INSPIRING PRIDE: HOW BIO-ENERGY VILLAGES CHANGE INSTITUTIONALIZED ENERGY SUPPLY IN GERMANY

Summary

"That is certainly also an emotionally charged process [...] In my experience, the rational arguments – I don't want to say take the backstage – but they are at least not in the foreground."

– a Bio-Energy Village initiator

Many of the great challenges of today, such as climate change (Howard-Grenville, Buckle, Hoskins, & George, 2014), are systemic in nature and thus require institutional changes to be addressed. Past research offers considerable insights into how social movements (e.g. Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000), organizations (e.g. Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006), and individuals (e.g. Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011) may alter existing institutions, with extant research identifying a wide range of institutional work practices to bring about endogenous institutional change (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). What unites these studies is a focus on cognitive processes (Toubiana & Zietsma, forthcoming; Voronov & Vince, 2012).

Yet, we know form organizational research more generally how important affective processes are in change. Social movement scholars have shown the importance of emotions in mobilizing collective action for social change (e.g. Gould, 2002; Jasper, 2011). Scholars of organizational change have demonstrated the important role of emotions in successfully managing organizational restructures (e.g. Huy, 2002; Vince & Broussine, 1996). Letting go of the familiar seems to be an emotionally charged process. Individuals are likely to not only be cognitively but also emotionally invested in the institutional structures they take for granted (Voronov & Vince, 2012). However, we know preciously little about the work required to manage emotions in institutional change. Despite cogent theoretical arguments for the role of explicit emotions in institutional change and maintenance (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014), empirical research remains scant. Through an inductive qualitative study appropriate for new research areas (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989), I seek to answer what role emotion and its management plays in building support for institutional change.

To build empirically grounded theoretical insights (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), I decided to focus on a comparatively recent instance of institutional change which enables the use of a breadth of qualitative data sources, including interviews, archival data, and observation. Empirically, I study institutional change in the energy supply system in rural Germany. Since the early 2000s, Bio-Energy Village (BEV) initiatives across Germany are changing how villages meet their energy needs. BEV-projects ask residents to switch from independent household heating systems and traditional fossil fuel-based energy supply to centrally-operated and communally-owned bioenergy plants. However, parting with their taken-for-granted energy infrastructure does not come easily to most residents. Initiative leaders need to work hard to build support for the proposed institutional change locally.

In this paper, I develop a process model of the institutional work involved in not only building a cognitive but also an emotional basis of support for institutional change. In a multi-case

study of five purposefully sampled BEV-initiatives, I find that emotion can both hinder and facilitate institutional change. I find that residents in rural communities initially react with considerable skepticism and anxieties when faced with the prospect of changing their institutionalized energy supply system. Initiative leaders of the local BEV-projects had to overcome these doubts and fears, if they wanted to achieve institutional change. Where initiative leaders failed to effectively deal with the anxieties induced by the proposed changes, the entire change initiative failed. The villages that succeeded in becoming BEVs managed to overcome initial negative reactions. To do so, they engaged in different types of institutional work to build support for their initiatives on a cognitive and/or affective basis. Through theorizing and offering supportive evidence, initiative leaders generated a justifying account for the new system, providing a basis for cognitive support. By engaging higher ends and providing recognition opportunities, initiative leaders inspired pride in prospective change participants, generating emotional support. Where leaders successfully managed to create both cognitive and affective support the greatest participation rates in the change were achieved. Engaging residents not only cognitively but also emotionally allowed initiative leaders to win considerably more local residents for the change. Sceptics, not convinced by the purely cognitive arguments alone, could be swayed by making more emotive decision criteria salient. Initial anxieties could be substituted by self-worth enhancing feelings of pride. Emotions thus played a crucial role in how successful the local change initiatives were and how much of village energy supply was changed from institutionalized fossil fuels to renewable resources.

This study builds on and extends the emergent literature on emotions in institutional work (Creed et al., 2014; Voronov & Vince, 2012). It contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms of institutional change in contexts where cognitive arguments alone do not suffice or have limited potential to build support. This is particularly relevant to contexts characterized by the tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968), where changes promise primarily collective rather than individual benefits. By explicitly incorporating emotive mechanisms for institutional change, it also allows us to better explain why institutional innovations rarely diffuse evenly and completely through a field (DiMaggio, 1988). Even if cognitive justifications have been theorized in a field (Strang & Meyer, 1993), adoption may stall or be weak locally. Emotions help explain why. By incorporating emotions into models of institutional change we may thus considerably advance and enrich institutional theory.

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