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Theorization of New Practices in Emerging Organizational Fields

by

Sushanta Kumar Sarma

*Associate Professor-HRD,
T. A. Pai Management Institute*



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Sushanta Kumar Sarma

Associate Professor-HRD,

T.A Pai Management Institute,

Manipal-576104, Karnataka, India.

Phone: 0820- 2701048, email: sushanta@tapmi.edu.in

Abstract: This paper examines the theorization strategies for diffusion of new practices in an emerging field. We identify the attributes of an emerging field vis-à-vis mature field across four dimensions and presents the challenges of diffusion of new practices in emerging field. Presenting the theorization as a means of legitimization, we explore the basis of legitimization and its intended audience. In an emerging field, exchange, structural, procedural, and consequential legitimacy forms the basis of legitimization. The constituents of market governance such as investors, consumers etc., and normative governance such as professional association etc., forms the intended audiences for the theorization process.

Keywords: Theorization, legitimacy, emerging field

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“Commercialization has been a terrible wrong turn for microfinance, and it indicates a worrying “mission drift” in the motivation of those lending to the poor. Poverty should be eradicated, not seen as a money-making opportunity”

----- (Yunus, 2011).

The year 2010 was a path-defining year for Indian microfinance because of two major incidents. First, SKS Microfinance – the largest and the most recognizable microfinance organization in the country, raised money worth US \$347million through an IPO in August. It generated mixed responses – the investors were impressed with the good asset quality and disciplined model of microfinance in SKS. On the other hand, one of the strongest critiques of the IPO came from Muhammad Yunus, the father of microfinance. He, like many other leaders, was against the idea of making money from microfinance. Second, in October, the national media reported the suicide cases of farmers from the state of Andhra Pradesh, many of whom were the clients of microfinance organization including SKS Microfinance. The media strongly reviewed the incident and the Government of Andhra Pradesh banned lending by commercial microfinance organizations for a couple of months.

The IPO and the subsequent suicides by the borrowers of commercial microfinance, threatened the legitimacy of the commercial microfinance. The legitimacy refers to a popular perception of what is being considered right and appropriate. The microfinance NGOs who transformed from a non-profit to a for-profit format during the period of 2009-2010 found their legitimacy was challenged. How did these organizations justify the adoption of new business practices in the given context? Although they had a legitimate organizational identity from the regulatory point of view, their legitimacy from the stakeholder’s point of view was at stake. The microfinance experts from finance and economics field viewed commercialization as desirable. Other experts from social sector viewed the generation of profit at the expense of poor people is morally wrong and hence it was illegitimate (Pache and Santos, 2010).The problem was more acute due to the peculiarity of the Indian microfinance. The field was itself emerging and struggling to find a stable balance between the twin logics of microfinance (Kent and Dacin, 2013). One logic stresses the role of microfinance organizations as a financially viable organization (banking logic) while the other emphasises on reaching the poorest of the poor (development logic).

The illustration mentioned above is a situation in an emerging organizational field, where the organizations adopting a new practice face the risk of losing legitimacy. An organizational field is a set of organizations who interact with each other while producing goods and services. Through their process of interaction, the organizations generate certain norms to be adhered to, define regulatory provision to operate within, create a boundary for the field by identifying its members, and establish a sense of appropriate way of behaving. For a mature field, most of these norms, regulatory provisions, field memberships, and appropriate way of behaving are well defined. However, for an emerging organizational field, such institutional arrangements are just in a state of evolution. There is no single shared belief system to dominate the emerging field. The institutional scholars acknowledge that an organization faces legitimacy threat in a field with plural demands (Kraatz and Block 2008) and the organizations often adopt different coping strategies (Pache and Santos 2010; Greenwood et al 2011) to manage the legitimacy. One of the coping strategies is adoption and diffusion of new practices apart from creating a new organizational identity or new organizational forms, etc.

Such organizational actions are not enough to ensure the legitimacy from the constituents of an organizational field. This is because any organizational action is subject to multiple interpretation derived from multiple worldviews. Therefore, there is a need to give proper meaning to the organizational action. To ensure that the organizational actions are interpreted in a deliberate way, the organizations resort to ‘theorization’ (Greenwood et al., 2002). Theorization acts as a process that ensures acceptance of the organizational actions to organizational stakeholders. It is defined as a process through which an organization can justify the change in the organizational practices with more pragmatic terms. The works on theorization (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Maguire et al., 2004; Vara et al., 2006) give us a framework on the focus of theorization and its intended audience. Rhetoric has been used as a major tool for theorization by an organization as it diffuses the new practices. The theorization has been often associated with the organizational action of making practices acceptable. However, the existing understanding on theorization does not relate the legitimacy with the stages of field development such as emerging or mature.

We intend to fill this gap by addressing the following research question, “*How do the organizations theorize a new practice in an emerging field?*” The question has two central focuses – theorization and emerging field. The theorization leads us to explore the concept of

legitimacy and its dimension, and the emerging field guides us to explore the attributes of the field.

The attributes of an emerging field help us to understand the different situations under which the legitimacy for new practices becomes desirable. The contextual understanding of the emerging field helps us to present the specific legitimacy requirement at different stages in an emerging field. Table 1 gives a brief summary of major work used in developing the paper. We begin by identifying the attributes of an emerging field and its difference with a matured field. We then explore the types of legitimacy and the potential audience for legitimacy. This is important as it helps us to understand two important questions – ‘legitimacy of what?’ and ‘legitimacy to whom?’ in the context of an emerging field. After this, we present the notion of theorization and develop four propositions on how the organizations would theorize new practices in an emerging field. We conclude after discussing the contribution and the limitation of the paper and suggesting the directions for research in future.

Table 1: Brief Summary of Literature

Emerging Field vs Mature Field		
Sl No	Reference	Central Argument
1	DiMaggio, 1991; Anand and Peterson, 2000; Phillips et al., 2000; Lawrence et al., 2002; Maguire et al., 2004; Child et al., 2007; Purdy and Gray, 2009)	Organizational field can be classified in two structures – “mature” and “emerging” based on certain characteristics of the field.
2	Greenwood et al. 2002; Lounsbury, 2002; Purdy and Gray, 2009; Greve et al., 2010;Anand and Watson, 2004;King 2008; Lawrence et al. 2002.	In a mature field, inter-organizational relationships are articulated and regularized by actors. In case of an emerging field, the inter-organizational relationship is restricted to organizational sub-communities only.
3	Garud et al. 2002; Navis and Glynn,2010.	Institutional norms defining acceptable behavior are ambiguous in an emerging field.
Organizational Legitimacy		
4	Aldrich and Fiol, 1994; Stryker, 1994; Suchman, 1995	Organizational legitimacy has several dimensions.
5	Hansmann, 1996; Williamson, 1996; Scott, 1995	Governance structure forms the sources for legitimacy
Theorization as a means of legitimization		
6	Munir and Phillips, 2005; Boxenbaum and Daudigeos, 2008; Lepoutre and Valente, 2012; Vaara et al., 2006; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Maguire et al., 2004.	Theorization as a legitimacy seeking agency for new practices

Emerging Field versus Mature Field

An organizational field comprises a set of organizations, which in totality represent a recognized area of institutional life (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The set of organizations include suppliers, consumers of resources and products, regulatory agencies, and other organizations producing related goods and services. A 'field' is distinguished from an 'Industry' because the field typically includes not only the organizations producing similar kind of products and services, but also the other organizations that influence their performance and conduct. For example, a car manufacturing industry may typically include the organizations in the business of manufacturing car. However, an organizational field of car manufacturer would include other organizations like regulators, funding organizations (Banks), accreditors of quality, and other intermediary organizations.

The research work on the organizational field has classified the field level structures (defined interactions among actors) as 'mature' and 'emerging' field (DiMaggio, 1991; Anand and Peterson, 2000; Phillips et al., 2000; Lawrence et al., 2002; Maguire et al., 2004; Child et al., 2007; Purdy and Gray, 2009). The journey of a field from an emerging stage to a mature stage is accomplished through the process of structuration, which is also termed as institutionalization. DiMaggio and Powel (1983) argue that the organizational fields have four attributes that differentiate an emerging field from a matured one (Table 2).

First attribute is the interaction among the organizations within the field, more the interaction, higher the stability. Suppliers, buyers, consumers, and producers interacting in a regular way lead to the standardization of practices and formation of rules. In the case of a mature field, the interactions are more frequent as the rules of interactions such as contracts; labour laws, etc. are more developed and established. The reverse is the case in an emerging field; the rules governing the interactions are still in the developing phase and there are ambiguities on the nature of exchanges that take place across the organizations. One of the outcomes of low interaction is that there exists a weak network of organization with little coordinated action (Gray, 1985).

The inter-organizational linkage in an organizational field can be fairly comprehended through the notion of 'connectedness' (Laumann et al., 1978). It implies the extent of existence of transaction binding the organizations with one another. A field with a higher level of connectedness implies large numbers of transactions taking place within the field that binds

most of the organizations with one another. Such an inter-linkage among the organizations might include a formal contractual relationship of supplier and producer, participation of employees in a common forum such as advocacy meet, or informal relationship as job-hopping by employees. In a mature field, the level of connectedness among the organizations is expected to be high; because the inter-linkages among the organizations are more clearly defined and established. While the reverse would be the case in an emerging field where the constituents are still exploring different mechanisms of inter-linkages with different sets of organizations.

Table 2: Attributes of Organizational Field

Dimension	Mature Field	Emerging Field
Extent of interactions among organizations	High	Low
Defined structure of domination and patterns of coalition among organizations	The structure and patterns are sharply defined	The structure and patterns are in an emerging state; not clearly identifiable
Information sufficiency with organizations	High	Low
Participants from organizations share a common purpose of existence	Majority of participants have a common purpose of existence	Not many have a shared understanding on purpose of existence

DiMaggio and Powell (1983)

Second attribute is related to the structure of domination and the patterns of coalition among the organizations. Domination by a set of organizations over others based on resource accessibility and control, and coalition among constituents for lobbying and influencing, are the characteristics of a mature field. With increasing transactions among the organizations, the bargaining power of buyers, sellers, consumers, etc. is more or less established in a matured field. The dominant coalitions among the organizations help to establish certain institutional norms as appropriate within the field. These inter-organizational relationships are articulated and regularized through ‘collective actors’ such as professional associations (Greenwood et al. 2002; Lounsbury, 2002; Purdy and Gray, 2009), ‘social control agents’ like national and local governments (Greve et al., 2010), ‘tournament rituals’ like award functions (Anand and Watson, 2004), and ‘informed diaries’ like media and consultants (King 2008). Unless there is some serious disruption, e.g., arrival of a new technology or discovery of an effective alternative product, the positions of different constituents remain more or less stable. In the case of an emerging field, it is unlikely to have a set of organizations exercising domination across the field. Rather, the organizations would resort to exercise their influence in sub-

communities through some incompetent institutional orders. These sub-standard institutions termed as ‘proto-institutions’ remain narrowly diffused across the field (Lawrence et al. 2002).

Third, in a mature field, due to standardization of institutional infrastructure, there is a higher degree of information sharing across the organizations resulting in sufficiency of information among the constituents. The equal access to information helps in maintaining stability within the field. In the emerging field, there is a dearth of information flow across the constituents and gives a sense of uncertainty. Because of such uncertainty, the institutional norms and rules defining the legitimate actions, and acceptable behavior are ambiguous (Garud et al. 2002; Navis and Glynn 2010).

Fourth, in a mature field, with growing transactions, standardization, and sharing of information, the participants generally tend to identify themselves with the field and, in turn, have a common purpose for existence. However, in an emerging field, the participants do not share a common identity and accordingly it does not have a purpose of existence, which is commonly shared.

The research works on the emerging field focus on the formation of the emerging fields, viz., how do the new forms of the organizations (for example, NBFCs as microfinance organizations) flourish in the phase of transition (Scott, 2000), how does a field-configuring event act as a structuring mechanism for the field development (Lampel and Meyer, 2008), how do the institutional entrepreneurs initiate the institutional changes (Maguire et al., 2004), etc. These works have emphasized on the composition of an emerging field and its evolution. Considering the unpredictable nature of the emerging field, these studies indicate that the organizations seek legitimacy for their action to ensure their survival and access to critical resources. In the following sections of the paper, we present a discussion on the legitimacy of the organization followed by the role of theorization in seeking the legitimacy.

Organizational Legitimacy

Legitimacy has emerged as a central concept in the Institutional theory and often understood as the cultural support received by an organization for its action (Meyer and Scott, 1983). Legitimacy is used as an explanation for the organizational action and accordingly it is argued that for any action to be acceptable, it needs to be legitimized. Hence, it gains importance in justifying the adoption of new practices by the organizations. Legitimacy is defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable,

proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p.575). Legitimacy is an evaluation of organizational action to that extent that the organizations departing from societal norms may not be able to retain their legitimacy in the end. The institutional theorists have recognized the organizational legitimacy as a critical resource related to survival of the organization. Since it is a generalized perception or assumption, it reflects the reaction of observers as they evaluate the organizational action as well as the organization itself. Thus, the legitimacy is also socially constructed and the meaning attached to the organizational action by constituents leads to the construction of legitimacy. The legitimacy is objectively possessed in a sense that the organization may lose it or earn it. However, it is subjectively constructed such that the behavior of the organization must be in congruence with the shared belief of some social group.

The dimensions of the organizational legitimacy received substantial attention during the 1990s (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008) and the theorists have identified several dimensions of legitimacy (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994; Stryker, 1994; Suchman, 1995). Suchman (1995) has worked extensively on dimensions of legitimacy and identified 12 types of legitimacy broadly covered under three major categories – pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy (Table 3). The pragmatic legitimacy involves perception about how the organizational actions visibly affect the self-interest of their immediate audiences. These actions are considered legitimate, in case it protects the well-being of the organizational constituents. The pragmatic legitimacy can take three variants – exchange legitimacy, influence legitimacy, and dispositional legitimacy. The moral legitimacy is derived from the judgment whether the observed activity is ‘the right thing to do’; it reflects the socially constructed value system of the interested constituents. The moral legitimacy takes four forms – consequential, procedural, structural, and personal legitimacies. The cognitive legitimacy involves the acceptance of an organization as necessary or inevitable based on some cultural account. It actually does not involve any kind of evaluation of the organizational action rather focuses on the cultural appropriateness of the action. The cognitive legitimacy can take two forms – comprehensibility and taken-for-granted.

Table 3: Dimensions of Organizational Legitimacy (Suchman, 1995)

Type of Legitimacy		Focus
Pragmatic	Exchange Legitimacy	Expected value of an organizational action to a particular set of constituents
	Influence Legitimacy	Constituents perceive the organization as being responsive to their larger interest
	Dispositional Legitimacy	Constituents evaluate the organization for their dispositional attribute like honesty, good intention etc.
Moral	Consequential Legitimacy	The organizations are judged on what they accomplish and produce
	Procedural Legitimacy	The organizations are conferred legitimacy as they embrace 'socially accepted technique and procedures'.
	Structural Legitimacy	The organizations are granted legitimacy because of their structural characteristics
	Personal Legitimacy	It rests on the charisma of an individual organizational leader (entrepreneur)
Cognitive	Comprehensibility	The legitimacy is derived from cultural models that provide explanation for organization and its action
	Taken-for-granted	The legitimacy is derived from practices, which achieves a stature of 'given'.

Another major concern in justifying the adoption of new practices is the question of 'justification to whom?' 'Who would be the audience for justification?'. Meyer and Scott (1983) argue that any entity that has the capacity to mobilize and confront the organizations can be a source of legitimacy. The organizations form the base for legitimacy around the governance structure in a field. Thus, professional associations, regulatory agencies, society, and other actors that are primarily associated with the governance structure constituted the intended audience for the legitimacy discourse. The governance structure broadly deals with the question of organizational purpose and control (Hansmann, 1996; Williamson, 1996). Accordingly, the legitimacy of an organizational purpose, organizational control mechanism, practices, etc. are all deeply influenced by the governance structure of the field. Scott (2013) categorizes the governance structure in three types – market, normative, and regulative (Table 4). All of these mechanisms would be present in any field at any given point of time; however, their strength to influence would vary according to the level of structuration in the field. The market governance structure primarily strived on the principle of efficiency and exchange. They are based on competitive principle and work through contract mechanism. In a field governed by the market mechanism, the goal of actors is to achieve the technical efficiency. The role of technical efficiency becomes pivotal as the field is matured. As the nature of

interaction becomes more standardized across the field, as more and more dominating pattern emerges, and as the organizations develop more awareness of market information, the market-based logic of efficiency becomes more pervasive in a highly structured field. Since the debate on means-end or cause-effect relationship is not settled in an emerging field, the penetration of the technical efficiency as a base for the legitimacy may not have many takers across the field; rather there would be different sub-communities within the field with a different interpretation of means-end relationship. Although the market-based governance structure may not be all-pervasive in the emerging field, one cannot completely ignore its influence either.

The normative governance structure focuses on the values and the behaviors that are considered socially appropriate. An organizational field with a normative governance structure would be guided by ‘logic of appropriateness’ (March and Olsen, 2010). The actors would often seek legitimacy by demonstrating the behavior in the line of what is expected of them within the given role. The definition of appropriate conduct generally remains debatable in an emerging field where the normative standards are still in a developing stage. The development of role for each actor generally takes place through mimetic actions. The organizations often mimic other relevant organizations from within the field or outside the field.

Table 4: Source of Legitimacy

Types of Governance Structure	Focus	Source of Legitimacy
Market	Efficiency and economic exchange	Investors, consumers
Normative	Socially appropriate behaviour	Professionals Associations, Advocacy Groups, Industry Unions
Regulative	Legislation	Regulators, Government departments

(Scott, 1995)

The regulative governance mechanism emphasizes on the state interventions and highlight the role of hierarchical structure, rules, and coercive actions in case of disobedience. The primary goal in the fields governed by the regulative power is the centralization of power and the control of field constituents. In a mature field, the regulative governance mechanisms are easy to execute as the state interventions are stabilized and the hierarchical structures are developed. The legal institutions are delicate in an emerging field and there is very little stringent regulation guiding the organization (Hoffman, 1999). Thus, in the case of an emerging field, the regulative governance is the weakest one in terms of the governance structure. As a source of legitimacy, all the three governance mechanisms are well developed in a matured

field, while in an emerging field only the normative and the market based governance structures are developed to some extent. Accordingly, in this paper, we have considered the normative and the market based governance structures as the sources of legitimacy operating in the emerging field, excluding the regulative structure.

Means of Legitimization: Theorization

From a legitimacy viewpoint, the organizations do not perform well because they are the most efficient ones. However, because they are perceived to be appropriate, have access to the critical resources. This perception of appropriateness is built through the theorization. In the structuration process, the theorization is important because it connects to one of the central concerns of institutional thinking, the conferring of legitimacy (Greenwood et al., 2002). The notion of theorization was first used by Strang and Meyer (1993) as they discussed its role in shaping and accelerating the diffusion of practices, models, etc., in wider social systems. For any new practice to gain acceptance and to be diffused in a field, it has to be given a symbolic meaning and the theorization is the mechanism through which such a symbolic meaning is attached to the new practices. The theorization is “the specification of the failings of existing norms and practices and justification of new norms and practices in terms of moral and pragmatic consideration...new norms and practices take a greater degree of legitimacy and, in turn, become institutionalised” (Dacin et al., 2002, p.48). Thus, the theorization broadly focuses on the moral and the pragmatic forms of legitimacy in order to justify any new action.

The goal of theorization is “to obtain resources and mobilize support, justify possible solutions and new courses of action, and translate interest to often diverse constituents” (Thornton et al., 2012,p 110). Theorization has been studied in various empirical settings like photography (Munir and Phillips, 2005), construction industry (Boxenbaum and Daudigeos, 2008), horticulture industry (Lepoutre and Valente, 2012), pulp and paper industry (Vaara et al., 2006), accounting profession (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), and HIV/AIDS field (Maguire et al., 2004). These cited works covered issues such as acceptance of a new form of organization, legitimacy of industrial restructuring, developing immunity towards existing institutional logic through rhetorical strategies, rapid diffusion of technology with institutional account, dissemination of new practices in an emerging field, etc. The empirical studies on theorization have focused on the process of institutional changes, which are mainly deviant and non-isomorphic in nature. Rhetoric as a theorization strategy and its role in legitimizing new

practices of social enterprises is a well-researched area. Waldron, Fisher and Pfarrer (2016) argued that the social enterprises that prefer to identify themselves differently from others would often use non-isomorphic frames to justify the adoption of new practices. While in the case of social enterprise that identifies itself as one among many other social enterprises would often use an isomorphic frame to facilitate the adoption of new practices. In another interesting work, Ruebottom (2013) argues that the social enterprises that try to bring in new practices use rhetorical strategies to project themselves as protagonists while casting those that challenge the proposed practices as antagonists. Hence, much is known on the role of rhetoric as the theorization strategy in seeking the legitimacy for social enterprises in general. Yet, how the acceptance of new practices is orchestrated in an emerging field such as microfinance remains a relatively less explored area. In the following section, the paper explores on how the theorization can probably be designed for the new practices in an emerging field.

Theorization of New Practices in an Emerging Field

For any practice to receive the acceptance followed by diffusion there is a need for interaction between the organizations who adopt the practice and those who would be willing to accept the practice. In the case of an emerging field, the low interaction among the organizations hinders the acceptance of a new practice. In the absence of any commonly shared understanding, the experiences of the new practices are difficult to diffuse. The low interaction also implies the low transactional dependencies across the organizations. This adds up to the challenge of legitimizing a new practice in an emerging field. Exchange dependencies helped in developing protocol of operations, which, in turn, become beneficial for adopting a new practice. The means-end relationship is not clearly settled in an emerging field. This is because there is a general lack of awareness on the alternative business practices among the set of organizations. Therefore, in the absence of a sufficient information flow, the organizations hold to various views on means-end relationship. This is further aggravated by the lack of dominance of a set of organizations. The dominance by a set of organizations implies a strong prevalence of a world-view, which defines the means-end relationship. In the absence of a dominating world-view subscribed by the influencing organizations, the opinion on means-end relationship generally, remains unsettled. Such an unsettlement further makes the process of acceptance of the new practices more complex. We argue that the theorization can play a crucial role in such a complex situation primarily because of two reasons – First, the process of theorization focuses on seeking the legitimacy from the organizational field. The studies have

indicated that the process of theorization can stress on different dimensions of legitimacy depending upon the issue at hand (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). Therefore, at different stages of structuration of a field, the theorization can seek justification for practices depending on the nature of the threat to legitimacy. Second, the process of theorization varies according to the intended audience such as the actors associated with the governance structure (Greenwood et al., 2002). Therefore, the theorization can focus on the sources of legitimacy depending on the type of legitimacy it is focusing on. Accordingly, it addresses the two pertinent questions of legitimacy – ‘of what?’ and ‘to whom?’ We now explore how the theorization of new practices shapes up along different attributes of the emerging field.

Low level of interaction

First, we focus on the attribute of a low level of interaction among the organizations in an emerging field. The organizations do not interact because there is no standard means of interactions that have been established within the field. The possible roles that can be played by different organizations are not articulated properly. In the absence of a proper protocol to interact, these organizations remain confined to their own sub-communities and develop micro organizational field. In such situations, the organizations may find it convenient to interact based on the transactions and the business propositions. If any action or practice is initiated to enhance the transactional value across different organizations, it may attract more acceptance across the field. For any new practice to be introduced into the field, the organization should be able to clearly articulate the tangible benefit that is to be derived from the practice. Under these circumstances, the theorization strategy for a new practice should focus on highlighting the benefit of a practice to its prospective audience.

For example, in Bolivia as the largest microfinance organization Compartamos Banco transformed from a non-profit to commercial microfinance, the co-founder argued that the commercial microfinance is more beneficial to the investors because of its focus on sustainability and they are more accountable than the non-profit (Kent and Dacin, 2013). These articulations on the benefit of commercialization are made primarily to convince the investors on the value of microfinance as a for-profit venture. This is because as the organization is shifting to a for-profit mode, it requires a new set of organizations to interact with for its resources (investment) and therefore it focuses on the beneficial attributes of the new practices to potential audience. Apart from the investors, the other constituent who would get the direct

benefit from Compartamos is the consumers. Therefore, in order to seek the legitimacy for the newly adopted commercial practices, the Compartamos sought the legitimacy from the consumers. The Compartamos Banco argues that a good commercial microfinance is also a good financial institution that can understand the needs of the client and offer products that add value to the client.

In a state of low interaction among producers, buyers, and investors, the potential value of transaction among the actors can increase the frequency of interactions. Since, there is benefit attached to transactions, more investors may like to interact with the producers and it is the case with the consumers. The pragmatic legitimacy derives its source from the self-interest of the immediate audience of an organization. Therefore, we argue that the theorization would focus on the pragmatic legitimacy to enhance interaction among the actors. However, out of the three variants of pragmatic legitimacy – exchange, influence, and dispositional legitimacies, the organizations are likely to focus on the exchange legitimacy to justify their action. The theorization resting on the influence legitimacy may be unlikely because it arises out of attending to the larger interest of audience and in an emerging field with low degree of institutionalization, the larger interest of actors are not clearly evolved. For dispositional legitimacy, there is a need for the articulation of organizational attribution like personality, goals, etc. In an emerging field, such dispositional attributes of organizations may not be evolved as most of them are trying to articulate their role and expectations from the field. Therefore, the organizations would focus on the exchange legitimacy only which is easy to articulate and more quickly visible.

As the theorization focuses on the pragmatic form of legitimacy, it aims at an audience who seeks to receive benefit from direct exchange with the organizations. Examples of such constituents may be consumers, investors, etc. who are guided by the principles of efficiency and profitability. Therefore, we argue that the constituents of market governance structure would be the primary target of theorization focusing on the exchange legitimacy. Where the focus is to enhance interaction among constituents through transactions, we believe that the theorization focus would less likely to target the constituents of normative and the regulative governance mechanisms. Therefore, we propose,

Propositions 1: *In an emerging field where there is low level of interactions across the actors, the organizations would resort to theorization strategy that focuses most likely on the exchange legitimacy and targets the constituents of market governance structure as its audience.*

Absence of Dominance

In the absence of dominance by a single cultural template, the organizations do not have a pattern of coalition that can rule the field. Thus, there is no a single set of opinion on new practices and the consequence of a new practice remains open to speculation; so one group may have a positive opinion of the outcome while the other may not. The justification of a new practice becomes a tricky business for the adopters. This is because when the legitimacy is sought from different constituents, some may approve the practice while others may not and in the absence of a domination, the organization may remain clueless as to where should the loyalties be placed. In practices where the outcome cannot be evaluated, the organizations can seek the legitimacy for technique and procedure termed as procedural legitimacy. If the organization demonstrates that, it follows ‘sound procedures’ in its newly founded operations, it may create a base for the procedural legitimacy – a variant of moral legitimacy. Hence, we argue that when there is no dominance of a single set of organization and there is no dominant pattern of doing a business, the organizations adopting divergent practices may opt for a theorization strategy that focuses on seeking the procedural legitimacy.

BRAC’s work on the participation of women from Bangladesh in economic activity is an interesting example of seeking the procedural legitimacy for a new practice (Mair and Marti, 2009). Constrained by socio-religious context, the rural women in Bangladesh find it difficult to participate in economic activities. BRAC through the Challenging the Frontier of Poverty Reduction Program (CFPR) program has been able to successfully legitimized the practice of women’s participation in the market. As evident the outcome of such practices are difficult to evaluate, hence they focus on seeking the legitimacy through building support for the procedures and related events planned in the program. They have sought the legitimacy support from society including religious leaders, village community, etc. (which can be considered the normative governance structure) through developing several capacity building programs aimed at women.

As the procedural legitimacy does not focus on any tangible benefit, the market governance structure may not be the intended audience for such a strategy. Rather the normative governance structure can be the most probable audience. In an emerging field, the normative governance structure is in an evolving state. Professional Associations, Industry Unions would try to get their footing gradually; since there is no a single dominant logic that permeates the field, the institutional gatekeepers such as Professional Associations may find it difficult to articulate their philosophy based on a single logic or in certain instances there may be more than one professional body campaigning for different logics. For example, in Indian microfinance there are at least two widely recognized professional associations of organizations – Sa-Dhan and Micro Finance Institution Network (MFIN). The Sa-Dhan is a promoter of development logic while the MFIN has an inclination towards the hybrid logic of microfinance. These sets of association have different viewpoints on the role of microfinance and the results that ought to be delivered by microfinance organizations. Therefore, in an emerging field, where the cause and effect relationships in the organizational actions are not widely shared, the evaluation of any activity based on its consequence may not seem to be feasible. Rather, the focus on rationality and soundness of the adopted practices would be more appropriate to seek the legitimacy. Therefore, we argue,

***Proposition 2:** In an emerging field where there is no a single established pattern of domination, the organizations would resort to theorization strategy that focuses most likely on the procedural legitimacy and targets the constituents of normative governance structure as its audience.*

Lack of Information Sufficiency

The information accessibility in an emerging field is limited. With a low level of interactions among the organizations and without any pattern of coalition, the field constituents generally do not have the required information for decision-making. In such cases when the organizational technology is not clearly understood, or the organizational goals are not clearly spelt out, the environment poses uncertainty to the organizations. When the organizations face the problem of an ambiguous nature and the causes and effects are not evident, they tend to model their behavior based on the other organizations. Modelling becomes a response to ambiguity and uncertainty. The organizations may not be aware of the rationality of a certain practice, but modelling their practices based on the other organizations projects them to be rational. Because of this modelling behavior, despite the existing variation in the organizations, most of them appear to be similar. The organizations tend to adopt the behavior of the relevant

organizations, which are well known. By mimicking the behavior of other established organizations, the organizations appear to be more credible.

Mimicking the organizational structure and practices gives the adopters the opportunity to locate themselves in a commonly accepted category of organizations. By including themselves within a socially constructed category, these organizations indicate their capacity to perform certain types of jobs (Scott, 1981). For example, a hospital with different divisions (pediatric, ophthalmologic, etc.), different hierarchies (senior doctor, resident doctor, junior doctor, etc.) installs confidence among the stakeholders that it can perform the desired job. Hence, the structural mimicking by the organizations makes it ‘the right organization for the job’ (Suchman, 1995). We argue that in an emerging field, in order to avoid the ambiguity due to the lack of information, the organizations sought the structural legitimacy for their structures and practices.

In the case of Indian microfinance, many commercial microfinance organizations adopted financial practices with a focus on standardization and growth, akin to the mainstream financial institutions (Sriram, 2010). These practices help the microfinance organizations to earn the confidence of investors, which in turn helps in attracting the resources. The mimicking of the practices borrowed from the mainstream financial institutions pushed these commercial microfinance organizations to a category of financial organizations that are focused on growth and efficiency. In an emerging field, the structural legitimacy helps to solve the problems that cannot be evaluated visibly like those related to goals, missions, etc. The target audience for justifying any practice based on the structural legitimacy would be the normative governance structure. The constituents of the normative governance like the professional associations would be keen to define the category of organizations that are perceived to have the capacity to deliver the performance. By building a category of organizations as ‘the right organization for the job’, the structural legitimacy has sought the approval of the normative governance structure. Therefore, we argue,

Proposition 3: *In an emerging field where there is no information sufficiency among actors, the organizations would resort to theorization strategy that focuses most likely on the structural legitimacy and targets the constituents of normative governance structure as its audience.*

Absence of Commonly Shared Purpose of Existence

In an emerging field, the organizations engaged in a similar business may not have a commonly shared purpose of existence. From a rational perspective, the organizational purpose for existence may remain limited to survival and growth, but from a macro-cultural perspective, the organizations exist for reasons beyond survival. The purpose of organizational existence frames the notion of organizational identity and helps to resolve the question “Who are we as an organization?” (Albert and Whetten, 1985). In an emerging field, where multiple logics co-exist exerting diverge institutional demands, the organizations respond to different logics through the constitution of different organizational identities (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Greenwood et al., 2011). Battilana and Dorado (2010) found that the microfinance loan officers who are identified as social workers carry the development logic and while those who are identified as the accountants carried the commercial logic. In such a situation of multiple identities, creating a common purpose for existence becomes challenging. Nevertheless, in the same paper, Battilana and Dorado also argue in favor of a need to create a shared organizational identity (hybrid identity) in order to prevent the organization from breaking apart.

In the absence of a commonly shared identity, the organizational actions may not have the legitimacy from the field constituents (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Greenwood et al 2011). For example, a certain set of activities is expected from an organization that identifies itself as a ‘Hospital’ such as treating patients, conducting critical medical procedure to cure ailments, etc. Such expectations are commonly shared across all the organizations that identify themselves as Hospitals. In the absence of a common identity of Hospital, these practices, which otherwise seem so obvious, may not have acceptance from the field constituents in totality. The identity of being a Hospital makes these organizations clear of their ultimate reason for existence and accordingly gives these practices a taken-for-granted status. The commonly shared purpose of existence is derived from what the organizations are meant to deliver. A Hospital is meant to cure people from ailments. Any Hospital that fails to deliver this outcome may lose its legitimacy within the field. Hence, we argue that the consequential legitimacy deriving from the outcome of the organizational action helps in developing a socially defined and commonly shared purpose of existence among the organizations.

The empirical context of Indian microfinance discussed in this paper, makes the case for consequential legitimacy. What is the purpose of the microfinance organizations – to run

the program efficiently by extending outreach or to target ultra-poor people to help them fight poverty (Morduch 2000)? The answer to this question defines the purpose of the existence for microfinance organizations and accordingly they would seek legitimacy from the field-constituent. However, in a field, when there is no commonly accepted purpose for existence across the field constituents, from whom the organizations would sought their consequential legitimacy? We propose that these organizations may not be in a position leave any constituent unattended due to the fear of losing the legitimacy. Consequently, they may have to address the constituents of both the normative and the market governance structures to seek the legitimacy. Therefore, we argue,

Proposition 4: *In an emerging field where there is no commonly shared purpose of existence among the participants, the organizations would resort to theorization strategy that focuses on the consequential legitimacy and targets the constituents of the normative and the market governance structures as its audience.*

Table 5: Theorization in Emerging Field

Dimensions of Emerging Field	Audience for Theorization	Focus of Theorization
Interactions	Market Governance (Example- investors, consumers)	Exchange Legitimacy
Domination	Normative Governance (Example - professional associations)	Procedural Legitimacy
Information sufficiency	Normative Governance (Example - professional associations)	Structural Legitimacy
Common purpose of existence	Normative Governance (Example - professional associations) Market Governance (Example- investors, consumers)	Consequential Legitimacy

As shown in Table 5, the actors associated with the market and the normative governance structures constitute the central audience from whom the legitimacy is being sought through theorization. The focus of theorization is centred on four dimensions of legitimacy viz., exchange, procedural, structural, and consequential. In summary, we propose that the organizations theorize the new practices by focusing primarily on the moral and the pragmatic legitimacies. Since the regulatory government structure is almost absent in an emerging field, the organizations often seek the legitimacy from the other two governance structures – market governance and normative governance. Specifically, we propose that the key to theorization of practices is the recognition of different attributes of an emerging field leading to structuration. This satisfies the fundamental argument on the role of theorization that it helps in the

institutionalization of an organizational field through legitimization (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2002).

The propositions reported in the paper can be studied in any empirical setting suited to be considered as emerging organizational field. For example, Indian microfinance can be a very relevant setting for these propositions to be examined. One can adopt a multiple case study design and examine the rhetoric used by selected microfinance organizations as they transformed from a non-profit to a for-profit format. Rhetoric is often used as a theorization strategy for diffusion of new practices. The data on rhetoric can be captured through qualitative tools like open interviews, archival materials, newspaper reporting, etc. Narrative analysis can be helpful in identifying the theorization strategies and its intended audience.

Conclusion

The theoretical argument that we pose in this paper, contributes to the existing literature in multiple ways. The early work on practice adoption by an organization focused on diffusion mechanism in a field (Green 2004; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Vaara et al., 2006). With the growing importance of organizational response to institutional complexity (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Greenwood et al., 2011; Greenwood et al., 2013), the diffusion of practices adopted by an organization as a part of response becomes a critical element to explore. The recent works on diffusion through theorization stress on the mechanism such as rhetoric, bricolage without acknowledging the stage of development of the field. This paper is an attempt to delineate more specifically the stages of development in a field, how they connect to the sources, and the focus of legitimacy. By linking the stages of development in an emerging field with the legitimacy, the paper has gone beyond the rhetorical strategies of theorization suggested by Suddaby and Greenwood (2005), and Vaara et al., (2006). These works highlight the focus of theorization in a mature field but do not link the theorization with the stages of structuration of a field. To address this gap we have discussed how the characteristics of an emerging field are intrinsically linked to the focus of theorization strategy. Accordingly, this paper contributes in framing a notion that in an emerging field, the moral and the pragmatic legitimacies are the major focuses of theorization.

We believe that this prediction on focus and target of theorization strategy in an emerging field is important given the increasing prevalence of the phenomenon of 'hybridization' (Pache and Santos, 2013) across the field. There is an explosion of hybrid

organizations and these organizations are continuously exposed to multiple and even contradictory institutional demands. They have to adopt the new practices that are earlier alien to them as well as the field. An interesting example may be the social enterprise as a hybrid organization pursuing a dual mission of financial sustainability and social purpose (Doherty et al, 2014). Because of its hybrid nature, the social enterprise requires to interact with a wide variety of stakeholders for the acquisition of resources. We argue that understanding the theorization and the intended audience can help these organizations to be more persuasive in seeking legitimacy.

The repository of theorization strategy developed in the paper is not without limitation. The definition of an organizational field lies in practice (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). It implies that the boundary of the field can only be decided once the actors get into practice and start interacting with the field. Within such constraints, theoretically it may not be possible to identify all the stakeholders constituting the governance structures. For the sake of simplicity, we have taken the market and the professionals as the major constituents of the field, ignoring the influence of the state. However, in practice, under certain situations, the state may have a decisive role as a source of legitimacy for the organization. The dimensions of legitimacy addressed through theorization strategy need not be exhaustive. The theorization involves both *saying* and *doing* things. *The saying* through theorization includes rhetorical, discursive strategies, etc. However, we do not have a detailed understanding on what includes in the *doing* as the theorization. In this paper, the legitimacy focus is primarily derived with the assumption of theorization as the *saying* things. As we look at theorization in terms of *doing* things, the propositions may include different dimensions of legitimacy other than those covered in the current paper.

Given the increasing focus on multiple institutional demands in uncertain environment, and the organization's response towards complexity, the future research may complement this work by exploring how the organizational position and skills can influence the implementation of theorization strategy in the face of varied institutional demand. Some of the questions that the future research can explore are – How does the theorization strategy vary for the organizations at the periphery of the emerging field compared to those at the centre of the field? What kinds of resource and skills are required for an organization to theorize effectively? What enabling conditions are required for a successful theorization? While much remains to be explored about theorization of practices, this paper hopes to provide a foundational

understanding on how the focus of theorization changes at the different stages of an emerging field.

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Faculty Profile:



Sushanta Kumar Sarma

Associate Professor

Area: Human Resource Management

Education: PGDM, FPRM (IRMA), PhD

Email: sushanta@tapmi.edu.in

Telephone: +91-820-2701048

Teaching: Organizational Behavior, Organizational Theory

Professional Activities

Prof. Sarma holds a doctoral degree (FPRM) from Institute of Rural Management Anand (Res topic: Theorization of Competing Logics in Emerging Organizational Field). Prior to joining the Fellow Programme, he has worked for five years in non-profit sector with organizations of national repute like CAPART, SEWA-Lucknow and PRADAN

Research

Competing Institutional logics, Institutional work, Organizational identity as theorization strategy, Microfinance.

Publications

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Sarma, Sushanta Kumar and Madhavi Mehta (2010), “People’s Education and Development Organization”- a case on organization culture. Used as a teaching case in the course “Understanding Organization” at IRMA.

Consultancy Assignments:

Conducted training need assessment for SEWA, Ahmedabad as a part of IRMA team for the project, “Assessing and Enhancing Managerial Effectiveness of Selected SEWA Bank Functionaries” in August, 2010.

Worked as a Sociologist and Gender Specialist in formulation mission of “Women’s Empowerment and Livelihood Programme in mid-Gangetic plains of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Priyadarshini)” for International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), from 17th June to 31st July, 2006.

“Reconfiguring SGSY: A Limited Scope Study” was conducted and presented jointly with Trust Consulting, Lucknow in state level workshop on “Empowering Livelihoods: State Policy, Private Initiative & Civil Society Action” at Lucknow from 22nd-23rd September, 2005.

Conference Presentations:

Sarma, Sushanta Kumar (2014), “Politician’s Dilemma: Interplay of Commitment and Conformity in Pluralism”, Paper presented at the Academy of Management Meeting, Philadelphia, USA,

Sarma, Sushanta Kumar (2013), “Walk the talk while pleasing all: Interplay of Commitment and Conformity in Pluralism”. Paper accepted for presentation at the 9th New Institutionalism Workshop, Warsaw, Poland.

Sarma, Sushanta Kumar (2012), “Changes haven’t Changed Us: Identity Protection as a Response to Institutional Complexity”. Paper accepted for presentation at PDW, “Organizational Institutionalism”, 28th EGOS Colloquium, 2-7 July, 2012, Helsinki, Finland.

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Sarma, Sushanta Kumar and Ishan Agrawal (2009), “Social Science Research in Vernacular Languages: Challenges and Opportunities”. Paper presented in 30th Anniversary Conference of Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) at IRMA, Anand, India on 15-16 December, 2009.

Awards:

His case ‘Who will lead the torch now?’ (Co-authored with Animesh Bahadur) was selected as the 1st best entry in EdgeFarm – CII WR HR Case Study Competition, 2015.

Selected for travel grant under Young Professional Award by International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to participate in the 13th Biennial Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) 2011 at Hyderabad, India on January 10-14, 2011.

His case study ‘Weaving Strength with Suta’ was selected as the third best entry for publication in the compendium of top 10 case studies under Sitaram Rao Livelihoods India - Case Study Competition, 2010. The event was organized under the aegis of India Livelihood Summit, November 17-18, 2010 and was hosted by Access Development Services.

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