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Microfoundations of decoupling: From a coping theory perspective

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Abstract. In neo-institutional theory literature, studies of decoupling have provided only a binary view of the employees of symbolic structures: ceremonial props or change agents. To obtain a richer view of the working life of these particular individuals, we rely on an instrumental case study to examine how they perceive a decoupling situation and do their job. Our fieldwork takes place in a multinational company, which adopts the vision and implements different tools and practices of knowledge management (KM), but a decoupling situation eventually emerges where KM ends up as a ceremonial façade. After four years of participant observation, we conclude our fieldwork by interviewing the seven knowledge managers we have worked with. We initially develop a typology representing the different ways in which these knowledge managers interpret the decoupling situation and accomplish their mission accordingly. Moreover, as we observe that they all suffer from stress, we use the coping theory to further investigate their working life and eventually transform our typology into a manifestation of decoupling at micro level. Meaning-making, work-level actions and emotions are brought into this picture, illustrating the reciprocal relationships between the decoupling situation and the micro-level employees of the symbolic structures, thereby explaining how decoupling persists from a micro perspective. This result contributes to enhancing the micro-macro link in institutional analysis that has been greatly missing in the neo-institutional theory literature

Keywords: coping theory, decoupling, microfoundations.

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INTRODUCTION

In neo-institutional theory, decoupling refers to creating and maintaining gaps between formal policies/structures that are ceremonially adopted and actual organizational practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Organization scholars are showing a resurrection of interest in this concept, as organizations are facing "increasing emphases on accountability and transparency" in their external environments (Bromley & Powell, 2012: 1). An important group of organizational members in a decoupling situation is the employees who are assigned to or hired in the symbolic structures, because their presence helps provide visible symbols of the organization's ceremonial conformity.

Neo-institutional studies on decoupling have produced valuable insights into how these particular employees do their jobs inside the organization. However, current studies analyze the working life of these employees in order to serve a larger interest, which is the evolution of the ceremonially adopted institutional norms within the organization. They provide a binary view of the employees of symbolic structures as

ceremonial props or change agents. As ceremonial props, these employees' positions are simply for decoration, while other organizational members keep doing their jobs as usual. On the other hand, under the banner of "coupling" (Tilcsik, 2010) and "recoupling" (Espeland, 1998; Hallett, 2010), studies suggest that employees try to fulfill their mandate even if it is meant to be entirely symbolic, leading to full implementation of the ceremonially adopted policies. The discussion nevertheless focuses on presenting the structural and relational mechanisms, through which they successfully make the initially created gaps between policy and practice unsustainable. An image of internal change champions is therefore created.

We consider this binary view of micro-level individuals as over-simplifying (Meyer, 2008), thus leading to a gap in the decoupling literature. Institutions and individuals have a reciprocal relationship. Institutional forces shape individual interests and desires, frame their action, and influence their attitude, while institutions are re-created, modified and eventually disappear in the process of being instantiated in and carried by individuals in concrete social situations (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). We need a richer view of people's working lives at the micro level of decoupling, which attends to their social relations and contextual interpretation.

To address this gap, we study how employees of the symbolic structures perceive a decoupling situation and do their job, by relying on an instrumental case study (Stake, 1994). It is a multinational company, which adopted the vision and implemented different tools and practices of knowledge management (KM). During the time we were conducting our participant observation, a decoupling situation eventually emerged where KM ended up as a ceremonial façade. Relying on coping theory, which has been widely considered as an appropriate framework to understand how people deal with stressful situations (Gardner, Rose, Mason, Tyler & Cushway, 2005), and in particular Skinner, Edge, Altman & Sherwood's (2003) coping framework, we investigate the working life of the knowledge managers. This framework emphasizes behavior and emotion. We offer a manifestation of decoupling at micro level, in which there are four possible experiences for individual actors: *trapped missionaries, recognized opportunists, disoriented escapees*, and *safe servants.*

Our work contributes to the microfoundations of the decoupling literature by considering the role of "meaning-making" and by revealing the work-level actions and emotions of organizational actors during a decoupling situation. In so doing, our paper responds to a call to integrate emotion into institutional analysis (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2015). It is important to note that our paper theorizes the reciprocal relationships between the decoupling situation and the micro-level employees of the symbolic structures, thereby explaining how decoupling persists from a micro perspective. This result contributes to enhancing the understanding of the micro–macro link in institutional analysis.

The paper is organized as follows. We first outline the theoretical background of our study and our research question. We then present our research methodology and our findings. Finally, we discuss how our paper contributes to the microfoundations of decoupling.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MICROFOUNDATIONS FOR DECOUPLING AND NEO-INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

Although the founding fathers of neo-institutional theory were interested in explaining how the rationalization and diffusion of formal bureaucracy make formal organization taken-for-granted (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), they did pay attention to the micro level of analysis. Their work was inspired by Berger & Luckmann's insight that individual interpretations become reified external objects, and therefore a world is not a human product but is perceived as something (1977: 341). Unfortunately, the bulk of institutional research that followed has focused largely on macro-lines of analysis (Hirsh, 1997). It aims at examining the transfer of ideas, practices and organizational forms across boundaries of organizations, industries, and nations (Powell & Colyvas, 2008).

As concerns for microfoundations have been neglected, micro-level analysis of institutions remains over-simplistic. In the decoupling literature, the extant discussion usually focuses on what happens to the ceremonially adopted institutional norms within the organization. Through such analysis, we can grasp a general understanding of how the organizational members, who are recruited to preserve the symbolic structures, do their job. However, these insights do not go further than a simplistic dichotomy of individuals as ceremonial props or internal change champions, as presented below.

INDIVIDUALS AS CEREMONIAL PROPS

DiMaggio & Powell (1991: 15–21) acknowledged that an underlying assumption of neo-institutional theory is the unreflective, scripted nature of human conduct, characterizing individual actors' interests as being constituted by institutions. This perspective is empirically supported in institutional research that includes microfoundations of decoupling as part of the analysis. Employees are assigned to or hired in the symbolic structures just to maintain the ceremonial conformity with external institutional pressures, thereby preserving legitimacy. They serve as ceremonial props. For example, during fieldwork in how recycling practices vary between colleges and universities, Lounsbury (2001) found that the employees assumed recycling management responsibilities as an extra workload and expressed little interest toward their recycling duties. Recycling programs consisted of little more than a scattering of blue recycling bins around campus. Similarly, it is found that the managers responsible for implementing an adopted management practice for legitimacy reasons just paid lip service to its actual day-to-day enactment (Collings & Dick, 2011), or had a very vague understanding of its objectives and other essential aspects (Boiral, 2007).

As for other organizational members, empirical evidence has shown that they continue their jobs as usual. Empirical studies into the adoption of institutional norms often claim that "no real inferences" can be made about "substantive" activity (Sutton, Dobbin, Meyer & Scott, 1994: 966), organizational members' daily operations were virtually undisrupted (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993), and organizational members were protected from external scrutiny, resulting in more autonomy and little evidence of ineffectiveness, conflict, or inconsistency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977. They see the formal structures as cumbersome and bureaucratic systems that are separate from their daily work (Boiral, 2007).

INDIVIDUALS AS INTERNAL CHANGE CHAMPIONS

In the decoupling literature, scholars have argued that the symbolic structures are given tangible flesh (Hallett, 2010) because organizational members involved in the situation of decoupling refuse to be ceremonial props (Scott, 2001). They are described as change champions, who help "couple" (Tilcsik, 2010) and "recouple" (Espeland, 1998; Hallett, 2010) the adopted formal structures with organizational practices. Although it is demonstrated that the relationship between the institutional context and organizational members is complex, scholars often skip this aspect and focus on describing the developed structuring and relational mechanisms leading to full implementation of the adopted institutional norms. Thus, the underlying assumption is that individuals are rational and purposive to successfully implement institutional norms. For instance, in a study of budgeting practices in a post-communist government agency, Tilcsik (2010) described the actors who did away with decoupling as "the reformists." Spillane, Parise & Sherer (2011) described how leaders of four public elementary schools relied on organizational routines as coupling mechanisms.

A GAP IN THE DECOUPLING LITERATURE AND OUR RESEARCH QUESTION

While current studies have provided insightful analysis of decoupling situations, existing accounts provide a somewhat simplistic view of the employees of the symbolic structures. Specifically, current insights are limited to two images of mindless institutional reproducers and successful change champions. It can be said that it is one of organizational institutionalism's weakest points to reduce individuals to passive recipients of institutions (DiMaggio, 1988; Meyer, 2008). If we think of individuals only as successful change agents, the role of their surrounding context in influencing their work activities remains unexplored. Yet, the relationships between organizational members, interests, and institutional change are complex (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). We need to go beyond the dichotomy between oversocialized, determined ceremonial props and undersocialized atomistic agents' free will (Meyer, 2008), allowing for their interpretation of their context and social relations (Powell & Colyvas, 2008).

This paper therefore aims to contribute to the literature on the microfoundations of decoupling, by studying the following research question: *How do employees of the symbolic structures perceive their situation and do their job?*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Our research relies on a unique instrumental case study (Stake, 1994) and focuses on a situation of decoupling of KM in a multinational company.

KM became a norm of management during the 1990s. This trend was described by Spender (2005: 127): "The most obvious news is that knowledge management (KM) has become big business, growing explosively since Drucker drew attention to it in 1988. We now see KM conferences all over the world, a huge number of KM trade journals and battalions of KM consultants. The majority of organizations, both private and public, have KM projects of various types and their spending is

enormous …" It also became an established academic discipline; many universities in the world were providing degrees in knowledge management.

KM supports an organizing vision (Swanson & Ramiller, 1997), in which knowledge is considered as a strategic asset of organizations. It is believed that encouraging the sharing of knowledge across the organization will improve organizational performance (Hildreth & Kimble, 2002). To fulfill this organizing vision, the common tools and practices of KM involve the capture, codification, and distribution of organizational knowledge via the application of information and communication technologies (McElroy, 2000). Another approach involves facilitating face-to-face or virtual interaction between organizational members for knowledge sharing (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

EMPIRICAL SETTING

Our empirical setting is a multinational company with 200 plants throughout the world and 40,000 employees. The company started encouraging its employees to share knowledge in the 1990s, although the term KM was not mentioned at that time. Two knowledge-sharing systems were developed. The first one was called Technical Portal, and its end-users were the technical community of the company, which includes technical experts, engineers and plant technicians. The second one was called Community Portal, which served non-technical staff. These two systems were designed to store various documents (such as information, procedures, standards, tools, best practices, etc.), which were supposed to be contributed and used by various company employees.

In 2002, KM was officially adopted. It was communicated throughout the organization as a strategic lever to improve performance and maintain competitive advantage. The two knowledge-sharing systems were re-designed to become the official KM tools. Knowledge manager positions were created. For the technical portal, there were two full-time knowledge managers at the headquarters and five part-time managers in the regional business units. For the community portal, there was a network of one full-time knowledge manager at the headquarters and six full-time or part-time managers in the regional business units. Organizational members were expected to engage in KM practices by becoming users of these two portals and sharing knowledge with each other via the two systems. Appendix 1 presents the two formal KM structures as decided by top managers, and the positions of the knowledge managers in these structures.

Our field study started in 2004, when one of the authors joined the KM team as a researcher for participant observation. During a four-year period, from 2004 to 2008, she spent one day every two weeks at the company, participating in knowledge managers' daily activities (mainly KM meetings), collecting and analyzing reports and documents related to KM, having formal and informal conversations during coffee breaks and lunch time with the knowledge managers and other organizational members, and spending time at several production plants to observe how KM was integrated into plant staff's daily work. In 2008, when her fieldwork ended, she conducted in-depth phenomenological interviews with seven knowledge managers, with whom she was in regular interaction. These knowledge managers were the most committed to KM, either because they worked full-time in the position or because they worked with, or related to, the headquarters promoting the KM initiative. She did not interview the other knowledge managers, because they were either located too far away

(in Korea or Brazil, for example), did not have sufficient proficiency in the company's official languages (French and English), or were asked to not spend too much time on KM. The interviews were to summarize the four years of collaboration in the KM endeavor.

DATA COLLECTION

Our data collection can be separated into two phases. Phase 1 provided data on the contextual situation and enabled us to understand the work activities of the knowledge managers thoroughly. Phase 2 helped confirm and deepen our understanding of how knowledge managers perceived and experienced the decoupling situation. The table below summarizes our collected data.

Phase 1	Phase 2
Fieldwork: from 2004 to 2008 *Secondary data* (from the 1990s to 2008): to understand the organizational context o 10 official KM documents; o 6 issues of internal press; o 6 documents on the KM function; o 5 reports from the company's KM consultants. *15 open-ended interviews lasting 2 hours*: to discuss how and why KM was adopted and implemented in the organization o 3 interviews with 3 top managers; o 12 interviews with organizational members. *Field notes from 20 meetings*: to understand how and why KM was adopted and implemented in the organization, to get to understand the knowledge managers and their job o 5 meetings between the knowledge managers and top managers; o 10 meetings between the knowledge managers and organizational members; o 5 meetings with the knowledge managers. **Total: 300 pages of field notes and transcript**	**Phenomenological interviews** (Seidman, 2006): in 2008 Interviews with 7 knowledge managers in 2 x 2-hour sessions • Alex and Christina: knowledge managers in charge of the Technical Portal at the headquarters in Europe • Mary, Kathy, and Tom: 3 out of 5 knowledge managers in charge of the Technical Portal at the regional business unit in France, Austria, and China • Carol: knowledge manager in charge of the Community Portal at the headquarters in Europe • Helen: 1 out of 6 knowledge managers in charge of the Community Portal at the regional business unit in North America **Total: 350 pages of transcript** **----------** Names of all respondents are pseudonyms Interview questions: o Respondents discuss their working conditions, including their difficulties; o Respondents discuss the process in which they manage to implement KM, as a story with different chapters; o Respondents are asked to exemplify their stories with concrete events and examples.

Table 1: Collected data

The method of phenomenological interviewing in phase 2 was developed by Seidman (2006). This method was suitable for our case study, because it enabled us to go further than the materials obtained in phase 1, to look into the details of the actual experiences of the knowledge managers. The interview sessions followed the approach of three series proposed by Seidman (2006), which aim at establishing the context for the participants' experience, allowing participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs, and encouraging them to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them.

DATA ANALYSIS—STEP 1: ASSESSING THE DECOUPLING SITUATION OF KM

We began by writing a description of the situation. From this description, we distilled an account of the formal structures of KM in place, which shows the KM vision of top managers, the way KM tools and practices were implemented, and how KM tools and practices had no influence on organizational members' work, except that of the small KM team.

In 2001, just before the adoption of KM, the company made an important acquisition, which helped double its size and made it the leader in its market. In order to ensure the financial analysts of its ability to smoothly manage the transition, the company referred to a prestigious consulting firm. The recommendation was to adopt KM, which was a highly popular management idea and a norm for multinationals at that time. Top managers therefore adopted KM to maintain legitimacy. Within the company, top management introduced this management idea as a great lever to improve performance. They emphasized its role of being a strategic tool that would enable the company to become the leader in its market.

Despite the communicated vision of KM, it was implemented in a convenient way for the organization. Top managers decided to implement KM in a way that would not lead to many changes and KM implementation had to be cheap. A chief knowledge officer was appointed at the headquarters. There were only a small number of knowledge managers to implement KM for 40,000 employees throughout the organization. The portals were the main tools that were supposed to support the organizing vision of KM, but organizational members did not appreciate these tools or engage in KM practices. Our secondary data showed that the portal usage rate remained very low.

During our fieldwork spanning from 2004 to 2008, the year 2006 was an important milestone for KM in this company, because top management officially did away with the chief knowledge officer position. New priorities for the entire organization became cost saving and security improvement. From this year onward, there was no longer any internal communication about KM, although the positions of knowledge managers continued to exist and the portals were maintained with a very low rate of usage.

DATA ANALYSIS—STEP 2: UNDERSTANDING HOW KNOWLEDGE MANAGERS WORK IN THE MIDST OF DECOUPLING

From the in-depth interviews, we were able to describe different dimensions of decoupling as experienced by the knowledge managers (see appendix 2). In order to build this description, we clustered these data into three distinct themes using the knowledge managers' own expressions as in vivo codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A theme labeled "*KM and my managers*" was used for data that expressed the "talks by top managers about KM as a strategic priority," "poor implementation of KM," and "lack of managerial support for KM in everyday work." The *"KM and users*" theme clustered data characterized as "end-users of the portals don't care," "experts don't care," "the portals are not usable," and "sharing knowledge is not part of the organization's culture." In the third theme, "*KM and I*," we clustered data describing the knowledge managers' perceptions about their "lack of competencies," "lack of legitimacy," "lack of resources," "infeasibility of mission," "uselessness of mission," and "vision of KM's malleability." During the analysis, we iterated between each theme and the

literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), looking for academic choice of words to identify theoretical cues woven into the raw data. We were able to develop the following conceptual labels for the dimensions of decoupling: decoupling experienced at hierarchical level ("*KM and my managers*"), decoupling experienced at peer level (*"KM and users*"), and decoupling experienced at individual level ("*KM and I*"). Consistent with our empirically grounded approach, we retained the empirical labels in our further analysis.

Following this analysis, we came up with two dimensions that map out how the knowledge managers looked at their situation and did their job on a daily basis. One dimension came from the experience of decoupling at individual level and especially from the data cluster called "uselessness of mission." It concerned the vision the knowledge managers developed regarding their own role: whether they saw themselves as an element of the KM façade or were determined to truly integrate KM into the organization's daily activities. The other dimension came from the experience of decoupling at all three levels, especially from the data clusters "talks by top managers about KM as a strategic priority" and "poor implementation of KM" at hierarchical level; "experts don't care" and "end-users of the portals don't care" at peer level; and "infeasibility of mission" and "vision of KM's malleability" at individual level. These data showed the extent to which the knowledge managers were aware of the difficulties and the freedom to fulfill their mission. This dimension therefore illustrated the way in which the knowledge managers accomplished their mission, whether they followed the prescriptions of their bosses or adapted their missions in order to keep the KM structures alive.

We constantly moved back and forth between our themes and the literature, in order to develop conceptual labels for these two dimensions. We came up with two labels: "*vision of role*" and "*ways of doing the job*." The first conceptual label embraced "change agent" (introducing the organizing vision of KM) and "ceremonial props" (element of KM façade). The second conceptual label encompassed "conformity" (doing exactly what I'm told) and "bricolage" (improvising to make the KM mission feasible). Conformity has been defined as the ideology of adhering to one standard or social uniform (Kelman, 1958). The idea of bricolage has been put forth in the literature of institutional entrepreneurship. Institutional entrepreneurs engage in bricolage to reconfigure existing resources and practices in order to respond to the challenges under the guidance of existing institutions (Desa, 2012). It encompasses all the variations of actions and experiences when the knowledge managers were confronted with the limits and difficulties of conformity, thus engaging in innovative or deviant behaviors (Alter, 2003. These labels helped categorize the knowledge managers into four groups with different ways of working in decoupling situations. These four groups corresponded to four quadrants of a 2x2 matrix organized around two axes. This matrix will be presented in the findings section.

During our participant observation, we observed that decoupling was a stressful situation for knowledge managers. The interviews confirmed and detailed that observation, for we were able to extract the verbatim of the knowledge managers expressing their stress over the decoupling situation. We then relied on the coping theory to further understand the working life of the knowledge managers. We adapted and simplified Skinner, et al.'s framework for coping categories (2003) for our purpose. This framework includes 12 families of higher-order coping strategies. Six of them are triggered by appraisals of challenges, with three families concerning coping strategies that target the self (e.g. problem solving) and

three others concerning coping strategies that target the context (e.g. support seeking). The six other families are triggered by appraisals of threats, including three families related to self (e.g. helplessness) and three others related to context (e.g. opposition). Within each family, lower-order coping strategies may be behavior-based, orientation-based, or emotion-based. Examples of behavior strategies are cooperation or avoidance; examples of orientation strategies include positive self-talk and priority setting. Emotional strategies can be both positive and negative such as confidence or loneliness. For the sake of simplification, we grouped behavior-based and orientation-based coping strategies into a category called "action-based coping strategies"; we kept emotion-based coping strategies separate due to their importance in handling stressful situations. This framework is presented in the table below.

	Challenges to self			***Challenges to context***		
Higher-order coping families	**Self-reliance**	**Problem solving**	**Accommodation**	**Support seeking**	**Information seeking**	**Negotiation**
Lower-order coping strategies	Action-based Emotion-based			Action-based Emotion-based		
	Threats to self			***Threats to context***		
Higher-order coping families	**Delegation**	**Submission**	**Helplessness**	**Escape**	**Isolation**	**Opposition**
Lower-order coping strategies	Action-based Emotion-based			Action-based Emotion-based		

Table 2: Coping framework adapted from Skinner, et al. (2003)

Based on this framework, we examined the coping strategies used by each knowledge manager to deal with the three dimensions of decoupling identified previously, i.e. decoupling experienced at hierarchical level ("*KM and my managers*"), decoupling experienced at peer level ("*KM and users*"), and decoupling experienced at individual level (*"KM and I*"). Skinner, et al.'s (2003) framework served as our predetermined coding categories (Miles & Huberman, 2003), but we remained open to categories that emerged from our raw data. Appendix 3 summarizes the coping strategies used by the knowledge managers.

Finally, we compared the knowledge managers' coping strategies and working lives in relation to decoupling across the four groups previously identified in our typology. We observed that, within each group, the managers had similar coping strategies toward each dimension of decoupling, but they had different coping strategies across the groups. Their lives as knowledge managers also varied. This further analysis helped develop an account of reciprocal relationships between decoupling and the micro level of employees of the symbolic structures. This results in a comprehensive picture of the microfoundations of decoupling.

FINDINGS

WORKING IN DIFFERENT WAYS IN THE MIDST OF DECOUPLING

From the interviews, we were able to deeply understand how the knowledge managers experienced decoupling. We found that the gap between formal structures and actual organizational practices was perceived by the knowledge managers at multiple organizational levels. The first level was the *hierarchical* one. At this level, the knowledge managers faced the problem that KM was not part of the company's strategic objectives, and top managers did not give direction to the management of the KM formal structures. Moreover, their own line managers did not provide them with the necessary support. *At peer level,* decoupling can be seen through the attitude of experts and end-users with regard to KM. They were not interested in sharing knowledge in general, and sharing knowledge via the portals in particular, complaining that the portals were complicated to use and that their activities needed hands-on experience. *At individual level,* the knowledge managers had to struggle to define what they could do with their missions, to bridge the gap between their ability and the demanding requirements of the job, and to handle their lack of power and resources.

In this context, the knowledge managers were not simply ceremonial props or change agents. This dichotomy helps characterize their visions of their role, but it needs to be completed with the ways in which they performed their job. Based on these two dimensions, the knowledge managers can be classified into four groups in the typology below:

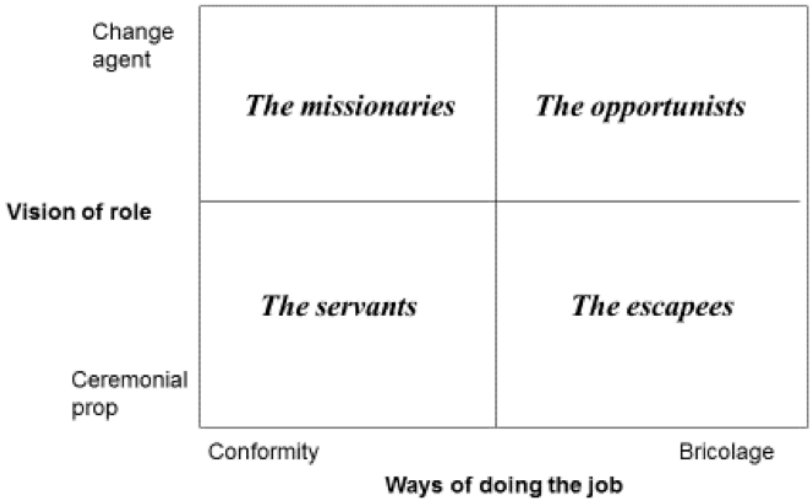

Figure 1: A typology of ways of working in the midst of decoupling

The first group is called "*the missionaries*," and is composed of Alex and Tom. The term "missionary" indicates that these knowledge managers saw themselves as the agents of top managers by implementing KM, and therefore wanted to integrate KM tools and practices into the organization's activities by doing their jobs at any price. They wanted to believe in the KM vision put forth by their superiors. They tried to accomplish their missions as prescribed by their managers, hoping that their colleagues would thereby accept KM. For example, Tom kept going to plants throughout his region to provide training on the technical portal and explain to plant staff that it was important to use it. Alex continued to participate in meetings with technical experts to convince them that they needed to contribute knowledge documents to the portals, and that they needed to tell plant staff, whenever possible, that sharing knowledge via the technical portal is beneficial for all. They acted as conveyors of KM.

The second group is called "*the opportunists,*" and includes Carol and Helen. The term "opportunist" is used because these knowledge managers saw a possible advantage in being assigned to the formal structures of KM. They wanted to become agents of top managers by introducing the latter's KM vision in order to advance their career. However, they quickly realized the impossibility of their mission, and also realized that the ceremonial adoption of KM gave them the freedom to do their job the way they wanted. Helen and Carol therefore used bricolage to turn their mission into communication and promotion-oriented tasks. Unlike Alex and Tom, who attempted to push KM tools and practices into organizational life, Carol and Helen promoted the KM tools and practices by considering plant staff as clients. In this so-called "marketing approach," they identified plant staff's needs, developed the community portal in accordance with those needs, and conducted a communication campaign to raise awareness. As a result, the number of visits to the community portal increased and their managers were happy with this outcome, but it was unclear to them whether knowledge was truly shared. Carol and Helen were opportunists, as they considered themselves as KM agents while taking advantage of its ceremonial nature to make themselves comfortable in their job.

The third group is called "*the escapees*." Mary and Kathy are in this group. The label "escapee" indicates that these knowledge managers found it hard to accept the decoupling situation and that they were simply a part of the ceremonial KM structure. They resented the top managers' KM vision. On the other hand, they also recognized the possibility offered by the ceremonial structure of adjusting their tasks. Mary and Kathy eventually accepted to play the role of ceremonial props, but undertook some kind of revenge by taking advantage of their symbolic role to eschew their mission. They considered that this was a trade-off for sustaining the symbolic structures of KM. Unlike Carol and Helen, who used bricolage to make their mission marketing-oriented, Mary and Kathy used bricolage to devote the least possible time and effort to KM. Mary and Kathy were not "opportunists" like Carol and Helen; they rather chose to avoid the decoupling situation.

The final group is *"the servants*." Christina is the only person in this group, and may be considered as a servant because she was fully aware of her ceremonial role, but was still committed to accomplishing her mission as prescribed by her managers. She trusted the KM vision communicated by top managers, but—unlike Alex and Tom—she did not try to integrate KM tools and practices into the organization's technical core at any price, and just did what was possible. Christina kept asking the technical experts to provide knowledge documents for the technical

portals, but was willing to make do with the amount of time and efforts the experts were ready to make. She continued sending emails to plant staff to inform them of updates to the technical portal, without being concerned about whether or not they paid attention to her messages. Christina did not fight hard and struggle like Alex and Tom; she just made modest attempts. She acted as a small custodian of the KM structures.

DECOUPLING: A STRESSFUL SITUATION FOR THE KNOWLEDGE MANAGERS

As it was difficult for them to do their jobs with the formal structures of KM in place, the knowledge managers suffered from stress. Their own managers did not give them the necessary power and resources, the organizational infrastructure was inadequate for the use of the portals, and the culture of the organization did not favor sharing knowledge. In other words, the knowledge managers had to implement KM but the organizational context did not enable them to do so. They experienced inconsistency between the KM arrangement and their missions. They became stressed, feeling lost and helpless. Alex was the knowledge manager who suffered the most, as he went through a nervous breakdown and had to spend some time in hospital for treatment.

The knowledge managers' stress was confirmed and detailed in the phenomenological interviews. All the knowledge managers said that they were stressed about doing their job. The following quote is a nice illustration of how stressed Alex felt about the KM situation: "*KM in this company is like a cruise ship. When it leaves the harbor, it just sails toward the horizon; nothing can stop it. After a while, we just realize that this cruise ship is really huge, so huge that we cannot control it. We try to do something but the effects are hardly noticeable. When we do something, it doesn't mean that we can slow it down or add more coal, so our results are very low. Now we see an iceberg ahead of us, and we really need to do something, but our captain is not willing to sit down to discuss this with us … We are alone on this cruise ship … Nobody cares.*"

Appendix 4 summarizes the stressful situation of KM and the verbatim of Carol, Helen, Mary, Kathy, Tom, and Christina expressing their difficulty in doing their jobs.

WORKING LIFE OF THE KNOWLEDGE MANAGERS: COPING WITH DECOUPLING

When faced with the stressful situation of KM being decoupled from the organization's core activities, the knowledge managers used different coping strategies. As decoupling was experienced at hierarchical, peer, and individual levels; their coping strategies across these levels varied. We observed that, in each category of the typology identified above, certain coping strategies were more frequently used by the knowledge managers, although there were individual specificities pertaining to each knowledge manager. We now present the dominant coping strategies used by the four categories of knowledge manager across the three levels of decoupling in the following table.

Coping strategies	The missionaries	The opportunists	The escapees	The servants
Dominant actions	*No dominant actions (strategizing, falling down the stairs, help seeking, positive self-*talk, etc.)	*Strategizing, studying*	*Strategizing, avoidance, unresponsive ness*	*Help seeking, random attempts*
	No consistency across hierarchical, peer, and individual levels of decoupling	Consistency across hierarchical, peer, and individual levels of decoupling	Consistency across hierarchical, peer, and individual levels of decoupling	Focused only on peer and individual levels of decoupling
Dominant emotions	Positive toward hierarchy and peers: *determination, taking others' perspective*	Positive toward hierarchy and peers: *taking others' perspective, determination*	Negative toward hierarchy and peers: *blame others*	Negative toward hierarchy: *blame others, loneliness* Positive toward peers: *acceptance, determination*
	Negative toward self: *self-doubt, discouragement, guilt*	Positive toward self: *determination*	Negative toward self: *self-doubt*	Positive toward self: *self-soothing*
Feelings expressed in the in-depth interviews	Being trapped in their job	Being recognized	Frustration	Peace of mind

Table 3: Coping strategies of the knowledge managers

Group 1: The missionaries

Alex and Tom set themselves the goal of integrating KM into the organizational activities and tried to carry out all their KM tasks. It seems that they could not find appropriate coping strategies to overcome decoupling. Across the dimensions of decoupling at hierarchical, peer, and individual levels, they did not have clearly dominant strategies in terms of actions. They did their best to try different ways of coping.

As for emotions, they had positive emotional coping strategies with regard to decoupling at hierarchical and peer levels: "taking others' perspective" and "determination." That means they put themselves in the shoes of their managers to self-explain why KM was not a priority and why

their managers did not give them support, believing that they were the agents of KM because their managers were not. They put themselves in the shoes of their colleagues to justify the latter's lack of interest in KM. With this empathy toward their managers and colleagues, they were determined to convert them, i.e. their managers would support KM, while experts and end-users would accept KM and share knowledge with each other as a daily activity. They maintained the determination that their mission in life was to integrate KM into the organizational life. However, they experienced negative emotions about decoupling at individual level: "self-doubt," "discouragement," and "guilt." For example, Alex said: "*I'm not in a senior enough position to implement KM in this company … how can one young guy, who has been here for only three years, work with the experts who have been here for twenty-five years?*"

In the end, these coping strategies did not help. Alex and Tom felt trapped and ended up quitting their jobs: in Tom's words, "*This job is too challenging, too difficult to see the future … it's like I'm in the middle of a forest.*" Similarly, the situation was described by Alex as a "poisoned chalice," meaning: "*I have to promote a sharing system but I don't have any power over it. It doesn't belong to me; I'm not responsible for its content … An old lady asks me to teach her to dance, but I'm not her husband, I can't choose the music, I can't change my dancing partner, but I still have to enable her to dance."*

Group 2: The opportunists

Carol and Helen saw themselves as change agents and recognized the possible room to maneuver the implementation of KM. They were pragmatic in defining the road they needed to take to implement KM. They first started at individual level, then moved on to handle decoupling at peer level. Once decoupling at this level was overcome, the usage of the community portal increased, they approached their managers to obtain their support and give KM a more important place in the organization. For decoupling at individual, peer, and hierarchical levels, they focused primarily on behavioral strategies of "strategizing" and "study." At individual level, strategizing means that these knowledge managers adapted their missions to the organizational context, given the freedom granted by the ceremonial nature of their KM structure. At peer and hierarchical levels, strategizing means that they approached their colleagues and managers as marketeers rather than missionaries like Alex and Tom. Study helped them better understand their clients and how to approach and serve them. Helen said: *"I have to keep doing more research; I have to keep promoting and communicating in a better way so that the use of the tool and the sharing initiative starts to show some significant improvement. How am I doing that? Obviously by reading more, interacting more with people, doing more research, increasing the number of articles that go on the portal today, developing more advertising campaigns*."

In terms of emotions, these two knowledge managers had positive emotional coping strategies across the three levels of decoupling: "taking others' perspective" and "determination." Helen was determined that they could do their job and handle the issues related to their managers, and Carol was even more so. The strategy of taking others' perspective, especially used by Helen, was consistent with their marketing approach when implementing KM. Without an understanding of what others wanted and needed, they would not be able to promote it within the organization.

These coping strategies turned out to be comfortable. Carol and Helen were considered to be the most successful KM managers. They

positioned themselves as change agents of KM, and at the same time, were able to achieve positive results. They managed to make people interested in the portals, thus obtaining recognition from their own managers for what they did. Carol said she was "*very happy when the number of visits to the sharing portal significantly increased*"; it was like a *"little victory*" for her. As Helen made progress in her job, her life as knowledge manager improved: *"I feel important, I feel respected, I feel trusted, I feel recognized*".

Group 3: The escapees

The coping strategies of the *escapees* (Mary and Kathy) are consistent with their perception of being only one element of the KM façade and the freedom they gave themselves in implementing KM. Across the three levels of decoupling, their dominant strategies were action-based: "strategizing," "avoidance," and "unresponsiveness." While Carol and Helen used strategizing to get their work done, Mary and Kathy relied on this strategy to spend less time and energy on KM. They strategized to simplify their tasks because no-one even cared. The strategy of unresponsiveness and avoidance implied that these knowledge managers did not do anything with regard to the decoupling situation. They hid behind the formal structure that was created just for them to do nothing. Kathy said: "*I think I do what I can … I know that I don't fulfill the KM mission … There are no major problems doing what I'm doing*".

In terms of emotions, their emotional coping strategies were negative with regard to all three levels of decoupling. "Blaming others" appeared as the dominant coping strategy toward their managers and colleagues, especially in the case of Kathy: *"People will not use it [the technical portal] even if they have training, even if we tell them that it is a good thing and so on. They're difficult because you cannot change their mind—you can pray, pray, and pray, but in many cases, it is impossible …. Especially people with a lot of experience … they haven't used it for the last 20 years, so they won't use it now.*" They also blamed the technical portal for being complicated to use, and the organizational culture and infrastructure for being unfavorable for sharing knowledge. As for the decoupling issues at their own level, they had "self-doubt." They questioned their ability to handle the lack of legitimacy and resources, and the lack of meaning of their mission. Their revenging behavior did not allow them to find peace of mind. Mary explained: *"I have taken a step back; otherwise, I would have come up against a wall … But it doesn't depress me; oh no, I'm very happy, great. I will now say only nice things about KM [laughed sarcastically]*".

Group 4: The servants

Perceiving herself as a ceremonial prop of the KM structure while attempting to implement KM as required, the dominant coping strategies of Christina at hierarchical level were only emotion-oriented. They are "blame others" and "loneliness." Christina blamed her managers for not giving KM sufficient support and paying attention to other strategic objectives. She felt like she was the only one who cared about the KM structure. The dominant coping strategies used by Christina at peer and individual levels were both action and emotion-oriented. The actions included "help seeking" and "random attempts." Christina relied on help from colleagues, especially the experts, to do her job. In order to get help, she tried to cooperate with them and was ready to compromise to accommodate their busy workload: "*We*

first try to see what he [the expert], owner of the domain, intends to do ... I'm not an expert, so I can't assess the contents of the documents. I can just help the experts and make them aware that the more their domain is up-to-date and well-structured, the easier it will be for end-users to find information and the more they will look for information there." From time to time, she made attempts to make changes in the way organizational members share knowledge and/or collaborate with her. However, those random attempts were never successful. These strategies were in line with her modest objective to integrate KM tools into the organization's activities wherever possible.

The emotional strategies used by Christina at peer level included "determination" and "acceptance." These strategies reflected that, even if she was disappointed by the attitude of her managers, she remained loyal toward her mission. She was determined to continue working to achieve her objectives and accepted the fact that not everything was feasible in her job. The emotional strategy at individual level was "self-soothing." Christina cheered herself up by telling herself that she was still doing her job well, no matter what. She was proud of herself for being able to withstand the difficult situation of decoupling and she continued to devote herself to her job. In her own words: "*KM is only for decoration, but it does not demotivate me at all. I continue doing my job, just business as usual".*

FROM A TYPOLOGY TO A MANIFESTATION OF DECOUPLING AT MICRO LEVEL

By taking into account knowledge managers' actions and emotions, what eventually happens to them, and how decoupling evolved, a manifestation of decoupling at micro level can be drawn up. The four groups of knowledge manager followed four separate experiences. Alex and Tom ended up as *trapped missionaries,* Carol and Helen as *recognized opportunists*, Mary and Kathy as *disoriented escapees* and Christina, as a *safe servant.* The term "manifestation" is used to imply that the microfoundations of decoupling are dynamic, being composed of many individual actors with diverse experiences, relationships, and destinies, and evolving over time rather than remaining unchanged. The figure below depicts this manifestation at the specific time and place of our study.

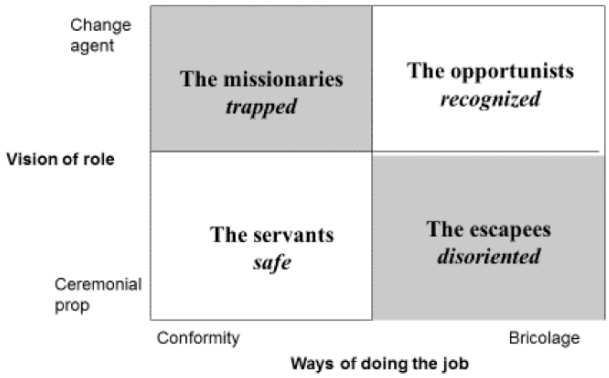

Figure 2: A manifestation of decoupling at micro level

The experience of the *missionaries* can be described as being trapped. They were preserving rather than transforming the institutional arrangement, while suffering at work. They were the "good soldiers" (Organ, 1988) that became prisoners of the very situation that they wanted to support. The institutional arrangement of decoupling prevailed totally over these individuals. The experience of the *opportunists* is more enjoyable. They were not transforming the institutional arrangement of KM to fulfill the organizing vision of managing knowledge assets and encouraging knowledge sharing, but were turning the decoupling situation into a success in the eyes of organizational members. In some way, they were "best actors with façades of conformity" (Hewlin, 2003). That means they were creating false representations to appear as if they embraced the value of KM. Navigating in organizational life required them to employ tactics beyond simply maintaining the decoupling situation. As a result, Carol and Helen were recognized by the organization as successful knowledge managers. The experience of the *escapees* was shaky. Kathy and Mary dealt with decoupling by avoiding it. This avoidance did not change the situation or make them happy. They were lost as to what they should continue doing and at the same time developed "cynicism" (Andersson & Bateman, 1998) toward the organization. The institutional arrangement of decoupling had a negative impact on their self-confidence and their attitude toward the organization. They were becoming disoriented in their job. The experience of the *servants* was not enjoyable, but safe. Christina could not do anything with decoupling, but managed to make her job peaceable. It was business as usual both for her and the decoupling situation. She continued to be a ceremonial prop of decoupling, but was neither passive nor a mindless reproducer of institutions; she was rather intelligent in dealing with the painful nature of being in the midst of decoupling. In this way, she was able to create a harmless space for herself.

This manifestation represents a rich and dynamic view of the microfoundations of decoupling. It indicates the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between the decoupling situation and the micro level of employees of the symbolic structures, helping explain how decoupling continues to exist over time. On the one hand, the experiences of the knowledge managers emerged over time as they continued to cope with the decoupling situation. They did not purposively choose to become *trapped missionaries, recognized opportunists, safe servants or disoriented escapees*. To survive, they were conditioned to either adapt to the situation or turn their back on the organization and withdraw into themselves, depending on how they interpreted the situation. They created two possibilities of being a ceremonial prop for themselves: by participating in the reproduction of institutional arrangement (*servant*) or by avoiding doing anything with that arrangement (*escapee*). Moreover, decoupling led to two ways to become a change agent that the knowledge managers adopted, either as a *missionary* or as an *opportunist*. These possibilities led to different outcomes, which in turn reinforced the experiences that the knowledge managers had been having. The two experiences that most suifferez were *trapped missionaries* and *disoriented escapees* (highlighted in gray in the diagram), and the ones that saved the day in their job were *safe servants* and *recognized opportunists.*

On the other hand, being ceremonial was part of a possible coping strategy. Carol and Helen used bricolage for decoupling and therefore successfully introduced the community portal into the organization. They were considered as change agents to the extent that organizational members associated their names with KM, though it still remained

peripheral to organizational core activities. To a lesser extent, the servants and escapees also did their job ceremonially, thereby maintaining the symbolic nature of KM structures. Ironically, the missionaries, who really wanted to transform decoupling, failed and could not create the image of a change agent for themselves or in the eyes of their managers and colleagues. Decoupling itself can therefore be seen as partly produced by the everyday activities of the knowledge managers. None of them eventually succeeded in truly becoming a change agent. In view of their different interpretations of decoupling and different ways of working in this situation, the knowledge managers helped to create and maintain the symbolic structures of KM. The situation of decoupling prevailed and persisted.

One may imagine a large number of variations within the four experiences we identified. For example, according to individual and contextual factors, such as meaning-making, the *safe servants* may be more or less *servants*, and more or less safe. In other words, considering the vision of the role as a continuum between the two extremes of change agent and ceremonial prop, and the way of doing the job as another continuum between the two extremes of conformity and bricolage, one can envision a mapping of the possible links between decoupling and individuals embedded in the situation. In this manifestation, individual moves between the different experiences could also be considered when the time dimension is taken into account. One possibility involves the move from the more harmful categories (the *trapped missionaries* and the *disoriented escapees*) to the less uncomfortable ones (the *recognized opportunists* or the *safe servants)*. One *trapped missionary*, perceiving a danger of being trapped, may accept moving away from a strict vision of KM and toward the *opportunist* realm. Another *missionary* may move toward a more realistic vision of their own role, therefore joining the less challenging area of the *servants*, but changes in the opposite direction might also be possible. For example, a *safe servant*, whose resentment toward their hierarchy might be reactivated, could decide to take revenge by using bricolage and so move toward the *disoriented escapee* category.

Finally, the four types of ways of working in the midst of decoupling —i.e. missionaries, opportunists, servants, and escapees—can be found in other situations. This is because they were built based on the concrete vision of role and ways of doing the job adopted by micro-level actors. The manifestation composed of four possible experiences is nevertheless specific to our case study. As this manifestation was determined by contextual and individual factors, the outcomes—i.e. being trapped, being recognized, being safe, and being disoriented—were inherent to our case participants. This is why the experiences may differ in other contexts and with other individuals. For example, a servant may not necessarily feel unsafe, but ends up being demotivated; an opportunist may feel fed up with being hypocritical. In short, the manifestation that we identified is both situated and generalizable.

DISCUSSION

This article attempts to contribute to the microfoundations of decoupling by studying how the employees hired in or assigned to the symbolic structures perceive decoupling and do their job. More precisely, our work "inhabits" (Scully & Creed, 1997) the decoupling literature by introducing local meaning-making and using coping theory to bring work-level actions and emotions back into the picture. Overall, it enriches the discussion about the micro–macro link in neo-institutional theory, by explaining why decoupling continues to exist over time.

LOCAL MEANING-MAKING

Studies in the decoupling literature acknowledge the importance of meaning-making, but have not delivered a dynamic and empirically grounded understanding of the meaning-making process (e.g. Edelman, 1992). This can be explained by the fact that neo-institutional theory is interested in rational myths, which are commonly treated as exogenous and "analytically removed from the more active struggles over meaning" (Lounsbury, Ventresca & Hirsch, 2003: 72). Organizations are assumed to follow these macro-level myths to gain legitimacy and enhance survival prospects, making them become taken-for-granted in all organizational settings. The current discussion of decoupling literature can be enriched by an approach that emphasizes how such macro-level myths are interpreted and given meanings at local level. This puts forth actors' actions, interpretations, and the context in which they act. In our case study, local meaning-making was observed in two main circumstances: when the knowledge managers struggled to describe what their job was and therefore what they should do; and when they wrestled with understanding their role in their decoupling situation. These meanings framed their work practices on a daily basis. Moreover, local meaning-making implies sensitivity to the situatedness of the decoupling situation. It is not the meaning-making of the decoupling situation per se that triggers and conditions coping, but its meaning-making pertaining to each individual knowledge manager favors some responses over others.

Attention to local meanings also extends the microfoundations of decoupling, by bridging the symbolic realms of meaning and substantive realms of activity. Hallett (2010) pointed out that there was a false dichotomy between these two realms when it comes to discussing decoupling. It is important to note that symbolic structures can be interpreted as the basis of activity. Indeed, in our case study, Carol and Helen's group, *the opportunists*, creatively interpreted the symbolic meaning of their place in the organization and their job. This encouraged them to handle decoupling at different levels accordingly. These two knowledge managers created an image of marketeers trying to serve the needs of organizational members using the community portal. Their meaning-making was in stark difference to that of Alex and Tom, *the missionaries*. These knowledge managers saw themselves as the ambassadors of top managers, striving to introduce a KM vision with the assumption that plant staff would understand the "benefits of sharing knowledge." Their image in the organization was not well perceived by organizational members. As a result, their coping efforts were tireless, but unsuccessful.

INTRODUCING COPING THEORY TO ATTEND TO WORK-LEVEL ACTIONS AND EMOTIONS

Relying on the result that decoupling leads to stress, we examined the everyday working life of the employees of the symbolic structures through the lens of coping theory. Thanks to this particular conceptual perspective, we can attend to both work-level actions and emotions of micro-level individuals.

In neo-institutional theory, work-level actions are implicitly reduced to conformity in order to reproduce and maintain institutions (Colomy, 1998). The theory fails to address individuals' intentionality, interest, and reflexivity; places too much emphasis on the prescriptive nature of institutional order; and alludes to the question of why individuals act and interact (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In the discussion about decoupling, studies favoring the image of individuals as ceremonial props describe their work activity as lip service (Collings & Dick, 2011) or lack of fulfilling duties (Lounsbury, 2001). Studies about recoupling/coupling provide insights into general action strategies such as contesting for organizational power (Tilcsik, 2010) or designing organizational routines (Spillane, et al., 2011), rather than actions on a daily basis. In our study, we observed the work activity of employees of the symbolic structures in their situated context. Our investigation revealed that the work-level actions of the knowledge managers were more complicated than a simple dichotomy of conformity and bricolage. Conformity and bricolage represent two types of first-order level of work activity. At the second-order level of work activity, we observed more diverse work-level actions, which are reflected in the different types of behavior to cope with the decoupling situation. Depending on the knowledge managers, these behaviors may differ significantly (for example Alex, Tom, and Christina) or may be consistent (for example Carol and Helen, and Mary and Kathy) across the hierarchical, peer, and individual levels of decoupling.

In terms of emotions, the relationship with institutions is an emerging area of inquiry beginning to attract significant interest (Zietsma & Toubiana, 2015). In order to understand the microfoundations of institutions in general, and of decoupling in particular, we need to attend to how people experience their own institutional milieu (Suddaby, 2010), because "institutional life demands myriad moments of located passion" (Friedland, 2012: 44). It is argued that meanings emerge through interactions embedded in the various types of emotional bonds and serve as the bases for human actions (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen & Smith-Crowe, 2014).

The few studies that address emotions have focused on discussing the role of emotions in triggering different types of institutional work (cf. Creed, et al., 2014; Voronov & Vince, 2012). Our case study examines emotions as part of everyday practices of individuals to cope with decoupling. In this way, we share these scholars' perspective that emotions influence, and are influenced by, the social context in which they occur, but also take into consideration individual differences. Emotions are established through particular interactions (Voronov, 2014). They are both outcomes of and inherent to the process of coping with the decoupling situation. This enables us to gain genuine insights into how people interpret institutions and respond to them through the lens of emotions (Voronov, 2014), instead of a systematic view of which level of emotion relates to which kind of institutional work (cf. Voronov & Vince, 2012). When we compare the four groups of knowledge manager presented above in terms of emotions, it can be seen that there is a difference between the groups, as well as a difference across the three levels of decoupling within each

group. A given emotion shows the extent to which a knowledge manager detaches themselves from or attaches themselves to the decoupling dimension that conditions their ability to act toward that very dimension. For example, Christina felt resentment against the managers, while being determined to cooperate with her colleagues and do her job. By way of contrast, Alex and Tom accused themselves, but not top managers and their colleagues. As a consequence, the agentic orientation regarding the institutional arrangement of decoupling differs between groups of knowledge managers. Alex and Tom overlooked their personal interests and wanted to fight to transform the symbolic structures of KM into something real. Christina focused instead on maintaining connections with the decoupling situation that exploits her.

MICROFOUNDATIONS OF NEO-INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

In response to the call for more attention to the microfoundations of neo-institutional theory (Powell & Colyvas, 2008), neo-institutional scholars have made considerable efforts. Studies have paid special attention to the interpretation of institutions in the field (cf. Currie & Spyridonidis, 2016 McPherson & Sauder, 2013) and individual agency at micro level (cf. Martin, Currie, Weaver, Finn & McDonald, 2016). Our paper joins force with these works. We confirm that inhabitants of institutions are not simply cultural dopes nor change agents. Individual choices and social interaction contribute to creating and maintaining the structural and macro level.

We extend the current discussion by examining the special case of decoupling. It is found that decoupling imposes certain working conditions, but also offers its inhabitants considerable latitude for human agency and interpretation. These individuals discover anomalies in their work, ascribe meaning to what is happening, and react accordingly. In this way, decoupling is instantiated in and carried by individuals through their actions and emotions. Some of them, purposely or unwittingly, contribute to reinforcing the situation, while others attempt to alter it without success. Thus, despite agency at micro level, decoupling continues to exist.

We also extend the current discussion by showing that the micro–macro link does not necessarily lead to significant changes. It happens in the context of organizational members who are less powerful than organizational leaders—or even powerless, in the case of the employees of the symbolic structures. Institutions are reproduced through the everyday activities of these individuals. Their daily practices, although mundane, reflect their interpretation; these practices aim to align with or transform institutions, or simply to survive in the institutional field. This finding supports the call for "more attention to everyday processes than momentous events, [and] to less powerful members of organizations as opposed to only leaders or champions" (Powell & Colyvas, 2008: 277).

Overall, our work contributes to providing an understanding of individual-level instantiation of organization-level phenomena and the ways "organizational participants maintain or transform the institutional forces that guide daily practice" (Powell & Colyvas, 2008: 277). It contributes to restoring "the guts of institutions" (Stinchcombe, 1997: 17) to neo-institutional theory, by helping explain why decoupling triumphs and continues to exist over time from a micro perspective. It can be concluded that rather than taking the macro level for granted, macro-lines of analysis could also profit from a micro-motor, which would involve theories that attend to action, emotion, interpretation, and meaning (Barney & Felin, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Our study started with the premise that the microfoundations of decoupling, which are brought up in neo-institutional theory, needed further attention. It addressed the issue by studying the working life of seven knowledge managers, who were hired in or assigned to the ceremonially adopted KM structures of a multinational. We were first able to develop a typology representing the different ways in which the knowledge managers interpreted decoupling and did their job accordingly. Insights from empirical data inspired us to use the coping framework of Skinner, et al. (2003) to study how these individuals handled the stressful nature of decoupling. We therefore turned our typology into a manifestation of the relationship between the situation of decoupling and the micro level of the employees of the symbolic structures. It is described by four experiences: the *trapped missionaries*, the *recognized opportunists,* the *disoriented escapees*, and the *safe servants*. From this manifestation of decoupling at micro level, it can be seen why decoupling triumphs over time. Overall, our paper contributes to the microfoundations of neo-institutional theory, by showing the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between the macro level of institutions and the micro level of individuals.

Moreover, our study shows that it is enriching for neo-institutional theory to borrow concepts from other perspectives to address the over-emphasis on the macro level of neo-institutional theory. Thanks to the particular conceptual energy of the coping theory, we were able to attend to both actions and emotions of individuals in the context of the macro worlds. There has been a call for neo-institutional theory to "reach out for a helping hand" from other perspectives such as strategy-as-practice (Smets, Greenwood & Lounsbury, 2015). We suggest that, in future research, other perspectives inspired by phenomenology (e.g. the work of Martin Heidegger, Merleau Ponty, and Edmund Husserl) or pragmatism (e.g. the work of William James, Charles Pierce, and John Dewey) also merit attention, in addition to the coping theory and strategy-as-practice perspective. Emotion, meaning-making, and practical actions of individual actors are the essence of these philosophies.

APPENDIX 1: THE FORMAL STRUCTURES OF KM

The figure below represents the formal KM structure of the technical community and the related positions of Alex, Christina, Mary, Kathy, and Tom.

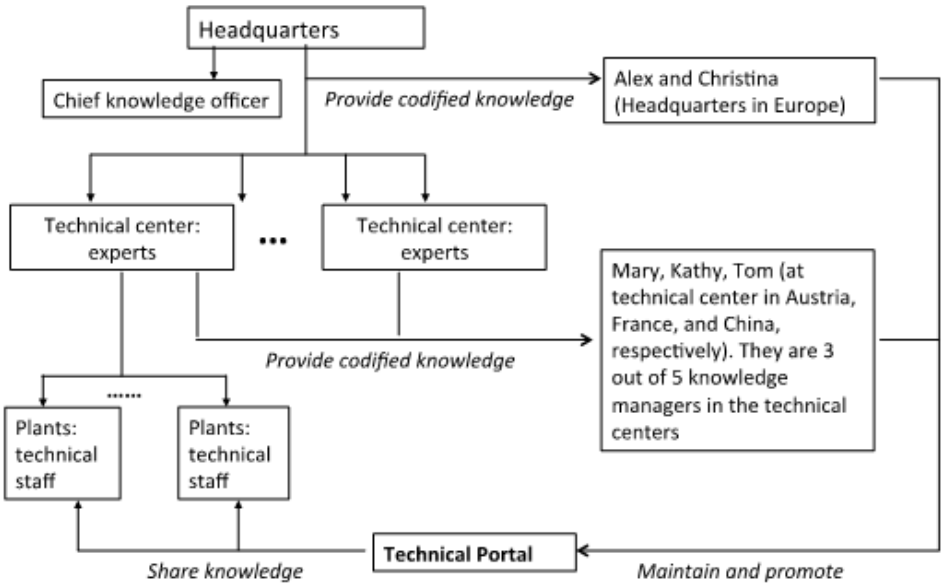

Figure 1: Formal KM structure of the technical community

In the KM structure for the technical community, the responsibilities of the knowledge managers (Alex, Christina, Tom, Mary, and Kathy) include: obtaining knowledge documents from the technical experts and then storing them in the technical portal, and encouraging technical plant staff to share knowledge with each other by using the technical portal. They have no hierarchical power over technical experts and plant staff.

The figure below represents the formal KM structure of the non-technical community and the related positions of Carol and Helen.

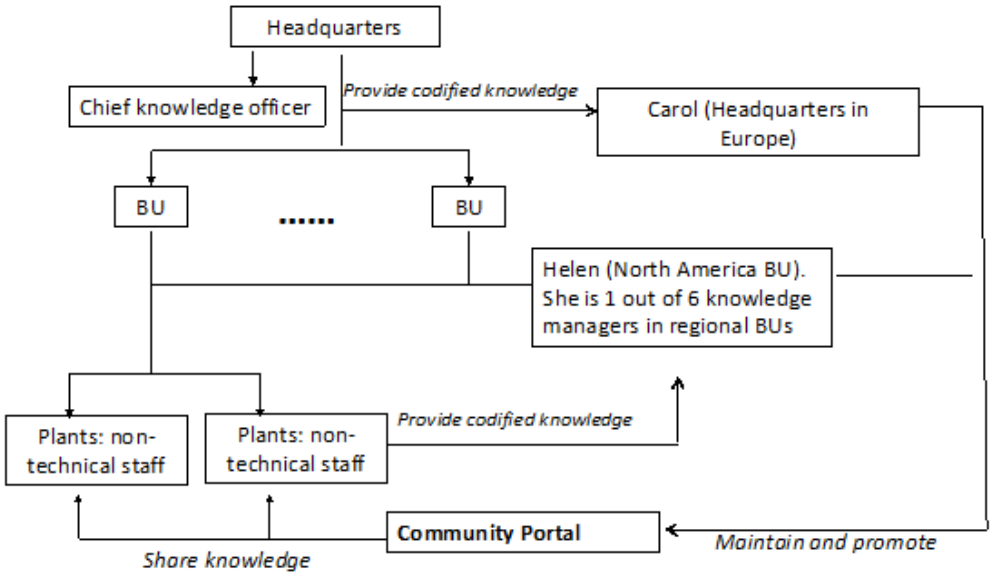

Figure 2: Formal KM structure of the non-technical community

In the structure for the non-technical community, the knowledge managers (Carol and Helen) have to encourage non-technical plant staff to contribute as well as to use others' contributions that are stored in the community portal. One difference between this structure and the other one is the absence of experts and technical centers. Non-technical plant staff are both providers and users of knowledge in the portal, but the knowledge managers have no authority over them.

APPENDIX 2: DECOUPLING OF KM

Timeline	KM vision communicated by top managers	Implementation of KM tools and practices as decided by top managers	KM tools and practices had no impact on organizational members' work
Before 2006	• KM is adopted to improve our performance (*Document—principles of action of the company*). • KM is one lever to make our company become leader in our market (*Document—future strategic plan of the Company*). • KM is one pillar of our strategic performance improvement program (*Document—performance improvement program*). • The portals are the key vehicles for sharing best practices (*Document—presentation of KM*). • The portals help break the functional and geographical silos and contribute to transverse synergy (*Document—presentation of KM*).	• We just made a huge acquisition. Adopting KM will show that we can make a success of the integration (*Field note*). • Subsidiaries have to pay to use the portals; we can reduce tax (*Field note*). • KM implementation should not cause any major changes (*Top manager*). • We set up the portals because it did not generate significant cost and was easy to do. There had been several databases in use within the company (*Manager 1*). • Chief knowledge officer and knowledge managers act as promoters of the sharing systems (*Field note*).	• When you say it's compulsory to share knowledge, it does not always mean it's not compulsory. We make a distinction between "compulsory" and "compulsory in this company" (*Field note*). • When we go to plants for coaching, we have the responsibility to transfer our knowledge directly to plant staff (*Organizational member—performance department*). • The sharing systems are extremely difficult to use (*Organizational member—process and development department*). • The adopted approach of KM is unsuited to the organization's culture. We prefer to call our colleagues in the plant next door (*Organizational member—laboratory manager*). • Documents stored in the systems cannot be used in real-life situations (*Organizational member—maintenance department*). • The documents are in English, but I don't speak the language (*Organizational member—production department*). • Sometimes the Internet connection is too slow. The passwords keep changing. I have no idea which ones to use (*Organizational member—production department*). • Limited awareness of the position of chief knowledge officer.
After 2006	• No discourse about KM.	• The position of chief knowledge officer was done away with in 2005 (*Field note*). • Adoption of new management ideas: cost saving and security improvement (*Document—new future strategic plan*). • The two knowledge-sharing systems remained (*Field note*).	Cost saving and security improvement are now the primary concerns (*Organizational member—quality department*).

APPENDIX 3 : COPING STRATEGIES USED ACROSS GROUPS OF KM MANAGERS

	Challenges to self			*Challenges to context*		
	Self-reliance	**Problem solving**	**Accommodation**	**Support seeking**	**Information seeking**	**Negotiation**
Action	Shouldering Protection Shielding Positive self-talk	Strategizing Repair Mastery	Cooperation Concession Commitment Conviction	Comfort seeking Help seeking Appreciation	Interaction Observation Studying Planning	Compromise Goal setting Priority setting
Emotion	Self-soothing	Determination Confidence Encouragement	Acceptance	Trust	Optimism Hope	Blamelessness Taking others' perspective
	Threats to self			*Threats to context*		
	Delegation	**Submission**	**Helplessness**	**Escape**	**Isolation**	**Opposition**
Action		Unresponsiveness	Random attempts Falling down the stairs Confusion	Flight Avoidance		Reactance
Emotion	Self-pity	Self-blame	Self-doubt Discouragement Guilt	Pessimism	Loneliness	Blame others Anger

Note: The boxes in gray indicate that those coping strategies are not used by the knowledge managers. The coping strategy of "interaction" emerged from our data.

APPENDIX 4: THE KNOWLEDGE MANAGERS' STRESS

Fieldwork	Interviews	
The stressful situation of KM	**The knowledge managers cannot do their job**	**The knowledge managers describe their stress**
• Insufficient resources: The number of knowledge managers is very small, while the number of employees is huge and they work in more than 150 plants throughout the world. It is difficult to promote the portals throughout the organization. • No power: The knowledge managers have no hierarchical power over the experts and plant staff, and therefore cannot impose knowledge sharing on them. • Outsourcing of the development of the portals to a consulting firm: Consequently, documents in the portals were not adapted to various plant contexts, many links became obsolete over time, and the structure of the portal was so complicated that people got lost while navigating to find documents. • Except for Alex, the chosen knowledge managers had no relevant KM background. • The organization is not prepared to share knowledge via the portals: o Many plants do not have access to the Internet and Intranet accounts to use the portals. o Employees are not willing to change their culture of learning from their colleagues by face-to-face discussion. They do not want to consult online documents.	**Kathy:** • *I thought we had a great new system, but when we started, it didn't work. It was problematic.* • *It is impossible for me to get knowledge documents from the experts.* **Mary:** • *People don't care about us or about KM.* • *I did my training. Then later, people asked me: "The technical portal? What is that?" Or others mocked: "The portal is useless anyway." I had to take a deep breath.* **Tom:** • *You know how disappointed I was when I first delivered a KM workshop? When I checked how many people had access to the Internet, only a few people raised their hands. There, I faced the reality. How am I going to do my job? It's just impossible ...* **Christina**: • *It was the time when I had no idea what to do and how to do it.* **Carol:** • *I had to start from scratch by updating the portal ... It was very technical. I didn't know anything.* • *Every time I make a decision, it's a bet. My bosses never say yes or no. I have to manage on my own.* **Helen:** • *I knew nothing about KM. I did not have any relevant training. So it was like, how do I know that I'm doing a good job?*	**Kathy:** • *My life as a knowledge manager was really hard ... It was the worst period of my time in this job.* **Mary:** • *KM is there, but our top managers just put it on the shelf. This is what depresses me the most in this job.* • *I had always been happy to go to work. But by that time, I really didn't want to show up at my office. It was a stressful time for me ... Frankly, I was fed up.* **Tom:** • *The company gives us a gift that we cannot open ... It is not for me to change. I have to accept that, but in the end, what I'm doing is not that meaningful. I feel kind of depressed.* • *The organization is not ready for KM. I cannot do much about it. I only have two hands.* **Christina**: • *Our bosses just keep KM there but do nothing to make it work. It's disgusting.* • *What will happen to the KM team in the future?* **Carol:** • *I struggled with my job. It was like being in a corner, working alone.* **Helen:** • *I was lost. I felt unable to do the job.* • *KM is no longer on the agenda of any management meeting.*

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