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Professionalization through dispersed institutional entrepreneurship
The case of the intercultural community

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address the decreasing role of professional associations in governing the work of entrepreneurial, knowledge-intensive professions such as management consulting. It presents the example of an alternative path to traditional professional regulation. This organic professionalization path is introduced through the concept of dispersed institutional entrepreneurship.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper builds on an in-depth qualitative investigation of professionals in the intercultural industry combining physical and digital ethnography in a multi-modal investigation.

Findings – The findings illustrate how an ideological divide within the professional community prevents an emergence of the traditional, association-led professionalization path. Instead, the investigated community follows an organic, bottom-up route, with competing individual entrepreneurs developing converging strategies and products. This process is labelled dispersed institutional entrepreneurship.

Research limitations/implications – The findings indicate that current views on professionalization need to reconsider admission criteria and the professionalization paths that are generally assumed. Further research could focus on investigating organic professionalization paths among other professional groups.

Originality/value – With an in-depth qualitative investigation of an aspiring professional community this paper contributes to an ongoing discussion on the process of professionalization. The findings show that independent agents' efforts could be at the centre of the process. They can prevent the professional association from leading the professionalization project while enabling the organic development of synergies across the community.

Keywords Professionalization, Cross-cultural training, Dispersed institutional entrepreneurship, Interculturalists, Online ethnography, Reentry

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Transformation taking place in the institutional environment, including higher demographic diversity, fragmentation of individual interests and specialization of expertise (Leicht and Fennell, 2008), has led to calls from scholars to redefine the term "profession". Intrigued by the multiplicity of definitions of the concept of the professional community and that of the professionalization project (Abbott, 1991; Watson, 2002), this study undertakes an ethnographic investigation of the professional group of interculturalists (Dahlén, 1997). It documents alternative practices and professionalization paths to those established in the field by sociological theory (Leicht and Fennell, 2008).

The interculturalists can be considered one of the newly emerging groups claiming "professional" status. They are trainers, coaches, consultants, advisors or educators in fields related to (cross-)cultural diversity. They form a loose professional community organized around a few associations. To that extent, they are an "unbounded profession" with fuzzy borders (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). These few associations provide physical and virtual meeting places where interculturalists exchange ideas and join in collective conversations (and sometimes heated debates) on the topic of the professionalization of the community. Despite open antagonism regarding the course of the professionalization project and the lack of a regulatory body that can legitimize and support the community, intercultural knowledge and practice have an established legitimacy among public and private organizations, educational institutions and governments (Pusch, 2004; Eisenberg *et al.*, 2013). We argue that individual, rather than collectively organized, practices of the interculturalists lead to institutional developments. Consequently, instead of focusing on professional associations or firms, our work draws attention to the actions of individual entrepreneurs, the dispersed process of entrepreneurial activity and the organic patterns of professionalization.

We introduce the concept of dispersed institutional entrepreneurship and exemplify its importance in explaining the professionalization efforts of the community. Our main contribution is to show how dispersed institutional entrepreneurship participates in the professionalization project, in an environment where individual voices and entrepreneurial actions are given strong legitimacy. We introduce a new organic pattern of professionalization that can potentially explain developments in other dynamically emerging domains, such as management consulting.

Theoretical context
Professionalization
The professionalization project is defined as an endeavour of occupational groups to establish control over unique, scarce and valuable knowledge and skills in return for social and economic rewards (Larson, 1979). Birkett and Evans (2005) describe the multiple outcomes resulting from different stages of the professionalization process, including: control over the particular expertise market; recognition and status; upward social mobility; and social closure (Birkett and Evans, 2005, p. 103). Abbott (1991) describes in more detail the sequencing of the professionalization project and adds the rise of professional associations and scientific transformation as critical steps in assuring the elite position of the community. The concluding stage of these processes results in professional monopolies where the exclusive control over the domain is assured through juridical measures (Abbott, 1988). First, this traditional path to professionalization includes actors' independent attempts to introduce new ideas into the field; second, the formation of professional associations; and third, the boundary work performed by the latter in order to limit access to the professional community. We illustrate this process in Figure 1.

It is not surprising, then, that majority of research projects examining professionalization focus on professional associations (Birkett and Evans, 2005), professional bureaucracies (Magala, 2009) or professional firms (Cooper and Robson, 2006). These studies mostly rely on a traditional understanding of the professionalization project and focus on independent liberal professions. Less understood are the professionalization efforts of entrepreneurial professions – often referred to as knowledge workers – whose rise has been linked to the deregulation and liberalization of the state (Reed, 1996). The entrepreneurial professions cannot rely on

formal control, professional structures or monopoly over their domain of expertise. Instead, their claim to professional status is built upon more "esoteric" grounds linked to highly specialized cognitive skills and extensive marketing strategies (Reed, 1996, p. 585). With limited or no reliance on highly organized collegial structures or bureaucracies (Reed, 1996) in what ways do these groups create their professional stance? How do they embed new practices and procedures within institutional fields? Acknowledging the non-existence of professional associations or large organizational structures that can govern the activities of entrepreneurial professions, we move our attention to individual actors in order to understand the ways in which the professional project emerges, transforms or is actively contested in its traditional form.

Professional developments and institutional entrepreneurship
Institutional entrepreneurs are defined as agents with sufficient resources, who bring about change motivated by their interests (DiMaggio, 1988; Maguire *et al.*, 2004). Whether through undermining the status quo or through addressing field-level problems, institutional entrepreneurs can be the driving force of new initiatives and professional developments (Maguire *et al.*, 2004). Their localized experimentation ideas can become a base for further theorizations subsequently anchored within the institutional field (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002). In this context, theorization can be defined as a transition from individual practices to an organizational and institutional level construct. It involves the definition of the situation requiring intervention, as well as specification of the intervention and its rationale (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002; Tolbert and Zucker, 1996). It is in the process of theorization that local deviations are abstracted and a streamlined and generalized solution is proposed (Abbott, 1988). Theorization enables the diffusion of the newly proposed initiative beyond its initial context (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002).

We build upon a comprehensive review of Hardy and Maguire (2008) to introduce an alternative application of the concept of institutional entrepreneurship. The present study adopts the authors' view that, instead of focusing on heroic actions of individual actors, research should look at the properties and field position of entrepreneurs, assessment of field conditions, the interpretative struggles faced by agents and intervention strategies including access to resources, rationale for change and building new relations with the affected entities (Hardy and Maguire, 2008). The approach is centred on the struggles of actors who might be solitary, multiple, spatially dispersed (Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007) or facing a collective action problem (Wijen and Ansari, 2007). While many studies reflect upon different aspects of the institutional entrepreneurship endeavour, what remains unexplored is the impact of entrepreneurial initiatives on the actors who introduce and lead the transformation.
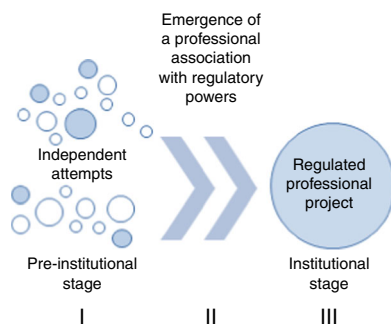
The world of the interculturalists

The intercultural industry

With a few noteworthy exceptions (i.e. Pusch, 2004; Renwick, 1994) the development of the intercultural domain and its practices has not been systematically traced. Table I incorporates various types of activities and events, some decisive, some more modest, undertaken by the intercultural community throughout its professionalization project. It is not an all-inclusive overview, but one that marks the wide diversity of intercultural achievements.

Within the community, Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR) is the largest association for intercultural enthusiasts. There are more than 15 national chapters of SIETAR operating around the globe (Berardo, 2008; Salzbrenner *et al.*, 2014). SIETAR conferences and online forums are the venues for presentation and exchange of concepts, ideas and products, such as intercultural tools or training techniques. Interculturalists are not all members of SIETAR. The exact size of the intercultural community is difficult to estimate.

The intercultural training domain is situated within the larger structure of international HRM and the meta-institutional field of multinational organizations (Kostova *et al.*, 2008). From the perspective of institutional theory, intercultural work embeds to a great extent the three key elements necessary for understanding of an institution: ideals; discourses; and practices (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000). Intercultural work rests upon the ideals of multiculturalism, tolerance and inclusion of otherness. These ideals permeate a discourse of intercultural dialogue and peace, with an overarching focus on diversity.

The interculturalists

The interculturalists contributing to conversations on professionalization, certification and professional boundaries bring a range of experiences and fields of expertise, reflecting the diversity of this community (Dahlén, 1997; Berardo, 2008). Romani and Szkudlarek (2014) propose an ideal-type classification into four distinct profiles based on two criteria: professional experience; and the nature of clients with which the interculturalists work (for-profit vs not-for-profit). The first ideal type, activists, are those individuals who are young in the field and predominantly work with not-for-profit organizations. Those who operate in the not-for-profit context for a long period of time and have established their reputation within the field are called professors, since the majority of them work in institutions of higher education. Among those who work predominantly with the for-profit sector, entrepreneurs are those who are new within the field and trying to establish their commercial activity, while gurus are those who have successfully established a well-functioning sustainable business model. It is important to stress that many experienced interculturalists work across both the profit and not-for-profit sectors and this categorization is based on their primary declared professional identity.

The entrepreneurs tend to be the largest group in the intercultural community (Romani and Szkudlarek, 2014; Salzbrenner *et al.*, 2014). Many work within the realm of their own-developed business, sometimes in partnership with other interculturalists with whom they associate to widen their range of service.

The research process

We build on an in-depth qualitative investigation of professionals in the intercultural industry, conducted by the authors independently between 2005 and 2010, and

Aspects(s) of the professionalization project		Date	Examples
Development of a specialized field of expertise	Knowledge	1959	E.T. Hall publishes "The Silent Language"
		1980	G. Hofstede publishes "Culture's Consequences, Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations"
		1993	Launch of the GLOBE Research Project
	Education	1983	D. Landis and W.R. Brislin publish "The Handbook of Intercultural Training" (1st edition)
		1990	ICI and the University of the Pacific (USA) co-found the Master of Arts in Intercultural Relations (MAIR)
		2004	Instigation of the Master of Advanced Studies in Intercultural Communication Università della Svizzera Italiana (Switzerland)
	Professional training institutions	1987	Foundation of the Intercultural Communication Institute (ICI)
		2005	LTS Training and Consulting starts offering a 5-day course: intercultural trainer training
		2006	The Intercultural Development Research Institute (IDR) starts its operations
	Academic institutions	1972	Society for Cross-Cultural Research (currently publishes Cross-Cultural Research) is established
		1997	The International Academy for Intercultural Research is founded (currently publishes *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*)
		1997	Launch of The International Association of Cross-Cultural Competence and Management (currently publishes *European Journal of Cross-Cultural Competence and Management*)
Professional community associations		1974	Creation of SITAR (Society for Intercultural Training and Research) later renamed to SIETAR (Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research)
		1991	Foundation of SIETAR Europa
		1994	Launch of the Nordic Network of Intercultural Communication
Market penetration		1954	Vacuum Oil Company establishes the first documented in-house training programme
		1955	Launch of the Business Council for International Understanding (BCIU)
		1989	F. Trompenaars starts the Centre for International Business Studies
Governmental institution penetration		1955	E.T. Hall enters the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) as Director of the State Department and designs the first training programme for foreign service officers
		1970	Peace Corps publishes a first cross-cultural manual
		2010	German army introduces the function of intercultural advisor
Organized attempts to professionalize the intercultural community		1997	Establishment of the first international taskforce aiming at setting up an intercultural certification procedure
		2009	SIETAR Europa launches a LinkedIn conversation on "Competence and Intercultural Professions"
		2014	Salzbrenner, Schulze and Franz publish "Status Report of the Intercultural Profession"
		2015	SIETAR Europa Congress Panel "Should SIETAR Introduce Quality Standards for its Members?"

Table I.
The professional project of the intercultural community

conjointly after that. In this paper we present our analysis of the discussions related to professionalization, and the work of entrepreneurs in the intercultural training field. We develop our arguments from two sources of insights combining physical and digital ethnography in a multi-modal investigation.

Data

Our main source of insight into the community's stance and arguments regarding professionalization was the online discussion forums of the intercultural community. Online forums present distinctive advantages for the study of a networked community. They enable the researcher to reach a larger range of interlocutors and record their own voices; they provide asynchronous, durable and collective conversations with explicit and developed arguments (see Herring, 2001; Murthy, 2008). We focused our digital ethnographic investigation on several online forums and multiple discussions (Intercultural Communication Institute, Intercultural Insight Group, SIETAR Europa discussion forum and SIETAR Europa: competence in intercultural professions).

Challenges to the use of online forums echo those of physical ethnography (e.g. position of the researcher, nature of the data, protecting the anonymity of participants, accuracy of the collected information, see Garcia *et al.*, 2009). In this paper we reproduce only the entries of those who granted us consent, and consistent with Boellstorff (2008), we paraphrased other entries so that they are not easily recognized. The first author purposefully started a thread on the professionalization challenge to collect opinions on the topic, specifying her agenda of writing a paper on the subject. Early on, we also introduced ourselves to the moderator of one of the main online forums and contacted him regularly during our fieldwork. During the study, our work evolved towards "informant ethnography" (Williams, 2006), that is, we progressively took a more interactive role than that of sole observer, developing multiple interactions with key interculturalists, presenting our work in progress and entering into dialogue with interculturalists committed to the professionalization process. The observations of the online conversations were corroborated with ethnographic observations of over 40 intercultural conferences, training events and seminars.

In analysing website content we aimed to trace the similarities and differences in intercultural training services offered among training providers across the globe. Consequently, we analysed the content of ten intercultural training providers' websites accessible online in June 2015. To ensure maximum variety (Patton, 1990) we randomly chose countries from six continents with the use of the keyword "intercultural training" in our search. The intercultural trainers included in our analysis were located in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, India, the Netherlands, Poland, UK and the USA.

Analysis

We used an inductive and emergent interpretive approach (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) for the analysis of our ethnographic material. Each of the authors independently analysed the field notes and divided them into categories linked to professionalization (e.g. professionalization processes, certifications, struggles, etc.). Those were subsequently compared and discussed and, as a result, we developed several sub-interpretations of our data (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000).

In our analysis we focused on the collective online and offline conversations linked to professionalization. In particular, we paid close attention to conversation threads

broadly concerned with topics related to legitimacy, certification and professional boundaries, and with the use of Nvivo10, made a detailed content analysis of about 700 pages of the printed text of conversations taking place on the four major forums from January 2010 to October 2013. We merely present here arguments by proponents and opponents of a professionalization project. We validated our interpretations by consulting numerous interculturalists (e.g. active voices or actors in the professionalization debate) to reach our final analysis.

With regards to training websites, we inductively content analysed (Patton, 1990) the advertised training services. In our analysis we aimed to capture the diversity of training offerings by performing a summative analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), that is, we searched for inductively derived keywords (e.g. "competence") and followed the search with contextual understanding of the concept (e.g. "competence" and leadership, teamwork, diversity). This allowed us to trace the variety of training offerings despite slight variation in vocabulary used to describe them. We corroborated our findings with the results of the 2014 "Status Report of the Intercultural Profession" (Salzbrenner *et al.*, 2014).

Our extensive ethnographic inquiry allowed us to capture both the ongoing conversation about the professionalization project and the here and now of intercultural practice. Below we present the results of our investigation, starting with the professionalization talks within the community.

Professionalization talks
The first international taskforce aimed at exploring and setting up an intercultural certification procedure was established in 1997 (Pusch, 2004). These efforts proved to be unsuccessful. Several later attempts were equally fruitless. In the SIETAR USA Raleigh-Durham Congress of 2009, a special interest group consisting of members from various international SIETAR chapters met and formed a consortium to initiate a global conversation about professionalization. This movement is at the origin of the SIETAR Europa LinkedIn conversation on "Competence in Intercultural Professions" and it aspires to "reopen the discussion on the nature and requirements for professional intercultural practices, and possibly, […] discuss how to create a process of recognition for those working in the intercultural field" (George Simons, the conversation's moderator). More than 8,000 interculturalists (*SIETAR Europa Journal*, 2015) have participated in this conversation, making it one of the largest conversations to our knowledge in the intercultural professional community. The content analysis of the many threads on this forum, and of three other major forums, showed the similarity of arguments with those we heard and recorded in SIETAR conferences, sessions and workshops.

In these conversations, recurrent themes touch upon the necessity of boundary work, its nature and the body that would regulate the access to the profession. Arguments put forward by each side are numerous, complex and often intertwined. In this paper, we present solely the major observable trends within these conversations in relation to the community's position on the professionalization project as they suffice to show the intercultural community's stances and ideologies resisting professionalization.

Why professionalize?
None of the SIETAR chapters select their members: all members are welcome, and consequently, all can call themselves "interculturalists" and promote their professional services independently of substantiated qualifications, experience and expertise.

As stated by one of the discussants: "There are too many people that call themselves "interculturalists" that do not have qualifications to back this up" (Jane, entrepreneur).

Common arguments in favour of increased levels of boundary work claim the necessity to assign a value to professional expertise, either because it is expected by the clients, or because it could be imposed by them, resulting in a loss of control by the community:

> I'd be willing to bet that if we interculturalists don't create these standards, the corporate world will do it for us within the next 10 years and those of us not employed in the corporate environment nor in the academic institutions invited to create the standards will not be involved in the process nor happy with the results (Brendon, *guru*).

At the same time, the opponents of regulated boundary work and the professionalization project support the notion that it is precisely the market that should be the reference benchmark for interculturalists, with competence (client's satisfaction) as the main criterion: "A satisfied client is the certification I need" (Agnes, activist/professor). To this, some add the idea of educating the market: "Perhaps a far better move for this new SIETAR [initiative on professionalization] would be to devote time and energy to educating the clueless clients […] so that they can choose quality" (Eric, entrepreneur).

Other opposing voices are more distant from entrepreneurs' commercial concerns, but closer to the proclaimed and unifying humanist ethos of the intercultural community (Dahlén, 1997; Romani and Szkudlarek, 2014). Since being open to diversity and multiplicity, as well as preaching about inclusiveness are the industry's core values, some wonder how the community will avoid the potential exclusion of individuals and groups that might have limited access to resources allowing them to acquire the necessary accredited qualifications. "There is a place for everyone in this field. There must be, or it would imply that the field itself does not stand for its own projected principles" (Lennard, activist).

On what criteria?

The proponents of licensing put forward various strategies that could support the formal process. For example, multiple voices reinforce the developmental nature of intercultural expertise: "Instead of setting the certification bar at some end point […] an idea would be to make certification criteria that acknowledge what people have and bring them into a "circle" that enables them to widen their knowledge, experience, skills" (Justine, entrepreneur).

The opponents argue about the difficulty of defining on which disciplines and skillsets these criteria should be based. In addition, some openly share their worries about the lack of research or empirical foundations of intercultural expertise: "Intercultural industry for too long has lacked a critical view of the models and theories underpinning it" (Walter, entrepreneur).

Established by whom?

Interculturalists also discuss who should orchestrate the professionalization process, on what grounds an entity should be granted the authority to do so, and which are the groups that could have legitimate control over the professional monopoly. SIETAR is considered by some as the entity that could assume this role:

> As for the SIETAR Europa's work on professionalization, I strongly believe in their important role in this process […] I have experience with another professional organization and I think SIETAR could learn a lot from them what to do and how to, for example, develop formal accreditations (Judith, *entrepreneur*).

Other voices denounce the lack of legitimacy of SIETAR, because they see it as either not representing the entire community or as an "entry level" organization: "SIETAR is in a good position to deal with establishing level one ethical standards for the profession [e.g. ethical professional guidelines] but nothing more […] It is an entry community, it introduces newcomers to the field" (Marty, guru).

To some extent the conflicting voices prevent the emergence of the traditional professionalization pattern, with accrediting bodies and certification procedures. These voices hamper a shared sense-making process of whether the professionalization project should take place and how it should look. Because of the very inclusive nature of the community and celebration of different views even one opponent of the professionalization project can successfully impact the course of any conversation, meeting or taskforce. When SIETAR organizations want to pursue a professional project, they too follow ideals of inclusive and democratic consultation processes – for example with online forums – where these individual voices gain a very powerful position.

Intercultural entrepreneurs and professionalization work
Organic isomorphism
Despite the absence of a centralized body regulating the work of the intercultural community, numerous intercultural interventions, such as expatriation programmes and cultural awareness sessions, permeate the organizational field. Since no regulatory body authorizes the dissemination of intercultural content, the intercultural community is forced to follow a more organic path to legitimizing its expertise. Our analysis of websites of interculturalists from ten countries presented in Table II revealed structural content overlap in the training activities offered. Not only do the trainers' training portfolios look very similar, but those overlapping areas of know-how are at the core of intercultural competence. When asked about their subject matter expertise, the intercultural community identified the following main themes: cultural awareness, intercultural communication, global teamwork, relocation, diversity and global leadership (Salzbrenner *et al.*, 2014). This semantic similarity as well as the similarity of training offered bring coherence and logic to the field-level work performed by each of the independent trainers.

The isomorphism of approaches pursued by the trainers occurs despite the dispersed nature of the intercultural training domain and despite the competitive character of the industry. As demonstrated by Szkudlarek (2008) this isomorphism is foremost an organic outcome of continuous independent day-to-day efforts of individual entrepreneurs who construct similar strategies to address the problems present in the organizational field. The similarities come first from what the trainers experienced while sojourning and from their shared experience with HR managers and trainees, and only second, from the professional training organized, for example, in connection with SIETAR conferences and workshops. In fact, the report on the intercultural community shows that many interculturalists admitted not pursuing additional forms of education because they believed that relevant life and work experience qualify as professional development (Salzbrenner *et al.*, 2014).

Institutionalizing presence in the corporate field
Every individualized training – selling effort contributes to securing the presence of intercultural expertise in the organizational field. Yet, those temporary successes do not guarantee consequent theorization (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002) of intercultural practice.

	Australia	Brazil	Canada	China	Egypt	India	The Netherlands	Poland	UK	USA
Relocation training	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Region specific training	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Multicultural/global teamwork	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Intercultural awareness/communication/competence	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Diversity management				X	X	X		X	X	X
Global virtual teams	X						X		X	X
Global/multicultural leadership				X			X		X	X
Cross-cultural negotiations		X				X		X		
Industry specific training (e.g. tourism/health/HR)		X				X		X		
Train the trainer					X	X	X			
Public speaking to multicultural audience				X			X			
Other			X			X		X		

Note: X indicates a training type offered by the provider

Table II.
An overview of the variety of intercultural trainings provided by ten providers across ten countries

To diffuse intercultural ideas entrepreneurs need to engage in new processes that will secure the project's execution and persistence beyond its initial local context. The main strategy in this process is mobilizing members of the targeted organizational field.

As demonstrated by Szkudlarek (2008) trainers heavily rely first on the spread of their ideas via word of mouth. They either hope that trainees will advertise intercultural services among their friends and/or colleagues, or that HR managers will advocate for intercultural training within the organization. Second, global mobility supports the spread of the idea beyond its initial context. When changing employment, employees take the concept of intercultural training to their new organizations. In this way, trainers' sphere of influence expands without their direct contribution to the process. Both of these approaches rely on trainers actively mobilizing existing members of the organizational field to spread the concept of intercultural practice. Yet, one of the largest mobilizing tools is online presence and passive use of previously mobilized actors in legitimizing intercultural expertise. Use of a few testimonials or selectively chosen evaluation statements is a common practice in the intercultural profession. Together with logos or names of former clients, these few selected endorsements are used to legitimize trainers' work and irreversibly embed the intercultural industry within the organizational field. The bigger and more renowned the client, the greater the legitimacy of the trainers and their expertise. Within our sample eight of ten analysed websites contained client lists and three included numerous testimonials (see also Szkudlarek, 2008).

Through these processes trainers aim to achieve sustainability and wider spread of a newly introduced product. These efforts support the legitimacy of the practice, encourage its efficiency and argue for its necessity within the organizational realm. In addition to inscribing the training in the corporate domain, this process supports the very existence of the intercultural "professional" who is presented as the only provider of this highly specialized intercultural expertise. Eight of ten websites display trainers' resumes and credentials or describe the profile of the training team with reference to terms such as "authority in a given area of expertise", intercultural "professional", "specialist" or "expert".

Discussion
Dispersed institutional entrepreneurship
Institutional entrepreneurship goes beyond the heroic actions of individuals and encompasses work on collective institutional entrepreneurship where multiple actors act collaboratively to achieve a desired outcome (Wijen and Ansari, 2007). We argue that the case of intercultural practitioners, in which individuals independently (and competitively) strive to establish their own professional stance and the status of their services within the field, exemplifies a phenomenon that has not been explored in previous accounts of institutional entrepreneurship and that goes beyond efforts entrenched in institutional work (Lawrence *et al.*, 2011).

In a community that loudly debates professionalization efforts, we observe actors whose position within the field considerably differs from that traditionally attributed to institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988); they can be described neither as resourceful nor organized. Individually, these entrepreneurs are weak and vulnerable as their survival depends on their continuous efforts to inform and convince clients of the necessity and legitimacy of their services. Yet, those dispersed efforts performed by numerous dispersed individuals result in the achievement of an isomorphic outcome, despite the solitary, detached and even competitive nature of the industry. While the collective action problem cannot be overcome, the aggregated efforts result in a shared outcome. To label this particular form of institutional change process, we propose the concept of *dispersed institutional entrepreneurship*. Individual entrepreneurial efforts lead to within-field isomorphism, despite within-industry competition and regardless of the idealist convictions expressed in the "professionalization talks" that prevent collective cooperation.

New patterns of professionalization
The majority of accounts of professionalization are linked to the expansion of professional associations (Larson, 1979). These associations would define the norm of self-governance and be the main site of boundary work. However, with the rise of democratization, new professionals can also gain their status through work (Larson, 1979). We see the case of the intercultural community as a manifestation of ongoing changes in the role of professional and occupational associations, which in a competitive market environment tend to lose their position and decision-making power (Leicht and Fennell, 2008).

While discussion on the professionalization of the intercultural industry began more than three decades ago, no progress has been made in unifying the field. Competition and free market are the preferred regulatory formula to govern development of the industry. Consequently, numerous independent and often competing entrepreneurs emerge within the field. Each performs locally bonded boundary work (Lamont and Molnar, 2002) and defines the exclusiveness of their knowledge, skills and expertise.

At the same time one can observe the remarkable similarity of the proposed services and methods of engagement brought independently by each of the detached and autonomous actors. They do not follow the traditional institutionalized socialization process considered typical for a professional career (Leicht and Fennell, 1997). In an unregulated field, client's satisfaction rather than formal credentials becomes a superior quality criterion. Finally, the ideological or ideational resistance that some interculturalists form against the professionalization process also prevents the emergence of highly regulated socialization arrangements since those resisting voices are heard and respected in the debate.

Figure 2 presents a schematic model of the organic professionalization project, mapped through observation of the professional community of interculturalists. First, individual actors attempt to bring independently new ideas in the pre-institutional stage. Second, if the professional organization does not emerge, or does not have a regulatory power, individual actors need to individually carry out localized projects. Third, due to the high similarity of actions brought by multiple independent individuals, the outcome of compound dispersed efforts is highly homogenized within the organizational field and leads to an emergence of dispersed institutional entrepreneurship. The dispersed institutional entrepreneurship project strives to legitimize the existence of intercultural practice, but it also contributes to the legitimization of the actors who have the expertise, thus becoming a new site of professionalization.

The intercultural community operates in a globalized economy, utilizes flows of knowledge with few constraints (e.g. virtual training), has a high mobility of people and limited applicability of state-governed jurisdictions – it cannot legally claim expertise. As such, it provides a case that invites institutional theorists to redefine the traditionally described canon of professionalization. Privatization of industries as well as greater reliance on market regulation and managerial forms of governance, according to Scott (2008), already redefine the place, role and form of professions in modern society. Our findings echo those of Kipping and Kirkpatrick (2013), who show, with the case of management consulting, that the main professional association may be unwilling or unable to perform the boundary work, which in turn will result in greater fragmentation of the field. Consequently, the mutation of the traditional institution of the profession is inevitable (Adler and Kwon, 2013). Professional groups will likely emerge and sustain their existence based on normative, rather than regulatory grounds. Interculturalists or management consultants are among the groups for whom access to the traditionally defined professional realm is denied by many. With our study of the intercultural community we have come to realize the institutional consequences of dispersed individual entrepreneurial actions and how, we argue, they
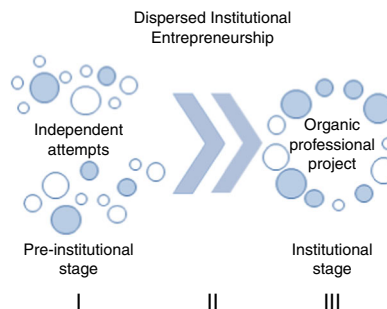

Figure 2.
Dispersed
institutional
entrepreneurship

impact the professionalization process. With this case, we propose that current views on professionalization should reconsider the necessity of admission criteria and assumptions about professionalization paths.

Conclusions

We have attempted to explore the professionalization project, not by focusing on professional associations, but by examining the practices of individual entrepreneurs and the collective conversations of a professional community. We show how individual, independent agents can prevent the emergence of the traditional professionalization project, with resistance related either to the dominant ethos of a given community, or preferred market-driven ways to achieve professional legitimacy within the organizational field. These voices, even if isolated, successfully influence the collective conversations within the community and stop the traditional professional project from progressing. These findings illustrate the case of the decreasing role of professional associations in governing the work of entrepreneurial, knowledge-intensive professions.

Despite these impediments, we argue that the professional project is by no means over. With the introduction of the construct of dispersed institutional entrepreneurship we capture the founding moment of a new organic site of professionalization. We explain how individually vulnerable, scattered and even competing agents, collectively can bring a field-level coherent change. With their laborious marketing efforts individual entrepreneurs create a space for a new domain of expertise and its carriers. As opposed to centralized and highly regulated strategies, they opt for market-driven, independent actions, which, nevertheless, create comparable field-level outcomes for the professional status of the community. The professionalization project progresses, despite the lack of deliberate efforts on the part of individuals or associations to secure its regulated execution. Our main contribution is, therefore, the introduction of the construct of dispersed institutional entrepreneurship that supports institutional theorizing efforts to keep abreast of dynamic transformations within the professional domain.

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