THE GENERATION, RECOGNITION AND LEGITIMATION OF NOVELTY

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THE GENERATION, RECOGNITION AND LEGITIMATION OF NOVELTY

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INTRODUCTION

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NOVELTY: SEARCHING FOR, SEEING, AND SUSTAINING IT

Gino Cattani, Dirk Deichmann and Simone Ferriani

ABSTRACT

The journey of novelty – from the moment it arises to the time it takes hold – is as fascinating as it is problematic. A new entity, to be recognized as such, needs to be differentiated from what existed before. However, novelty poses cognitive challenges that hamper its appreciation since it is difficult to form expectations about and make sense of something genuinely new. And since novel ideas, products, technologies, or organizational forms often violate existing practices and social structures, they are usually met with skepticism and resistance. In this introductory piece, we take stock of research into the challenges of generating, recognizing, and legitimating novelty. We review each paper in this volume and highlight the new perspectives and insights they offer about how individuals, teams, and organizations search for novelty, see novelty, *and* sustain novelty. *Finally, we outline several research themes that, we believe, are worthy of further scholarly attention.*

Keywords: Novelty; ideas; creativity; innovation; generation; recognition; legitimation

INTRODUCTION

Where does novelty come from and how does it take root? Scholars looking through the lenses of various disciplines and perspectives – including organizational theory, economics, evolutionary dynamics, sociology, and history of science – have searched for answers to this problematic question. The problem has perhaps most forcefully been dramatized in recent years in Salam Rushdie's

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The Satanic Verses, where a disembodied voice poses what turns out to be the enduring question of that novel: "How does newness come into the world?" In his impulse to establish how newness comes into the world, the narrator fails to establish that it does indeed "come into the world": novelty is expected to spring up in the world from some point outside it, as if there were some alternative space with a tank of novelty that from time to time percolates through our space (North, 2013), to evoke a famous metaphor by William James (Bella, 2019).

The metaphor is a reminder of the conceptual difficulty all scholars face when accounting for the manifestation of novelty. Something is not genuinely new if it already exists in our current practice or imagination if it is, in other words, already present in some form or shape in our world. Even in the abstract, of course, novelty depends on something prior, on the very continuity it claims to violate. If what distinguishes new things is their difference from what existed before, then it does not seem possible to establish novelty as such, without reference to a past that did not contain it (North, 2013). As Padgett and Powell (2012b, p. 1) aptly note:

> We [...] have many theories about how to choose alternatives, once these swim into our field of vision. But our theories have little to say about the invention of new alternatives in the first place.

New ideas, projects, practices, identities, and individuals usually make their appearance from off the stage of our imagination – such as in the popular business mantra "to think outside the box" – before our analytical machinery can be put into good use.

This conundrum is compounded by the epistemological difficulty of relying on causal logic to address the "novelty origin" problem: if a logical connection is to hold, then the conclusion is already implied by the premises preceding it. No matter how useful for refinement, improvement, and optimization, causal logic alone cannot be a fundamental novelty-conducive process "because logic can only use axioms that are already there" (Padgett & Powell, 2012b, p. 1; but see also Crosby, 2009, for an attempt to reconcile novelty and causal continuity). Not surprisingly then, the common sense for the ages seems to have been established for good and all in Ecclesiastes:

> What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already, in the ages before us. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)[1]

In short, a major component of the conceptual challenge of the new is the origin of its very existence, and yet questions on the genesis of novelty recur, driven by an intellectual curiosity about the sources of the new.

A second crucial difficulty scholarship concerned with explaining novelty has to wrestle with is that novelty is typically evaluated negatively when first encountered (Barber, 1961; Criscuolo, Dahlander, Grohsjean, & Salter, 2017; Rietzschel, Nijstad, & Stroebe, 2010; Trapido, 2015). New styles of music and painting, new ways of structuring our social world, and new modes of organization are usually greeted with skepticism if not outright ostracism. For at least two reasons: first, it may well be efficient initially to avoid the novel, for the simple reason that favorable novelty is the improbable outcome of processes that ordinarily yield little, or any, reward (March, 2010). Most of the time, it just does not happen. It is widely

accepted that favorable novelty is a quality that emerges from unconventional mixes of elementary components (Uzzi, Mukherjee, Stringer, & Jones, 2013). Yet, as pointed out by Augier, March, and Marshall (2015, p. 1141), in "the ordinary course of events, unconventional mixes do not occur; if they do occur, the results are more likely to be negative or minor than to be dramatically positive." Second, novelty is likely to elicit confusion because unconventional combinations are usually challenging to categorize, so it is difficult to form expectations and make sense of them (Mueller, Melwani, & Goncalo, 2012; Wang, Veugelers, & Stephan, 2017). This is most easily demonstrated in the arts, when the new way of seeing or hearing creates pungent dissonances in the viewer and hearer. Beethoven's music provides one of many examples. A contemporary critic of the Eroica symphony noted that one left the concert hall "crushed by the mass of unconnected and overloaded ideas and a continuing tumult by all the instruments" (cited by Rosen, 1971, p. 393).

Thus, on the one hand, creating something genuinely new requires breaking out of existing categories, perhaps by reconfiguring and recombining them in unusual ways. Yet, on the other hand, the outcomes of such recombination are less likely to be positively recognized by relevant audiences, sometimes resulting in false negatives. Creative industries, in particular, seem to abound with cases in which key resource providers passed over or even disparaged highly novel ideas that subsequently proved to be highly valuable. Notorious examples include such smashing hits as Star Wars (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003), Seinfeld (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003), and Harry Potter (Licuanan, Dailey, & Mumford, 2007), which were all turned down multiple times as cultural oddities before gaining recognition. These cases suggest that novelty recognition is challenging and fraught with uncertainty. Yet, novelty recognition is also "the crucial starting point in the long process of putting new ideas generated into good use" (Zhou, Wang, Song, & Wu, 2017, p. 180) as relevant social audiences must come to appreciate those ideas for them to survive and take hold (Adarves-Yorno, Postmes, & Haslam, 2007).

Unfortunately, the factors that help explain why novelty struggles to gain recognition do not necessarily inform us about the conditions that facilitate its legitimation. This point brings us to a third crucial difficulty that any attempt to account for the successful manifestation of novelty must face. Not only does novelty pose cognitive challenges that hamper its appreciation, but also it is likely to threaten the social structure that is supposed to host it. New ways of doing or seeing by definition are discontinuous with the past; thus, "they will often be seen as destructive of existing values and standards" (Mandler, 1995, p. 22). The artist who breaks new paths, the inventor who spearheads a new technology, or the scientist who creates new theoretical understanding will all have to challenge habitual schemas and institutional arrangements, thereby eliciting strong, sometimes even vehement, reactions from field incumbents (Barber, 1961; Fligstein & MacAdam, 2012). Indeed, the social structure of the field is usually highly resistant to novelty claims, especially when the initial settlement that defines the field proves effective in creating an advantageous arena for those who have fashioned it.

This observation underpins a related puzzle in the journey of novelty: that those who are best positioned to make novel contributions – newcomers, outsiders, marginal actors – precisely because of their position are least able to enact it

(Cattani & Ferriani, 2008). Weaker embeddedness in the dominant culture enables these types of actors to cross boundaries and import ideas from external domains, while their relative freedom from conformity pressures makes them more prone to novelty claims that threaten the received wisdom (or adopt practices that diverge from it). However, lacking the authority of incumbents and their privileged access to resources, relationships, and other external credibility markers, marginal actors face significant obstacles in marshaling legitimacy around those claims (Cattani, Ferriani, & Lanza, 2017).

> The paradox in this situation is less about how such actors come up with new ideas; rather, it relates to how these peripheral, marginal actors get other field members to adopt them. (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 202)

Under what conditions can then novelty gain momentum and take root?

Of the many pioneering ideas in Stinchombe's seminal piece "Social Structure and Organizations," few have become as iconic as "the liability of newness" to convey the puzzling nature of the processes underlying the emergence and legitimation of novelty. Yet, such processes remain undertheorized in the social sciences (Padgett & Powell, 2012a). To be true, it seems only natural that social scientists have devoted most of their effort toward slightly more tractable puzzles concerning the dynamics of existing entities and their relation with the social context: such topics are more prone to theoretical generalizations and identification of empirical regularities (Clemens, 2002). But instances of emergence, recognition, and legitimation of novelty recur and although Stinchcombe (1965) rightly recognized how organizations bearing the congealed imprint of their history recall the timeless words of King Solomon in Ecclesiastics that there is nothing truly new, from time to time novel exceptions are consequential and merit attention. As these exceptions cumulate and are increasingly documented, questions otherwise unanswerable except in highly contingent terms become more tractable, and more general claims about the processes and conditions that sustain novelty can be attempted.

Collectively, the scholars we brought together for this unique volume contribute to this effort: they advance arguments and ideas that powerfully illuminate why, how, and when novelty happens. Many of them have been actively involved in a two-year-long period of community-building efforts at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting in Vancouver (2020) and at the European Group of Organization Studies Colloquium in Hamburg (2020) and Amsterdam (2021). Their scholarship spans different levels of analysis (from micro to macro), empirical settings, and methodological orientations. Still, each paper is illustrative of the research that can be conducted to advance our understanding of the fascinating journey of novelty from the moment it arises to when it takes root and propagates.

NOVELTY IN THIS VOLUME

Besides this introductory paper and a coda, the volume contains 12 papers divided into three clusters: the first cluster, *Searching for Novelty*, offers insights

into how novelty makes its appearance into an existing field (market or industry), sometimes challenging or even altering its structure. The second cluster, *Seeing Novelty*, switches to the demand side, examining the reception of novelty by social audiences. The third cluster, *Sustaining Novelty*, sheds light on mechanisms and processes underlying the acceptance and legitimation of novelty. Because explaining novelty often requires spanning the conceptual categories of emergence, recognition, and legitimation, many papers of this volume cannot be cleanly separated into just one of these three clusters. Therefore, we group them into the cluster to which we believe they offer the main contribution with the caveat that such grouping is necessarily artificial. Table 1 indicates the link between each paper and the respective categories. While individually each paper offers new insights to our understanding of novelty, collectively, they create a mosaic of ideas that open up exciting avenues for future research. The concluding section summarizes these research avenues highlighting areas that, we believe, are ripe for further scholarship on the topic of novelty from an organizational theory perspective. Below we provide a brief summary of the key arguments of each paper in the hope that this will motivate readers to delve into the rich material that this volume offers.

Searching for Novelty

Any attempt to establish whether something is new implies substantial agreement on the meaning of novelty and how it can be identified and measured. Yet, there is considerable ambiguity and inconsistency regarding the novelty construct in the scholarly debate, which threatens the comparability and validity of scientific findings. A general lack of agreement on how novelty should be measured

Table 1. Volume Structure and Contributions.

Section	Paper	Novelty Generation	Novelty Recognition	Novelty Legitimation
Searching for novelty	Davide Bavato	X	X	
	Giacomo Negro, Balázs Kovács, and Glenn R. Carroll	X	X	
	Konstantin Hondros and Lukas Vogelgsang	X		
	Matthew S. Bothner, Frédéric Godart, Noah Askin, and Wonjae Lee	X		X
	Friederike Redlbacher, Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock, and Jetta Frost	X		
Seeing novelty	Brian P. Reschke and Ming D. Leung		X	X
	Denise Falchetti		X	
	Wayne R. Johnson		X	
	Daniel B. Sands		X	X
Sustaining novelty	André Spicer, Pınar Cankurtaran, and Michael B. Beverland			X
	Leonardo Corbo, Raffaele Corrado, and Vincenza Odorici		X	X
	Ignasi Capdevila, Pilar Opazo, and Barbara Slavich	X	X	X

and operationalized further compounds scholars' quest for novelty. In "Nothing New Under the Sun: Novelty Constructs and Measures in Social Studies," Davide Bavato synthesizes different conceptualizations and operationalizations of novelty across social, cognitive, and organizational sciences. His review aims to bring clarity to the meaning and measurement of novelty in scholarly practice. He reveals that in archival and quantitative studies – which form the basis of the review – novelty is often seen from two perspectives. When taking a proximity perspective, scholars operationalize novelty by calculating an idea's distance to other ideas that populate the same context or sociocultural space. When taking a frequency perspective, on the contrary, scholars measure novelty by counting the number of occurrences of an idea or its constituting components relative to the other ideas populating the same context or sociocultural space. Both conceptualizations are associated with challenges, though. For proximity measures, for instance, it can be challenging to establish when a departure from the past truly implies novelty. Similarly, it can be difficult for frequency measures to establish what counts as the chronologically first instance of a novel insight. While Bavato's paper does not and cannot resolve all the challenges associated with the different novelty constructs and measures, it provides a stimulating overview and reflection about how we can think about what is novel. It also highlights the need to integrate the role of time or temporal dimensions more explicitly when operationalizing novelty – either from a proximity or a frequency perspective.

Some of these challenges are particularly evident when addressing the question of the origin of novelty because data should be used that allow for a systematic examination of the evolutionary patterns of novelty emergence. The type of data some researchers use in conducting their analysis may indeed reveal higher levels of novelty in contexts where others found the opposite. This, in turn, has obvious implications for how we think of the origins of novelty and its carriers. In their paper "Bustin' Out: The Evolution of Novelty and Diversity in Recorded Music," Giacomo Negro, Balázs Kovács, and Glenn R. Carroll address this important question by exploring whether recorded music has become more or less diverse over time. Accordingly, they analyze the differentiation of recorded music in terms of distance of an album from other contemporaneous albums at that time. This approach assesses diversity through the actual existing recordings in a period rather than against some specific classification scheme that may or may not be relevant in the period of interest or against a small set of successful records only. Distance in this measurement scheme is about relative position of an artist from other artists, a time-invariant, nonhistorical variable that can be compared across eras and cultural contexts.

Using novel measures based on stylistic and acoustic data on recorded music from 1967 to 2017, they trace trends in the evolution of diversity over time in 125,340 albums and find that patterns of diversity differ for stylistic and acoustic measures and that musical diversity differs dramatically by genre. Interestingly, Negro, Kovács, and Carroll find that temporal patterns of diversity differ not only for stylistic and acoustic data but also by genre. While some genres, such as blues, jazz, and pop-rock, decrease in diversity over time, most other genres increase in diversity. They further find that results of previous studies that have