

# Chapter 9

## Know Thy Place: Location and Imagined Communities in Institutional Field Dynamics



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How do members of an institutional field<sup>1</sup> construct its location? Institutional fields are central to institutional dynamics, for this interorganizational level is where the institutional drama unfolds (Scott, 2014; Zietsma, Groenewegen, Logue, & Hinings, 2017). Nonetheless, the conceptualization of institutional fields has transformed since the early days of neoinstitutionalism. Whereas early understandings of fields rested on the assumption that they are geographically bounded and inhabited by members who are quite close to each other, later conceptualizations seem to underline fields as deterritorialized social processes that form around issues and their negotiation (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). In particular, by the 2000s, institutional fields had come to be conceived mainly not as geographical or spatial phenomena but rather as shared *discursive* worlds (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004; Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). Accordingly, institutional fields, like other forms of communities (Anderson, 1983; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002; Said, 1978; Zerubavel, 2003), have been increasingly understood to be constituted through language and a continual “conversation” among various stakeholders (Hoffman, 1999). However, institutional actors are also located in distinct places—actual locations, locales, or senses of place (Agnew, 1987). The question is thus how places are worked out in such conversations within institutional fields. Which discursive practices do actors use to construct the semiotic space of their institutional field?

To explore these questions, my case study focuses on the Israeli high-tech industry. I ask how actors in this field construct the meaning and implications of its

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<sup>1</sup>Although fields are central to institutional theory, there are many different definitions thereof and some confusion between the terms *organizational fields* and *institutional fields*. Following Zietsma, Groenewegen, Logue and Hinings (2017), I see these designations as interchangeable. In this chapter I use *institutional field* to highlight the concept’s importance to the institutional drama.

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location. Conceiving conferences as field-level events (Henn & Bathelt, 2015; Lampel & Meyer, 2008), I draw on an ethnographic study of an Israeli high-tech conference held in 2005 in Santa Clara, California. I examine how participants discussed—both directly and indirectly—“location” in configuring Israeli high tech as an institutional field. In short, I demonstrate how, for Israeli high-tech stakeholders, “place” is not a fixed and rigid location. Rather, it is constantly deliberated, invented, imagined, and even flexibly fabricated. Overall, the data suggests that place was constructed in different ways by the various actors in the studied event. As opposed to a quite common, perhaps axiomatic construction of Israeli high-tech as bounded by its peripheral geographical location, it was also constructed by some participants as an integral part of a global field. Specifically, Israeli high-tech was depicted by various members as part of three different imagined communities: one based on imaginative geography, one on practice, and one on memory.

I illuminate discursive practices operating in the constructions of place of, and within, institutional fields and highlight the theoretical implications of such discursive maneuvering for rethinking the meaning of location in institutional fields.

## **Theoretical Grounding: Institutional Fields, Place, and Knowing**

### ***Place, Institutional Dynamics, and Institutional Fields***

Issues of location have been central to theorizing institutionalization processes. Whether conceptualizing institutionalization as diffusion or as translation of ideas (structures, practices, and meanings; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), institutionalization involves the travel of ideas across spatial and social borders (e.g., organizations, fields, or nation-states). Yet, whereas scholars have pointed out and analyzed broad patterns of such movement, they have paid only scant attention to the detailed dynamics of place involved in them (Lawrence & Dover, 2015). Institutional theorists seem to have taken the very travel of ideas for granted and have missed the spatial turn that affected the social sciences and, more specifically, management and organization theory (Taylor & Spicer, 2007). The common methodological choice to focus on institutional dynamics in one location has contributed much to making the issues of movement in space (and of place) analytically transparent, treating it as a given and objective phenomenon.

The disregard of place in institutional analysis is especially surprising in the study of institutional fields. The original formulation of institutional fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) implied its embeddedness within a bounded geographical location that allowed proximity and interaction between field members (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). The definition of institutional fields has since evolved and has taken a discursive turn (Phillips et al., 2004). Place is still central within a discursive

conception of institutions, yet it is hidden and quite implicit. Institutional fields are defined as “*richly contextualized spaces* where disparate organizations involve themselves with one another in an effort to develop collective understandings regarding matters that are consequential for organizational and field-level activities” (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008, p. 138, emphasis added). Fields, then, are not necessarily constructed through physical proximity but rather through processes of “referencing” between actors, for actors note and pay attention to each other when partaking in the same conversation (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008, p. 139). How are such contextualized spaces constructed?

Adopting a discursive definition of institutional fields, I build on a constructivist understanding of place as a continuing process (Patterson & Williams, 2005). I thus assume that it is not merely a given, objective, and geographical location as such but rather an assignment of meaning, values, and material form to a geographical location. “A place is a unique spot in the universe . . . [that] has physicality [and is] interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined” (Gieryn, 2000, pp. 464–465). Given the discursive turn, I ask how the sense of an institutional place—“the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 7; see also Agnew, 1987)—is negotiated among members of an institutional field.

### ***Institutional Fields, Collective Identity, and Field-level Events***

Institutional fields materialize, and are negotiated, through various platforms, including field-wide organizations, field-wide agreements (e.g., standards, measurement tools and rankings), and field-level happenings (e.g., committees, contests, rituals, and events; for a review see Zilber, 2014). Whether field-level events configure the field (Lampel & Meyer, 2008) or “just” reproduce it (Henn & Bathelt, 2015; Schüßler & Sydow, 2015), they are important for constructing field-level collective identity. Field-level events serve as an arena for collective sense-making (Garud, 2008; Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Maguire & Hardy, 2006; McInerney, 2008; Oliver & Montgomery, 2008; Zilber, 2007), for they redirect actors’ attention (Anand & Watson, 2004) and offer an opportunity for actors to present and discuss issues that they find important (Anand & Jones, 2008; McInerney, 2008). Field-level events also facilitate interactions among field constituencies, distribute prestige, and allow for conflicts to be expressed and worked out (Anand & Watson, 2004) or downplayed (Zilber, 2011). They thus establish and foster the social structure of the field and its identity (Glynn, 2008; Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Moeran, 2010; Moeran, 2011; Oliver & Montgomery, 2008; Rao, 1994; Stam, 2010). Field-level events may therefore be an instructive site to explore how field members come to know—that is, to construct—the location of their field or their sense of place in their institutional field.

## Methodology

### *An Israeli Hi-tech Event as a Case Study*

My study is focused on an Israeli high-tech industry conference held in November 2005 in Santa Clara, California. The conference was organized by The Israel Venture Association (IVA) and was entitled, “The Israeli Hi-tech VC Conference: Exploring Growth Opportunities.” In the newswire announcing the conference, the organizers underscored that the gathering would include three of the world’s largest investors in venture-capital (VC) funds as well as senior executives from leading U.S. technology companies and senior members of the VC community in Israel, “aiming to identify partnership and acquisition opportunities among the start-up ventures taking part in the conference” (IVA newswire, November 2, 2005). The event, so declared the organizers, was “the sixth of a series of conferences IVA has organized throughout the world during the past two years (the latest one was in Tokyo) in an effort to generate new business opportunities for funds and start-ups in Israel” (IVA newswire, November 2, 2005).

To judge from this text, place seemed to be a crucial matter for the organizers and participants. They organized a special event at the heart of U.S. high-tech industry and marked the positions of Israeli high-tech in its quest to be recognized by and cooperate with the leading actors in the field. This concern with place was explicit in a statement added by the organizers:

According to Avi Zeevi, the conference chairman and founding partner in Carmel Ventures, “[w]e decided to hold the conference this year in the Valley in light of the significant progress in the global standing of the Israeli high-tech industry and venture capital during the past year. The event will constitute an exceptional opportunity for Israeli companies and entrepreneurs to meet leaders of the American technology industry located in this region and will enable venture capital funds to meet with potential investors and partners.” (IVA newswire, November 2, 2005)

I use the Israeli high-tech industry for my case study because that sector is an extreme case (Yin, 1984/2014). First, the high-tech industry is a global phenomenon because it not only has centers worldwide but also produces and uses communication technologies that seemingly transcend geographical locations and boundaries. It has created and is interconnected through cyberspaces that allow for instantaneous interaction with people thousands of miles away. Constructing a sense of place in such a globalized, “flat” world (Friedman, 2005) may require more effort and may be more apparent—and thus easier to depict and analyze—than in low-tech settings.

Second, the Israeli high-tech is a thriving industry, part of the global high-tech field. Location is an exceptionally loaded nexus in Israeli identity, constantly negotiating a balance between the global (the Western world) and the local (the conflictual Middle East). The conference under study was not held in Israel but rather in the global hub of high-technology more than 7,500 miles away: Silicon Valley. The dynamics of place may be more evident and easier to capture in that context than in conferences held in Israel.

## *Data Collection and Analysis*

This study is based on participant observations (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998), notably of the discursive activity as it unfolded during the event. All the deliberations were recorded and later transcribed. The event started with an evening “networking reception.” An intensive day of plenary sessions and simultaneous one-on-one meetings at the Santa Clara Marriott Hotel ensued. The conference ended with a Black-Tie Optional Gala dinner for the 2005 International Partnership Award, hosted by the California Israel Chamber of Commerce at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View. All in all, 41 different speakers took part across eight different sessions. Speakers’ affiliations varied. They included politicians (e.g., the California State Controller and the former Israeli Minister of Finance), diplomats (e.g., the Ambassador of Israel to the United States), senior VC and high-tech executives (including Israelis such as Shai Agassi, then an executive board member of SA, and Americans such as Dan Rosensweig, then COO of Yahoo!), and service providers (representative of Israeli and American Law and accounting firms).

I read the more than 200 resulting pages of proceedings, presentations, and field notes, using content analysis (Lieblich, 1998) to identify the material’s main substantive categories through cyclical refinement from the concrete and specific to the abstract and general. This process was focused especially on issues of location and place. I examined explicit statements about the Israeli hi-tech industry, the differences and similarities between it and the high-tech industry in other locations, and explicit reflections about “the Israeli character” and its similarities or differences from the character of other nations. I also used explicit markers—such as names of locations (e.g., states, cities, and landmarks), organizations (e.g., universities such as Technion, one of Israel’s premier institutes of higher education; MIT; and Harvard), and location-bound historical events and institutions (e.g., military operations or service in the Israeli Defense Force)—to identify implicit themes concerning place. Likewise, whenever I noticed the use of Hebrew words in the mainly English proceedings, I strove to understand the context and meaning of such language use. In particular, I tried to understand the possible ways such linguistic usage marks, or at least evokes, the location of the speakers and the audience. I also noticed stories of personal experiences and jokes about cross-cultural experiences of the speakers, trying to figure out their implicit meanings. Drawing on all these markers and segments of text, I then asked generally what significance the location of the Israeli high-tech industry had in those exchanges. How did different participants construct place, and what meaning did they give it?

I mapped the different constructions of place throughout the texts produced, disseminated, and consumed (Phillips et al., 2004) during the event and identified the different voices they reflected. Each speaker spoke from specific and idiosyncratic experiences, understandings, and interests. All speakers had stakes in the industry and its construction. My analysis suggests that all of them—regardless of their nationality or official roles—took part in constructing a rich and varied discourse

about place as it pertained to Israeli high-tech. The following sections present my account of this collective, yet heterogeneous, discourse.

## **Locating the Field of Israeli High-Tech: Imagined Geography, Practice, and Memory**

Place was constructed as referring to a very wide range of aspects, including issues of location, context, language, values, history, and culture. At the heart of these different constructions was a continuous effort to bridge a seemingly huge geographical and cultural divide between the Israeli and U.S. high-tech industries. Focusing on place, I found that speakers constructed three kinds of communities: an imagined geographical community (Said, 1978), a practice community (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002), and a mnemonic community (Zerubavel, 2003).<sup>2</sup> These three constructions of communities were used to blur the boundaries between the Israeli and U.S. industries.

### ***Divided We Stand***

To appreciate the explicit and implicit efforts to construct the two industries as part of the same institutional field, it is first necessary to highlight the constructions that differentiate between them. They consisted repeated, direct, and explicit mentions of Israel's geographical location, with speakers referring to the country's small size and its distance from its markets in the United States, the Far East, and even Europe.

Over and beyond the geographical distance, speakers often constructed cultural differences. For example, one speaker referred to—or constructed—the unique characteristics of Israeli “mentality,” including the inclination to “team work” (Ron Moritz, Chief Security Strategist, Computer Associates, plenary session, “Israel: A Source of Strategic Partnership Opportunities”).<sup>3</sup> Another speaker stressed the ability to transcend cross-cultural differences, for Israelis are “global in our blood,” given the diversity in Israeli society and its multilingual population (Dr. Levy Gerzberg, cofounder and Chief Executive Officer of Zoran, plenary session, “Building Israeli Global Category Leaders”). He also called to mind Israelis’ “tenacity . . . [and] attitude of winning.” Optimism, too, drew attention (as conveyed through a common saying in Hebrew that foreigners quickly learn, *i'h'yeh beseder*, ‘all will be O.K.’ (Dr. Sass Somekh, President, Novellus Systems, plenary session, “Israel: A Global Source of Innovation”). An additional example of constructed

<sup>2</sup>I thank Roy Suddaby, one of the editors of this volume, for pointing me in this direction.

<sup>3</sup>All the citations in this section are from the studied conference—The Israeli Hi-tech Industry VC Conference: Exploring Growth Opportunities—held in November 2005 in Santa Clara, California, and organized by the Israeli Venture Association.

cultural differences between Israelis and other peoples was the Israeli tendency to be creative, to think “out of the box,” and to be determined to find unconventional solutions (Amnon Lamdan, founder and Chief Executive Officer, Mercury Interactive, plenary session, “Building Israeli Global Category Leaders”).

Alongside such admiring comments, many speakers were critical of Israelis’ character. They were even condescending:

When we first opened there [some 20 years ago], we didn’t know what to expect, so we recruited a group of Israeli managers[.] . . . We went over there, and you know, the management team that worked was smart, spoke well, and seemed to know what they were doing. And we put a bunch of stuff over. We thought we had a few problems in some areas. We asked them about it, and we learned a different word from them. It is *no problem*, ‘just leave us alone and we’ll take care of it’. . . . Maybe they thought it was a sign of weakness to ask for help. And, of course, that turned out to be a terrible, terrible weakness in the company. . . . We taught them a lesson that says, hey, if you don’t improve your operation, we are going to shut you down. And they said no kidding, you’re going to shut us down? . . . Then we got a different response. They said well, how about we send a few people over to the United States and learn some management techniques there? . . . [O]ver the last 10 years there has been a tremendous amount of international experiences. [Israelis] have drifted into various companies; the knowledge is infusing into Israel. So now when I see new Israeli companies going up, there isn’t a lack of management talent, . . . [T]hey have [had] to acknowledge international standards in all of their activities, and I think it is a very helpful situation. (Ken Levy, Chairman of the Board, KLA-Tencor, plenary session, “Israel: A Global Source of Innovation”)

Many participants made jokes about Israelis, delivering complex messages of both acclaim and criticism regarding their character and culture. Joseph Vardi, a known Israeli entrepreneur, offered a humorous opening to the panel discussion he chaired:

We just want to set the rules for the panel discussion. We will try to create an Israeli environment for the next hour, which means that the panelists don’t have to wait until they each have a turn with one of the microphones. And if you want to interrupt, prevent, or to object or to ask the other panelists a question, by all means go ahead and do it. The audience is requested to keep their cell phones on so that we can hear the rings. . . . (Dr. Joseph Vardi, Chairman, International Technologies Ventures, plenary session, “Internet vs. Traditional Media”)

Another speaker addressed the issue of formality versus casualness:

The reason I tossed my jacket off, by the way, is since Silicon Valley, since I’ve spent seven years here, I feel much more comfortable without the jacket on. And the other thing to point out I think was on my first trip to Israel. Somebody said to me, you’d better lose the tie as well because it is only gangsters and politicians that wear ties in Israel today. (W. Robert Genieser, Managing Partner, Vertex Europe)

Yet another brought up the topic of Israeli impatience and the tendency not to listen to others:

Amnon said earlier that we are not good listeners. . . . So one day I am walking into a presentation like this, and I hear the instructor saying, you know Israelis are not known to be very good listeners. So I told her you are absolutely wrong. Israelis are very good listeners, especially when they are talking. (Dr. Levy Gerzberg, cofounder and Chief Executive Officer of Zoran, plenary session, “Building Israeli Global Category Leaders”)

The conference abounded with a discourse, both positive and negative, that highlighted how different and distant the Israeli and U.S. high-tech industries are from each other. At the same time, a unifying discourse was also apparent, one that highlighted the similarities between the two industries. Exactly how did speakers manage to construct them as similar and as part of the same institutional field? In the following sections I demonstrate how place was used linguistically to construct three kinds of united communities.

### *Constructing an Imagined Geographical Community*

Although nobody debated the objective geographical location of Israeli high-tech, its meaning was constructed in a way that created an imagined geographical community. Geographical knowledge, according to Said (1978), is grounded in cultural and symbolic domains. A geographical fact “is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel” (Said, 1978, p. 55). Through a process of “fabrication and poesis” involving “anxiety, desire and fantasy” (Gregory, 1995, p. 456), “profoundly ideological landscapes” are created (Gregory, 1995, p. 474). Speakers thus interpreted the geographical facts in ways that united Israelis and Americans, presumably in the “same” (imagined) place.

This imagined geographical community was created through a series of discursive steps. To begin with, actors mentioned how far away Israel was and used the California scene to illustrate this distance: “It is easier to drive your car down the 101<sup>4</sup> than it is to fly all the way to Israel,” said Ruth Alon, General Partner in Pitango Venture Capital, while chairing a plenary session on life science. A chief executive officer of an Israeli-born firm agreed that, given the distance, “you sit on planes all the time.” In the same vein, Ken Levy, Chairman of the Board of KLA-Tencor, claimed that “a great strength of Israel is that it is far away, but they are willing to travel. You see four Americans and ninety-five Israelis on the plane” (plenary session, “Israel as a Source of Innovation”).

Acknowledging the distance *between Silicon Valley and Israel*, speakers highlighted various factors that help Israeli high-tech transcend it, including the very willingness of Israelis to travel often and government support to the industry (Yaakov Neeman, Senior Partner in Herzog Fox & Neeman law firm and former Israeli Minister of Finance). Also credited were infrastructure (e.g., a strong legal system); the existence of top research universities (e.g., the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which manages its intellectual property in the emerging nanotechnology market as Harvard, MIT, and UC Berkeley do); the technological units of the Israeli Defense Forces; and high-quality manpower, partly because of the massive immigration to Israel of former USSR citizens well trained in science and technology.

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<sup>4</sup>Route 101, a key North-South route on the U.S. west coast, serves as a major road in Silicon Valley.



Speakers proved to be quite creative in bridging the distance. Some claimed that geography is not that important, asserting that “money is global” and “the quality of the people is far more important than the geography” (Allen Hill, President and Chief Executive Officer, VisionCare Ophthalmic Technologies, Inc., plenary session, “Life Science”) or that this “handicap” (distance) is losing its meaning as “the world becomes flatter” (Clinton Harris, Managing Partner, Grove Street Advisors LLC, plenary session, “Israel: A Global Source of Innovation”).

Not only that the distance may be bridged, some speakers turned it into an advantage. Given the distance, the infrastructure, and government support, doing business in Israel—so the argument went—is less expensive than doing it in North America, especially in the phase of research and development:

Why is Israel successful? . . . [F]or a long time Israel has been the lowest cost place to do innovation or technology development and certainly from the venture-capital perspective, it is the lowest cost place to do that. You have extremely high-quality people. They are very creative and innovative. In part we pay them less than we pay in Silicon Valley; and in part we have arrangements over there in terms of government subsidies and the like. (Clinton Harris, Managing Partner, Grove Street Advisors LLC, plenary session, “Israel: A Global Source of Innovation”)

Speakers also discussed the very concept of the “global,” arguing that the U.S. market should not be considered the same as “the global.”

Well, surprisingly enough, the Asian markets for companies are not the emerging markets, they are the established market. The emerging markets are more like markets in the U.S. and Europe that are emerging out of some stagnation, investment in previous technologies, and . . . self-assurance that we have got everything set and we don’t need to improve anything . . . [T]he market today is definitely in Asia, a lot of things are happening there, there is a lot of money. (David Welsh, General Partner, Parth International, plenary session, “Information and Communications Technology”)

Actors thus portrayed the markets as changing so that the relevant distance of Israel from “the market” changes as well. This distance may even turn into an advantage, given the skills and capabilities that Israeli companies have had to develop and the experience they have in dealing with markets that are far away (Erez Schar, Managing Partner, Evergreen Venture Partners, plenary session, “Israeli VCs: Bridging Capital and Opportunities”).

### *Constructing a Community of Practice*

Another way to construct the similarity between the fields of U.S. and Israeli high-tech was to situate them both as part of one global “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice are united in that they share the same professional language, tacit skills, and identities and abide by the same rules and norms (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). Because communities of practice transcend borders (organizational and geographical) through “shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139), the construction of Israeli and

U.S. high-tech as belonging to the same practice community allowed actors to symbolically construct a united field.

This imagined community was constructed by using the seemingly universal and neutral discourses of economics and technology. Speakers underscored Israel's economic and high-tech standing, which places the country on a par with U.S. high-tech hubs:

[T]he last one was Bill Gates, and two weeks ago he visited us in Israel. In order to be accurate, let me quote to you what he said about Israel: "If you are good in certain areas, success leads to success in other areas. Israel is more similar to the U.S. in these areas than any other country I have ever visited." It is no exaggeration of Bill Gates to say that the kind of innovation going on in Israel is critical to the future of the technology business. . . . We had 13 IPOs this year . . . . We have more than 40 M&A transactions over 3 billion dollars. Israeli fundraisers estimate this year 1.4 billion dollars, compared to 800 million dollars last year, and practically zero in the year 2003. We are at the rate of 1.5 billion dollars in investments into a VC-backed company. We are, based on these numbers, number four after California, Massachusetts, [and] Texas, and way ahead of every European country today. (Yoram Oron, Chairman of the Board, Israel Venture Association; Founder and Managing Partner, Vertex Venture Capital, opening plenary session)

Speakers also tended to frame Israeli high-tech challenges in abstract and general terms. For example, panelists in a plenary session entitled "Israel: A Source of Strategic Partnership Opportunities" discussed partnerships between big multinational firms and small Israeli firms, comparing a "friendly hug" with a "bear hug" and suggesting universal principles for managing such relationships in order to ensure that the small firms are "meaningful in that dialogue."

In lieu of such general and abstract language of economic practices, successful Israeli entrepreneurs who were invited to tell their stories drew universal lessons about the trials and tribulations of developing a technological idea into a business.

So we started as a DSV [Dynamic Signature Verification] company here and in Silicon Valley, in Sunnyvale [California] actually and in Haifa [a city in the north of Israel]. . . . [T]rust me, I didn't know what the market was. We were a bunch of techies. We knew how to design very fast chips, and we said, "Let's design a DSV and see who will bite." . . . Later on I learned that design doesn't mean anything till you see the revenues. . . . I had business plans, powerpoint presentations, but no revenues. . . . Then we said, "O.K., . . . let's try and change the direction," . . . and actually this is what Zoran has been doing since then. . . . [W]e jumped into an existing market, and we made [a] real dent[.] . . . [W]e are looking into these markets that we see the growth coming, and we ride on the growth. . . . Several years ago there was a student at Stanford [who] made an observation . . . which I confirmed again this summer when I watched the Tour de France. Do you know that in the Olympic Games, when you look at long-distance runners, . . . 5 K, 8 K, 10 K, marathon, . . . the guy who is the first more than half of the laps . . . is never the winner. . . . [B]eing the first is not always first to profit. (Dr. Levy Gerzberg, cofounder and Chief Executive Officer of Zoran, plenary session, "Building Israeli Global Category Leaders")

In addition, speakers assumed that high-tech people around the world face similar choices—should we invest in infrastructure or in content? What is the future of online games? And what about the WiMax, the new transmission standard? Is it "going to be [a] huge [or] overhyped phenomenon" (Information and

Communications Technology panel, W. Robert Genieser, Managing Partner, Vertex Europe)? Such sharing created a shared imagined community of practice that was reinforced time and again. It allowed for downplaying the distant and presumed difference. When a U.S.-based business lawyer was asked his opinion about alternative exit routes, he began his answer by stating, “I don’t think it is first of all uniquely an Israeli issue. It is a market issue in terms of the IPOs” (VC panel, Robert Grossman, Principal Shareholder, Greenberg Traurig).

In such a presumably unified community of practice, professional identity is stronger than national identity, as reflected in the following joke.

Three people in the French Revolution . . . were supposed to be executed with the guillotine. So, it’s an engineer, a doctor, and a lawyer. The lawyer comes up and they put his head on the deck, whatever, and they pull the string and the machine doesn’t work, and they let him go because this is what they do if the first time it doesn’t work out. And then the doctor comes up and the same thing happens, so they let him go. And then the engineer comes up and he says, ‘If you give me a minute, I think I can fix it, right.’ (Tuvia Barlev, Chief Executive Officer and cofounder, Actelis, plenary session, “Information and Communications Technology”)

The joke thus made fun of engineers—those tech guys, as many of the audience were. It was this professional identity that rendered the joke funny and united them within a shared community of practice.

### *Constructing a Mnemonic Community*

Another common discursive practice used at the conference was reference to shared “collective memory” (Halbwachs, 1925/1992; Olick, 1999), which serves as the basis for “mnemonic communities” (Zerubavel, 2003). Mnemonic communities (including organizational fields; see chapter by Coraiola, Suddaby, & Foster in this volume) remember—that is, construct—the past in a similar way and share events and artifacts of commemoration. In particular, they tell narratives about their past that offer similar implications for their present and future (Liu & Hilton, 2005).

Some speakers reflected on the similarities between Israeli and U.S. histories:

I want to share this story with you about my trip to Israel. I was there just last year. . . . I will tell you, nothing in my entire life felt more like Silicon Valley five years ago: the energy, the dynamism, the entrepreneurship, the belief that anything is possible. The only place in the world I have seen anything like Silicon Valley is in Jerusalem today and in Tel Aviv. You are doing something stunning there. . . . California is so similar to Israel—an agriculture economy 50 years ago, now grown up to be . . . technology based, leading the rest of the world in that area. (Steve Westly, California State Controller, opening plenary session)

He then went even further and connected history and character:

What is more interesting to me, though, is that Israel, like California, . . . is a state of mind. It is a place where people think, and they connect to higher purposes, with innovation, with leadership. It goes far beyond a job industry, and I feel that California shares this inextricably.

The speaker thereby constructed a historical similarity, which serves as a basis for shared cultural values and similar character helping to bridge the more than 12,000 km [over 7,500 miles) that separate the two locations. Similarly, Daniel Ayalon, Ambassador of Israel to the United States, started his talk with claims about the similarity between Israeli and American values and then moved to set them on the same side of the historical clashes between cultures:

[F]rom my vantage point in Washington [D.C.], I am following very closely the high-tech joint ventures between the United States and Israel. We have never had better relations . . . , as we have a real basis of sharing values [and] building practices. And, of course, we have the same interest of stability and prosperity. Not to mention [that] we also face now the same threats of radicalism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, [and], of course, the extreme ideology and international terrorism by these generic Islamic Jihad or Al Qaida, which is a very loose structure and organization but yet very dangerous, as we saw yesterday in Amman. (Daniel Ayalon, Ambassador of Israel to the United States, opening plenary session)

The fact that shared memory and cultural values associated with it serve as resources for community-building is apparent from the following example. The speaker reflects a logic similar to the one linking Israel and the United States—except that he links Israel and China instead.

[W]hat is the source of this funny name, Zoran. It is pronounced in Hebrew “Tzoran.” Many people don’t know it, but it is the oldest word for silicon. It is silicon in Hebrew, and that is the reason we chose it some twenty-two years ago. The funny thing is that eight years ago I learned that if you pronounce it almost like in Hebrew, it means “outstanding” in Chinese. When I discovered that, we switched to China. Actually, this is our largest market today. (Dr. Levy Gerzberg, cofounder and Chief Executive Officer of Zoran, plenary session, “Building Israeli Global Category Leaders”)

Because language is a central marker of location, it serves in this context to connect the Hebrew word with relevant meaning in Chinese, associating the speaker’s firm with this huge and awakening market.

## Discussion: Locating the Field

Building on the understanding of place as a cultural and social construction (Cresswell, 2004) and of institutional fields as discursive constructions (Hoffman, 1999), I explored how actors reshuffle presumably self-evident notions of place in an institutional field. The diverse constructions of place during the conference highlight the concept’s importance to institutional dynamics. The varied configurations of the location of Israeli high-tech highlights the power of discursive practices, or rhetorical strategies (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), to transform place as part of the construction of field-level collective identity (Brown & Humphreys, 2006). Actors assumed Israel’s peripheral location to be distant and small in comparison to U.S. or other global markets, yet they simultaneously undermined these seemingly objective geographical facts. Actors used various discursive practices to globalize

and Americanize the field of Israeli high-tech. They created similarity between Israeli and U.S. high-tech industries and placed them within a shared institutional field while downplaying the differences.

This remarkable shift was achieved through three discourses of community. In one of them—an imagined geographical community discourse (in the spirit of Said, 1978)—the speaker would acknowledge geographical facts while infusing them with new meanings so that distance was shortened or deemed irrelevant. Second, a practice-community discourse (following Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002) involved the use of the languages of economics and technology to portray Israeli and U.S. high-tech members as professionals who engage in the same practices and thus share the same collective identity. Finally, a third discourse constructed a mnemonic community (after Zerubavel, 2003), depicting Israeli and U.S. high-tech as sharing similar collective memories and related cultural values.

Further theorizing the pragmatics of discursive practices can yield new insight into the construction of place in institutional fields. For example, place was central to all these discourses, but there were some important differences in the ways it was constructed. In the imagined geography discourse place was infused with new and diverse meaning that changed its more common peripheral understandings. By contrast, the shared-practice discourse and the memory discourse constructed place as obsolete by offering new—nonspatial and deterritorialized—ways to understand a common institutional field. Whereas the shared-practice community discourse resorted to the universality (and thus unity) entailed in economics and technology, the collective memory discourse integrated all members into a new, shared institutional field by anchoring them in a common morality and character.

Interestingly, these different discourses of place were produced by all participants at the event, regardless of their nationality or professional background. Unlike previous studies on the construction of place, which portray different actors as offering different constructions (e.g., different constructions of a wall as communicated by residents from its different sides; see McKee, 2013), in this case all actors spoke in a multiplicity of voices. But this portrayal may be an artifact of the data used—varied and rich, yet from only one conference with a relatively small number of speakers. Research based on data from numerous conferences may allow closer examination of how subject positions (Phillips & Hardy, 2002) in an institutional field are related to *specific* uses of this or that discursive practice of place. For instance, political agendas were pursued by some of the conference's actors, including the California State Controller, who was running for the state governorship, and the Israeli ambassador, who was quick to use the shared-memory discourse to underline the closeness of Israel and the U.S. as allies and to legitimate the Israeli government and its policies. Other participants had financial interests. Members of the VC community were looking for investments, and representatives of start-ups were looking for money. Some U.S.-based actors tended to underscore the differences between U.S. and Israeli managers, whereas their Israeli counterparts seemed to stress the common ground of the two professional groups. There is a need to inquire further into and theorize about the interface between actors' subject positions in an institutional field and the multifaceted construction of place.

Nonetheless, the various constructions of place and the U.S. and Israeli high-tech industries reflect actors' agency. The conference under study was indeed a highly public and interest-driven event. All speakers had various agendas they were promoting through their participation. Clearly, the discursive practices used were strategic, deliberate, and designed to be persuasive (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). It is the flexibility of place that makes it such a potent discursive resource in identity work (Larson & Pearson, 2012). Because place is a construction, it can be used by institutional actors in different, sometimes contradictory ways in their abiding efforts to articulate their identity as part of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Institutions, knowledge, and place are intertwined, for institutional field members draw on place in order to know—to construct—the field of which they are part.

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