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Disentangling executive relationships in light of social autopoiesis

(conducted together with Stijn Viaene)

Abstract

When one starts to ponder the possible entropy of our social universe of communications, the emergence and persistence of organizations amid such potential communicative chaos seems improbable. A number of theorists have concluded from this thought experiment that the key to understanding the management will come from understanding how organizations can surface and survive from this primordial soup of communications. (Morgan, 1997; Knudsen, 2005; Ocasio 2005; Seidl, 2005).

German social scientist Niklas Luhmann's answer to this conundrum was the concept of social autopoiesis (Seidl & Becker, 2006). Luhmann borrowed the notion of autopoiesis from evolutionary biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (Seidl & Becker, 2006). According to Maturana & Varela, the key to the survival of cells is their ability to reproduce their own essential molecules, such as lipids, proteins, and so on (1980). Correspondingly, in Luhmann's theory, social systems are only able to sustain if they are able to kickoff and uphold the recursive self-reproduction of their own building blocks, i.e. communications (Luhmann, 2005).

Mingers (2002) summarizes a number of main points of attraction of Luhmann's work for organization researchers. First, the distinction made between the process of organizing and the structures that govern it allows the researcher to account for continuous change without loss of identity, even in cases of radical change (see also Hernes & Bakken (2003) for further discussion on this matter). Second, Luhmann does not restrict the identification of a system to the identification of specific inputs and outputs. This allows for more openness and creativity in determining the influences on a system. Third, structural determinism places the origin of change and development firmly within the system rather than from the environment.

Notwithstanding that perturbers of a system's autopoiesis can be highly varied, ultimately understanding organizing comes down to understanding how these influences are processed within the system. This fits well with Giddens' (1984) ideas on structuration and recursivity. Fourth, Luhmann's theory of communication and the interpenetration of meaning between psychic and social systems allows for the application of theories of languaging (e.g. Habermas, 1979). Finally, Luhmann's theory also resonates well with social constructivist viewpoints on how we ourselves 'bring forth' the world we experience (Gergen, 1999).

To develop new pathways for management thinking, we propose in this paper to consider management as the act of influencing the processes and structures of autopoiesis by a specific kind of social systems, organizations. We will illustrate this proposition by applying an autopoietic view on shared meaning creation between executives with different functional backgrounds, i.e Chief Information Officers (CIOs) and Chief Financial Officers (CFOs).

We will adopt and develop Luhmann's conceptualization of three dimensions of social meaning establishment in social systems: the social dimension (who), the factual dimension (what), and the temporal dimension (when) (Luhmann, 1985; 1995). We will then apply said meaning dimensions to empirical data collected from 7 case studies of reputed CIO-CFO dyads. By doing so we will be able to disentangle how these CIOs and CFOs have been able to establish meaningful working relationships.

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