

Why Meta-Organizations Matter: A Response to Lawton et al. and Spillman

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Abstract

In a recent issue in this journal, Lawton et al. and Spillman argue for the importance of studying trade associations, also referred to with the broader term *meta-organization*. They discuss why meta-organizations matter and why more research is needed on the topic. We fully concur with the authors that meta-organizations constitute an inflating, diverse, and undeniable phenomenon of collective action among organizations and that collective scholarly efforts are necessary to improve our understanding of meta-organizations in their multiplicity. In this article, we shed some light on a body of work already investigating the matter. They constitute what we call the “European School” of meta-organization. We show the relevance of this recent European work for the US–UK-oriented trade association research and aim to bridge the gap between these research traditions by proposing a common research agenda on key topics of resources, forms’ differentiation, coopetition, and their role in sustainability governance.

Keywords

meta-organization, collective action, review, inter-organizational relations, resources, coopetition, governance

In a recent issue in this journal, Lawton, Rajwani, and Minto (2017) and Spillman (2017) argue for the importance of studying trade associations, also referred to with the broader term meta-organizations. They are dissatisfied with scholarly neglect of trade associations, and discuss why more research about them is necessary. They examine trade associations as organizations, and identify research questions worth pursuing related to effects of organization, culture, and resources. We appreciate their efforts and we agree that a collective endeavor is necessary.

With this paper, we aim to establish a dialogue between two research communities, which have, thus far, been disconnected (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016). One of these research communities, mainly located in Europe, builds on the seminal paper of Ahrne and Brunsson (2005) and their book *Meta-Organizations* (2008). The other research community, mainly US–UK based, uses as their key reference the paper introducing a special issue in the *Strategic Management Journal* by Gulati, Puranam, and Tushman (2012) discussing meta-organizational design. Although there are many similarities in the aim to understand the organization of collective action among organizations in these contributions, a key difference lies in their definition of the meta-organization. Ahrne and Brunsson define meta-organizations as organizations, or associations, with organizations as their members, whereas Gulati et al. define them as organizations with organizations and/or individuals as their members. Although more specific in the definition, we argue that the theoretical developments by the European research community usefully

extend the research agenda put forth by Lawton et al. (2017) and Spillman (2017).

The work of Ahrne and Brunsson focused explicitly on theorizing the effects of the particularities of having organizations instead of individuals as members. Meta-organizations, as associations of organizations, are not limited to trade associations. As pointed out by Cropper, Ebers, Huxham, and Ring (2008, 2011), a common problem in the field of interorganizational relations is that research has focused too much on the manifestations of interorganizational relations, and therefore too little theoretical and conceptual developments have been able to provide understanding of the phenomena more broadly.

The concept of meta-organization, as developed by the “European School” of meta-organization, overcomes the focus on manifestations, as the concept of meta-organization crosses various empirical and theoretical types of manifestations. Thus, collaborations among public, private, and third sector organizations and among organizations across sectors are included. This would encompass among others, industrial associations (Reveley & Ville, 2010), transgovernmental networks (Jordana, 2017), corporative-associative order

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(Streeck & Schmitter, 1985), and multipartner alliances (Das, 2015). A wide set of empirical settings can also be included from the European Union (EU) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), to the UN Global Compact or North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), from R&D consortia to associations of public agencies, such as the Association of Bank Supervisors of Americas (ASBA), or multipartner alliances such as the Wi-Fi Alliance (an alliance promoting Wi-Fi technology).

Our response to Lawton et al. and Spillman is organized in three parts. First, we elaborate the meta-organization concept as developed by the “European School”. Then, we shortly present the key theoretical developments since the seminal paper by Ahrne and Brunsson in 2005. We finish the article by arguing for a common research agenda, whereby we invite scholars to join forces and contribute toward theorizing the conditions and particularities of meta-organizations.

The Meta-Organization Concept of the “European School”

Following the definition of meta-organization by Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008), the concept of meta-organization of the “European School” has three important elements (Bor, 2014). First, a meta-organization is essentially an organization. Organizations, including meta-organizations, are decided social orders. A decided social order means that “the elements necessary for the continuation or repetition of social interaction are the result of decisions, rather than being the result of common institutions, norms, or status differences” (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016, p. 95). These elements include their membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctioning (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Ahrne et al., 2016). The meta-organization can, however, remain partially organized, as they are not always able to use all of these elements (Ahrne et al., 2016; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016). They, for example, often have weak central power and low sanctioning power.

Second, the meta-organization is an association. This means that members collectively form the center of authority. Although members may vest their collective authority further into executive committees or even into an administrative organization, the ultimate authority lies with the members collectively. Furthermore, membership of an association is voluntary and members keep most of their autonomy. Members have their own authority center in place, which can decide to stay or exit, to contribute or not, and to communicate and agree with other members about the collective goals. Members are thus only partially absorbed into the meta-organization. A meta-organization as a collective strongly depends on each member’s choice to remain a member and on each member’s willingness to contribute to the collective. Thus, member organizations are simultaneously the owners, co-producers and clients or end users of the collective (Bor, 2014).

Third, members of this organization are themselves organizations. Organizations are collective action units composed of individuals or organizations. They possess resources, which they can (but not necessarily will) contribute to the collective, the meta-organization. As organizations, member organizations have much more available resources than individuals do, which means only a few members are enough for the meta-organization to function. However, the differences in resource’s availability among organizations are potentially also much higher than among individuals, which may result in inequalities among member organizations. Finally, organizations need a degree of autonomy to legitimize their existence. Because both members and meta-organization are organizations, members and meta-organization may compete with one another to protect their own autonomy, identity, and legitimacy.

By recognizing the associative nature of the organization and the specific circumstances created by having organizations as members, the concept of meta-organization helps us to understand and theorize a variety of effects, such as member power and influence dynamics, decision making, conflict handling and resolution, resource acquisition, and resource utilization. In what follows, we present some of the theorizing work started by the “European School” of meta-organization during the last 15 years.

Working Toward a Theory of Meta-Organizations

Meta-organizations, due to their particularities of being associations with organizational members, “work under different conditions than other organizations” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, p. 43). Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008), like Lawton et al. (2017) and Spillman (2017), regretted that organizations of organizations were underestimated and argued that a full blown meta-organization theory was needed to understand the specific conditions to these organizations. The key areas that, thus far, have been set out include formation and dynamics; functions of meta-organizations; decision-making in meta-organizations; and relations to the environment.

Formation and Dynamics of Meta-Organizations

Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) argue that certain features affect formation and continuation of meta-organizations. First, membership of meta-organizations is relatively cheap. It often costs little compared with members’ total resources. Second, meta-organizations do not need to own resources of their own. Member organizations can provide such resources—also called indirect resources (Bor, 2013, 2014), such as members’ staff, offices for meetings, and so on (Berkowitz, 2016). Third, meta-organizations can grow by stimulating membership through outreach (Berkowitz, 2016) or even actively setting up member organizations.

Because of these, one of the first consequences is that meta-organizations are easy to set up and maintain. Indeed, they can function without owning resources or having their own personnel. Moreover, only a small number of members is enough to set up and sustain a meta-organization.

Second, meta-organizations seem to have a low turnover of members, especially due to cheap membership (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). This low turnover can result in membership divergences. Member organizations may change over time, their priorities evolve, but all member organizations may not necessarily move in similar directions (Bor, 2014). Finding a common ground and deciding on the collective purpose or goals of the meta-organization can therefore become more difficult over time, and may lead to inertia.

Third, growth of meta-organizations can be stimulated also when members do not exist. Meta-organizations can create or support the creation of their own members. When membership represents geographical areas (local, regional, national, or continental), for example, and an area is not represented, a meta-organization may decide to support the development of a member organization in such area. It may also start a branch, similar to a multinational, with the aim to let such branch grow into a member organization.

Fourth, the possible low costs structure results in meta-organizations persisting over the long term. In the oil and gas industry, Berkowitz (2016) shows that meta-organizations keep appearing throughout the 20th century, but do not disappear. These meta-organizations subsist even when their direct objective has vanished (e.g. price negotiation) and they become “dormant.” Such “ghost” meta-organizations may therefore stack up and occupy organizations’ environment.

Finally, still due to low costs of membership and maintenance, multiple meta-organizations can emerge on the same topic (e.g. human rights or environmental performance) and coexist (Berkowitz, 2016). These meta-organizations often have different boundaries (infra-sectoral, sectoral, cross-sectoral) and classes of members (business only or multistakeholder) (Berkowitz, Bucheli, & Dumez, 2017). One organization may cumulate membership to these various meta-organizations. Membership overlap creates links between such meta-organizations, like board interlocks (Kogut, 2012). Such links enhance the chances for cooperation between these meta-organizations, for instance, concerning joint production of environmental reporting guidelines. However, at the same time, such meta-organizations compete over members and resources, in a similar fashion as Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) highlighted.

Functions of Meta-Organizations

As Lawton et al. (2017) and Spillman (2017) also recognize, meta-organizations can have a wide variety of functions. Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) present three general purposes for which a meta-organization may be set up, though they

note that meta-organizations in practice commonly pursue a combination of these purposes: (a) interaction among members, (b) collective action among members, or (c) creation of collective identity. Berkowitz (2016) highlights the information production function of meta-organizations to support each of these purposes, and shows a wide variety of goals for meta-organizations. She describes, for example, the preservation of sectoral commons (such as reputation), managing stakeholders (including lobbying) and tackling sustainability issues by allowing members to collectively develop responses to social or environmental challenges (Berkowitz et al., 2016; Chaudhury et al., 2016; Vifell & Thedvall, 2012). Two key features of meta-organizations link and may explain some of the strengths of meta-organizations. We highlight these shortly below.

First, Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) argue that meta-organizations, due to the autonomy of their members, have difficulties creating and maintaining hard laws. Meta-organizations, therefore, often produce voluntary self-regulation in the form of standards, rather than hard laws, to enhance or make interaction and collective action possible. As Rajwani, Lawton, and Phillips (2015) also outline, meta-organizations thereby contribute to shaping industry norms. Standards are less constraining and they facilitate the diffusion of a set of practices throughout member organizations to achieve collective learning (Gadille, Tremblay, & Vion, 2013). Other studies also highlight this collective peer-learning and the role of meta-organizations in the diffusion of management practices in, for example, health care (Leys & Joffre, 2014) or the oil and gas industry (Berkowitz et al., 2016).

Second, meta-organizations, due to their lack of authority over members, focus on creating a collective playing field agreed by all members (Bor, 2014) through decision making by consensus. The creation of such playing field facilitates dialogue, negotiation, and even co-competition, that is, combined advantages of cooperation and competition, between very diverse, potentially competing actors, from firms to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and governments (Berkowitz, 2016). Meta-organizations thereby can act as a multistakeholder governance device where best practices can be propagated among different organizations (Berkowitz, 2016).

Decision-Making

Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) argue that meta-organizations make decisions by consensus and have trouble reaching decisions by other methods. This results from both the associative nature of the organization and members’ autonomy, which means that there is a need to ensure that members remain members. Subsequent research—by Bor (2014) concerning R&D consortia and Malcourant, Vas, and Zintz (2015) concerning the World Anti-Doping Agency—shows that the need for decision-by-consensus particularly concern governance issues.

In her study of European Commission funded R&D consortia, Bor (2014) argues that the associative nature and members' autonomy do not affect the managerial or administrative decisions in similar fashion. She finds varied ways of making managerial and administrative decisions, including top-down, bottom-up, and horizontal decision-making processes. The author shows that the way of making resources available to the meta-organization—directly (resources becoming controlled by the meta-organization, for example through fees) or indirectly (resources remaining controlled by the member, for example staff, tools or facilities)—may affect managerial and administrative decision making in meta-organizations. Managerial and administrative decisions are more horizontal or bottom-up when member organizations control resources, while decisions follow a more top-down process when the meta-organization itself controls these resources.

Members may intentionally decide to provide the meta-organization with more control over resources. The objective then could be to ensure that the meta-organization's actions continue beyond meetings of members. STAR alliance, for example, made such decision when they realized that, in-between meetings, member representatives were unable to prioritize the meta-organization beyond their own organization. This resulted in slowing down the meta-organization's work (Findeisen & Sydow, 2016). In other cases, however, members may decide not to delegate control over resources to the meta-organization, as this would give the meta-organization agency without members' involvement. The meta-organization could then become unresponsive to members' needs and wishes. In addition, involvement in managerial and administrative decisions carries especially high stakes when the meta-organization offers mutual learning or mutual coordination among members (Bor, 2014).

As a unit of decision making, meta-organizations raise questions of addressability or nonaddressability (Grothe-Hammer, 2016). Meta-organizations make collective decisions and as such, act as a "voice for the industry". They can become a representative, which is supposed to be addressable (Rajwani et al., 2015). However, when a meta-organization does not have a very clear hierarchy or single point of authority, the collective becomes nonaddressable (Grothe-Hammer, 2016). When it has no responsive boundary, external actors cannot address it as a single unit. Furthermore, as collective decisions are made, member organizations can hide behind such decision with the argument that they cannot be held responsible for such collective decisions.

Another issue related to decision making is accountability, that is, who is accountable to whom. In meta-organizations, representatives of member organizations are accountable to both their own organization and the meta-organization. In parallel, meta-organizations are primarily accountable to those that provide them with resources. When members pay

fees, they will ask the meta-organization to render account. When external organizations, as the European Commission, provide resources, also they can demand the meta-organization to render account. In this multidirectional accountability situation, it is not always clear who has priority and whom the meta-organization reports to (Bor, 2014).

Relations to the Environment

Meta-organizations can be understood as a way for member organizations to affect (part of) their environment. In resource dependency terms, members create a negotiated environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The environment thereby becomes less uncertain, because the meta-organization provides a regulated and coordinated space—a decided order—for their members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Berkowitz and Dumez (2015a) analyze trade associations among other forms of meta-organizations, such as thematic meta-organizations or cross-sectoral meta-organizations in the oil and gas industry. They show that oil and gas companies may decide to strategically organize and shape their environment through setting up meta-organizations, depending on the issue at stake. Some companies, for example, have set up the research-oriented meta-organization CONCAWE to reduce uncertainty in relation to environmental issues relevant to the oil industry.

Member organizations not only create meta-organizations to establish a negotiated environment for members, they often also aim to actively affect their environment beyond the boundaries of the meta-organization. As we mentioned earlier, a stream of literature on business associations (Barley, 2010; Rajwani et al., 2015) has focused on their role as voices for industries. As also discussed, some key functions of meta-organizations are lobbying, enhancing legitimacy or status, and coordinating production or service delivery. Little research, however, examines how meta-organizations influence their institutional environment beyond these functions. For instance, meta-organizations may allow to defuse potential conflictual situations with other stakeholders by integrating them in a meta-organization (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015b). The study shows how multistakeholder meta-organizations, such as the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative, internalize local governments and NGOs in the decision-making process to neutralize conflicts on transparency of payments in countries of production.

Another important issue concerns how the environment in return affects meta-organizations. Some literature has studied meta-organizations' reaction and resistance to change in their environment. König, Schulte, and Enders (2012) study German industry associations and their reactions to the emergence of online trade. The authors show that meta-organizations disclose similar responses to nonparadigmatic change as individual-based organizations, that is, inertia.

A Common Research Agenda on Meta-Organizations

The research done by the “European School” is, as we have tried to highlight, compatible with the research agenda suggested by Lawton et al. (2017) and Spillman (2017). Below, we specify some additional lines to the suggested research agenda.

Resources and Resourcing Meta-Organizations

Lawton et al. (2017) suggest a first key theme of the research agenda: resources and resourcing. They specifically suggest exploring and unpacking the ways in which members extract proprietary benefits from the meta-organization and how they extract benefits from combining their resources with other members. We agree that this is an unexplored avenue, well worth pursuing.

We would like to suggest, however, to broaden this part of the agenda, which so far has a member-centric focus. We suggest including to the agenda a collective or meta-organizational focus on resources. As Bor (2014) notes, the control meta-organizations get over resources they mobilize affects the way and the extent to which meta-organizations monitor and sanction members. Bor and Cropper (2016b) have set out to further explore this relation between resource acquisition and the organizing of meta-organizations. They suggest that resource dependency differently affects goal orientation, membership, hierarchy, monitoring, and sanctioning of the meta-organization, depending on the source (internal or external) of resources, and the extent of control the meta-organization gets over resources.

We think that this shows exciting possibilities for future work in exploring how meta-organizations and their members mobilize, acquire, combine, and use resources and the consequences of this for the working of the meta-organization as well as their members.

Differentiating Meta-Organizations

Another key research question, that Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) outline, is to explore “the differences among meta-organizations” (p. 171). Similarly, Spillman (2017) invites to study variations in meta-organizational forms along two different lines. First, we can learn from studying variations along already acknowledged differences, such as purpose. Second, we may learn about variations when “asking what associations do for members compared with other organizational forms of coordination and governance” (p. 3). We think these are very fruitful suggestions for the way forward.

We believe that there are also benefits in comparing meta-organizations with other devices of coordination and governance. We think it can be fruitful to try to bridge the gap between literatures on interorganizational forms and literature

on meta-organizations. Recent work by Bor and Cropper (2016a) explores whether and how theoretical insights about other interorganizational forms (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2000), multipartner alliances (e.g. Das, 2015) and whole networks (e.g. Provan, Fish, & Sydow, 2007) can be fruitfully borrowed or integrated into meta-organization theory. We also see much potential in exploring how other forms of “unconventional organizations” may provide insights (Brès, Raufflet, & Boghossian, 2017).

Coopetitive Dimensions of Meta-Organizations

We agree with Spillman (2017) that the very existence of meta-organizations challenges traditional assumptions that “business is entirely anomic and competitive” (p. 1). On the contrary, business is by nature coopetitive, thus both cooperative and competitive (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996; Yami, Castaldo, Dagnino, & Le Roy, 2010). Understanding why competitors decide to gather in such meta-organizations and how they collectively create or fail to create value is essential.

A recent study aims to analyze business collective action in the form of a sectoral meta-organization in the crowdfunding sector (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2017). The study shows that competitors agree to cooperate not only among each other but also with legislators and regulators to develop a public policy. In that context, the meta-organization acts as an institutional entrepreneur (DiMaggio, 1988) in addition to what Spillman (2017) calls “policy-shaper,” by co-constructing a public policy with multiple stakeholders and corralling a new regulatory space (Souchaud, 2017).

Other types of “coopetitive meta-organizations” are out there, in the forms of patent pools, for instance, or research-oriented meta-organizations. Do such meta-organizations escape free riders, or are they victims of the paradox of collective action that Olson (1971) already identified for individual-based collective action? Meta-organizations combine three potential levels of coopetitive strategies: meta-organizational, organizational (members), and individual (representatives of member organizations). This may result in multilevel conflicts of interest that may in return affect meta-organizations’ functioning. A stream of research in coopetition addresses the issue of tensions and paradoxes of collective action (Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016; Tidström, 2014). We think such frameworks can also be fruitfully applied to coopetitive meta-organizations.

Toward a Normative Approach of Meta-Organizations and Sustainability

Finally, in line with Spillman’s call to study the contextual conditions under which meta-organizations activities become consequential, we suggest to work toward a more normative approach of meta-organizations and their contribution to the

governance of sustainability. Furthermore, to date, little research has thoroughly examined the key issue of meta-organizations' performance, especially in this perspective of sustainability.

Meta-organizations may help address major socioenvironmental challenges such as climate change (Chaudhury et al., 2016). Although some literature has outlined the importance of studying governance in the transition to sustainability (Leal Filho et al., 2016; Turnheim & Geels, 2013), few studies focus on meta-organizations' role in this transition. Yet they can act as a multistakeholder and distributed governance device that defines and diffuses sustainable practices (Berkowitz, 2016; Berkowitz et al., 2016). More empirical and conceptual research is needed to understand how meta-organizations may facilitate transition to sustainability and how they interact with other governance devices to tackle grand challenges (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015).

Further developing such a model of sustainable governance through meta-organizations would also require assessing their conditions of performance. Little work has managed to address this issue, partly due to the challenge of accessing empirical data. Indeed, meta-organizations have no obligation of transparency, nor of monitoring. As we have shown earlier, they multiply, coexist, and affect members in varied combined ways. In addition, existing performance instruments and accounting methods that apply to organizations made of individuals may not directly apply to meta-organizations. Therefore, we would need to develop new theoretical and managerial tools to assess meta-organizations' contribution to sustainability transition.

The first step would consist in framing what is being assessed. Meta-organizational performance as efficiency is hard to evaluate. It may be fruitful to think of it in terms of effectiveness, rather than efficiency (Ostroff & Schmitt, 1993). As producers of information, meta-organizations' effectiveness for members depends upon various dimensions: influence on regulation, sectoral diffusion of industrial norms and standards, reputation management, corporate social responsibility capacity building, enhanced industry sustainability, and so on.

The second step would require developing tools to evaluate contributions to these dimensions. Mathieu, Verhoest, and Matthys (2016) propose a tool to assess participation to legislation of multiple regulatory actors, using for instance level of coordination. A similar tool could be transposed to study meta-organizations' multiple functions. Another fruitful venue could be to explore network performance models applied to meta-organizations, developing for instance multilevel scorecards (Vesalainen & Autio, 2017). Assessing impacts on members in terms of norm adoption or collective sustainability enhancement calls for developing not only such standardized quantitative measurement techniques but also more qualitative measures. What is at stake is the ability to systemically compare meta-organizations for further theoretical developments and to identify conditions for sustainable governance.

Conclusion

As we show in this article, the "European School" of meta-organization is a dynamic and diverse community. The concept of meta-organization, as developed by the school, overcomes the focus on heteroclitic manifestations of interorganizational forms and has therefore a strong analytical power. Ongoing research projects undertaken internationally would benefit from a common agenda and a collective effort. In this article, we attempted to identify and frame some of these common venues to bridge the gap between the European and American research communities.

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