

**Nonprofit Trusteeship in Different Contexts.**  
Rikki Abzug and Jeffrey S. Simonoff. Hants, England: Ashgate, 2004. 155 pp. \$79.95.

*Nonprofit Trusteeship in Different Contexts* is important reading for those interested in neo-institutional theory and the study of nonprofits. Abzug and Simonoff examine variation in the structure and shape of U.S. nonprofit boards of trustees over a 60-year period based on historical era, geographic community, industry, and religious basis (these are the "Dif-

314/ASQ, June 2005

#### **Book Reviews**

ferent Contexts" referred to in the title). While the specific setting is nonprofit boards, the book makes a larger contribution to our understanding of how institutions have changed over time and across space. Most prior work in the neo-institutional tradition examines effects of industry on organizational behavior. The primary theoretical implication I took away from this book is that the same cultural and social logics and mechanisms underlying institutional theory can be applied to understand the effects of a wide variety of organizational environments.

After an introductory chapter that motivates the study and provides a review of the neo-institutional literature on nonprofits, chapter 2 describes the outcome variables of interest, nonprofit board composition, and structure. These include demographic factors such as gender and race, elite indicators such as listing in social registers and attending an elite college or university, and network connections to other boards. The authors draw on an impressive database of nonprofit trustee data from six cities across the U.S. during the three years of 1931, 1961, and 1991. They note that their approach is inductive and that this book is a first step in understanding the relationships between their outcomes of interest and different contexts that they theorize would have an influence on those variables.

The authors cover interesting theoretical ground in chapters 3 to 6, each of which addresses one of the four contextual factors that they examine. Chapter 3 examines how the institutional environment is contingent upon the historical era. They theorize this is a result of shifting legitimacy pressures from social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, feminism's second wave, a task environment more focused on achievement and skill level, and finally a shift from a local to a national elite. Chapter 4 applies neo-institutional logics to understand how and why there would be cultural differences based on geographic location. In particular, the authors do a nice job of illustrating the mechanisms that would lead to differences in board composition across localities, states, and regions, including identity, networks, state incorporation laws, local taxes, and other factors. In chapter 5, they focus on variation between different types of non-profits and suggest that there are isomorphic forces based on funding environments. Chapter 6 suggests "religiously affiliated" nonprofits are akin to a separately identifiable organizational field, and differences exist between parallel religious and secular organizations. These four chapters as a whole indicate that organizations face an incredibly complex and multifaceted social and cultural environment, and institutional theory provides useful tools to unpack how history, geography, and other social factors influence organizations.

Chapters 7 and 8 cover data and analysis issues. Chapter 7 contains detailed information on the Six Cities Trusteeship Project and its associated database, which the authors use to investigate their theoretical points. It is an impressive historical dataset, with data on 289 separate boards and the 8,927 associated trustees across six cities observed at three time points. This dataset is publicly available through the Cultural Policy and the Arts National Data Archive ([www.cpanda.org](http://www.cpanda.org))

315/ASQ, June 2005

and is a promising source for understanding historical changes, which is a particular challenge in the study of boards and networks (Mizruchi, 1996). Chapter 8 describes the information-theoretic approach to model selection that the authors use in their inductive analysis of the data. This entails running models for all combinations of variables and associated two-way interactions and then selecting the model that provides the best and most parsimonious fit for a given outcome. It is a straightforward and interesting way to conduct inductive work using quantitative data. While these two chapters provide important information, some of the more fine-grained content (e.g., details on the data collection process and teams in the six cities, discussion of missing data, review of various regression methodologies, formulae, and assumptions) may have been better as appendices.

The last two chapters describe and interpret the analyses of the constructs in chapters 3 to 6 on the variables in chapter 2 and represent the theoretical payoff of the book. The bottom line is that contexts are exceptionally important in understanding nonprofit boards. Board demographics, elite representation, networks, and structure are all to some extent contingent on city, industry, and time period. Thinking more broadly, their results suggest that the behavior of organizations is very responsive to a wide array of social and cultural contexts. Even more interesting than the main effects are the interactions between them, particularly the city and year interaction, which was the variable in the greatest number of their final models. For example, Boston and Philadelphia boards have greater elite representation than boards in other cities across all time periods. So city traditions appear to be important in board structure (Marquis, 2003). Like in all cities, however, elite representation decreased in both Boston and Philadelphia over time, particularly between 1961 and 1991. Thus, to fully understand these boards, *both* city and historical time period are important. The authors underplay the theoretical importance of these interaction effects. That both the contexts they examine as well as the combinations of contexts are important to understanding these board structures is a stronger demonstration of their overall theoretical position than they suggest.

Although the book lays new ground in its systematic exposition of the complex environmental influences on organizations, I think its contribution could have been even greater if it had a more focused scope. The authors' primary audience is organizational scholars with a neo-institutional focus, and a natural second audience is nonprofit researchers. They suggest in the preface, though, that they are also targeting the book to statisticians and practitioners. Writing a book for such diverse populations may have diluted the contribution to the primary audiences and is perhaps why some material, such as the overly detailed methods sections, that would have been better in appendices are presented as long chapters. Because there is a focus on the methods, readers have to wait until after the methods are presented to get to the analyses, which are all presented in one chapter. So someone who is interested in the importance of the historical time period, which is primarily discussed in chapter 3, does not

#### Book Reviews

see how this affects nonprofit boards until chapter 9. I would have preferred a different structure for the book that was more organized around the authors' theoretical points.

Finally, while I appreciate their inductive approach, I am not sure that its execution is consistent with their theoretical setup. As portrayed in the title, chapters 3 through 6, and the concluding chapters, the authors are primarily interested in how contexts influence the structure of nonprofit trusteeship, but their analytic approach is designed to seek out the best model for each of their dependent variables, which gives prominence to their outcome measures. For example, their theories do not address why a trustee would be a woman or man but, rather, why changes in the historical period or differences across cities would influence a variety of board structures. Because the authors only focus on the best-fitting model for each dependent variable, the reader is not able to see the effects of different contexts on all the outcomes they analyze. To be fair, the authors do note that this book is only a first step in exploring the data. The data are publicly available, and their work suggests a rich set of future projects for the authors and other interested scholars.

Though I do list a few minor execution-related faults, overall I am impressed with the theoretical insights and systematic nature of their examination. Abzug and Simonoff have highlighted the importance of understanding the complexity of contexts in which organizations and industries are situated and contributed an important typology for the systematic study of contextual influences on organizations. It is now time for future researchers to build on their work and increase our understanding of the complex and interrelated influence of diverse external environments on organizations.

**Christopher Marquis**  
Organizational Behavior Unit  
Harvard Business School  
Boston, MA 02163

#### REFERENCES

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Marquis, C.</b><br/>2003 "The pressure of the past: Network imprinting in intercorporate communities." <i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>, 48: 655-689.</p> | <p><b>Mizruchi, M. S.</b><br/>1996 "What do interlocks do? An analysis, critique, and assessment of research on interlocking directorates." <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i>, 22: 271-298.</p> |
|--|---|