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Why does partial organization expand? A conceptual primer to turn partial organization into an explanatory theory[1]

Abstract

Partial organization is a neat theoretical solution: it broadens the scope outside the formal organization and distinguishes between the organized and the non-decided. The purpose of this paper is to make a first, conceptual step towards exploring the drivers of partial organization and its expansion. We put partial organization in dialogue with other organizational theories and outline three different theoretical ways to explain why partial organization expands. First, the elaboration of organizational actorhood results in expanded partial organization. Second, new forms of organization, which deviate from the standard model of centralized organization, drive partial organization. And third, decided orders outside organizations perpetually expand, because they are based on decisions. Partial organization consequently expands for different reasons, but attention is focused on organizational expansion that satisfies Western principles, such as liberalisms and democracy. The theory of partial organization, however, would give us the tools to likewise analyze equally coercive sanctioning or power-laden hierarchies and to fully grasp organizational expansion. Mobilizing the lens of partial organization across Western contexts could bring the benefit of discovering cultural features and differences of organization, which in turn will increase the explanatory power of partial organization.

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[1] Sub theme 62 "The Organization of Society: Meta, Macro and Partial Organization"

Introduction

When the seminal paper on *partial organization* was published in 2011, Ahrne and Brunsson made two claims made: that organization theory was stuck in studying its own core object, the formal organization as an entity, and that too much focus within the realms of organization theory was actually not about organization, but about other social structures, such as networks and institutions. This, the argument went, hampered organization theory to grasp all contemporary, societal phenomena. A solution was then presented to address the problems: organization was proposed to be defined as a "decided order", transforming the concept of organization into something broader than the orders existing inside organizations – decided orders can exist also outside of them. The concept of organization was also narrowed down – decided orders are different than orders usually labeled "organization", such as networks or emerging orders like institutions. These are typically not decided. In other words, if the initial problems addressed was organization theory's one-sided focus on formal organizations and on social orders that typically should not be labeled organization, partial organization is a neat solution: it broadens the scope outside the formal organization and distinguishes between the organized and the non-decided.

Partial organization then became a tool to distinguish and discuss differences: differences between degrees of organization (more or less decided orders/number of elements) and differences between sorts of social orders (sometimes framed as "functional equivalents" of networks, institutions and organization). Today, there is much complementary empirical evidence that partial organization is expanding and gaining societal relevance. For example, scholars refer to an ongoing proliferation of standards (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000), rankings (Ringel et al., 2021), metrics (Muller, 2018) but also audits (Power, 1997) and indicators (Rottenburg et al., 2015), platforms that are currently attracting a lot of attention can also be understood as partial organizations (Kirchner & Schüßler, 2019).

By all means, partial organization has indeed been a remedy to the problems pointed out in the article from 2011. But as the framework of partial organization moves into its second decade, it is time for it to become more explanatory. Partial organization can be understood as a subtle criticism of a too vast spread of new institutional theory. One reason for the comprehensive use of new institutional theory in organization studies, is that it provides strong explanations. We know the "why's" to organizations' inner workings and why they behave the way they do in relation to (and because of) their environment. We also have explanations to why organizations, as entities, expand in number. New institutional accounts posit the explanation in grand, societal trends: rationalization, scientization and education, for example. We do not yet have such thorough, systematic and theoretical discussions on why partial organization expands. With the assumption that partial organization is expanding in parallel with the expansion of formal organizations, the purpose of our paper is to make a first, conceptual step towards exploring the drivers of partial organization and its expansion. We ask, why does partial organization expand?

Just as the initial article, many subsequent texts about partial organization level the argument for why this particular perspective is needed, by stating that too much focus is put on formal organizations as entities, and by that, we miss all the organized attempts being made outside and among organizations. We will not drill into the debate for or against the focus of formal organizations (but for two inverted views, see Czarniawska, 2013 and Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2015), rather the opposite. We believe that theories about formal organizations and a theory of partial organization need to be in dialogue with each other in order to expand and advance. In this paper, we put theories about formal organizations as social actors, into conversations with the scholarship of partial organization. The relationship between the expansion of formal organization and the expansion of partial organization is not yet explicitly accounted for or theorized. Filling this gap will be a fruitful endeavor in understanding the current organizational

landscape in its variety and the relationships between organizational forms. For example, organizations often turn to external sources in order to elaborate their actorhood: standards, certifications, and consultancy services are all examples of services provided for organizations to become more actor-like. These are also examples of various forms of partial organization.

Our purpose is not to force partial organization into conversation with new institutional theory though. We seek to encourage the attention of forms of organizing that become visible through the lens of partial organization. Therefore, we will not limit our scope to understanding partial organization solely as dependent on formal organizations. Rather, we will give space to the fragmented debates around new forms of organization that deviate from the standard model of formal, bureaucratic organization. Also, we will go to the roots of the main assumption underpinning partial organization, and elaborate on how decisions themselves drive partial organization. In doing so, our goal is not to evaluate different understandings and conceptualizations of organization, but to use them to find clues as to why partial organization is expanding.

In the next section, we successively illuminate partial organization first as a dependent variable of formal organizations as actors, then of new organizational forms, and finally of decisions. We propose that an expansion of partial organization is to be expected in all three cases. In section four, we discuss our three propositions made, and then we conclude our paper with a reflection that expanding partial organization reflects Western expectations, as decided orders commonly follow principles, such as liberalism, democracy, and voluntary participation. In contrast, we know little about the potential expansion of partial organization that departs from these principles and accentuates, for example, top-down sanctions, punishment, and surveillance. As a theory, however, partial organization would give us the opportunity to grasp

these different forms of organization to make visible worldwide cultural differences in organizing.

2. Organizational expansion

2.1 Organizational actorhood and partial organization

As theorized by new institutionalists, orders that used to be labeled families, tribes, groups or even bureaucracies can now be labeled under the generic term "organization" (Bromley & Meyer, 2017). These orders are developing beyond being just legal persons with one purpose, they are becoming proper social actors (Meyer, 2010; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Although organizational actorhood is a fairly new field within institutional organization theory, there are a growing number of studies which pin down the core features of organizations as social actors (Hwang et al., 2019; Patriotta, 2020). Organizational actorhood stems from the same cultural rationalization that individualization does: an individual is more bounded, more articulated and more purposive than a person (Meyer, 2010) and so organizations as social actors display a means-end rationality, a purposiveness, identity claims, and a clearer decision-making capacity than more traditional forms of organizing. With neo-liberalism, social actorhood has increased and all sorts of organizations today can display logos, slogans, lengthy annual rapports narrating more than just the organization's budget (Bromley & Sharkey, 2017). This applies not only to for-profit firms competing over market shares, but to public authorities and non-profit organizations too (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Hasse, 2019; Pope et al., 2018). This means that organizations as social actors are not just becoming more elaborated in their structures, they are also spreading in numbers. World polity research has explored and identified many causes for this expansion, where the explanation is not functional or economical – many activities and features of organizational actorhood reach far beyond what could be

explained by financial or economic theories, rather the explanation to why social actorhood is expanding, lies in cultural rationalization (Meyer et al., 1987; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).

Organizational actorhood is constructed internally through multiple professional groups (finance and accounting professionals, diversity and sustainability managers etc.), while at the same time external actors or initiatives push organizations to pronounce and depict their opinions and boundaries on different matters (e.g. equality, diversity, sustainability). One example of how actorhood is expanding in tandem with partial organization is the increasing demand for responsibility, which has become the object of a decided order. While the literature on organizations as social actors gives the impression that organizations *strive* for responsibility as part of their actorhood (empowerment, taking responsibility to shape society), responsibility is increasingly *demanded* from organizations. This responsibilization trend and the resulting claims for accountability may be one of the reasons why new institutionalists no longer confine themselves to examining the ways in which organizations superficially assume responsibility while investing in ceremonial controls and displays of goodwill (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), but instead ask to what extent the organizational tools decided (e.g. audits, standards, certifications) achieve their ends (Bromley & Powell, 2012) . In general, organizational actors are responsive to external expectations to secure legitimacy and survival and organizational actors that seek to achieve responsibility as part of their actorhood often turn to partial organization circulating outside their boundaries. Many attempts in order to appear responsible (for what it may be) is to adhere to decisions coming from others and partial organization helps organizational actors to display responsibility.

In short, the assumption and assignment of responsibility is a good example of the proliferation of organizational actors that inflate their activities and goals beyond their proper roles (Pope et al., 2018). It seems a mundane observation that organizations who are claiming responsibility

for themselves boost the expansion of partial organization. An illustrative example is provided by Mumby (2016), who shows that organizational branding, which is intended to boost the perception of organizations as social actors, lead to more organization outside the focal organization. Yet, we know from institutional accounts that it is more legitimate and brings status advantages for actors if they do not stand up for their own interests and goals, but claim responsibility for the interests of others who can only poorly stand up for themselves (e.g., marginalized groups or animals) or even better for higher, abstract principles (e.g., justice, biodiversity or non-discrimination). In these cases, where actors advocate on behalf of others (and not primarily for themselves), scholars use the term *otherhood* (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Zapp, 2021). When organizations elaborate otherhood, they again contribute to the construction of decided orders outside their boundaries, for example, because they set rules for others through policy work or control others to conduct audits.

> *Proposition: When formal organizations elaborate on their actor/otherhood, they establish a decided order outside their boundaries.*

2.2 New organizational forms and partial organization

Coming from a rather different angle than the new institutional view on formal organizations as social actors, the identification and analysis of new, unconventional organizational forms is attracting much attention in the current organizational literature. Diagnoses vary, but authors agree that new organizational forms have in common that they depart from the archetypal model of the bureaucratic large-scale organization (Arnold et al., 2021; Bartley et al., 2019; Brès et al., 2018). Although there are still countless conventional organizations that appear as easily recognizable organizational entities (e.g., banks, hospitals, universities), this standard model no longer guides and orients all organizations. Rather, we find a proliferation of new organizational

forms that drive the expansion of partial organization because they are less centralized and rigid but accentuate flexibility and fluidity.

With the formula "concentration without centralization", Tim Bartley et al. (2019) highlighted that new organizational forms can concentrate much economic power, but appear less as a unitary entity. An illustrative and well-studied example are digital platforms such as Uber or Airbnb, which are identified as innovative new forms of organization (e.g., Gawer, 2022) that can be economically powerful, while outsourcing and decentralizing their activities and operations. The former characteristic (concentration) is socio-politically relevant, but the latter characteristic (without centralization) is crucial regarding the expansion of partial organization, because it helps to explain why new forms of organization drive the expansion of partial organization.

In a centralized organization "there is a direct relationship of authority between bosses/leaders and workers/members" that would be typical for large-scale bureaucratic organization. Unconventional organizations deviate from this standard model, by loosening the hierarchical relationship and replacing it with a decided order that is more flexible and less rigid. In this sense, Boersma et al. (2019) found that deviating from the bureaucratic, centralized organization and using a decided was beneficial to find a resilient solution during the refugee crisis in Amsterdam. Empirical studies from other contexts, coworking spaces (Blagoev et al., 2019) or collective housing (Törnqvist, 2021), likewise indicate decided orders establish when people attempt to avoid hierarchical top-down structures. This means that unconventional organization drives the expansion of partial organization because these new organizational forms seek an alternative to rigid hierarchies and find it in decisions about partial organization.

New forms of organization are also characterized by the fact that they do not centralize their attention on the inside of their organization but show a strong interest in operating and exerting influence in their outside. Digitization enables and supports this development, as shown by the case of the digital platforms, which use digital technology to outsource their activities and focus on their intermediary role (Davis, 2016). At the core of digital platforms are internet companies, i.e., formal organizations (Ametowobla, 2020), which, according to Kirchner and Schüssler (2019), establish a decided order to organize markets. For example, they decide on membership, which, in comparison to the membership of conventional, centralized organization is rather vague, which allows to enroll many actors opens up opportunities for scaling. Social movement scholars make a similar argument when explaining that a decided order is helpful in recruiting participants and growing the movement (Simsa & Totter, 2017). Hence, creating social orders helps unconventional organizations to organize decentral and outside their boundaries, driving the expansion of partial organization.

Due to the weak centralization and the shifting focus from the inside to the outside, the new organizational forms may appear less entitarian compared to the bureaucratic, centralized organizations. As a result, their actorhood is less elaborated, because the new organizational forms are less bounded and articulated compared to conventional organizations. The current platform debates indicate that new organizational forms might even be interested in a less accentuated actorhood, because it makes them more difficult to be held accountable. We know that the accountability relations of platforms are uncertain (Dijck et al., 2018), which is why it is much contested, for example, whether Uber is accountable for the working conditions of their cab drivers or not. This means, unconventional organizations use and expand decided orders to organize without actorhood, because partial organization gives them the possibility to avoid accountability (Arnold, 2022).

In summary, new organizational forms that deviate from the conventional, centralized bureaucratic model drive the expansion of partial organization, because decided orders are a means to reach out to the organizational outside, to bypass hierarchies in favor of agility and flexibility, and to avoid accountability. However, decided orders can stabilize and solidify in the longer term, as demonstrated in the case of Emanuel Macron's political movement "En Marche," which "gradually moved from emergent organizing through a partial organization to a bureaucratized and hierarchized party" (Fougère & Barthold, 2020).

Proposition: New forms organizing drive partial organization when deviating from conventional, centralized forms of organization.

2.3 A decision approach to organization

When the seminal paper on partial organization was published in 2011, emphasis was put on understanding organization as a *decided* order. The authors argued that it was due time to bring decision back to the fore of organization studies, and referred back to March and Simon's classic work from 1958, thus anchoring the framework of partial organization in one of the most traditional streams of organization scholarly and signaling that partial organization was not a strange detour or sidetrack. It was about bringing back the concept of organization to its roots. What is sometimes overlooked in discussions of partial organization, is that another reference to decisions was also made, but less mainstream and traditional, namely to the work of German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (2000). In Luhmann's theory, society is structured into different systems, and each social system has its own mode of communication. What distinguishes organizations from other types of social systems, is organizations' way of communication through decisions. Organizations are to be understood as systems of coupled decisions. Luhmann's ideas on decisions were informed by the Carnegie school's way of thinking but he nonetheless presented a rather different theory on organizations and decisions. At the heart of

decisions, Luhmann placed a paradox: in order for decisions to communicate their decidability, they also have to communicate that there are alternatives to the decisions made, otherwise it is not a real decision but a mere calculation of something or a series of related events. In that way, decisions always communicate that something else could have been decided instead, and thereby they carry their own contingency. In Luhmanns words, for organization to happen, the paradox of decisions needs to be "deparadoxified" which is done by coupling future decisions to past ones. Future decisions communicate the decidedness of past decisions, why organizing is a process of structurally coupled decisions. As a result, and in other words, one observes chains of decisions (Besio & Pronzini, 2011)

To the extent that the Luhmannian side of partial organization has been noticed, it has been through criticism rather than exploration. The main message in the critical responses was that partial organization violates the idea of a Luhmannian organization because essential to Luhmann's systems of decisions is that they are self-reinforcing and for that to happen the organization needs to form some sort of entity, a system. It cannot be partial. The decision paradox cannot be placed outside a formal organization (Apelt et al., 2017). Instead of disqualifying the Luhmannian theory of decisions, we suggest exploration in the attempts of theorizing partial organization. Specifically, taking the decision paradox seriously might explain why partial organization seems prone to expand: partial organization expands because it is based on decisions. And the Luhmannian decision paradox explains why decisions keep expanding. From this perspective, the very existence of partial organization as a form of decided order outside of formal organizations, is equal to the expansion of it. In order to exist, it must expand, because future decisions need to be made in order to validate the past ones.

Several scholars have noticed how the elements of partial organization seem to have mechanisms inherent in them, which makes them expand. This has been elaborated on

especially in relation to standards, that seem to have a tendency to generate escalating structures (Arnold, 2022; Brunsson et al., 2018; Rasche & Seidl, 2019), but as we discussed in section two, emerging orders such as networks and more fluid forms of organizing such as platforms, also show tendencies of expanding partial organization.

This does not mean that new elements will be added or created in an escalating manner, and that all forms of partial organization are destined to become macro-organizations or formal organizations. It means that for those elements existing, they will be reproduced by being perpetually decided on. The question is thus not so much on whether or not partial organization will expand (it will), the question becomes: what would make it stop? One way to "stop" this expansion would be to create a formal organization, to make a decision to create a legal person to which decisions could be ascribed. Then self-reinforcement of decisions would replace expansion. This is what many scholars have shown empirically, that is, how networks turn into formal organizations (e.g., Fougère & Barthold, 2020; Weinryb et al., 2019). In sum, the reason to why partial organization expands is because it is a decided order, based on decisions. The decision paradox is key in accepting this explanation.

Proposition: The decision paradox makes partial organization perpetually expansive.

4. Implications of expanded partial organization

Our overall question in this paper was, why does partial organization expand? We posed this question because we thought by answering it, we could contribute to making partial organization more of an explanatory theory, rather than empirically descriptive. In order to answer the question, we drew from three distinct set of organization theories that all, in some way, relate to partial organization. This was also part of the purpose: by putting partial

organization into conversation with other theories, we could move partial organization further than being used as an analytical tool to investigate orders in various, separated sectors. In other words, we wanted to compile the ideas of partial organization as the field of partial organization risks becoming fragmented.

We ended up making three propositions:

1. That elaboration of organizational actorhood will result in expanded partial organization
2. That new forms of organizing will result in expanded partial organization
3. That decided orders outside organizations will perpetually expand

Evidently, there are three (at least) different theoretical ways to explain why partial organization expands. In the following, we will discuss the dynamics between these three propositions, and then the implications of them.

As stated above, formal organizations turn to external sources to elaborate on their actorhood. These sources could be various forms of rules (standards, guidelines, directives), memberships in organizations, submitting to various forms of monitoring (rankings, certifications etc). All in all, organizational actorhood seems to be dependent on partial organization in order to prevail. That is, the expansion of organizational actorhood will result in a tandem expansion of partial organization. Actorhood generates a demand for partial organization. But the relation is not necessarily linear: there might be a push-and-pull-relationship between the construction of social actors and the proliferation of partial organization: social actors are dependent on partial organization to become social actors, but the more partial organization we see, the less actorhood of these social actors we will see as organizational actorhood is being hollowed out when being more and more organized – decided on - from the outside.

Avoiding actorhood might also be an intent. In section 2.2 we discussed how new forms of organizing more or less explicitly use partial organization to avoid actorhood. The goal is not to become a formal organization but to stay fluid, flexible and non-tangible. The reasons may vary: one reason can be to avoid accountability, another reason may be that these new forms of organizing are more democratic and less paternalistic, and they develop with the purpose to question traditional sources of power and authority. No matter the reason, partial organization will expand.

Whether "no actorhood" should be considered a driver or an "unintended" outcome of partial organization might be something to study empirically. It might be both – we could imagine networks explicitly wanting to avoid actorhood and we might imagine organizations working on their actorhood while becoming more and more dependent on external decisions. We have discussed partial organization as the dependent variable, asking why it expands. The third section allows us to flip the perspective and put partial organization as the independent variable: given that partial organization is a decided order and that the decision paradox will make partial organization constantly expand, what happens to organizational actorhood? What happens to network forms of organizing?

This relates to questions about implications of expanded partial organization: one implication might be the diffusion of responsibility. The decision perspective helps us understand why more decisions result in less responsibility (Brunsson 1990): partly because the orders outside of organization will diffuse responsibility, and partly because having organizations being organized by other organizations will hallow out their actorhood and thus their acclaimed responsibility. But this diffusion of responsibility might as well be a driver for partial organization, i.e. the reason we see more partial organization is because partial organization is way to avoid responsibility for formal organizations. Organizations construct responsibility

through elaborate and rapidly changing combinations of partial organizations in such a way that it becomes almost impossible to identify and hold accountable the decision makers. The diffusion of responsibility is thus not only an effect of expanded partial organization, but also a cause when organizational actors seek to avoid/lessen responsibility by dispersing it through partial organization.

The discussion on responsibility is illustrative to demonstrate the usefulness of partial organization in order to discuss bigger, societal issues. Instead of debating whether or not orders are more or less organized, one can discuss the bigger implications. We believe partial organization has the potential to be used more like an instrument to understand issues like responsibility, power, democracy or justice. To conclude, we discuss how partial organization can be put to even more use, in other contexts.

5. Partial Organization in the (Non-)Western World

Research on partial organization and its expansion, including this paper, are embedded in the Western cultural framework. Partial organization, as researched and discovered, conforms to those principles that are well-accepted and legitimate in the Western world—think of democracy, liberalism or self-responsibility. In this sense, standards as voluntary rules build a classic and well-recognized example of partial organization (e.g., Rasche & Seidl, 2019), as well as audits or rankings, both of which are likewise the results of decisions that rely on beliefs in soft regulation and participation. Not only does partial organization seem to conform to Western principles, much more do our propositions indicate that Western culture is responsible for its expansion. The construction of organizations as social actors, which we identified as the main driver of partial organization, is an outcome of the ongoing Western rationalization project (Meyer, 2010; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Similarly, the new fluid, decentralized forms of

organization, which also drive the rise of partial organization, can also be considered as Western projects.

From this, one could conclude that Western culture drives the expansion of partial organization, in a self-reinforcing process. That is, partial organization has its origins in Western culture and here it unfolds and proliferates aligned to unquestioned beliefs in democracy, liberalism, self-governance and so on. While this may be true, we believe that partial organization as a theoretical lens has the potential to do more than provide further evidence that organization is expanding and diffusing (e.g., Boli & Thomas, 1999; Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017).

The current developments around the war in Ukraine make us realize that organization does not always follow Western ideas. We are witnessing that there is also a violent, even brutal organization from the top down through hierarchy and sanctions, and we are watching Western politicians deviate from their belief in soft regulation and participation, making rough decisions on economic sanctions that will harm the Russian people. The theory of partial organization would give us the tools to analyze such coercive and power-laden organization, but given its anchoring in Western thought, scholars of partial organization pay little attention to it and therefore do not yet fully grasp partial organization in current society. Filling this gap will help to make partial organization relevant and useful, as one of its values lies in the fact that we can use it to identify and study organization in the most diverse settings. Thus, we can and should not only study organization outside organization in innovative organizational settings that appeal to Western thinking, such as hip coworking spaces in Germany (Blagoev et al., 2019), but also use partial organization to understand, for example, how Boko Haram in Nigeria or the Clan del Golfo in Colombia is organized and what the implications are. An expanded use of the

partial organization perspective is not, of course, to be equated with the study of terrorist groups, but much more fundamentally to explore what organization in non-Western cultures entails.

Mobilizing the partial organization lens across Western contexts, will bring the gain in discovering cultural features and differences of organization, which in turn will increase the explanatory power of partial organization. While organizational expansion has so far been conceptualized as a Western project that diffuses worldwide (e.g., Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Drori et al., 2006), partial organization is well-equipped to grasp diachronic and synchronous differences in organization. With an empirical extension to non-Western contexts, partial organization has the potential to explain and understand what organization means in those places not to be organized according to Western principles. Given the many problems that libertarian, voluntary, and soft organization brings us, just think of environmental collapse, getting a better understanding of other, more binding forms of organization seems to be a highly relevant endeavor.

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