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**Learning from Environmental Actors about Environmental Developments  
- The Case of International Organizations -**

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## **Zusammenfassung**

Im vorliegenden Aufsatz wird der Versuch unternommen, internationale gouvernementale Organisationen als lernfähige korporative Akteure zu betrachten. Damit soll gezeigt werden, dass internationale Organisationen weder als Instrumente mitgliedstaatlicher Interessen noch als Arenen multilateraler Verhandlungsprozesse hinreichend verstanden werden können. In der Perspektive des Organisationslernens wird danach gefragt, wie internationale Organisationen im Zuge des Interaktionsgeschehens mit Akteuren aus ihrem Umfeld über äußere Veränderungen und Trends lernen. Dabei geht es um die Vermittlung als auch die Interpretation der von außen an internationale Organisationen herangetragenen Erwartungen, Anforderungen, Ideen und Wissen. Ziel des Papiers ist die Entwicklung eines theoretischen Analyserahmens, der das Interaktionsgeschehen zwischen internationalen Organisationen und den ihre Umwelt repräsentierenden Akteuren als Auslöser für organisationale Lernprozesse begreift und gleichzeitig auch institutionelle, kulturelle und politisch-interessenbezogene Bedingungen berücksichtigt. Die aus dem Spannungsfeld zwischen Organisation und Umwelt resultierenden Lernprozesse sind dualer Natur: Erhöhte Anpassungsfähigkeit in den Grenzbereichen internationaler Organisationen geht mit Abpufferung des Organisationskerns von Umweltfluktuationen einher. Diese Einschätzung gründet auf der Prämisse der sozialen Konstituierung des Organisations-Umwelt Nexus und dessen Verbindungen mit organisationsinternen Prozessen. Darüber hinaus wird die politische Bedingtheit organisationaler Wissensprozessierung und der Einfluss administrativer Routinen und Verfahren auf die Aufnahmefähigkeit internationaler Organisationen betont.

## **Abstract**

This article makes a case for viewing international governmental organizations (IOs) as corporate agents capable of learning. In doing so, it attempts to go beyond prevailing conceptions of IOs as means or settings for multilateral negotiation and bargaining. The proposed theoretical framework argues from an organizational learning perspective. By integrating notions from neo-institutionalism and policy-analysis it tries to capture the impact of IOs' publicness on learning processes. The focus is on IOs' relations with stakeholders and constituencies for the development and implementation of transboundary policies. These interactions are seen as a means to learn about external demands, expectations and expertise. Their impact on the internal dynamics in IOs tends to be of a dual nature: enhanced adaptability in its margins and buffering the organizational core from environmental fluctuations. Hence, some skepticism is appropriate in assessing IOs' capacity to engage in profound changes as a result of learning. It rests on the contention that the social constitution of the organization-environment nexus and its linkages with intra-organizational processes is of crucial importance for IOs' ability to learn about environmental changes and developments. Emphasis is placed on the contested and controversial nature of knowledge absorption and the limiting effect of administrative routines and procedures on IOs' absorptive capacity.

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## **1. Globalization, international organizations, and learning<sup>1</sup>**

Against the backdrop of a globalizing economy there is a growing range of societal problems which cannot be addressed sufficiently at the national level. Due to their reduced problem solving capacity, national governments are challenged to become more intensively engaged in international cooperation, coordination and organization (Grande 1997; Messner 1998; Senarclens 2001). New forms of political governance are emerging at the transnational level (e.g. multi-level governance in Europe) and international intergovernmental organizations (IOs) become increasingly important for purposes of multilateral cooperation and negotiation. According to Senarclens (2001: 512) states need IOs "to create the right conditions for peace and security, to promote international regimes, to carry out joint economic, social, cultural, ecological, or humanitarian projects, for knowledge-sharing and harmonizing their public policies, and for managing scientific and technical cooperation programs." They often serve as arenas in which argumentation, deliberation, and persuasion can take place – thereby contributing to the rise of a distinct type of social interaction in international affairs to be differentiated from strategic bargaining and rule-guided behavior (Morgenthau 1963: 411; Risse 2000).

IOs play an important role in bringing new issues or problems on the agenda of international policy planning. But they are not sufficiently equipped with resources (personnel, finance, expertise, authority) to develop and implement transboundary policies on their own (Schmitter 1996; Weisband 2000). IOs' engagement in a great variety of communication and coordination relationships with actors from their environments involving national governments' representatives, experts they consult, private parties, NGO's etc. can be seen as a way to overcome these constraints. As a result, "IOs are deeply enmeshed with and dependent on their environments" (Haas 1990: 207). Moreover, as Gordenker and Saunders (1978) have argued, international organizations can rarely pursue their goals in a straightforward fashion under the administration of experts in the inertial and partly hostile environment of the state system. They must function with special sensitivity to their environments because they are urged to satisfy their clients and paymasters with appropriate programs. "The point is that these programs do not result from the exclusive exercise of technical rationality" (Haas 1990: 30). These processes are complicated by the

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frequent requirement in the administration of transnational policies to achieve coordination and collaboration of different governmental bodies which are operating in various institutional settings (Brown 2000: 583; Schmitter 1996: 145). As a result, the increased likelihood of competition or conflict between those bodies together with discussions directed by political ideology affect rationality in the development and execution of transnational policies (LaPalombara 2001: 560).

All together, these external forces exert considerable pressure on international organizations to engage in learning (LaPalombara 2001). They exist and survive only because they manage to identify and please the demands and expectations emanating from national governments and private groups (Haas 1964; 1990; Rittberger 1995; Wiegand 1978). However, there is surprisingly little known on how these organizations identify "relevant" demands from external actors and accommodate or anticipate to changing environmental conditions. The question of what their bureaucracies will do when confronted with challenges emanating from a complex and dynamic environment puzzles not only observers but probably the agents of their international bureaucracies as well (Gordenker/Saunders 1978). The present paper aims to develop a theoretical framework to study how IOs cope with the challenges emanating from their environments. It incorporates the organizational learning (OL) perspective to highlight how, and under which conditions, "new knowledge" about external demands and trends is transformed into an organizational property (Huber 1991). The proposed framework is based on the premise that the social constitution of an organization affects its ability to learn from environmental actors about environmental developments (Child/Heavens 2001; Child 1997).

The underlying idea of the paper relates to an important claim in theories of organizational learning that learning is triggered by processes of responding to changes in the external environment (Child/Heavens 2001; Dodgson 1993; Hedberg 1981; Huber 1991; Klimecki/Thomae 1997). Hedberg (1981: 3-4), for instance, has pointed out that "organizational learning includes both the processes by which organizations adjust themselves defensively to reality and the processes by which knowledge is used offensively to improve the fits between organizations and their environments." It is argued that the various communication and coordination processes between international organizations and actors in their environment play an important role in becoming knowledgeable about developments in a given policy field. In this respect, organizational learning – or more specifically 'knowledge

acquisition' (Huber 1991) – is triggered through interaction and participation in social relations with environmental actors (Gherardi/Nicolini 2001). These linkages – captured under the term 'boundary spanning activities' – are conducive to the transfer of outside signals (expertise, demands, expectations) into the organization (Böhling 2001). The same processes allow for the intrusion of outside signals that emanate from what is institutionally embedded in the social context of the organization, i.e., they bring society in (Granovetter 1985; Scott 1992). Understood as social interaction, the linkages of an organization with its environment can be more specifically qualified in terms of their behavioral quality and structuring (Tacke 1997).

The transfer of outside signals into the context of an organization is not of a direct nature. Or as Dodgson (1993: 387) has put it, "organizational learning cannot be created and eradicated by varying external stimuli." Much depends on organizations' perceptual filters due to the fact that they "typically face much more information than they can sensibly process" (Hedberg 1981: 8). Processes of interpretation and sense-making are significant for an organization's capacity to cope with the complexities and dynamics of its environment (Dierkes 1988; Dierkes/Hähner/Berthoin Antal 1997). Theories of organizational learning pay particular attention to these cognitive aspects of organizing by emphasizing the communicational structure of organizations which creates for its members a mental box in which to think and to work (March/Simon 1958; March Olsen 1975; Weick/Ashford *forthcoming*). Moreover, processes of interpreting, distributing and using outside signals in the context of an organization reflect the political nature of organizational knowledge (Berthoin Antal/Böhling 1998). Drawing on these insights, it is suggested that organizational learning is an active rather than intuitive process highlighting the contested and controversial nature of knowledge absorption (Cohen/Levinthal 1990) and knowledge creation in organizations (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka/Toyama/Byosière 2001).

Before these issues about organizational learning can be discussed in more detail, we need to broaden our understanding of international organizations to view them as corporate actors. The presentation of international organizations in institutional and legal terms leaves much out of interest. They are not merely instruments for the attainment of converging interests of their member states but also develop their own dynamics as agents within a transnational policy space that is expanding on the back of economic globalization. It is argued that the focus on IOs' capacity for agency and

the ensuing OL perspective is a useful starting point to open up the 'black box' of their organizational dynamics. Assuming that there is no freedom of discretion to IOs agents and that their bureaucracies merely mirror Max Weber's idealtyp would probably just reproduce what we know already about public organizations' resistance to change (see LaPalombara 2001: 561). The application of the OL perspective to the organizational dynamics of international bureaucracies is an invitation to look at their capacity for agency in a demanding and complex environment. It promises fresh insights about IOs' dynamics in their roles as corporate actors in a transnational policy space. Conversely, theory-building in the OL discourse may benefit from the proposed analysis of learning in IOs due to the fact that the bulk of research in this field is based on firms (Berthoin Antal 1998: 45; Ventriss/Luke 1988: 349).

## **2. Opening up the 'black box'**

Depending on how we think of international organizations, different approaches to the study of this type of organization become appropriate. Rittberger (1995: 25) has pointed out that IOs can be seen as (a) 'instruments' of member states' diplomacy, (b) 'arenas' for multilateral negotiations, or (c) 'corporate actors' assuming a third party role towards the member states; i.e., their behavior is not merely a reflex of member states' demands and expectations. The images of instrument and arena share assumptions from the intergovernmental approach assuming that member states use IOs to defend their interests (see Moravcsik 1995). Eising (2002) has summarized the core assumption of intergovernmentalism as follows: "Member-state actors form their preferences on the basis of domestic economic situations or in response to pressure from domestic interest groups. Agreements are then reached on the basis of bargaining power and mutual concession" (idem: 85). The important point is that perspectives arguing from this realm of thought do not attach an autonomous role to international organizations. The major players in international affairs are primarily national governments. Accordingly, IOs are either viewed as means or settings for political governance, but not as actors – the third image differentiated by Rittberger. Adherence to this image involves looking at their bureaucracies or secretariats in relation to the member states and constituencies. Rittberger has argued that an IO's function (e.g., policy planning, implementation, monitoring) and role (e.g., authority, decision-making competence) are critical components of its capacity for agency.

Due to the fact that international organizations are always established by a multilateral international treaty, their purposes and objectives reflect common or converging national interests. IOs are political institutions shaped by member states. Looking at their embeddedness in political and institutionalized environments, there is much to say for IOs as instruments for strategic bargaining and arenas for rule-guided behavior. Feld and Jordan (1994), for instance, stress that an IO's institutional framework is its most distinguishing feature. Variations occur from very simple, consisting of nothing more than a lightly staffed secretariat to very complex and comprehensive international bureaucracies with legislative, executive, and judicial competences similar to national governments. In this sense, the ways in which IOs cope with environmental changes cannot be described without reference to the underlying rules for social interaction. Both – their relations with actors who are formally outside the organization and the internal mode of working and organizing – are embedded in values, norms and regulations set by their members states. Their behavior reflects the rules and belief systems emanating from the broader context. Accordingly, the lessons learned through interaction with people from the outside are affected by the underlying rules for these coordination and communication activities. But political institutions are more than simple mirrors of social forces (March/Olsen 1984: 739). This basic claim in neo-institutionalism stresses that processes external *and* internal to the corporate agents of political institutions affect the flow of policy planning and execution. The critical point is on how we understand the relationship between 'external' and 'internal'.

From the enactment perspective, organizational environments cannot be separated from the process of organizing (Weick 1995). Though it is acknowledged that institutionalizations have a constraining impact on IOs' capacity for agency (DiMaggio/Powell 1991; Scott 1992), it is based on the premise that the ensuing conventions, norms and procedures are constructed and reconstructed in processes of social interaction (Geppert 2000; Majone 1989). In this sense, the density of institutionalizations in international affairs enables and constrains but does not determinate social interaction, for human agency creates, reproduces, and changes rules, norms, and values in the daily work of policy planning and implementing (see Giddens 1984; Risse 2000). The impact of 'external' performance criteria on international organizations may be discussed in a similar vein. External bodies are in a position to exert significant influence on IOs' scope for action because they impose

certain conditions for the organization to perform well. However, through participation in relationships with representatives of their member states, IOs' agents gain opportunities to influence the success criteria which external bodies may apply to them. An organization creates choice possibilities in a demanding and complex environment through the engagement in relationships that extend its external boundaries (Child 1997: 57). The same line of thought holds for an organization's ability to learn. According to Hedberg (1981: 13), for instance, it is "not only a function of the nature of the environment but also of their coping capacity, and of the dynamics that develop during the learning process."

The relation of organizational agency to the environment is therefore dynamic in nature. From this stance, the environment has a constraining *and* enabling impact on organizational life. It presents threats to survive and opportunities to innovate. Accordingly, it is not meaningful to abstract from the environment when considering an organization's efforts to adapt to changing environmental conditions. External influences do not have a direct impact on organizational life. Organizational design and structure are not merely an outcome of environmental and other contingencies (Child 1972). The ways in which organizational actors understand their environment affect the perception of choice possibilities (Berthoin Antal/Dierkes/Helmers 1993; Friedberg 1995: 87 ff.). External influences become meaningful to an organization through interpreting them as being consequential for organizational action. They enter the organization through the filtering mechanisms of its external boundaries. An organization's perceptual filters are crucial for its capacity to buffer outside fluctuations and preserve its autonomy (Thompson 1967: 165). The conception of the organization-environment nexus as socially constituted acknowledges the enabling and constraining properties of the environment and the resultant balancing act between autonomy and dependence (Child 1997).

Drawing on Lequesne (2000), it is argued that international organizations act somewhere between dependence and autonomy. On the one hand, IOs are created by and dependent on national governments. Moreover, they are obliged to act according to rules and procedures set up by their member states (e.g., treaties). These institutionalizations – whether formal or informal – serve to stabilize and control the interactions between the various actors involved in policy processes. They affect the distribution of resources which in turn affects IOs' power as political actors (see March/Olsen 1984: 739). Depending on the degree of financial and

administrative resources at their disposal, IOs are more or less autonomous. And depending on the issue at stake (high or low politics), national governments are more or less keen to use IOs for the facilitation of their interests and bargaining.

On the other hand, international organizations enjoy a degree of autonomy from the national governments and other stakeholders in their environment. Senarclens (2001) has stressed the importance of external relations in this regard. International organizations "enjoy some autonomy in the performance of their mandate, all the more so when they can rely on the support of transnational political and social movements" (idem: 515). The mobilization of specific resources in the planning process of political programs brings their agency to the fore. IOs act as architects and brokers in the roundtable operations necessary for policy planning (Feld/Jordan 1994). Moreover, they often serve as agenda setters by attending to new problems or introducing new perspectives on certain issues (Risse 2000: 20). The related organizational tasks consist in the management of cooperation, coordination, and the achievement of political compromises. Being the drafter of policy initiatives and programs with the possibility of synthesizing various inputs into one document is an additional significant resource in the hands of IOs' agents (Cram 1994; Laffan 1997; Lequesne 2000).

IOs' agency refers primarily to their role as political actors and it is in this realm that they are assumed to display openness toward outside signals. Conversely, IOs' properties as public organizations present significant limitations for their capacity to learn. LaPalombara (2001), for instance, cautioned against a too-easy extrapolation of agency theory to the public sphere due to the very fact that their organizations are normative at their core. The prevalence of normative considerations in policy-making would be detrimental to rationality and efficiency. "Learning things about goal-setting or policy implementation that may be rational and efficient but that are palpably unfeasible politically is not only a waste of resources but also a one-way ticket to political bankruptcy" (idem: 558). Considering the recent changes in political governance at the national and supranational level in Europe, this trade-off between efficiency and rationality on the one side and political feasibility on the other may be questioned. In the European system of multi-level governance, for instance, the chances of policy adoption increase if they are politically feasible *and* well-informed (Kohler-Koch 1992: 101). Due to public policies' growing complexity traditional command-and-control techniques of government bureaucracy become less effective

(Majone 1996: 616). The rising importance of policy-networks and the ensuing greater variety of actors involved in policy-making indicates a qualitative shift in political governance (Mayntz 1993). There is strong evidence in favor of ideas as an explanatory factor for policy-making that complements the supposedly independent role of institutions and interests (see Héritier 1993; Kissling-Näf/Knoepfel 1998; Klimecki/Lassleben/Riexinger-Li 1994). These factors do not replace but complement utility-maximizing and norm-guided behavior. Bringing in new ideas and perspectives is influenced by the underlying power relations. They define who has legitimate access to policy deliberation and may affect what counts as "good argument" (Risse 2000: 15). These insights from policy-analysis form the basis for adhering to a political view on international organizations when conceptualizing internal learning processes.

### **3. Modeling processes of organizational learning**

The identification of preference orderings, and the resolving of scientific uncertainty and strategic ambiguity present significant challenges to an international organization's 'absorptive capacity' (Cohen/Levinthal 1990). It is the underlying idea of this concept that "the ability to evaluate and utilize outside knowledge is largely a function of the level of prior related knowledge" because such knowledge "confers an ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it" (idem: 128). An organization's absorptive capacity consists in its ability to exploit outside sources of knowledge, i.e., its ability to interpret, store, and use it. As Kim (2001) has pointed out, merely exposing organizations to relevant external knowledge without exerting efforts to internalize it is insufficient. Cohen and Levinthal suggest that the effective transfer of external knowledge depends on the structure of communication between the organization and its environment, as well as among its subunits, and the character of distribution and expertise within the organization.

Huber's (1991) differentiation between four constructs related to organizational learning is useful to explore an organization's absorptive capacity in more detail. Accordingly, organizational learning consists in processes of 'knowledge acquisition', 'information distribution' and 'interpretation', and 'organizational memory'. Rather than indicating a linear phase model, Huber's constructs are used to attend to the four distinct moments that are seen as crucial to processes of organizational learning. By

doing so, it will be emphasized that "organizational learning is neither an effortless nor an automatic process" (Berthoin Antal/Lenhardt/Rosenbrock 2001: 865).

First of all, 'knowledge acquisition' is the process by which an organization obtains knowledge from internal or external sources. An organization's units will acquire new knowledge if it is recognized as potentially useful to the organization. The acquisition of new knowledge is triggered by an organization's efforts to enhance adaptation and adaptability – particularly in fast changing and unpredictable environments.

Knowledge may be acquired in a mindful and conscious way or it may be picked up tacitly (Weick/Ashford *forthcoming*). In the latter case it tends to be more complex, which makes it more difficult for the receiving organization to make sense of it. Huber noted that the unintentional and unsystematic way of knowledge acquisition is more frequent than the mindful way. However, as Child and Heavens (2001: 320) have pointed out, "even explicit knowledge is not necessarily imported with ease across an organization's boundaries." The transfer of outside signals across an organization's external boundaries merely opens up possibilities for the organization to adjust to changing environmental conditions. The question then is not whether intentional knowledge acquisition leads to more learning than unintentional (or vice versa), but how does either mode affect the other processes of organizational learning. Much depends on the ways in which new knowledge is communicated across the organization such as the setting where it is articulated or the value attached to it.

The second construct relates to 'information distribution' as the process by which information from different sources is more widely diffused among the subunits of the organization. It relates to the breath of organizational learning. Huber asserts that more organizational learning occurs when new knowledge is made available to a greater variety of an organization's subunits and viewed as valuable. This quantitative approach to organizational learning is deepened out by the additional statement that "more organizational learning occurs when more and more varied interpretations are developed" (idem: 126). If a greater variety of meanings is given to new knowledge, the range of potential behaviors increases – albeit with the risk of being detrimental to the effectiveness of organized behavior. What matters here is the elaborateness of knowledge diffusion *and* sense-making.

The diffusion of new knowledge is linked with 'information interpretation', which is the third construct. It highlights the development of shared understandings among

organizational members about distributed information. The development of more varied interpretations would probably increase an organization's centrifugal tendencies. The essence of information interpretation lies in the thoroughness of knowledge absorption according to Huber. The elaborateness of learning processes across an organization's subunits is a precursor to the thoroughness of learning. It concerns the uniformity of understandings across units regarding the possibly different meanings attached to new knowledge. Huber follows Daft and Weick (1984) in defining interpretation as "the process through which information is given meaning" (idem: 294), and also as "the process of translating events and developing shared understanding and conceptual schemes" (idem: 286). How information about changing environmental conditions is framed or labeled affects the value attached to it and in that sense if it is of any significance to organized action. Interpretations in organizations are socially constructed. The distinction between information distribution and interpretation is rather analytical in nature. Both activities occur intertwined in the reality of organizational life. The inter-subjective evaluation and sense-making of new knowledge is part and parcel of its diffusion.

Finally, 'organizational memory' indicates the means by which knowledge is stored for future use. These include decision making processes, standard operating procedures and manuals, organizational structure and culture (Berthoin Antal 2000: 34).<sup>2</sup> It is about the mechanisms for individual learnings to become embedded in an organization's knowledge base. The impact of these mechanisms is complicated by the fact that a great deal of knowledge is tacit. Ways to surface this type of taken for granted knowledge are among others impeded by structural and cultural barriers in the organization (Berthoin Antal 2001). Beyond its impact on the storage and retrieval of new knowledge, organizational memory is of a fundamental nature. To some extent processes of knowledge acquisition, distribution and interpretation are directed by previous learnings, criteria used in decision making, and frames of reference. In that sense it is similar to Cohen and Levinthal's concept of 'prior related knowledge' which highlights the impact of existing knowledge on the assimilation of new sources of knowledge. In his conceptualization of organizational learning as adaptation, Shrivastava (1983: 10) has also pointed out that it is a function of an "organization's experience with the knowledge base that underlies decision processes." It is for

these reasons that organizations tend to learn what they know already. Path dependence is an important feature of organizational learning, i.e., new sources of information become relevant knowledge to an organization if they are compatible with the dominant beliefs and practices. Knowledge acquisition operates in the service of these beliefs and practices (Weick/Ashford *forthcoming*). The adherence to visions where the feasible and the thinkable are brought together is of some value to overcome this conservatism (Dierkes/Marz 1998). Moreover, the blurring of an organization's external boundaries is another factor that challenges an organization's dominant beliefs and understandings, though with the inherent risk of information overload (Wiesenthal 1995).

#### **4. Towards a model of learning in international organizations**

The engagement in relationships with external partners is significant for international organizations to survive. The various coordination and communication activities with actors from the outside are necessary for the development and implementation of transboundary policies. Along with this functional need, the interaction with external partners presents also opportunities to innovate. Haas (2000), for instance, showed that the transmission of information from outside sources is the most common process by which learning occurs in international organizations. Brown (2000) has pointed out that uncertainty in policy-related aspects makes policymakers in the European Union more willing to seek out and accept information from within and outside the organization including those provided by epistemic communities (see Haas 1992). "Scientific uncertainty may exert greater impact on the policy process than direct lobbying" (Brown 2000: 578). Moreover, Schmitter (1996) and Weisband (2000) have observed severe implementation difficulties regarding transnational programs (e.g., supervisory system of the ILO). The diversity of the 'policy space' and the lack of resources to monitor and to assure the compliance with IOs' programs are among others important reasons for international organizations' increased sensitivity to their environments. Depending on their openness to outside signals, implementation difficulties create compelling sources for information and feedback on how well they are doing.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Weick's and Ashford's (1996) conceptualization of organizational culture and its impact on learning processes: "It acts as a symbol and storage of past learning, and it works as an instrument to communicate this learning throughout the organization" (idem: 5).

IOs' relationships with the external environment present considerable pressure to engage in organizational learning. Their relatively blurred boundaries towards the environment (Haas 1990; 1964) make them particularly well-suited to study how interactions with environmental actors trigger learning. The proposed theoretical framework is based on the premise that the ways in which openness to outside signals is achieved affects the establishment of processes whereby that knowledge is used in the context of the organization (Child 1997).

"These social networks facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and other resources by organizations and the offering back of desirable goods to the outside world. The same networks also permit exchanges of information relevant to the formulation of goals for organizational development and learning. The plurality of these networks ... adds grist to the mill of internal political debate and negotiation." (idem: 68-9)

In that sense, it follows the notion of Crozier and Friedberg (1979: 94) to analyze the organization-environment nexus – i.e., boundary spanning activities – in relation to its linkages with intra-organizational processes. Huber's model of organizational learning forms the basis for such a comprehensive approach. By discussing the role of boundary spanning activities in each step of his model, factors hindering and promoting learning from interactions with outside partners will be delineated. The framework revolves around the duality of boundary spanning activities for organizational learning (Böhling 2001). A closer look at international organizations' interaction with outside partners is therefore useful to analyze (a) whether these contacts are used as a chance to adjust and innovate or (b) whether transferred impulses are perceived as disturbances to organizational routines and procedures. Because of IOs' properties as international bureaucracies with blurred external boundaries, both options are thinkable. The intensity of contacts with outside partners makes them vulnerable to demands, expectations and expertise. Simultaneously, the bureaucratic mode of working and organizing presents blockages to knowledge absorption and internalization.

#### ***4.1 Knowledge acquisition through boundary spanning activities***

The role of boundary spanning activities is most obvious in processes of knowledge acquisition. Child and Heavens (2001: 320) have more recently pointed out that "boundary spanners, who work at the interface between their firm and its external environment, play a critical role in the process of transferring information into an

organization.” Huber (1991) discusses the contribution of boundary spanning personnel to organizational learning under the heading of environment scanning. Among other mechanisms, boundary spanners act as sensors of the organization's environment and thereby contribute to an organization's performance monitoring. As a result of their external relations, boundary-spanners are able to assess how well the organization is meeting both their own standards and the expectations of external constituencies and stakeholders. Moreover, these contacts open up possibilities to influence which issues are being emphasized when external bodies evaluate how well the organization is doing.

The ideas associated with boundary spanning activities can be traced back to Thompson (1962; 1967) and Aldrich (1979). They have coined the terms 'boundary spanning units and roles'. While the first term refers to particular structural arrangements situated at an organization's external boundaries, the term boundary spanning roles indicates a certain work role which is necessary to engage in social networks that extend an organization's boundaries. Together, they constitute 'boundary spanning activities'. Boundary spanning units have a dual function for organizations. They contribute to organizational adaptation by importing new developments into the organization and they protect the core from information overload through buffering. "Organizations ... seek to isolate their technical core from environmental influences by establishing boundary-spanning units to buffer or level environmental fluctuations" (Thompson 1967: 165). Aldrich's (1979) view on boundary spanning units is similar in scope, but he puts greater emphasis on boundary spanning units' contribution to organizational adaptation.

"They are the points of contact with the environment for information monitoring and intelligence gathering, and because they absorb uncertainty they protect the core of an organization from information overload ... by importing new developments into an organization they make possible its continued renewal and adjustments to changing environmental conditions." (Aldrich 1979: 251)

Boundary spanning units embody certain perceptual filters that "enable some things to be seen more clearly by blending out others" (Berthoin Antal et al. 2001: 868; Crozier/Friedberg 1979: 101; Dierkes 1988). These selective mechanisms are crucial for the functional duality of boundary spanning units to occur. They play an important role for an organization's agency in a dynamic and heterogeneous environment because they contribute both to the identification of relevant external changes (for adaptation) and the buffering of external disturbances (for uncertainty absorption).

The duality of boundary spanning units means for organizational learning that it can be preservative as well as innovative (Weick/Ashford *forthcoming*). This connection highlights a basic tenet in theories of organizational learning that learning occurs when people reaffirm frames of reference as well as when they change them, i.e., single-loop and double-loop learning (Argyris/Schön 1978).

Through emphasizing 'activities' the interactions between organizational members and external partners are highlighted. This accentuation points to the process of conducting relationships with people who are formally outside the organization. The interactive element of boundary spanning activities is seen as a form of enactment (Weick 1995) in the sense that opportunities and constraints in accommodating to changing environmental conditions are socially constructed through various intra- and inter-organizational interactions. At a more basic level, it attends to a sociological stance in the OL discourse – as formulated by Gherardi and Nicolini (2001) – that social relations are important for the transmission of knowledge and that learning is always situated in the sphere of social interaction (see Nonaka/Toyama/Byosiére 2001). Following from that, boundary spanning activities are conceived as a social practice which triggers organizational learning. As a variation on Hedberg's (1981: 4) assertion that "acting is the mean to acquire knowledge", it is argued here that boundary spanning activities are a means to acquire knowledge about changing conditions and developments in the environment. They are situated at an organization's external boundaries. Since this organizational context for learning is characterized by multiple realities and a combination of shared and unshared meanings (Weick/Ashford *forthcoming*: 16), processes of interpreting the acquired knowledge are essential for effective learning.

Boundary spanning activities illustrate the blurring of an organization's external boundaries (Böhling 2001). The establishment of relations that extend an organization's boundaries raises doubts about how externalized the environment really is from its constituent organization. Theories of organizational learning suggest that the blurring of external boundaries would make organizations particularly responsive to changing demands and conditions in their environment (Hedberg 1981; Huber 1991; Klimecki/Thomae 1997). Learning is triggered by the process of responding to changes in the external environment. The important note is that these processes are not of a direct nature. The acquisition of new knowledge due to boundary spanning activities is mediated by factors inherent to the social constitution

of the organization-environment nexus. Blurred boundaries cannot be equated with learning since "the permeability of those boundaries and the provisions for transferring information across them are consequential for organizational learning" (Child/Heavens 2001: 320). Wiesenthal (1995) has pointed out that an unconstrained transfer of outside signals into the organization may result in information overload. This in turn leads to a higher degree of uncertainty which is detrimental to an organization's capacity for agency. Tacke (1997) has argued in a similar fashion. The impact of blurred boundaries for organizational learning is ambiguous. Though blurred boundaries may enhance an organization's capacity to learn about environmental developments, they also present threats to the stability of the system due to a greater load of potentially contradictory information. Because information overload detracts from effective interpretation (Huber 1991: 146), it may hinder instead of fostering learning processes.

The shaping of an organization's external boundaries is therefore crucial for an understanding under which conditions an organization learns from environmental actors about environmental developments and changes. The interaction of organizational members with external partners through boundary spanning activities is organized and regulated, linked with intra-organizational processes, and exhibits characteristics of mutuality (Crozier/Friedberg 1979: 94). Boundary spanning activities are more or less formalized, serve specific goals, embody particular rights and obligations, and certain underlying orientations guide actors' behavior together with institutionalizations in terms of rules and 'taken for granted assumptions'. The structuring of boundary spanning activities gives rise to a certain quality in the ensuing interactions. A setting which allows the articulation of diverse understandings is conducive to organizational learning because it offers opportunities to the organization to adjust its 'beliefs about reality' (March 1991).

Risse (2000) has shown that nonhierarchical and network like international institutions provide the structural conditions for discursive and argumentative processes. The emphasis on communicative action between IOs' agents and their external partners rests on the assumption that those involved in multilateral negotiations do not hold fixed preferences and interests but are open to deliberation and persuasion (idem: 33). A distinctive feature of interactions within these social networks is the collision of a variety of interests, perspectives, and arguments that do not necessarily fit into one frame of reference. A certain openness towards other

understandings and a willingness to incorporate those into ones own thinking are important prerequisites for the occurrence of communication and negotiation in the context of boundary spanning activities (Weyer 2000: 27).

Findings from policy studies in the European Union substantiate Risse's judgment. In the European system of multi-level governance one can observe two types of interaction patterns. Strategic bargaining is complemented by the emergence of an interaction pattern that is more strongly oriented towards problem-solving and deliberation (Mayntz 1993). Both are differentiated in terms of underlying orientations. Whereas a selfish exchange-logic is guiding the bargaining mode, argumentation and persuasion are more prevalent in the second mode. There are striking parallels between the interaction pattern oriented towards problem-solving and the bridging strategy which is discussed in the context of organizations' efforts to gain greater control over their environment (e.g. Neergaard 1998). With bridging, organizational members try to stabilize environmental and other operational contingencies through various forms of reciprocity with external actors, i.e., negotiation, co-operation, and exchange of information. Following from that, it is concluded that the problem-solving/bridging pattern is more conducive to organizational learning than the bargaining mode because it allows a greater variety of perspectives and ideas to be communicated. However, one needs to take a closer look at internal processes of knowledge absorption to assess whether these perspectives and ideas are transformed into organizational knowledge.

#### **4.2 Knowledge absorption beyond information-processing**

Boundary spanning activities reflect an organization's dependence on external bodies for its survival and development. It is probably reasonable to assert a positive correlation between engagement in external relationships and dependence on environmental contingencies. Moreover, as Crozier and Friedberg (1979: 95) have noted, the engagement in external relations present significant power resources to the actors involved – all the more so if organizations rely heavily on outside partners for their agency as is the case with international organizations. Following from this, it is assumed that boundary spanning activities are entangled with power relations and that this affects the lessons learned through interaction with outside partners. Gordenker and Saunders (1978: 87) have argued in a similar fashion by suggesting

that considerable power "accrues to those who can extract facts from the environment, promulgate ideas which can serve as a basis for coherent planning, and 'absorb uncertainty' by selectively paring away the world's native complexity."

Taking the dynamics of power relations into account when studying an organization's absorptive capacity builds on a growing field in the OL discourse. Processes of knowledge absorption and internalization are political (Berthoin Antal/Böhling 1998: 232). Czarniawska-Joerges (1996: 3974), for instance, has pointed out that "negotiations in an effort to make common sense ... would prove unrealistic if all were to negotiate with all. Leaders are given a special prerogative: that of organizing the organizing" (see Filion/Rudolph 1999). Child and Heavens (2001: 322) have noted that "the significance of information for organizational learning is not what it literally says but also where it comes from and how its social implications are interpreted." Knowledge has a contextual nature. Based on these grounds, they have criticized the prevalence of information-processing in theories of organizational learning. The perspective of organizations as information-processing systems is entangled with a tendency to view knowledge as an objective, transferable good to the neglect of symbolic connotations attached to it.

Nonaka, Toyama and Byosière (2001; see Nonaka 1994) approach the underlying view of organizations as information-processing systems in the OL discourse also with some skepticism, but they come from a different angle. Organizations do not just process information obtained from internal or outside sources in order to solve defined problems in accordance with a given goal, but create new knowledge through interaction, cooperation, and communication. In the 'theory of organizational knowledge creation' knowledge is viewed as a dynamic asset, "for it is dynamically created in social interactions between individuals both within and across organizations" (Nonaka et al. 2001: 493). A clear distinction between the terms 'information' and 'knowledge' is drawn to highlight that knowledge is created by the flow of information in organizations and that this development constitutes learning. These insights help to overcome the somewhat artificial distinction between individual and organizational learning and the ensuing transformation from individual into organizational knowledge (see Wilkesmann 1999: 47). Emphasis is placed on social interaction as a central driving force behind learning processes. Moreover, they give credence to think of organizations as dynamic and active entities that cope with changes in their environments and change themselves through learning. However,

the underlying enthusiasm for organizational knowledge creation as "a never-ending process that upgrades itself continuously" (idem: 498) fails to take account of factors inherent to the social constitution of organizations that impinge upon learning processes. Processes of knowledge creation are analyzed to the neglect of debate and negotiation as constituent elements of sense-making. Moreover, barriers to learning emanating from an organization's structure, culture, and leadership are not addressed (Berthoin Antal/Lenhardt/Rosenbrock 2001).

When looking at international organizations who are assumed to learn primarily in their role as political actors, the impact of power relations on learning processes cannot be ignored. Debate and negotiation are seen as integral aspects of knowledge distribution and interpretation. The adoption of new beliefs and facts about reality calls for a change in or at least a reconsideration of an organization's behavior towards its environment. It may also challenge an organization's internal status quo. The politics of organizational knowledge become a pressing issue since "key members of the organization have a stake in maintaining the structures and power relations that are advantageous to them" (Berthoin Antal et al. 2001: 866). This holds also for those members of the organization who are involved in boundary spanning activities. They are assumed to exert control on the flow of information emanating from interactions with outside partners. They affect what type of knowledge may be expected from boundary spanning activities through the definition of experts that are involved for instance; i.e., they influence the search direction for environmental scanning. Moreover, to some extent they can influence which actors and subunits in the organization gain access to these newly acquired sources of knowledge and the value attached to them; i.e., boundary spanners influence whether acquired knowledge makes its way to decision-making in the upper echelons of the organization. It is therefore reasonable to assert that boundary spanners may pursue certain interests when they search for and distribute the ideas and perspectives gained from interaction with outside partners.

However, studying organizational learning solely in terms of organizational politics to the exclusion of other factors would be misleading. The attainment of interests is embedded in certain worldviews or belief systems. The discussion about the relationship between ideas and interests in the growing field of policy analysis which

follows the 'argumentative turn' is illuminating in this regard (Fischer/Forrester 1993).<sup>3</sup> It is argued that the rational and the political are not antithetical and mutually threatening. Instead, paradigms or perspectives and visions on policy problems convey certain interests since "one's interests are shaped by one's experiences" (Haas 1990: 2). Rather than stressing a trade-off between ideas and interests as explanatory factors for policy change, it is at the center of this more recent strand in policy-analysis to identify the conditions under which certain ideas or perspectives serve the attainment of certain interests (Conzelmann 2002). Policy changes are then explained in terms of a paradigm shift and with reference to the underlying social rules. The central argument of this discussion may be summarized as follows:

"We often act both strategically and discursively – that is, we use arguments to convince somebody else that our demands are justified – and by doing so we follow norms enabling our interaction in the first place ... The real issue then is not whether power relations are absent in a discourse, but to what extent they can explain the argumentative outcome" (Risse 2000: 18).

The conceptualization of interests and ideas as intertwined factors in policy-making reminds the organizational learning scholar that the articulation of good arguments and appropriate perspectives in processes of knowledge distribution and interpretation is a function of one's values and interests. Referring to outside partners in these processes may enhance one's capacity of being heard in the context of the organization, but it also increases the likelihood of internal debate and negotiation. The chances of internal adoption rise if the boundary spanners involved succeed in framing the newly acquired knowledge within overarching political visions or consensual perspectives (Böhling 2001). It is in this sense that boundary spanners serve as perceptual filters. Established perspectives and beliefs guide to some extent whether external arguments and demands are considered relevant knowledge for policy planning and execution. At a more general level, these insights point to the discretionary content in such institutionally staged performances of international organizations. At an IO's external boundaries policy-relevant issues tend to be

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<sup>3</sup> Majone (1989; 1996) was one of the first authors who stressed deliberative elements in policy-making. He suggested that "we miss a great deal if we try to understand policy-making solely in terms power, influence, and bargaining, to the exclusion of debate and argument" (Majone 1989: 2). The focus on argumentation in the study of policy-making and planning has paved the way for an alternative approach to the dominance of rational choice and game theory in policy analysis. It opens the way for a critical examination of problem construction, reconstruction, and its underlying dynamics of rhetoric's and interpretation. In that sense it is similar to Gherardi's and Nicolini's (2001) 'metaphorical conception of organizational learning' that allows us to recognize the relationship between organizing and the social and cognitive processing of knowledge, and between organizational action and thought.

represented in many languages, discourses, and frames of reference. This calls for deliberative efforts of the actors involved which in turn allows for some discretion within the boundaries set by the member states. The relationship between institutional constraints and actor's behavior in international affairs may therefore be viewed as dynamic in nature. Majone (1989: 96), for instance, has emphasized that "policy actors are not artificially separated from the process that sets constraints on their behavior. The same people pursue their goals within the given institutional framework and attempt to modify that framework in their favor."

Along with the impact of power relations on knowledge distribution and interpretation there is also much that depends on the ways in which internal organizational barriers are bridged during process of knowledge distribution and interpretation. An organization's structure and culture may present significant barriers to processes of organizational learning. They constitute an organization's memory and affect the ways by which new knowledge becomes part of the collective knowledge base. Berthoin Antal et al. (2001) remind us to think of OL relevant issues in an organization's structure, culture and leadership as interrelated rather than as distinct and independent elements. Hedberg (1981), for instance, has suggested that organizations can enhance their information-processing capacities through decentralization and participative management, provision of resources, and the development of rewards and incentives for sharing knowledge. As a result of specialization, differentiation, and departmentalization organizations do not know what they know (Huber 1991). Organizational knowledge grows differentially across functional, departmental, and hierarchical boundaries (Shrivastava 1983). Moreover, an organization's hierarchies and the ensuing distribution of resources and opportunities exert a significant influence on interpreting new ideas and facts about reality. The power to define reality is affected by one's position in the hierarchy (Weick/Ashford *forthcoming*). This definition power is maintained by an organization's procedures and regulations.

An organization's procedures and regulations reflect its structure and embody its underlying socio-cultural norms (e.g., incentives and punishments for bringing in new ideas). They determine which member will be privy to what kind of information. Shrivastava (1983) has pointed out that bureaucracies have elaborate systems of procedure and regulations to control the flow of information among organizational members. "These rules guide exactly which information goes to whom and for what

purposes ... there is little concern for organizational members sharing their perspectives or frames of reference with each other" (idem: 23). Accordingly, one may expect substantial limitations to the emergence of debate and discussion across the internal boundaries of international bureaucracies. These structural barriers lead to difficulties in understanding each other's terminology, metaphors, or stories (Berthoin Antal et al. 2001). IOs are far from being monolithic cultures and mechanisms to bridge internal barriers are probably hard to find. The structural differentiation is complemented by the frequent existence of multiple realities and a combination of shared and unshared beliefs – an effect that is enhanced by IOs' blurred external boundaries (see Wiesenthal 1995: 151). If people hold different perspectives, they learn different lessons from the same data (Weick/Ashford *forthcoming*). Moreover, if the communicational structure of the organization is flavored by a 'not-invented-here syndrome' among its various subunits, the likelihood of cross-departmental knowledge sharing and sense-making is severely limited.

Beyond that a differentiation between policy making and implementation is helpful to assess an IO's capacity to learn from boundary spanning activities. During processes of policy implementation adherence to rule-guided behavior is assumed to be greater than in policy making. When it comes to the execution of transnational policies, IOs are more clearly bound to legislature and one may expect a lower degree of discretionary content than is the case with policy development and planning. If programs are fixed and if their execution is mainly guided by standard operating procedures, there is not much that boundary spanners may change about it through the contribution of policy-relevant knowledge. Stated differently, in an organizational climate that is dominated by thinking formatted in procedures and regulations new perspectives and ideas tend to be equated with unwelcome disturbances to the normal routines. However, the implementation of policies is not an automatic process. The top-down approach which assumes a dichotomy between specified program goals (politics) and mechanisms to ensure implementation (administration) is untenable empirically (Palumbo/Calista 1990: 14). Lang (2000), for instance, has argued that the agents in implementing bodies do not simply adhere to the prescribed limits of political measures but make use of the discretionary content in their work role to adjust transboundary policies to the local demands and expectations. It may therefore be concluded that the capacity of IOs' agents in using discretion is of crucial importance for the extent to which policy-relevant knowledge is

incorporated during processes of implementation. In this sense, the constraining and enabling impact of rules and procedures on knowledge absorption is acknowledged (see Kieser/Beck/Taino 2001; Risse 2000).

The development and planning of policies in the institutionally staged performances of international organizations is assumed to allow for a greater degree of discretion than policy implementation. The initiation of roundtable operations, identification of external demands, and building of coalitions with relevant partners in a given policy field calls for openness and flexibility in the behavior of IOs. The use of elaborate procedural systems in the external boundaries of IOs would be detrimental to these innovation triggering efforts. Coming from this angle, it is rather in the outer margins of this type of organization where we may find evidence of organizational learning than in its core. It is the area where IOs attempt to arrive at consensual knowledge with external partners for the sake of policy development and planning. This is also the part of organizational life in IOs where boundary spanning activities are assumed to play a significant role by bringing together inputs from various sources inside and outside the organization. A shift in the underlying rules of the game would indicate a substantial change in the way an international bureaucracy acts towards its environment; i.e., a profound policy change or in terms of Argyris and Schön (1978) double-loop learning. They found that organizations have great difficulties to engage in this type of learning which involves the calling into question of norms, objectives, and basic policies.

Based on these grounds it is assumed that international organizations learn from environmental actors for the attainment of consensual policies. But the attainment of consensual policies rests on bringing together what is feasible politically and administratively coupled with a solid knowledge base (expertise) regarding the issues to be addressed. It is in this sense that path dependencies become apparent. Established beliefs – internal or external to the organization – direct what types of societal problems need to be or should be addressed politically at the transnational level. And bureaucratic rigidities impact upon the ways that IOs incorporate policy-relevant knowledge to tackle the defined issues. Whether the adopted programs indicate a profound or merely symbolic change may be questioned due to the significant restrictions in changing the accompanying procedures and rules necessary for implementing them. Hence, potential cross-fertilization and synergies

are expected to occur merely in IOs' boundaries with the effect of buffering the organizational core from external disturbances.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this article a theoretical framework is introduced to study how international organizations learn from their external partners in politics and society about changing conditions and developments in their environments. It follows the overarching principle that the social constitution of organizations matters for the mechanisms and underlying conditions of learning processes. Moreover, it rests on the claim that the organizational dynamics of international bureaucracies are more than simple mirrors of social forces in their political and institutional environments. In this sense, the integration of notions from neo-institutionalism with the overall OL perspective is seen as a necessary step to approach IOs as corporate actors capable of autonomous action. Based on these premises, Huber's (1991) model of organizational learning is used to explore IOs' interaction with outside partners as a triggering mechanism for organizational learning and its impact on subsequent processes of knowledge absorption and internalization. These interactions are captured with the term boundary spanning activities and understood as a means to acquire knowledge about changing conditions and developments in the environment. They refer to the rather intensive contacts of IOs' agents with actors in their environments that make them particularly well-suited to study this mode of organizational learning.

However, not every interaction with people from the outside may be perceived by IOs' agents as a chance to learn and innovate. Ideas and perspectives might be in conflict to what is seen as politically desirable and/or feasible. Boundary spanning activities reflect the intertwined relation of ideas and interests in international affairs. IOs' interaction with representatives of their member states and constituencies is therefore a good example for studying the contested and controversial nature of knowledge absorption. Moreover, not every source of new knowledge makes its way through and across the organization's subunits due to barriers in its structure, culture and leadership. Administrative routines and procedures present severe limitations to an IO's absorptive capacity.

Learning about environmental developments is more likely to occur in international organizations,

- if the boundary spanning activities are characterized by a problem-solving/bridging mode of interaction;
- if boundary spanners succeed in framing acquired knowledge within overarching political visions or consensual perspectives;
- if boundary spanners have a stake in distributing the policy-relevant knowledge to a great variety of the organization's subunits;
- if the organization's structure and culture allow for debate and discussion within and across its subunits;
- if the organization's members engage in policy planning and development rather than in the implementation of its measures.

A more specific account about the interrelations between these factors necessitates empirical research. The theoretical discussion about learning processes in international organizations reveals three issues that need further exploration. First, it should have become clear at this stage that the underlying conditions of boundary spanning activities are consequential for processes of knowledge acquisition and internalization. The critical question is whether these conditions enable the people involved in using discretion. There needs to be room for maneuver to engage in deliberation and to make decisions between alternative choices of action. Second, the contribution of boundary spanning activities seems to lead most likely to first-order learning in IOs. This claim rests on the contention that the incorporation and building of new knowledge through boundary spanning activities tends to result in both: increased adaptability or innovativeness of policies and buffering the organizational core from environmental fluctuations. Hence, rather than assuming a trade-off between both effects, enhanced adaptability and buffering seem to necessitate each other. The final issue relates to the outcome of learning in IOs. Looking at private organizations one may expect improved competitiveness in uncertain technological and market circumstances. This is qualitatively different in governmental organizations. The incorporation and building of knowledge is assumed to enhance IOs' capability for political governance.

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