ARUNA: Congratulations on your award!

JOHN: Thank you.

ARUNA: I thought it would be really interesting to start at the very beginning of your career and talk a little bit about what motivated you to go to grad school in sociology at Columbia.

JOHN: I came from an academic family. When I was in college, I knew I was going to be an academic and the question was in what. And sociology was a natural interest. My father had been a sociologically inclined professor of history. So in college, I shifted from a hard science major to taking more interest in sociology. It was quite a natural transition.

ARUNA: I noticed that you had done your Bachelor’s degree in psychology, was it common then to switch between the disciplines?

JOHN: I went to a small religious college and choosing psychology as my major was convenient. I had no interest in being a psychologist, but in fact, the college had different people teaching various courses in psychology and I could do some independent study too, whereas if I majored in sociology, there was less choice. So I was interested in sociology and I wrote my thesis under a sociology professor’s jurisdiction but I majored in psychology, which was very convenient.

ARUNA: Okay. That makes sense. And were you always interested in organizations right from the start?
JOHN: Well, organizations as a field didn’t really exist at that time — it arose as a field slowly in the fifties and sixties. Before, there was public administration, business administration, in effect bureaucratic management. But organization as distinct from bureaucracy as a phenomenon didn’t really exist, and as an academic specialty, was only gradually emerging. So the typical sociology department wouldn’t have had courses.

ARUNA: Okay.

JOHN: So when I came here [to Stanford], I tried to avoid it [the study of organizations] a little bit. Later, in the seventies, I got back in and I went to Richard Scott and I asked “what do I have to read now to catch up after five years?” There wasn’t very much, but I got involved. Partly because there was funding. Jim March came to Stanford and then Dick Scott had raised money. So there was some action and a number of us took more interest in the field. It was pretty dull … you wouldn’t be familiar with the literature at the time. It was contingency theory. But there was a transformation - some of it occurred at Stanford -- to make it more interesting and probably a lot of it, intellectually, was liberated by Jim March. It was his extensions on bounded rationality that attacked rationalistic models, and liberated the field, especially at Stanford, which is why Stanford was a creative center at that time. Richard Scott raised money for continuing research in organizations, and training programs, and brought people together. Those were quite influential times for the field.

ARUNA: That’s great. So your paper with Rowan, in particular, is considered one of the foundational pieces in neo-institutionalism. It would be great to hear some more about how that paper came about. Was this around the same time period?

JOHN: Yeah. The early seventies - it was during this period that you could make arguments and reflections of this nature. Prior to that, I had been thinking in terms of institutions — what is now called institutional theory -- and I had been thinking about that in relation to education, with ideas that were institutional in spirit. And I was thinking through the significance of taking-for-granted institutionalization. But to keep things going, I mean, to raise research money and support graduate students (that was very crucial then, more than now), we worked our way into the education research institute -- several sociologists, including Scott and me, and worked up a couple of more standard research designs to study education. And those were also periods when data were rare. Now data is everywhere and you don’t have to leave your office. But getting data on organizations or anything interesting was tough.
And in the course of our research in the Bay Area, it became clear that the answers to many policy questions were poorly correlated across people we asked - so what the principals say, what the teachers say, was poorly correlated. Like on basic questions — is there a policy for reading in the school? Some say yes. Some say no. You can call that unreliability, but it was — these were, obviously, important things in education, you’d think. But despite the inconsistencies, schools are quite orderly places. And they don’t have very high conflict. Everybody’s getting along. But they don’t agree.

So we wrote these findings up in a couple of papers. One is the one you referred to and there’s another, fairly highly cited one also on educational organization. The storyline was — wait a minute, these people run perfectly normal organizations, but they don’t do what organization theory says. I mean, a hot book of that time was Thompson ’67. And you could see what in that model was really wrong. Getting order, and what maintains order, is external definitions. You have to have the certified teachers, you have to have the school accredited, it has to have the appropriate numbers of windows per kid and toilets per kid and play space per kid, and you have to have a third grade. It doesn’t matter what’s in it, you have to have one, and the teacher has to be certified.

So we started thinking through what does it take and then, is there a problem if nothing good happens? Well, we learned that not unless the parents complained. So it must give the appearance of being okay. So qualitatively, you know like a school where the principal didn’t much care what the teachers did, but at the end of the day he wanted every blind halfway down so it looked like an orderly factory. And that was important. And a number of teachers might tell you that a crucial person in their school is a janitor. He was famous for being ordered. He paints a circle on the floor, here’s where the wastebasket should be. Okay. And so you get a strong sense of the maintenance of structures, legitimate enterprise, and so that led us to generalize that and think about what that means, and later I think people understood that there was a connection between that kind of thought and much earlier institutional theory.

But at the time it looked new, because it was such a striking reaction to the functionalist ideas built into contingency theories and those kind of theories. And there was a fairly sharp reaction. And that picture of our theory being a little crazy remained for five to ten years. When the version generated six years later by DiMaggio and Powell came out, it was already seen as more normal. Of course, now it’s standard storyline, probably one of the most important storylines, but it’s, of course, spread out in meaning.

ARUNA: Fascinating! I particularly enjoy reading some of your work on the global diffusion of institutions such as educational institutions. It has informed some of my earlier work on the
diffusion of western plumbing institutions to India. So one question that I was particularly curious
about is how you became interested in globalization much before it became a popular field of
study?

JOHN: Again, these were all separate interests around 1970, almost independent from my
emerging institutionalist kind of thinking, theoretically, and my interest in organization and
education. I was interested in comparative stuff, and my interest there was partly
methodological. I had always been interested in contextual analyses, with aggregated data.
Now routine, but then rare, those were. And it was clear to me there was more and more data
on countries and I knew there were all these different propositions and functions in sociology
about the relations between the institutions of the modern system of modernization. And of
course, national data were more manageable because there were only so many countries and
there’s only so many things you could do. I tried a couple of analyses, exploring, not thinking
globalization, but okay, what could you do with this stuff.

Many, many findings showed that the traditional functionalist propositions during this period did
not hold. Education was expanding everywhere, not where it was supposed to, in terms of the
economy. Political change was going on everywhere and not where it was supposed to. And it
looked like isomorphism. By 1978 or ’79, or ’77, or ’78 we started to do papers on this. One of
the first was on childhood -- national conventions, and what did they say about childhood. And
it has nothing to do with national development. It has everything to do with time period. And
the new countries that came copy the currently fashionable. Child labor, child protection,
education, compulsory education, you know, basic stuff. And the paper showed that.

By the 1990s I was heavily involved -- in the eighties, increasingly with world global data and
countries, nation states and such. But remember the field of organizations didn’t include that. So
those lines of thought, although intellectually in my mind linked, are separate literatures,
separate sections of the American sociological association. The people who study
globalization are different than the ones who study organizations. That may decline a little bit.

ARUNA: Building on that, what advice would you have to scholars like me who are working at
the intersection of organizations and economic development and doing work in the global
economy?

JOHN: Well, there’s been a merger since - there are more people with such interests and I was
describing a time when these were separate discourses, that’s decreasingly the case and it’s
Interview with John Meyer (2016 Distinguished Scholar Recipient)

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routinely the case that you have collections with chapters for countries and a few of them comparative. It’s a very natural evolution that’s happening and increasingly routinized and legitimate, I think. I mean, there are books that have come out that are collections of sometimes country-by-country chapters, and sometimes more exclusively comparative. So if somebody did what you were doing in your dissertation ten years ago, that would have been more exotic. Now it’s less exotic and I think you can present in conferences that are not about India.

ARUNA: I agree with that. You mentioned earlier that you think that some of the current work that’s falling under the organizations field is quite boring, so I was wondering whether you could speak more to what would be more exciting.

JOHN: Yeah. I think it’s a major problem that the field is so strongly dominated by people working in applied professional schools. That means that some of the cultural elements get understated and the actor-focused elements get emphasized, because you’re teaching students to imagine—MBA students, especially -- that they’re actors in the world, not that they’re creatures of a cultural system.

Concretely, for example, I mean, if you look at citations you would find Americans are less likely to cite Meyer & Rowan and more likely to cite DiMaggio & Powell. The difference is that DiMaggio & Powell are talking about why did they do it, whereas Meyer & Rowan talk about why it is done to them. They’re very similar arguments, but with a different perspective. In Europe, I guess, I have never checked, but I would assume that citations to Meyer & Rowan would be more than DiMaggio & Powell; the Europeans imagine the history occurring in a more collective level.

And then the endless logics discussion, which is, why did they do it. And well, this reason, or this reason, which do they do. I remember a few years ago a guy came from Indonesia. He said he had been teaching in Australia. I asked, “what’s your dissertation?” His dissertation was on human resource management in Indonesian multinationals. But he takes for granted there are more Indonesian multinationals and that they have human resource management! Wait a minute. You’re transforming huge areas of organization into something called human resources. Wow. All right. I’m interested in those changes and I think the field tends to take them for granted. I think a lot of the logic stuff is perfectly good research, it’s just not, I mean, it’s not real exciting.
ARUNA: That’s interesting. As a final question, I wanted to ask if you have advice to incoming graduate students who want to do an exciting dissertation on organizations - what advice would you give them?

JOHN: The problem is that they have to start thinking about the dissertation rather quickly. These different programs here all expect you to do papers and things. I come from a time when you thought, you weren’t supposed to be thinking about writing papers for several years. And it wasn’t on the agenda -- what you were supposed to do was pay attention, think about what is going on in the field. I was at Columbia so there were several senior people there, who played dominant roles in the field so you could really react to that.

And I would think at Stanford there are a lot of influential participants in the field and you could see how they’re thinking and react to that. And then you’re more likely to do creative work, but I don’t know that the career structures of such an education now permit that. Students have to write a paper at the end of the second year, so I find myself advising students on papers they shouldn’t be doing. They’re not ready for that. So then they lower the standards of what they can publish and end up publishing minor papers in very minor outlets.

And then some give up. There are some very thoughtful people who give up and decide they’ll get a terminal PhD and go to Facebook. You have some students who come with such strong intellectual visions and preparation that they can get fairly quickly into critical productive enterprise and some people just have gifts for doing that.

But I think it’s also very much a problem in business schools. There’s a kind of hyper professionalization that arises and one of the consequences is that any two people can write a paper together after meeting each other for one day. And that happens when one visits business schools..People that I don’t know propose writing papers. And I think that’s part of the problem. I don’t have any solution for it, but it is a problem.

But that doesn’t mean I would give advice to anyone. That is the real world they’re living in and so I would be very careful about flipping out and giving advice about how to make your career go well starting in 1955, because they’re not starting in 1955, they’re starting now!

ARUNA: Thank you very much for your insights! I’m sure the OMT community will learn a lot
from your words of wisdom. I sure did. It's always very interesting to get a historical perspective on the field, it gives me a new sense of purpose. Thank you!