Introducing The ‘Neo-Contingency Approach’ To Community Development

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Introduction:
In this paper, the authors introduce the ‘neo-contingency approach’ (Donaldson, 2001; Sorge, 1983, 1991) to community development. In the neo-contingency model, individual organisations adapt to various factors with which it is faced (i.e. ‘contingencies’) and being in a state of adaptation means – at least in theory – that the organisation’s structure ‘fits’ the contingency or contingencies that the organisation is confronted with at a given point in time (McKinley and Mone, 2005).

The neo-contingency approach has been used to explain how large organisations have been able to diffuse best practice in work organisation, leadership and training arrangements across national cultures (Mueller, 1994), thus countering or mitigating against cultural or societal specificities. However, much less concern has been given to applying the approach to those organisations that – by necessity – have to be much more rooted to their local communities, such as those engaged in community development. Such an organisation is unlikely to be ‘successful’, it could be argued, unless the individuals involved have a thorough appreciation and understanding of local context.

Through presenting three case studies from research undertaken in rural areas of Japan, we attempt to explain each organisation’s ‘pattern of adaptation’ to their particular local context, through focusing upon three contingencies that are familiar to community development research: social capital, ‘communities of practice’ and leadership.

Methods:
In this paper, we utilise a case method approach. Our three case studies were chosen after an initial survey of a range of community initiatives around rural Japan to identify the common organisational forms (i.e. Private company form, Non-profit organisation form, and a ‘hybrid’ of the two other forms).

A purposive sample was drawn of potential sites that were believed to have community development-oriented activities that have persisted over time, in different sectors, and employing different methods. Three rural communities – Higashi Naruko, Kamijima and Tono – were chosen based upon their considered heterogeneity. Data collection involved a combination of efforts: interviews with key informants, including officials at local and municipal government level; interviews with knowledgeable informants from the selected communities (particularly the ‘drivers’ of the activities); site visits to each of the sites on a number of occasions, during which in-depth interviews were conducted with key actors; and participant observation (Howell, 1973) which involved establishing rapport with the people, immersion in the field, recording data and observations, and consolidation of the information gathered. The three organisations examined are located in various rural locations around Japan. Higasgashi Naruko Yumekaigi (Higashi Naruko Dream Council) is located in a mountainous area of eastern Japan, Shima no Kaisha (Company of the Island) is located in a coastal area of western Japan and Tono Yume Sato (Tono Dream Village Life) Network is located in a mountainous area in the north of the country.

Conclusion:
A strong case can be made that societies – nations or groups of nations with similar characteristics – put strong imprints on organisational cultures (Alvesson, 2013). The three case studies presented here, however, rather than exhibiting institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) have shown that distinct sub-cultures can emerge, which are the product of a pattern of adaptation to the environment. Local contingencies such as leadership, social capital and communities of practice all have a role in influencing organisational culture in community development organisations, and thus we consider that the neo-contingency approach to community development is potentially valuable in furthering our knowledge and understanding of such facets. However, we also consider that the approach requires further theoretical and conceptual development: examination of a wider, more varied, range of contingencies through
more – perhaps longitudinal – empirical research, in different communities and cultural settings, throughout the world, would help to do this.