

Interview with 2014 Distinguished Scholar Royston Greenwood

Written by Laura Singleton

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At this year's Academy of Management meeting in Philadelphia, Royston Greenwood received our division's Distinguished Scholar Award and delivered an engaging talk on the past, present, and future of OMT research (and his research in OMT). Royston is the Telus Professor of Strategic Management at the University of Alberta School of Business. [You can read Royston's presentation here](#). This interview was conducted by Laura Singleton, winner of this year's Pandy Award.

LS: In preparing for this interview, I looked over your CV and noticed that you'd initially done your research on British municipalities. How did you get from there to the big accounting firms that you've studied more recently?



RG: Well, as an undergraduate student in political science, I had done a thesis on the socioeconomic status of members of the Bradford city council over the previous 75 years and how it was changing. At that time, in political science, municipal (or 'community') politics were viewed as microcosms of the state, though we don't think of it that way now. Because of that study, I was invited to be research assistant at the Institute of Local Government Studies. They had seen my thesis and gave me a salary of 680 pounds a year, which wasn't much, even then, but it allowed me to indulge myself by doing higher degrees.

Back then, the Institute did executive education for public officials – which, of course, included various professions – lawyers, social workers, engineers, as well as accountants. So my start was in public administration and in particular I was exposed to the professions. Because local government was undergoing significant reforms I became interested in the intra-organizational dynamics of organizational change - and in particular, how the different professions within municipalities were responding.

Then in 1982 I went to the University of Alberta. An MBA student told me of the planned merger (which actually didn't happen) of two very large accounting firms and it seemed an interesting change process to study. So, partly by accident again, I got drawn into the arena of professional firms as an empirical context of organizational change.

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LS: I know it's a stereotype, but I have to ask: Doesn't it get boring talking to all those accountants?

RG: People do think accountants would be boring, but why would they be? They're the gatekeepers of the capital markets and part of what keeps the system running. (Today, I'm particularly interested in their role in corruption and how it's been able to happen – you can't say that's not interesting!) Accounting is also actually quite like higher education in that they theoretically have to combine quite a few institutional logics such as professionalism, making money, and the like. So, although we have stereotypes of accountants wearing green eyeshades and such, they're not boring at all. What they do matters. Moreover, they're often ego-driven, yet they have to work together. Does that sound like a university, or what? But seriously, when I began to study professional service firms they were a very different – and important - type of organizational form (they are now often referred to as 'knowledge-intensive firms') and we (Bob Hinings and myself) thought we could learn from them and develop interesting theory.

LS: What drew you to institutional theory as a framework for your research?

RG: Again, it was something of an accident. We (Bob and myself) had written a book that was reviewed by Christine Oliver, who said, "What a wonderful institutional story this is!" We were also invited by Andrew Pettigrew to give a paper on organizational change from an institutional theory perspective at a seminar in Warwick in the late 1980s. In other words, we were being told that we were telling an institutional story even though we didn't fully realize it – so, we learned more about the institutional perspective and became 'caught' by its way of understanding change. We learned what we were doing by others telling us (sounds a bit Weickian, doesn't it?).

Our particular interest at the time was the idea of 'archetypes' - we were saying that

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organizational structures and processes are underpinned by an 'interpretive scheme' which gives the organization coherence and makes it very difficult to change. Today we'd probably use the term 'institutional logic'. In the UK local government sector, a new archetypal form was being pushed by the State and we were interested in why organizations were responding differently to that prescribed archetype. We were looking at intra-organizational politics and two books were very influential in our thinking – Dalton's *Men Who Manage*, which is really all about politics, then there is Burns & Stalker, which everyone thinks is about organic and mechanistic organizations, but it's also about pathologies and gives political explanations for why organizations can't move from one perspective to another.

LS: Your political science background would seem to have made you familiar with issues of power. It strikes me that the piece you co-authored regarding institutional change originating from central actors, like the Big Five firms, touched on an aspect that had really been overlooked up to that point, since the focus had been on change coming from the peripheral actors in a field. Once you think of it, it seems pretty obvious that power would matter, too, though.

RG: That's the way academic life goes. Power is one of the things we talk about but it often gets washed out in the papers. Institutional processes are definitely a reflection of power, though.

LS: If you go back to Selznick and the work on the TVA, it's definitely all about public administration and power.

RG: Yes. If you think about the people in the '50s and '60s - Selznick, Gouldner, Burns & Stalker, Cyert & March, Dalton - I guess they were always talking about politics and power. It's still in today's institutional studies, for instance in the works of Steve Maguire, Cynthia Hardy and Tom Lawrence. They ask – how do you get DDT banned? That's a power story. Or how do you get AIDS into the public health conversation? That's a power discussion.

Bob and myself were recently asked by Matt Kraatz to write a chapter on Selznick and it brought back memories of hearing Selznick speak at the Western Academy of Management, and one of the things he said was that often today's scholarship - as he saw it - lacks 'a sustained commitment to a program of research'. I mentioned that in my talk at AoM this year because it seems to me that we keep bouncing around from topic to topic - we're often too focused on just getting the papers out.

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LS: True confessions here: I didn't know I'd be getting the privilege to interview you, and I missed your talk at AOM. How did you approach it?

RG: Well, I didn't want to do what most people do, which was review the individual's own research career. Instead I reflected on what it was like to be an academic at the start of my career as compared to being one today. A big factor is that we've grown as a community, we've internationalized, and we've unfortunately become obsessed with rankings. With people joining from abroad, though, the risk is that we might force them to come in on our terms versus learn from them, which is what's important. I once got a whole raft of puzzled looks when I said that every Ph.D. student should spend time in another country, especially one where they speak a different language from your own.

[2014 Royston Greenwood Distinguished Scholar Talk](#) from [OMT Division](#)

LS: Do you feel you've applied that advice? In going from England to Canada, you kind of migrated within the British empire.

RG: I don't speak other languages, so I'm not a great example. I have spent time in some other countries, but it's been relatively short. I spent time in Sweden, looking at the local government system there, but they were all speaking English with me, because they love to speak English. Their governmental system, though, was similar enough yet also different enough from what I had seen in England that it was helpful to me to learn from it. More recently, I've definitely benefited from working with people from other countries. I've been lucky to get that kind of comparative intellectual stimulation, but I do wish I'd spent more time in other countries. I did co-author a paper on corruption in Italy and the role of accounting firms – that was fascinating to do. I did another on Spanish firms' responses to institutional complexity and the differences across regions. It was very clear that to understand Spanish institutional arrangements today we had to look back to the time of Franco, because that's where it all comes from. Cross-country influences like this give us some of the reflexivity we need to ask questions about our own institutions.

LS: In addition to the recognition from OMT this year, you were honored by EGOS last year. How would you compare the two organizations?

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RG: EGOS is much smaller. The Academy to me is like a zoo – and when I first went to it I was overwhelmed and intimidated. It's like going to an overcrowded bustling restaurant and moving around among tables, picking up an entree here and jostling for a dessert there. At the AoM Conference I'm always moving from one room to another, meeting and chatting to people on the way to somewhere else. In some ways, the AoM is less about papers and more about conversations. EGOS is organized very differently - you participate in a thematic track and you stay with the same people in that track. But it, too, is getting rather large. An interesting development today is that we are getting a greater number of workshops and small conferences on specific themes.

LS: It seems like those focused conferences might be a corrective for what you spoke of earlier in terms of scholars bouncing around and not sustaining a research agenda.

RG: The risk, though, is that you get to know a lot about less. [We do an institutional conference every three years](#) ^{up} here in Alberta. There are lots and lots of participants, ranging from 1st year doctoral students to old guys like me. And it's a great experience. But, the institutional perspective is still one (admittedly very broad) theoretical perspective. Looking across the waterfront of organizational theory, our intellectual world is much more complicated than when I started out, but it is working with that intellectual variety that sometimes generates the kind of reflexivity we need. So, workshops are good, but we need to avoid tunnel vision. As Mats Alvesson puts it, we need 'nomads' who cross theories.

LS: You keep emphasizing 'reflexivity' and I don't want to assume I know what you mean by that. Why do you think it's important?

RG: Institutionalization, according to a famous phrase by Lynne Zucker, means that alternatives are 'literally unthinkable'. 'Reflexivity' is when people are able to 'see' and potentially challenge prevailing ways of thinking. When Christine Oliver's article introduced resource dependence theory into institutional theory, for example, that was a reflexivity moment. It's something that makes sense, and it's obvious once it's stated, but it has to be said first! It's like when DiMaggio said, 'You guys can't explain institutional change' – that too was a reflexivity moment and set us scurrying to understand institutional change rather than diffusion and stability.

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LS: A perennially-popular question for this interview seems to be the topic of advice to new scholars entering the field. What would you say to them?

RG: It always sounds slightly presumptuous to be giving advice to others about what they should do, but I guess the first thing I'd say is don't let journal reviewers deflect your voice. I think the review process is sometimes more aggressive than it needs to be, and there is a temptation to try and 'do' all that the reviewers ask you to do, even if that distorts or weakens your story. Sometimes, we have to have the courage to push back.

A second thing I'd say is that working with other people is great, and I'd emphasize that it's both fun as well as stimulating. A major formative moment for me was meeting Bob Hinings. He was everything I'm not - he was a steeped sociologist, whereas I had the background in political science, he saw big stories whereas I was a bit narrower in focus. Between us, we had fun (not least because we supported different soccer teams and his team was rubbish).

LS: Does having someone else involved make it easier to absorb the blows when those rejections come back?

RG: Yes. You can always blame it on them! A third bit of advice I'd say is that it's time to look at the big problems. Let's stop doing any mere footnote research.

LS: What do you see as the big problems that should be studied?

RG: One of the big ones to me is corruption. Why is it that the Enrons of the world are able to get away with so much? I'm not interested in individual corruption - why a specific person makes the choice to act in a corrupt way - but I'm interested in the institutional framework that enables it or fails to detect it. What are the gatekeepers - the accountants, the analysts, and so on - doing that allows this to happen?

Steve Barley highlighted another big problem in his distinguished scholar talk – he referred to the 'asteroid belt of organizations' that gets between individuals and governments in modern democracies. We need to know more about this asteroid belt and its consequences.

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One thing that's encouraging to me is the recent interest in 'hybrid' organizations - i.e., organizations that are trying to combine multiple logics – such as 'social enterprises' or 'private-public partnerships'. What I like about this kind of stuff is that it centres on the role of organizations in addressing fundamentally important societal issues.

Or what about poverty? How many studies do we have on poverty and the role of organizations?

LS: Not much in the organizational studies field - but how could we study poverty in our field?

RG: You can look at it as inequality. Why is it that the differential between the salaries of US CEOs and average workers has escalated in the last few decades? A student of mine from Brazil showed me a picture of incredibly luxurious homes overlooking a shanty town of impoverished slums. How do we rationalize (or 'legitimate') that level of inequality so that we're prepared to live with it? And what's the role of organizations in enabling it to happen?

A book I'd recommend is by Angus Burgin's *The Great Persuasion*. He shows how 'free' markets have been brought back since the 1930s. What we think of today as normal wasn't at all back then. It's not written as an institutional story, but it contains many ideas that resonate. It's great reading.

That's reminds me of another key change, by the way, since I started as a scholar--the rise of journals versus books in terms of numbers and status. Journals like *AMJ* were nothing in the 1960s - you published in

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or the sociology journals, or you published monographs. Now you've got all these rankings often based on rankings of journals, and there's pressure to behave in a certain kind of way. It's driven us to be overly interested in pushing out articles than perhaps developing ideas more fully in books.

LS: What kind of impact do you feel that that's had on the scholarship in the field?

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RG: I don't think the journals do this on purpose but there's a perception that to get published you should follow the mainstream of ideas that are currently in vogue. This doesn't mean you have to just do something incremental, but it's leading to a 'play it safe' tendency. I think we need people who are willing to fly against the instant gratification instinct of the salami-slicing rush to publish put upon us by the ranking industry.

LS: As a wrap-up question, given your position in Alberta, how do you feel about the AoM coming to Canada next year?

RG: It's great. The first Academy I attended was actually in Vancouver so it's sort of coming full circle. I encourage everybody to come to Vancouver. It'll rain, but it's a wonderful city. It's not Disneyland or Florida - the climate will be nice that time of year. So, leave your guns at the border and come and have fun!

LS: Does that mean you're thinking this will be your last AoM?

RG: No way!