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Towards a relational innovation

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relational
innovation

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to work on the relational innovation. Innovation is a key factor in understanding organizations. Emerged as a growth paradigm, it is a good indicator of their priorities. Considered in a more pragmatic way, it has been noticed that other forms of innovation linked to relationships are developing alongside the most formal technological one.

Findings – Highlighted in the 1960s, administrative innovation aimed to account for the stakeholders involved and how, by modifying the relationships, they were able to change the configurations of the organization. Since then, the authors mentioned the concept of organizational innovation which has been extended and modified. The term is still being discussed, but it has already appeared in the continuation of previous research.

Originality/value – The authors put forward a related and different form of organizational innovation: a relational innovation. This one seems to be linked to relational patterns of the organization. This theory paper aims to present relational innovation.

Keywords Innovation, Organizational innovation, Knowledge management, Managerial innovation, Relational innovation

Paper type Viewpoint

A simple query on Google shows that more than 400 million pages dealing with innovation are available for reading. Innovation has got a place that goes well beyond organizations and affects the whole society. One only has to read political or economic discourses in France, making innovation an indispensable recourse for growth. This dogma around innovation, sometimes associated with growth sometimes with progress, has been questioned for some 15 years (Alter, 2002) if not criticized (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2011). For a long time in France, innovation was rhyming with technology (Godet *et al.*, 2010). There is a translation from an academic point of view. The relational processes around innovation, and even the innovation linked to relationships, are still quantitatively minor; according to Crossan and Apaydin (2010), out of the 1,000 articles written on innovation per year only 4 per cent focus on describing the processes around innovation and less than 3 per cent deal with organizational administrative innovation. To paraphrase Chanlat (1990), do relationships constitute the “forgotten dimensions” of innovation?

This seems more surprising given that since the mid-2000s many researchers have wanted to promote innovations centred on individuals and their relationships. We can cite, for example, Gary Hamel at Harvard or Birkinshaw at the London School of Economics. This interest goes hand in hand with research on an “unleashed” enterprise (Getz and Carney, 2012), where the individual would be at the core of a particularly informal innovation where creativity and the search for productivity would go through processes and tools that are not necessarily technological but rather relational. Following their aftermath, since 2012, we have noticed a resurgence of interest in the community of management



science researchers for the notions of organizational innovation (e.g. a special issue of the *Revue Française de Gestion* in 2013) or management (Damanpour and Aravind, 2012). Our theoretical article returns initially to the difficulty of speaking about innovation. We then establish a chronology and a definition of the innovations linked to relations (administrative innovation, organizational innovation, managerial innovation).

Finally, we would like to provide a different perspective of innovation: a relational innovation. The latter is related to the concept of culture, revisited by the earliest studies of cultural anthropology and especially relational patterns (or relational patterns, Benedict, 1934). This is the first step allowing answering to the following question: Why on equal terms, some organizations are able to adapt to change when others cannot? Taken from this perspective, relational innovation is just the manifestation of a broader package – a relational heritage in which individuals within organizations draw on unexpected situations or problems they have to solve.

1. Perspectives and biases around innovation

In the field of innovation management, relational processes have often been broached as phenomena facilitating or preventing the “good” management of innovation. Thus, many articles have regarded innovation from the perspective of change or apprenticeship (Hage, 1999). In this context, innovation is only one means of analysing change or flows of information or knowledge within organizations. Studies examining the relation as a specific phenomenon that can lead to innovations of a relational type have been rare. At least four phenomena make it difficult to build a consensus and a unified research field on relational innovation and more generally on innovation.

First, innovation and its social reception have altered our representation to the point of creating myths (Birkinshaw, Op. Cit.). Growth, progress [...] are all terms often contiguous to innovation. After Schumpeter, few researchers showcase that an organization can evolve without resorting to innovation. Relational-type innovation is often associated with services reflecting the shift from the centre of gravity of industrial activity to non-product-related market activity (Pauget and Peyrard Moulard, 2013).

Second, if we try to define a relational innovation, we must at least be able to explain these two terms. As noted by Clarkson (1995) about the relationship:

It is the first condition of being human. It is so obvious that it is frequently taken for granted and so mysterious that many [...] have made it a focal point of a lifetime's preoccupying passion.

With a vague term and a porous outline, the relationship cannot easily be understood or deified (Pauget, 2013). In the service economy (Djellal *et al.*, 2003), relations underlie the creation of services, but these relations are not clearly defined. The term innovation is just overused[1].

The third relates to the nature of innovation: Crossan and Apaydin (2010) pointed out that analyses of innovation are not replicable:

According to Schumpeter, innovation is reflected in novel outputs: a new good or a new quality of a good; a new method of production; a new market; a new source of supply; or a new organizational structure, which can be summarized as ‘doing things differently’. However, as Hansen and Wakonen state, ‘it is practically impossible to do things identically’ (Hansen and Wakonen, 1997, p. 350), which makes any change an innovation by definition.

Indeed, from an epistemic point of view, it is difficult to define what is singular, even if it is not unique. If this is achieved, it is necessary to be able to replicate this understanding if we place ourselves in a positivist paradigm. However, how can we study the replication of

innovations linked to relationships, knowing that the same causes do not necessarily produce the same effects?

Finally, the fields of study of innovation are extremely extensive. Indeed, innovation extends from the initial idea to the product/service. In other words, it covers virtually every aspect of the organization. The associated fields for the study of innovation are felt in management, strategy, marketing [...] or in more cross-cutting themes (learning, key competences, knowledge management) (Cohendet *et al.*, 2013). It is innovations known as organizational innovations “non-technological processes” that are put forward (Dubouloz, 2014) in the field of management.

It is this perspective that we are going to process in our second part devoted to innovation related to relationships.

2. Administrative innovation

In the 1960s, sociologists and managers focused on the limits of a rational approach, regardless of being economic or sociological. The idea of a rational *Homo economicus* or even of a rational organization cracks: one thinks here of Weber in particular whose works are being criticized. In France, it is the Marxist approach that is questioned. In his early works, Crozier wonders why workers in factories in France do not have class consciousness, whereas the Marxist theory would like them to have it. In his upcoming writings, Crozier will endeavour to describe the actors' games (*The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*). They can innovate by changing work habits according to their interests. This perspective has often been studied superficially: the actors, namely, react to bureaucratic limitation by imagining strategies for their own benefit or by forwarding the aims of the organization regardless of its functioning that they consider too rigid. In this sense, even if the aims seem to be different from that of the Americans (a positive perspective to develop the organization), this current of the sociology of Paris can be linked in a wide acceptance to administrative innovation.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Evan (1996) offers to overturn the classical vision of innovation. In the latter in fact, innovation is a product often underpinned by technological research. This vision is inherited from two industrial revolutions. Evan points out the interactions between individuals who are capable of having an impact on the functioning of the organization. Beyond this shared opinion with Crozier, Evans considers that the modes of coordination (horizontal and vertical) can be modified.

Damanpour (1991) extends this definition: administrative innovation is described as likely to modify the design of the organization:

(it has) a structural organizational innovations influence, change and improve responsibilities, accountability, command lines and information flows as well as the number of hierarchical levels, the divisional structure of functions (research and development, production, human resources, financing, etc.) or the separation between line and support functions. Such structural organizational innovations include, for instance, the change from an organizational structure of functions (product development, production, human resources, etc.) into product- or customer-oriented lines, segments, divisions or business units.

Relationships must be managed as a means to gain responsiveness and flexibility. For Damanpour and Evan (1984), the organization has to rely on a social system, that is, a set of relationships at work to optimize them to more effectively carry out a specific task or objective. Stating a study case of a major hospital (Pauget and Wald, 2017), administrative innovation was manifested, for example, through schedules change and meetings planning to add some flexibility to the organization. These innovations are not very visible and are often associated with a well-established hierarchical structure. In a bureaucratic organization, they appear to be linked to the willingness of the actors to carry out a common task more or less complex.

3. Organizational innovation

In the second part of his study, [Evan \(1996, p. 51\)](#) enhances the study of innovation by adding to it a more individual tone. Administrative innovation can also be: “an idea for a new policy pertaining to the recruitment of personnel, the allocation of resources, the structuring of tasks, of authority, of rewards”. This perspective will be taken up by [Damanpour](#), who has spoken of organizational innovation which had been developed during the 2000s. [Leroy et al.](#) attribute the notion of innovation to the end of 1970s ([Daft, 1978](#)), but innovation as defined then has a different meaning from its posterior use. It was by the end of the 1980s ([Damanpour, 1987, 1991, 2012](#)) that the vocabulary changed gradually. It will witness a long eclipse to come back later on in another form (we speak of managerial innovation ([Birkinshaw and Mol, 2006; Hamel, 2009](#)). In this specific case, innovation is drawing near more to a change in perspective on behalf of actors. They picture another form of organization and other ways to collaborate [...]. This type of innovation, called organizational innovation, is also considered in the literature as an equivalent of managerial innovation ([Peris-Ortiz and Hervás-Oliver, 2014](#)). Starting in the 2000s, the innovation linked to relations is centred on the management and manager: “managerial innovation is the implementation of new practices, processes and management structures that are significantly different from the usual standards” ([Birkinshaw and Mol, 2006](#)) translated by [Jaouen and Leroy \(2012\)](#). [Birkinshaw et al. \(2008\)](#) offer an integrating model in which four dimensions are put forward. They aim to account for the process of creating managerial innovations by focusing on the motivation of the actors (it all starts with them); the experimentation during which new ideas relative to managerial innovation appear; the implementation of this innovation and finally the legitimization of the latter within the social system (in the sense of [Damanpour](#)). This characterization of the innovation process provides a possible way of explaining the birth of an idea to its adoption in the organization.

[Nobre \(2013\)](#) thinks that this type of innovation calls into question the foundations usually described of management. De facto, if we examine the history of management, we can see that at least two elements at the heart of the construction of organizations inherited from Taylorism are progressively contested ([Thietart, 2001](#), reedition). The first element is the silo organization which results in a lack of coordination and communication between the various entities of the organization (department, divisions [...]). Some responses were put forward: project management to encourage the repartitioning of teams and deal collectively with complex cases, flattening the structure to limit hierarchical levels and gaining more responsiveness, particularly within the framework of health and social organizations ([Grenier and Pauget, 2006](#)). The second element is more recent. It consists of a new challenge to authority to the point of imagining, in [Hamel's](#) words, “a business without a leader”. The paradox is therefore to call for a managerial innovation aimed at eliminating management. We will highlight the contrast between Francophone literature which makes of managerial innovation a mix between organizational and managerial innovation (close to the definition of [Damanpour and Aravind, 2012](#)) and the Anglo-Saxon literature for which managerial innovation is characteristic of a new phase in the life of organizations that go beyond Taylorism. In this type of post-Taylorist organization, it is the quality of relations and their reconfigurations that are at the origin of managerial innovation. Examples of companies are put forward (such as [Goretex](#) or [Valve](#) [...]). The latter is particularly highlighted because it runs in a very competitive sector (video games) where innovations take place at a very rapid pace. According to [Gary Hamel](#), for example, it is in the very organization of [Valve](#) that success must be sought. In this undertaking, there is no leader. Each employee comes up at the end of the year with a project that must be approved by the other employees. He will be allocated resources to carry out his project according to the success of the proposal.

3.1 *The limits of managerial innovation*

Nevertheless, the limits of this type of innovation are rarely covered. Hage (1999) already pointed out some of them. Is this type of innovation compatible with a high degree of complexity in the division of tasks? The companies presented are often highly structured in small autonomous units but this is not in itself new even if a level in the initiative left to the employees is often crossed. The second is the size of the organization. In France, a study on organizational innovation and reduction of working time (*réduction du temps de travail*, RTT) shows that size has little to do with the ability or not to innovate (Ashkenazy, 2003). Is this internationally valid? The third is the purpose of innovation. A sectorial study of the literature was undertaken. We quickly focused on the health and social sector among all sectors. This one is currently being reconfigured and is trying to find other organizational models. Moreover, it is strongly marked by its relational character (Pauget, 2014). According to a classical perspective, Kimberly and Evanisko (1981), innovation should be looked at from a decision-making angle. However, Girard and Vézina (2002) provide a different insight. Economic performance cannot be compared to other sectors. There is a strong challenge around the finality and more precisely the notion of utility. Huard and Schaller (2012) are on the same track when speaking of finality of use. What is the criterion that can allow institutionalizing and then disseminating an innovation based on relationships? (Pauget and Wald, 2017)

4. Relational innovation

4.1 *Definition of the relational innovation*

How can certain organizations manage external constraints and adapt to their environment better than other ones with an equal configuration? This classical question in the literature of the resource can be viewed according to a relational perspective. We define relational innovation as a set of relational configurations in which actors are exploring and which help them to reinvent their daily life, their task management, their coordination with other members of the organization [. . .].

We follow Linton (1977, pp. 56-57) who emphasized that:

[. . .] since an environment is never completely static, no society can survive without an occasional inventor who can find solutions to new problems. Even if he often invents in order to cope with the pressures he feels like other members of society, it is essentially his own needs which pursue and push him to invent.

By following Lefort taken over by Dubar (2003), we define institutions as “a set of patterns [. . .] determined by the repetition of individual actions”. In other words, we choose to see the organization as a cultural paradigm (Morgan, 1989) and to associate innovation with culture unlike managerial innovation. This perspective has already been intended by Van De Ven (1986) who reminded us that innovation is first and foremost a perception which is related to our purpose and a way of considering relationships to deal with a given problem (Fourcade, 2008). Rogers (1995) was not saying anything else, taking into consideration that novelty is above all a matter of point of view of individuals in the organization – (see also, Leroy *et al.*, Op. Cit.). Its genesis (or failure to be born) depends on the point of view of individuals.

4.1.1 *Proximity and cultural alignment allowing the birth of innovation.* Busse (2014) showed that culture could facilitate innovation. This view of culture, which is classical, is in line with the one given by Linton (1977), where it is described as “a way of incorporating, feeling and thinking”. However, Linton continued:

[...] in reality, the role of the individual towards society is double. In usual circumstances, the more perfect its conditioning and integration into the social culture, the more efficient its contribution to the proper functioning of the whole, and the more its reward is ensured (p. 56 in its French translation).

It should be understood that interactions between individuals found a social system that allows a more or less important proximity to prevailing rules and values. Individuals draw relational patterns settled by habits and values (of the sense) from this social system.

4.2 How does innovation spring up and how is it institutionalized?

We state that it is in the recombination or the creation of relations that a relational innovation raises. It can come either from individuals at the centre of relations of the organization (Pauget and Wald, 2013) or from individuals at the margin. We think that relational innovation becomes prominent (and therefore can be studied) when individuals are faced with problems (complex cases to be dealt with [...]). It is therefore the practice-relation bond that is essential to generate a relational innovation. The individual who would like to institutionalize a relational innovation can adopt different postures. He can either try to generate practices and new relational habits within communities (professional or practices) and/or try to sediment these relational innovations in the rules [...] of the organization in which case it enters into a game of actors.

Fourcade (2008) suggested a relational organizational innovation. This one was built on a set of similarities and/or proximity in connection with a territory. Though the relational character was emphasized it was not clearly defined however.

Bringing back Linton's work to the organization, we reckon that the more complex the tasks are to be carried out (which leads either to a very advanced labour division by the mechanistic organization or because the tasks require many experts to deal with problems), the more the social system is weakened. In other words, the heritage diversity of the social system declines with an important increased division of tasks. Culture then becomes a "selection of cultural options" (Dubar Op. Cit., Linton, Op. Cit.). In organizations that are emerging or collapsing owing to a too strong external shock (the collapse of market share at a short notice), the plasticity of the social system is at its peak. However, it is not plasticity that makes relational innovation possible. It is in the ability to identify problems and to draw (or reconfigure) relational habits, resulting from a settled social system.

In more stable organizations, innovation is much more "ordinary" (Alter, Op. Cit.) and the problem of the adoption of relational innovation is raised. Its institutionalization is guided by the meaning that innovation has for individuals in the organization. It is disseminated according to the aims (value in use or use as considered in the literature on organizational innovation). In many sectors, including health, the relational system is more oriented and manufactured by health professionals than it is for patients. It is combined in the best-case scenario.

One example would be the case of a retirement home whose staff had to contend with the limited resources of the residents. How to reduce the daily cost for the resident? Initially, conventional ideas were adopted to bring down costs. It was mainly to reduce costs by pooling the laundry, outsourcing certain services [...]. Then, the staff, very open to its environment, imagined an alternative. Hence, we could mention the case of a retirement home whose staff had the burden to deal with the limited resources of the residents. How to reduce the daily cost for the residents? At a first step, conventional ideas were adopted to bring down costs. It consisted mainly to reduce costs by pooling the laundry, outsourcing certain services [...]. Then, being very open to its environment, the staff conceived an alternative. They opened the restaurant to people outside the nursing home. The profits of the restaurant (combining the earnings of the residents but also of anyone who came to eat

for cheap in this new type of restaurants) allowed to be reinvested to bring down the average daily cost for the residents.

5. Conclusion

We think that the model of classical organization is gradually giving way to the appearance of structural arrangements based on transversality and a more ephemeral character. The boundaries of the organization are becoming blurred. The indistinction between the external and the internal has led researchers to take an interest in organizations that put forward “strategic options with relational dominance” (Froehlicher, 1999, 2003, p. 12). This relational transformation seems so strong that it can lead to the emergence of more relational organizations (Pauget, 2013). Highlighted in the 1960s, administrative innovation aimed to account for the games of the actors and how they were able to change the configurations of the organization by modifying the relationships.

We talk about organizational innovation, as this concept has been extended and modified. The term is being debated, but it is a continuation of previous research. Managerial innovation in fact reveals another perspective on the more relationship-oriented organization. Are we going to a “relational era” Galbreath (2002)? Supposing it is the case, special attention must be paid to relational processes and perhaps even to think of an innovation that is no longer confined to management but to relations in the broad sense. It seems to be linked to a relational heritage and patterns related to the organization. The following theory article aims at presenting the foundations. It is this set of patterns that we call relational innovation.

Note

1. Crossan and Apaydin (2010) think that this notion can be encapsulated: “Innovation is: production or adoption, assimilation and exploitation of a value-added novelty in economic and social spheres; renewal and enlargement of products, services and markets; development of new methods of production; and establishment of new management systems. It is both a process and an outcome”. We will go back to these elements in the last section devoted to relational innovation.

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