EUN YOUNG (EY) SONG
University College London
The Bartlett School of Construction & Project Management
(TBD, in the meantime: eysongg@gmail.com)

OSW-003: Goodness overloaded: Bystanders' role in undoing institutional change

Abstract

Why are some positive changes prone to being reversed? Although this is an important question in institutional studies, surprisingly little is known about inherent limits to change. To fully understand why some changes are prone to reversal, I focus on a particular type of institutional change, namely, morally right and socially desirable change. In this study, I address this question, turning my attention to bystanders. Drawing on insights from the literature on bystander apathy (Darley & Latané, 1968; Garcia, Weaver, Moskowitz, & Darley, 2002; Latané & Darley, 1969) and common knowledge (Chwe, 1998, 2001; Clark & Marshall, 1992; Lewis, 1969), I introduce the concept of the imagined scope of responsibility: the degree of action or participation in the process of change to which a person feels compelled. Bystanders, as ordinary people, are more likely to be influenced by their perception of fellow bystanders' behavior than by that of activists or institutional entrepreneurs. I argue that the imagined scope of responsibility of a bystander increases due to the perceived presence of a few active bystanders within the community. Having observed the actions of those around him or her as a signal of there being "good types" in the community, a bystander is likely to feel an impulse to follow the behavior of fellow bystanders. However, the scope of responsibility that bystanders perceive to apply to themselves decreases when it appears evident that everyone else also supports the good cause and is ready to act. In such a case, the bystander public is likely to come to see support of the change as a routine performance and is likely to withdraw their support. I test my thesis using original data on 44,204 individuals obtained from the Danish *Frihedsmuseets modstandsdatabase* (The Freedom Museum's Resistance Database) in the context of the displacement of Danish Jews during WWII. Considering the society-wide desirable change of breaking official rules to help people on the run, I conduct multinomial logistic regressions to predict bystanders' help.

The main contribution of this study is its clarification of how socially desirable institutional change can be reversed, an issue which prior studies have tended to skirt. The assumption that new behaviors potentially become institutions has led us to expect for change a binary outcome of either success or failure (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002), leaving a void in the research on the chance that change is reversed. The present study enriches current research on institutional change in this area. Furthermore, it provides promising avenues for future research on the role of bystanders in undoing apparently successful institutional change. The prevailing account is that mobilizing a crowd not only increases the chance of change but also sows the seed of internal contradiction from multiple institutional orders (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017). Although acknowledging potentially conflicting institutional arrangements aids understanding of adverse outcomes of change, those outcomes are often something new rather than reversals of original changes. In this regard, the identification of the imagined scope of responsibility complements the literature, because it advances the understanding of the role of bystanders in systematically diminishing the perceived need for change and limiting the mechanisms through which socially desirable change can occur. Lastly, this study provides important insights into the question whether public indifference or even intolerance will develop as the number of good Samaritans grows. I propose (and empirically test) that the bystander public is unlikely to assume personal responsibility for a humanitarian crisis when everyone is aware of the likely support of everyone else. Taken together, the results of this study have theoretical and practical implications for understanding institutional change in the context of displacement.

References

Battilana, J., Leca, B., & Boxenbaum, E. (2009). How actors change institutions: Towards a theory of institutional entrepreneurship. *Academy of Management Annals, 3*(1), 65-107.

Chwe, M. S.-Y. (1998). Culture, circles, and commercials: Publicity, common knowledge, and social coordination. *Rationality and Society, 10*(1), 47-75.

Chwe, M. S.-Y. (2001). *Rational ritual: Culture, coordination, and common knowledge*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Clark, H. H., & Marshall, C. R. (1992). Definite reference and mutual knowledge. In H. H. Clark (Ed.), *Areas of language use* (pp. 9-59). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 8*(4), 377-383.

Garcia, S. M., Weaver, K., Moskowitz, G. B., & Darley, J. M. (2002). Crowded minds: The implicit bystander effect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83*(4), 843-853.

Greenwood, R., Raynard, M., Kodeih, F., Micelotta, E. R., & Lounsbury, M. (2011). Institutional complexity and organizational responses. *Academy of Management Annals, 5*(1), 317-371.

Greenwood, R., Suddaby, R., & Hinings, C. R. (2002). Theorizing change: The role of professional associations in the transformation of institutionalized fields. *Academy of Management Journal, 45*(1), 58-80.

Latané, B., & Darley, J. M. (1969). Bystander "Apathy". *American Scientist, 57*(2), 244-268.

Lewis, D. K. (1969). *Convention: A philosophical study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Micelotta, E., Lounsbury, M., & Greenwood, R. (2017). Pathways of institutional change: An integrative review and research agenda. *Journal of Management, 43*(6), 1885-1910.