

involve charting the institutional work that goes into creating, maintaining and perhaps even destroying brand logics in different industries. The tools and theories of institutional theory could prove to be right for the job here. A third pregnant question is the role of brand value and various technologies of valuation that have been applied to brands. This research would look at the various techniques and agencies that have appeared that turn brands into a financial asset that can be put on balance sheets and circulated on markets. The sociology of finance might come in handy here.

The final question that begs for answers is how brands work as a new form of power in the workplace and how they are resisted. This would involve researchers looking in depth at how brands can be a complex form of control that goes beyond normative control in important and fascinating ways. It would also involve asking how exactly this new form of control is resisted and contested by those subject to it. Studies of power in organizations could prove useful here. Organization theorists are uniquely equipped to begin to make sense of these pressing questions. It therefore seems that if we want to understand our collective self-portraits in a brand society then we need to draw on some of the tools which we as organization theorists can offer.

Note

- 1 Redfern is the last railway station before Sydney central. This phrase is usually used to describe a rather risky contraceptive method. I will leave the reader the space to guess what it is.

Göran Ahrne and Nils Brunsson: Meta-organizations

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Olga Malets
Technische
Universität München,
Germany

What do the European Union, Universal Postal Union, Forest Stewardship Council, International Cremation Federation, United Nations, Federation of Swedish Industries and the Swedish Associations of Local Authorities have in common? What can we learn from comparing these organizations ranging from local and national associations of industries or municipalities to large intergovernmental organizations? What could be a basis for such a comparison? In their new book, Göran Ahrne and Nils Brunsson provide answers to these questions. They argue that organizational scholars have mainly focused on developing a theory of organizations that consist of individuals and that it is high time we should look at organizations that have other organizations as their members. They call them meta-organizations.

Ahrne and Brunsson point out that such organizations have been important in structuring and organizing contemporary societies. Without them, we would not be able to send a letter abroad or have a single European currency, yet they have remained relatively under-theorized. Meta-organizations are in many respects similar to organizations made up of individuals but do have a number of properties that make them different and require a separate theory to explain their emergence and functioning. In turn, since there are fewer rules that govern the

activity of meta-organizations, the study of meta-organizations may contribute to the general theory of organizations by highlighting fundamental organizing processes of innovation, experimentation and conflict. In order to close this theoretical gap, Ahrne and Brunsson develop the concept of meta-organizations, outline the foundations of the theory of meta-organizations and sketch avenues for future research.

The book is some 200 pages long and consists of nine chapters. After a brief introduction, the authors expand their definition of meta-organizations, describe the varieties of meta-organizations (Ch. 2) and elaborate on key differences between meta-organizations and individual-based organizations (Ch. 3). In the subsequent chapters they focus on the creation and maintenance of meta-organizations (Ch. 4); on the relationship between differences and similarities between meta-organizations and their members as well as on the role of identities (Ch. 5); on conflicts and decision making in meta-organizations (Ch. 6); and on their dynamics (Ch. 7). In the two final chapters, they propose a set of hypotheses and questions for future research.

The book contains many theoretical insights, promising hypotheses and interesting empirical examples that highlight a very special character of meta-organizations and shed new light on the organizations that may seem to be well researched and even 'boring' (Meyer 2001 cited by Ahrne and Brunsson on p.146). The book is easy to read. At the same time, it is intriguing and thought-provoking. It clearly opens up a new field in organizational analysis and lays the ground for a new perspective on many familiar organizations. The book would be of interest both to the experienced readership looking for new insights and to beginners and the general public with little knowledge of organization theory.

Across chapters, the main arguments presented in the book concern two central themes of organizational analysis: the relationship of organizations with their environment and with their members. The authors argue that meta-organizations are attempts to eliminate parts of their environment but in contrast to other forms of environment elimination, such as a conquest or a merger, no organizations disappear and the motives for organizing are different. Meta-organizations are established for information exchange and joint knowledge creation, collaboration and the creation of common rules (for example, to regulate competition among members), for creating a new actor (for example, to lobby or campaign for their common interests) and for creating and reinforcing status and identity hierarchies in an organizational field. As far as the membership theme is concerned, the authors suggest that, in order to survive, meta-organizations have to creatively manage differences and similarities between members, as well as between a meta-organization and its members, and continuously balance their own identities with the identities of their members. These are challenges unknown to individual-based organizations.

The authors assert that individuals are different from organizations in several important ways and that this has serious implications for the operation of meta-organizations. Although this may seem to be obvious, scholars often treat individuals and organizations as 'actors', thus making fundamental differences between them murky. Ahrne and Brunsson make a strong contribution by critically analysing the differences between people and organizations as members of

organizations. I can cite only a few examples here. Ahrne and Brunsson point out that the lifespan of organizations is less predictable than that of human beings. Meta-organizations, therefore, face more uncertainty and cannot predict their future: They do not always know how long their members, and thus they themselves, may be around. This causes problems that individual-based organizations are not likely to face. There are also fewer similar organizations than similar individuals that can become members of organizations. There are fewer universities than university students. This implies that meta-organizations are likely to have a smaller pool of potential members and to be more dependent on them. In turn, this requires meta-organizations to be more flexible and creative in recruiting and keeping members. Moreover, meta-organizations can become competitors to their members, which is never the case with individuals as members of organizations. In sum, meta-organization is a separate form of organizing that has been overlooked in the organization theory. Studying it can deliver interesting insights about organizational life of meta-organizations and their members.

Yet, the question that often comes to mind is whether the demarcation line that Ahrne and Brunsson draw between meta-organizations and individual-based organizations is indeed so strict. Individuals may leave an organization and found a competing organization, which may put the former organization under pressure or even threaten its existence. In this case, organizations turn out to be dependent on their individual members in the same way as meta-organizations are dependent on their member organizations. In the rest of the review, I discuss several examples that might challenge this demarcation line. I focus on two issues. One deals with the differences and similarities between meta-organizations and individual-based associations. The authors do not clearly distinguish between these two types of organizations, focusing instead on the differences between meta-organizations and individual-based organizations in general. The second issue deals with the lack of a clear classification of meta-organizations, which, I argue, could help in formulating hypotheses about the relationship between certain characteristics of meta-organizations and their environments and the patterns of behaviour of meta-organizations. Along with a number of avenues for further research that the authors identify in the conclusion of the book, the discussion of these issues may suggest how the theory of meta-organizations can be enriched further.

(1) Many features that the authors identify are undoubtedly important for defining meta-organizations, but at least some of these features and problems associated with them are also characteristic of associations that consist of individuals. The authors, however, do not explicitly specify the differences between individual-based and organization-based associations. They compare meta-organizations to all types of organizations that consist of individuals. Yet, individual-based organizations are not all the same. Ahrne and Brunsson point out that meta-organizations are always associations. In this sense, they are different from business conglomerates and federative states, exactly as associations are different from firms or states. In both meta-organizations and individual-based associations, membership is voluntary and can cease at any time. Members are equal. Associations do not have a clear hierarchy, as firms or states have. Decision making is democratic. Members keep most of their autonomy and their identity.

Therefore, meta-organizations can be redefined as associations of individual-based organizations.

This may explain why many problems that meta-organizations face, according to the authors, can also be typical for individual-based associations. The motives for creating individual-based associations are similar, including information exchange, regulation of competition, collaboration or lobbying. Professional associations, associations of senior citizens or associations of natural disaster victims serve as examples. Membership and recruitment may also constitute problems for individual-based associations. In many fields, the number of organizations that can become members of a meta-organization is less than a dozen. Clearly, the pool of potential members is small and the unwillingness of one large member to join can make the efforts to establish a meta-organization worthless. The pool of individuals is always larger, but in some cases only several dozen individuals with a common interest would be available for an association. In this case, it is also likely that associations would have problems with organizing a strong association and would work hard to recruit and keep their members. Moreover, it is likely that such associations would be highly dependent on their few members. Similar to meta-organizations, it is often the case that not everyone can become a member of an association. People have to be beauty surgeons, journalists or professional auditors to join the respective professional associations. They have to share a similar educational background, experience and identity. Both meta-organizations and individual-based associations may recruit their members by creating them: international meta-organizations can establish a national organization while individual-based organizations can win members by making their ideas known to potential members via promotion or education. Associations may also face the need to manage differences and similarities within their members. Groups within political parties, trade unions or non-governmental organizations may want different things within a defined spectrum. They may threaten to leave the association unless their interests are taken into consideration. Associations may find themselves needing to accommodate different views if the exit of this group is likely to weaken the association.

These examples do not make the theory proposed by Ahrne and Brunsson weaker but suggest that thinking about differences and similarities between associations of people and associations of organizations may help generate new ideas for both the theory of associations and the theory of meta-organizations, as well as the general theory of organizations. Contrasting these two types of organizations highlights the issue of the degree to which organizations reveal certain characteristics. This brings me to the second issue.

(2) The examples above, as well as many examples in the book, suggest that claims and hypotheses formulated by Ahrne and Brunsson can hold for some meta-organizations (and possibly associations) but not for others. While some meta-organizations may indeed find it difficult to recruit and keep members, the European Union may actually find it necessary to restrict access to this meta-organization and set up strict accession rules. Organizations with a more heterogeneous membership, such as the Forest Stewardship Council, where members represent economic, environmental and social interests in forestry and are both individuals and organizations, are more likely to face difficulties

in managing differences and similarities between their members than more homogeneous organizations. This suggests two points. First, some sort of classification would be helpful to understand how meta-organizations structure their relations with the environment and with their members. We learn from different examples that meta-organizations can be national or international, or large or small, have more or less homogeneous membership or consist of states, firms, civic associations or other meta-organizations. It should be possible to formulate hypotheses that would specify the relationship between certain characteristics of meta-organizations (and individual-based associations) and the ways they manage environmental and membership relations. Since, however, there are many factors that shape this relationship, it may also be important to search for combinations of factors or structural conditions that lead to certain patterns of behaviour of meta-organizations. Such hypotheses would enable a more systematic study of many meta-organizations. This would help specify what kinds of organization are likely to emerge under what conditions and operate in a specific way.

Ahrne and Brunsson conclude by acknowledging that the book spells out the foundations of the theory of meta-organizations rather than providing final answers. On the last two pages, they list numerous open questions about the dynamics of meta-organizations, their impact on their members and the future of meta-organizations that are becoming increasingly global. They ask how meta-organizations that are both the driver and the product of globalization would change over time. The book should, therefore, be a 'must' not only for organizational scholars looking at organizations that Ahrne and Brunsson call meta-organizations but also for sociologists, political scientists and students of international relations seeking a new perspective on the relationship between organizations and globalization. *Meta-organizations* is best described as a source of many interesting ideas that need to be empirically tested.

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**Thomas Lawrence, Roy Suddaby and Bernard Leca (eds):
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Frank Wijen
Rotterdam School of
Management,
Erasmus University,
The Netherlands

When social processes derail, people tend to rediscover the value of effective institutions. It thus seems hardly surprising that, amidst environmental and economic crises, Elinor Ostrom and Oliver Williamson received the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics for their work on the contingent effectiveness of institutions to govern environmental resources and economic processes, respectively. Yet, academic interest in institutions has a long and rich history, at least dating back