

Isomorphism

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Strategic management of an organization's institutional environment requires an understanding of isomorphism. Hawley (1968) defined isomorphism as a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions. With their path breaking analysis of environmental effects on organization structure, Meyer and Rowan (1977) first applied the term isomorphism to institutions. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) elaborated the concept in their influential theory of institutional isomorphism in organizational fields.

The organizational field is defined in relational network and social constructionist terms as the organization's environment, including in aggregate key suppliers, resources, product consumers, regulatory agencies and other organizations that produce similar services or products. There are two types of isomorphism—competitive and institutional. The first refers to competition among organizations in an organizational field for resources and customers—the economic fit. The second refers to the quest for political power and legitimacy—the social fit. Distinct from efficiency and competitive motivations for organizations' adaptation to their environment, institutional isomorphism assumes that organizations seek legitimacy by conforming to a socially constructed environment.

The overarching proposition is that increases in 'structuration' in an organizational field lead to increases in isomorphism in organizational forms and practices. The activities of the professions, the state, and competition are the key drivers of organizational field structuration. This occurs by 1) an increase in interaction among organizations of the field; 2) the emergence of inter-organizational structures of domination and patterns of coalition; 3) an increase in the information overload with which organizations must attend to; 4) the development of mutual awareness among participants in a set of organizations that they are involved in a common enterprise.

Institutional isomorphic change occurs by three mechanisms—coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive isomorphism originates from political influence and organization's seeking legitimacy, as from government mandates derived from contract law; mimetic isomorphism is in response to uncertainty and seeking legitimacy for example from models diffused through consulting firms; and normative isomorphism refers organization's seeking legitimacy from alignment with professional values stemming from licensing and educational credentialing. Organizations centered in institutional environments where the professions and the state have a heavier hand are more susceptible to isomorphic pressures.

Boxenbaum and Jonsson's (2008) review concludes that it is difficult to determine the degree of empirical support for the concept of institutional isomorphism because DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) constructionist definition of isomorphic forces in an organizational field renders few studies directly comparable. Quantitative studies for example may apply the theory to an industry, not organizational field-level data set. Quantitative studies focus on the mechanisms in which practices spread, not the level of isomorphism in the field, suggesting that diffusion is

synonymous with isomorphism. This may conflate legitimacy driven isomorphism with the concept of diffusion which can be driven by competing theories, such as resource dependence. Isomorphism studies became so prevalent that Mizruchi and Fein (1999) studied their implementation, concluding that among the three isomorphic pressures, mimesis has received the most attention, suggesting this research is shaped by academic trends. Clearer evidence of isomorphism is found within the world system literature, where the unit of analysis is better defined and highly aggregated, prompting the question of how observer distance and level of abstraction contribute to findings. Kraatz and Zajac (1996) showed that increasing maturity of an organizational field did not lead to the expected isomorphism in educational programs because of a simultaneous increase in competitive pressure to differentiate student programs. Scholarly attention to isomorphism research has peaked with more recent emphasis on culture and cognition and individual- and organization-level agency and institutional logics (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008).

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Definition

A concept derived from population biology and mathematics and applied to institutions and organizations to understand the constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions. Increases in structuration of organizations' environment increases isomorphism in their forms and practices. Structuration is driven by the activities of the state and the professions and organizations seeking legitimacy by conforming to state mandates and professional norms.

Cross-references

Institutional theory

Institutional environment

Decoupling

Keywords (index terms)

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