process of specification in which general forms are translated into a local version; labelling normally involves a process of generalization, in which specific local ideas are given more general labels.

Frequency of forms

Given the processes described above, the number of organizations using a particular form will depend mainly on the length of time during which a particular form is comparatively uncontroversial in the discourse. The longer a form or a problem is considered to be the right one in the discourse, or the greater the frequency of its being so considered, the greater the number of organizations which will have entered upon a reform period

during this particular discourse, and the greater the number which will have adopted the form or invented similar forms. In this way (length of) time translates into (width of) space.

The frequency of a particular form also depends on whether or not competing forms appear. If new forms do compete, the old ones are likely finally to be erased. For instance, an old principle for structuring the whole organization cannot normally be retained when a new such principle is installed. It is hard to be basically centralized <u>and</u> basically decentralized. When the competitive aspect is weaker, an old form can be retained together with new ones, so long as it does not fall into disrepute for other reasons.

A form becomes very common if it is attractive and remains uncontroversial for a long time, and if competitive ideas do not appear for a long time after the attention giving rise to the reform has faded away. Budgeting may provide a relevant example. It became popular for private sector use in the sixties and provoked a great deal of literature over a long period. It has proved possible to combine it with various other forms, including other management accounting procedures, and has not so far fallen seriously into disrepute. Thus most organizations still present budgets, although budgeting is not any longer much attended to in the discourse. Budgeting has even become highly institutionalized or almost a constitutive norm - being taken for granted, having formed the basis for special departments etc in many organizations - and may now not easily be questioned in the discourse or such a questioning would not affect organizations very much (Wallander, 1994). Similarily organizations can maintain that they carry out "development talks" with employees long after anybody except a few specialists talk about the technique as being important. In this way forms which may once have appeared quite suddenly, can produce sedimental forms, that continue to exist although they are no longer given much attention (Danielsson, 1983).

Cropping-up explained

The cropping-up model is not intended for use in explaining any actual homogeneity and heterogeneity in organizational forms. But it might be able to clarify some phenomena that are difficult to explain with the help of the model relating operations, environments and forms mentioned in the introduction or with the help of the diffusion model. The cropping-up model constitutes a possible or partial explanation of the more or less simultaneous appearance of similar forms among organizations with no contact with each other and lacking a common transmitter. And, for explaining homogeneity and heterogeneity, we do not need to know any specific characteristics of individual organizations apart from their position in the reform cycle. Further, the model can explain instances of standardization arising from processes other than imitation.

Interaction between reforms and discourse

In the cropping-up model the general discourse affects local reforms. But in reality influence may also operate in the other direction. Local reforms may influence organizational discourse; experience of local reforms may be generally discussed. In fact, local organizations may reinforce the popularity of forms, by reporting their own reforms and proclaiming their success.

But local reforms in line with the current discourse may also introduce controversy about a particular form, or even create agreement on its negative aspects. It may then be abandoned giving room for a new idea. As in the individual organizations, attempts at implementing reform may make general principles seem less attractive. There may be several reasons for this.

First, reforms can lead the discourse towards a higher level of

specification. As has been noted, local reform generally calls for a more specified version of a general form, or a general problem must be met by a specific form. The specifications may vary from one organization to another; if these different specifications appear in the general discourse, there will be a higher risk of controversy than before. Different people may argue for different specifications, which can reduce confidence in all specifications. But this process depends on the way the specifications are reported back in the general discourse. The more general the terms in which they are described, the less impact they have on the discourse. If top managers with little information about details, or consultants or researchers skilled in generalization dominate the discourse, then the probability of creating controversy is less than if people with more detailed information and a weaker tendency to generalize enter the discourse.

Secondly, information about local attempts at implementing reform can be expected to produce a more mixed discourse on implementation and results. Without empirical evidence, agreement on any particular form is based on the expectation of its relative ease in implementation and its positive results. If empirical observations are included in the discussions, there is a greater risk that information about difficulties and negative results will emerge, thus producing a less favourable picture which may then increase controversy and produce many arguments against the form. Difficulties in implementation can be expected to be more threatening than negative results. Assessments of results tend to be more ambiguous, and hence less obviously negative. On the other hand, in periods of general decline and difficulty ambiguity about the results of reform may turn reforms into scapegoats, thereby producing agreement on how bad they are, thus providing room for new ideas.

Thirdly, reforms in the same direction in a large number of organizations may change perceptions of the form in question among organizational actors and in the discourse. When the news spread that this

form is being implemented in many organizations of different kinds, the invention process is no longer possible and the ways in which the form can be introduced are thus limited. But, what is more, the form may now come to be perceived in some cases as a "fashion" rather than a rational solution; its adoption may be criticized as an instance of imitation, which is difficult to combine with the standard conception of the organization and its management as a rational problem-solver (Abrahamsson, 1993). Fashions are also difficult to combine with the basic idea that organizations have strong identities of their own, with particular or even unique characteristics and tasks. Such a conception of a form involves negative arguments in the discourse, making it more difficult to implement locally. Fashions are more powerful when actors do not perceive them as fashions (Rövik, 1993).

These mechanisms do not always work: in some cases the high frequency of a form has the opposite effect of reinforcing the agreement that it is a good one. On the other hand, it is not likely that such a form will be attended to in the discourse for much longer.

Fourthly, the discourse may be affected by an active local demand for new forms. After a while there will be a number of organizations which have failed in the implementing of a specific reform, or which have recognized the absence of results and which therefore enter upon a phase of new reform. To borrow a term from the diffusion model, we could say that previous reforms may make organizations immune to the form in question. It will be difficult for the reformers to produce the same reform again, so they will look for another area of agreement in order to be able to launch a new reform.

In most of these cases local reforms create, or help to create, changes in the content of the general discourse. This in turn provides a basis for new reforms, which in turn tend to change the discourse again, and so on. In most of the circumstances described above, the system as a whole becomes very dynamic and highly diversified: the discourse changes at a

great rate and individual forms are therefore adopted by few organizations only, which in turn gives rise to diversity.

Some additional questions

In this article I have mentioned three ways of explaining homogeneity and heterogeneity in organizational forms by referring to operations and environments, to diffusion processes and to cropping-up processes. The first explanation builds on the assumption that forms and operations are closely connected, the other two on the assumption that forms and operations may be fairly independent of each other. Some homogeneity and heterogeneity among organizations could be explained by versions of one of these models only. Other cases can only be explained with the help of more than one of the models. Detailed empirical studies of reform processes can give us insights into the way the conditions and processes described in the models interact in practice.

All three models explain homogeneity by referring to a common element among the organizations concerned. They work under similar operational conditions, they have been infected by the same idea or they share a common discourse. But the models do not explain much of how these underlying common elements arise or develop; rather, they indicate that this is an urgent topic for research. In the first model it is important to investigate how similar conditions come about. In the diffusion model it is important to explain why something "diffuses" at all and why it affects a particular population of social entities. In the cropping-up model, it becomes important to explain how the organizational discourse evolves over time and how its perceived relevance for various organizations develops. All these questions call for empirical studies at a higher level than that of the individual organization.

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