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A Nurse and a Civil Servant changing institutions: Entrepreneurial processes in different public sector organizations

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Summary

The notion that there is strong connection between the private sector and entrepreneurship has resulted in entrepreneurship in the public sector being neglected. This in turn leads to theoretical, practical and political shortcomings. The role of entrepreneurs as change agents is captured in the concept 'institutional entrepreneurs', but most studies focus on actors on the higher levels. This article sheds light on previously forgotten or ignored entrepreneurial processes, those taking place within the middle levels of the public sector, and which result in institutional change. We elaborate on the characteristics of the entrepreneurial processes and their prerequisites. The framework draws on the tension between entrepreneurship and the institutional context, and suggests a multi-level approach, drawing on insights from both entrepreneurship studies and new institutional theory. The cases highlight the importance of being able to create alliances and find sponsors to ensure freedom of action and grant legitimacy. The enabling and constraining aspects of the institutional context are illustrated and discussed.

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Introduction

In both public debate and mainstream research, the concept of entrepreneurship is still associated with the start of businesses within the private sector (for example, Davidsson & Delmar, 2006; NUTEK, 2007). Numerous studies discuss entrepreneurship in the new economy, but we also need to look beyond its purely economic aspects (Hjorth & Steyaert,

2003). In this paper, we take a Schumpeterian point of departure, and claim that entrepreneurship exists in all types of settings (1934/1994) and is constructed in time and place. The notion that there is a strong connection between entrepreneurship and the private sector has resulted in entrepreneurship in the public sector being underestimated (Sundin & Tillmar, 2007). This leads to both theoretical, practical and political shortcomings, as entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs, are important for the development of society in other ways than through starting businesses, for example, through effecting change. Public sector organizations are among the arenas, which entrepreneurship studies have neglected. Indeed, the sector is often considered as

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the absolute opposite of entrepreneurship. Consequently, there is still a lack of empirical studies on entrepreneurship in the public sector (Bartlett & Dibben, 2002; Morris & Jones, 1999), and especially of studies focusing on the entrepreneurial processes within their contexts (cf. Gartner, 1989).

The role of entrepreneurs as change agents is captured in the concept 'institutional entrepreneurs' (DiMaggio, 1988). To date, a clear majority of the studies of intraorganizational entrepreneurs focus on actors on a higher level and/or in private companies. Goals and strategies, however, are not fulfilled by those working in the higher echelons alone, but by all members of the organization. This is particularly obvious in service-producing organizations. In research on management, the importance of first-line-managers and middle managers is often emphasized. However, creativity and entrepreneurship on the middle and lower levels of the hierarchy need to be explored. This article is based on two cases of institutional entrepreneurship within the public sector started and driven by people in a middle position in the organizational hierarchy—one from a County Council and one from a Municipality. This way, we contribute to the re-contextualization and re-conceptualization of entrepreneurship.

We have chosen to report processes that have come to an end. When the processes started, the visions for change were very entrepreneurial. One process aimed at decentralizing the making of 'time-tables' for the employees at a university hospital.

This I thought was unacceptable...this had to change...

the entrepreneur in question commented the previous system. Now, the decentralized way of making 'time-tables' is conventional. This illustrates that the common truth of today can be the result of the battles of yesterday. In that respect, our second case is of the same kind. It concerns the idea and practice of public sector employees starting firms of their own, as so called 'alternative' suppliers of goods and services. This is now the dominating rhetoric and practice, although when it started it was met with resistance and was questioned. The entrepreneurs studied were successful in eventually managing to alter institutions.

The aim of this article is to elaborate on the characteristics of the entrepreneurial processes taking place in the organizational middle within the public sector. What characterized the entrepreneurial processes driven from this organizational level? What were the contextual prerequisites for the processes? Why did the entrepreneurial actions of these public sector employees result in institutional change?

The notion of institutional entrepreneurship emanates from two different research traditions: entrepreneurship and new institutionalism in organization studies. Generally speaking, entrepreneurship studies represent a voluntaristic perspective, paying much attention to the actor and actions, whereas institutional theory is said to represent a more deterministic view, attributing more importance to structure. Our cases and analyses can be read as a matter of structure vs. action (cf. Giddens, 1984), or stability vs. change. Yet, the two research traditions seem to be approaching each other. Within new institutional theory, the interest in change and in the role of individual actors is

increasing (Battilana, 2006; Johansson, 2002) and within entrepreneurship studies, the importance of contextual embeddedness is being recognized (Hjorth, Johannisson, & Steyaert, 2003; Jack & Anderson, 2002). This article contributes to this trend, in the sense that we take a multi-level approach, incorporating the individual-, organizational-, and sector levels of analysis in order to understand the entrepreneurial processes and the institutional change they result in. In this way, we hope to contribute to the dialogue between entrepreneurship studies and other academic fields (Gartner, Davidsson, & Zahra, 2006), in this case new institutional theory within organization studies.

The multi-level approach taken is a result of our empirical findings, which suggest that the institutional context in time and space has great influence on the entrepreneurial processes as well as on the prerequisites for institutional change.

In the next section, we start by explaining the methodology used in this study. Then, our framework of analysis is outlined and contextual prerequisites in the Swedish public sector are elaborated on. We then describe the case stories of first the Nurse and the time-tables, and then the Civil Servant and the alternative providers. These case stories are followed by a discussion of the described entrepreneurial processes in theoretical terms, before conclusions are outlined.

Methodology

The empirical study is mainly based on interviews conducted with the two entrepreneurs described over a period of 15 years. It is their work-experiences and strategies that are taken as the point of departure in this qualitative study. Contrary to many previous studies on institutional entrepreneurship, we do not take a managerial perspective or discuss how entrepreneurship in the organization can be fostered for strategic purposes. Furthermore, no senior managers in the public sector organizations under study have been involved in selecting or recommending the entrepreneurs studied.

The very first interviews were performed in connection with activities and initiatives carried out by the two entrepreneurs in the early 1990s. One of the authors met the Nurse for the first time when the Nurse, who had applied for and been granted some money from a national program for equality in working life, was presenting her flexi-time project. The presentation was impressive. She was then interviewed as a part of a study evaluating the program for equality (Hagberg, Nyberg, & Sundin, 1996).

The Civil Servant was also encountered by one of the authors in the beginning of the 1990s. The Civil Servant phoned and asked for a lecture on female entrepreneurship and later, for help in evaluating her first program for Municipal employees who wanted to start a firm of their own. An evaluation was made and the result was documented (Hammar Chiriac & Sundin, 1995) and later used in an article on the reorganization of the public sector and entrepreneurship from a gender perspective (Sundin, 1997). Later, during 2002 the Civil Servant was interviewed by the other author of this article for a study on the conditions

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