



Dali Ma (Drexel University), winner of the 2009 Lou Pondy Best Paper from a Dissertation Award, interviews Christine Oliver (York University), the recipient of the 2009 OMT Distinguished Scholar Award.

DM: Christine, thank you again for your contribution to OMT. My first question starts from your Ph.D. period, which was from 1982 to 1987 at University of Toronto. Why did you become interested in institutional analysis?

CO: It really occurred by accident. I was doing my PhD in the early '80s and we had been asked to read DiMaggio and Powell's 1983 article. I got to the end of that article and I was hooked. I was totally excited by that article and never looked back. All along, my interest has really been around two things – institutional theory and interorganizational relations. Much of my work has been a combination of the two. Institutional theory has been very much the main focus of my interest and continues to excite me tremendously.

DM: When you did your Ph.D., it was a booming period for organization theory and there were multiple approaches – institutional theory, resource dependence, and population ecology. Why were you particularly interested in institutional theory?

CO: I think it was because it was one of the first article I read that suggested, very persuasively, that maybe economists only got it partially right. Firms also compete in social environments and in order to compete effectively, you not only have to be able to handle your competitors, but also the regulatory environment, the media pressures, the advocacy groups, and the social movements that are surrounding you. There was a large chunk of competitive strategy getting short shrift in terms of firm actions and performance.

DM: Institutional analysis is one of the major theoretical perspectives that challenges the neoclassical rational choice theory. One potential counter-argument by rational choice theorists might be that institutions originate from an aggregation of individual rational choices. What do you think?

CO: I think anyone who assumes that all choices are rational is probably seriously misguided. It is not that we are not or cannot be rational, but in fact that at least some proportion of the way that we behave is the result of custom, history, habit and social conscience.

DM: And sometimes there are unintended consequences. Individual choices may be rational, but the collective results may be unintended.

CO: That's an excellent point. I do think that most people intend to be rational. I am a very non-cynical person who believes that in most cases people actually endeavor to make rational choices. They fail, not because they are inevitably self-interested, but because there are so many preconscious social forces shaping the way they make decisions.

DM: Getting back to your doctoral studies, your dissertation was entitled "The Structure of Interorganizational Relations" and you innovatively integrate institutional theory, population ecology, and social network analysis. If I am correct, the dissertation paper came out in ASQ in 1988 (CO: Yes. That is correct.) Why did you become interested in integrating these different streams of organizational theory?

CO: I have always been interested in integration, as Matt Kraatz said in the introduction to my Distinguished Scholar talk. I believe the growth of a field comes from looking for complementarity as much as from looking for conflict among theories. I am not discouraged by the fact that a striking change in our field has been increasing specialization and a growing profusion of topics and theories. This is reflected in the fact that we have more divisions in the academy and more specialty journals on specific topics. That profusion I feel strongly increases our responsibility as scholars to look for integration and linkages across theories and topics. I do think that new understanding comes from such linkages.

DM: Excellent. That comment naturally leads to another question. There were three articles that were generally considered as foundational works of institutional theory – (1) the 1977 AJS article by Meyer and Rowan on formal structure as myth and ceremony; (2) the 1977 ASR article by Zucker on institutionalization and cultural persistence; and (3) the 1983 ASR article by DiMaggio and Powell on institutional isomorphism and collective rationality. They represent two lines of thinking, one focusing on collective or macro-level analysis and the other focusing on social psychological or micro-level analysis. Do you think micro-level mechanisms can explain

both macro- and micro-level behavior, or micro-level and macro-level mechanisms are separate yet complementary?

CO: I think the capacity of institutional theory to speak to multiple levels of analysis is one of its key strengths. Yet for reasons that I don't fully understand, it has been used almost exclusively at the macro level. It could have been applied with equal ease at a more micro level with significant and interesting results. I believe institutional theory is a theoretical tool with the potential to explain such micro-level phenomena as the formation of personal habits, the means by which individuals come to take organizational practices for granted, or how individuals are shaped by the history and institutionalized practices of their work environments. Perhaps future scholars will examine both levels of analysis and look at more of the behavioral and organizational factors that link the two.

DM: Let's now talk a little bit about your academic career. Besides excellent sole author papers, we have seen that you collaborated with several colleagues and produced outstanding collaborative work. For junior scholars, what would be your advice on forming and managing fruitful collaboration?

CO: We learn more by collaborating than by working alone. Junior scholars find the best opportunities for co-authoring by attending sessions at conferences that specialize in their particular area of interest. I would really encourage collaboration, not only because we learn so much by working with others, but because you have others with whom you can share your struggles as you attempt to re-work your papers or face down a particularly challenging revision or critical reviewer. I have found collaboration to be both comforting and informative. I have also been unusually fortunate in having fabulous co-authors. My experience has been extremely positive.

Having said that, I had to push myself to collaborate, because my natural tendency is to work as a sole author and much of my work remains so.

DM: For a junior scholar, we need to build our identity in the area where we specialize. How do we balance the formation of our own identity and the importance of collaboration?

CO: Your identity comes not out of your collaborations, but out of the degree of specialization of

your focus and your sense of commitment to that focus. Your external identity, your image, also tends to correlate with your breadth of focus. The most well known scholars are those that have focused on a particular area, and become known as the 'culture' person or the 'alliances' expert, etc. I believe that junior scholars should focus in a particular area for which they can become highly accomplished, and then diversify their interests as their career matures.

DM: That's great advice. Now let's talk about your service to our profession. You served as an associate editor for ASQ from 1993 to 1997 and then editor from 1997 to 2003. In your opinion, what makes ASQ distinctive?

CO: One of the things that makes ASQ distinctive, I believe, is its receptiveness to Ph.D. work. If you examine ASQ over several decades, a significant portion of articles are by junior scholars publishing their dissertation and early work. This allows ASQ, together with its more flexible article-length policy, to publish rich work with considerable theoretical novelty. The other element is the extent to which ASQ strives to maintain itself as a generalist journal, a mission that I believe it shares with the Academy journals. ASQ seeks papers from a very broad array of perspectives and methods. So you will see everything in ASQ from laboratory studies to simulation modeling on an unusually broad array of topics.

DM: Based on your observation, from 1956 when Jim Thompson founded the journal ASQ to now, have there been any major changes in terms of scholarship of articles published in ASQ? If so, did such changes reflect changes in scholarship in organization and management theory, or just a shift of focus of the journal per se?

CO: I think any changes in ASQ over time are primarily a reflection of changes in the field. I did a historical review of the journal for the editorial board while I was editor and most early work pertained to intraorganizational structure and processes, particularly research on structure. The range of topics today is much broader, as is the range of methodologies, which I believe enriches the field as a whole. The other major change is the growth since the late 1980s in work that is more strategy related. This is very reflective of the field in general and of the increasing overlap between organization theory and strategy. Those lines are blurring and I think that's very good thing.

DM: Any other advice for junior scholars?

CO: I really encourage junior scholars not to take rejections too much to heart, difficult as that may be. Virtually all scholars in our field are routinely rejected by the top journals (DM: That makes me feel better). It is really important to not be discouraged and to know that you are not alone in having that experience. We all share that struggle from the most junior scholars to the most senior people in the field.

My other piece of advice would be to look for role models in the field that really typify a compassionate and respectful approach to the practice of scholarship. I would look at role models like Jane Dutton or Bob Hinings who set the standard for treating other scholars with respect whether it be in the context of reviewing other scholars' papers, offering colleagues advice at conferences, showing kindness towards one's own doctoral students or serving the discipline selflessly.

DM: I remember in your speech, the last question was from someone who sent you a paper without knowing you before and you actually gave her lots of valuable comments. That's exactly what we need as junior scholars.

CO: That person was very sweet.

DM: That's all my questions. Thanks a lot for your time, Christine. I am sure the OMT audience will like your insights.

CO: It's so lovely to talk to you. Take care. Bye.