Current Interest in the Theory of Path Dependence – A Short Update*

Jörg Sydow, Department of Management, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany.

There is an increased interest in the field of technology and innovation management in studies that are informed by path concepts (e.g. Ansari and Garud, 2009; Valorinta, Schildt, and Lamberg, 2011; Dobusch and Schüßler, 2013; Kay, 2013; Bergek and Onufrey, 2014; Greve and Seidel, 2015; Singh, Mathiassen and Mishra, 2015; Berggren, Sydow and Tell, 2017; Wessel, Gersch and Harloff, 2017). The same also holds true for the fields of strategic management, including research on interorganizational alliances/networks (e.g. Koch, 2011; Müller-Seitz and Sydow 2011; Sydow, Windeler, Schubert, and Sydow, 2012; Burger and Sydow, 2014; Rothmann and Koch, 2014; Schmidt and Braun, 2015; Wenzel, 2015; Ding, Kininmonth, and McKinstry, 2016; Laudien and Daxböck, 2016; Berggren et al., 2017), as well as for organizational research (e.g. Sydow, Schreyögg, and Koch 2009; Schreyögg, Sydow and Holtmann, 2011; Kremser and Schreyögg, 2016). Even the fields of project management, international management and business logistics have shown a first interest in the study of path dependencies (e.g. Hutzschenreuther, Pedersen, and Volberda, 2007; Sydow, 2009; Manning and Sydow, 2011; Pajunen and Fang, 2013; Truschkin, Elbert, and Günter, 2014; Alscher and Brauer, 2015). Finally, the numerous studies with a focus on economic geography (e.g. Martin and Simmie, 2008; Isaksen, 2015; Binz, Truffer, and Cohen, 2016; Jing and Benner, 2016) deserve to be mentioned. Interestingly, even scholars interested in identifying and solving unfamiliar problems ad hoc (Ritala, Heiman, and Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, 2016), refer extensively to path-dependent properties (in this case: of dynamic capabilities; see also Verge and Durand, 2011) in order to clarify the non-path-dependent character of such processes. Last but not least, and long overdue, economics has restarted reflecting its status as a path-dependent discipline (Yalcintas, 2016)

This type of research, even if applied to business and management, can be traced back to David’s (1985) and Arthur’s (1989) conception of technological path dependence, which emphasizes the importance of self-reinforcing processes that are triggered by (small) events leading to a (potential) lock-in and occurring mainly behind the backs of agents. In contrast, the more recent approach of Garud and Karnøe (2001) calls for a more explicit conceptualization of (multiple) actor(s) who are thought of as intentionally influencing the path’s trajectory. Though both approaches are obviously related to one another, they are
usually dealt with separately. What is more, previous studies in which an attempt has been made to integrate these different views at least to some extent have turned to the organizational realm (e.g., Sydow et al., 2009, 2012) and thus improved our understanding of paths in settings other than technological ones.

References


Sydow, Jörg, Georg Schreyögg and Jochen Koch (2009). Organizational Path Dependence:


* As of March 2017. For more detailed information see the Path Community Newsletters at http://www.wiwiss.fu-berlin.de/forschung/pfadkolleg/_NEU_Organisation/Newsletter/index.html