

Institutional Work: Refocusing Institutional Studies of Organization

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss an alternative focus for institutional studies of organization - the study of institutional work. Research on institutional work examines the practices of individual and collective actors aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions. Our focus in this paper is on the distinctiveness of institutional work as a field of study and the potential it provides for the examination of new questions. We argue that research on institutional work can contribute to bringing the individual back into institutional theory, help to re-examine the relationship between agency and institutions, and provide a bridge between critical and institutional views of organization.

Keywords

institutional work, agency, organizations, institutions

Institutional theory represents a dominant approach to the study of organizations but one that is creaking under the weight of its own theoretical apparatus. The ascendance of institutional theory as a macrotheory of organizations is at this point undeniable—ever larger swathes of conference time and journal space seem devoted to exploring issues from an institutional perspective. The institutional perspective has had tremendous success in generating intellectual excitement for a macrosociological understanding of how organizations operate, are structured, and relate to each other. Much of this success and excitement, we believe, can be traced to the core concepts around which it is organized and the potential they hold for helping to make sense of large-scale interorganizational and societal transformations. At the same time, however, these core concepts—such as institutionalization, institutional change, and institutional logics—have focused attention on the macrodynamics of fields—the processes through which large-scale social and economic changes occur. Somewhat lost in the development of an institutional perspective has been the lived experience of organizational actors, especially the connection between this lived experience and the institutions that structure and are structured by it.

In this article, we discuss an alternative focus for the development of institutional studies of organization. “Institutional work” describes the practices of individual and collective actors aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions. Shifting the focus to institutional work represents an extension of traditional institutional concerns and an alternative to the path along which institutional theory has been developing. With traditional institutional theory, the

study of institutional work maintains a fascination with the relationship between institutions and action. It also maintains as central the structurationist notion that all action is embedded in institutional structures, which it simultaneously produces, reproduces, and transforms. The point where a focus on institutional work departs from traditional concerns is in its rejection of the notion that the only agency of interest is that associated with “successful” instances of institutional change—cases of institutional entrepreneurship that produce new structures, practices, or regimes (Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004); social transformations that spawn new logics (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Thornton, 2002); or the widespread adoption of innovation such that it affects a new normative order or taken-for-granted status quo (Hinings & Greenwood, 1988; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). Missing from such grand accounts of institutions and agency are the myriad, day-to-day equivocal instances of agency that, although aimed at affecting the institutional order, represent a complex *mélange* of forms of agency—successful and not, simultaneously radical and conservative, strategic and emotional, full of compromises, and rife with

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unintended consequences. The study of institutional work takes as its point of departure an interest in work—the efforts of individuals and collective actors to cope with, keep up with, shore up, tear down, tinker with, transform, or create anew the institutional structures within which they live, work, and play, and which give them their roles, relationships, resources, and routines.

Invited to develop this essay, we were asked to make sure we would provoke discussion. Elsewhere, we have outlined the concept of institutional work based on a systematic examination of allied empirical research (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) and developed in detail a balanced account of what might be involved in developing a research area around the idea (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). In contrast, here we push the concept further to highlight its distinctiveness and its potential for catalyzing significant shifts in how we understand and study institutions.

The Concept of Institutional Work

We begin by breaking down the idea of institutional work into its components—“institutions” and “work.” With a long and varied history, the concept of an institution has been defined in myriad ways. For the study of institutional work, the concept of an institution can be thought of as those (more or less) enduring elements of social life (Hughes, 1936) that affect the behavior and beliefs of individuals and collective actors by providing templates for action, cognition, and emotion (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001), nonconformity with which is associated with some kind of costs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Jepperson, 1991).

Although organizational research is primarily concerned with work organizations, the concept of work has received relatively little attention (Barley & Kunda, 2001) and only very recent attention in the institutional literature. We have argued that two issues are critical to understanding how the concept of work might usefully be connected to institutions—intentionality and effort. Associating intentionality and institutions may seem problematic—neo-institutional writing has tended to emphasize institutional change and stability that emerge despite, rather than because of, intentional action. The concept of work implies some kind of intentionality, however varied that intentionality might be. To provide a more nuanced understanding of intentionality, we draw on Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) three-part conceptualization (see Battilana & D’Aunno [2009] for a fuller, more nuanced discussion of the role of this conceptualization in the study of institutional work). The most commonly held view of intentionality with respect to institutional work is associated with what they describe as “projective agency” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Such a view emphasizes a future-oriented intentionality, focused on consciously and strategically reshaping social situations. Alternatively, the intentionality of institutional work might also involve a practical form of

intentionality, focused on managing the exigencies of immediate situations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). More radically but most commonly, perhaps, the intentionality of institutional work might look like habit, with the agency involved oriented around the recall, selection, and application of “more or less tacit and taken-for-granted schemas of action that they have developed through past interactions” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 975).

The notion of effort is one that has received very little attention in organizational research, despite its centrality to the lived experience of organizational actors. We have argued that effort represents a potentially important concept, particularly in regard to understanding what does and does not constitute institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2009). Drawing on a dictionary definition of work as “activity involving mental or physical effort done to achieve a result” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2007), it seems that the concept of work implies a connection between effort and a goal. Institutional work would therefore involve physical or mental effort aimed at affecting an institution or set of institutions. We believe that examining the kinds of effort associated with social practices could reveal a great deal about the ways in which those practices connect to the institutions that give them context and that may be the target of their intended outcomes.

New Questions

An important test of a proposed new concept is whether it engenders new, interesting questions or provides fresh, useful perspectives on existing ones. We believe that the concept of institutional work has significant promise in this respect. In the remainder of this article, we discuss three sets of questions that we believe are highlighted by the concept of institutional work. These questions are not, of course, unique to the concept of institutional work. They represent broad sets of issues that have long-standing interest both in institutional studies of organization and in organization and social theory more broadly. We argue, however, that the concept of institutional work has the potential to bring freshness to these issues by pointing to important questions that have remained relatively neglected within the mainstream of institutional research.

Bringing Individuals Back Into Institutional Theory

The relationship between individuals and institutions is a complex one that, while central to social theory, more broadly has attracted relatively little attention in neo-institutional studies of organizations. The concept of institutional work highlights the (perhaps controversial) notion that individuals actively engage in processes of institutional creation, maintenance, disruption, and change. This notion is at odds with current organizational institutionalism in which the individual

has largely disappeared (see Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008). In fact, the stream of institutional writing that has taken the individual most seriously as an object of inquiry has located the very concept as a historical product of Western rationality in which the category of the individual emerges from the institutional structure of mass education (Thomas, Meyer, Ramirez, & Boli, 1987).

Early thinking on institutions, however, conceptualized a more intimate relationship between individuals and institutions. This is apparent in the work of Berger and Luckmann (1967) who describe institutional creation as arising directly from reciprocal typifications that occur in the habitual interaction of individuals:

In actual experience institutions generally manifest themselves in collectivities containing considerable numbers of people. It is theoretically important, however, to emphasize that the institutionalizing process of reciprocal typifications would occur even if two individuals began to interact *de novo*. (p. 43)

They go on to argue that repeated interactions, particularly in the area of “labor, sexuality and territoriality” will ultimately produce habituated actions that form the nucleus of incipient institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 44).

From an institutional work perspective, the issue shifts somewhat from Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) conceptualization of this relationship toward what Hecló (2008) refers to as the act of “thinking institutionally.” More than mere critical thinking, Hecló draws on Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* to resolve the paradox of embedded agency by acknowledging that individuals may, on occasion, adopt a perspective that allows them some reflective capacity to consciously engage in institutional work. Thinking institutionally, according to Hecló (2008), involves adopting an “appreciative viewpoint” that allows one to “acknowledge, and then through choices and conduct, . . . help realize some normative order reflected in the task of upholding (an) institution and what it stands for” (p. 102). This viewpoint, Hecló argues, provides individuals in contemporary civic society the capacity to think and act in ways that allow them to transcend the totalizing cognitive influence of institutions.

The notion of institutional thinking shares with other institutional research its debt to Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* for the idea that many elements of social structure become objectified at the level of individual subjectivity. Battilana (2006), for instance, argues that some individuals, because of the subject positions they occupy in society, are better able than others to resist and often challenge the conforming pressures of institutions. Often this capability arises because of high social status; thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that the nobility and Hollywood actors were among the first to challenge religious taboos against divorce. Sometimes, however, this capability arises because the subject has low or no social

position—such as Rosa Parks. Viale and Suddaby (2009), similarly, draw on Bourdieu to argue that individuals as a result of their life history accumulate “institutional portfolios” that differentially grant both access and influence to societal institutions.

A consideration of how individuals interact with institutions in reflexive ways need not only focus on how they create or transform institutions. Berger and Luckmann (1967) argue that individuals also play critical roles in maintaining institutions, primarily through the fulfillment of social roles. They cite, for example, the rather graphic example of capital punishment:

[when] the institution of the law posits that heads shall be chopped off in specific ways under specific circumstances, and that specific types of individuals shall do the chopping (executioners, say, or members of an impure caste, or virgins under a certain age, or those who have been designated by an oracle). (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 42)

Although Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) emphasis is on role fulfillment, injecting a more nuanced understanding of agency, in which habit and practical action both count, allows a richer understanding of how individuals might actively and reflexively maintain institutions, even while fulfilling socially prescribed roles. Even highly ritualized contexts, such as the chopping off a head by an executioner, are full of choices on the part of those involved (the arrangement of bodies, subtle issues of timing, the display or not of emotion, the emitting or not of sounds), some of which might undermine the institution while others might bolster its legitimacy or its coercive foundations.

More contemporary (and less dramatic) examples of the ways in which individuals act in relation to institutions are offered by Zucker (1977) and Barley (1986). Zucker demonstrated the powerful ways in which individuals actively interpret role structures imposed by organizations: Her study showed that subjects attribute actions emanating from individuals acting in an organizational capacity with more credence and legitimacy, than actions emanating from individuals acting alone. Similarly, Barley demonstrated the scope for individuals to reproduce and alter institutionalized patterns of behavior. Both studies demonstrate the scope of interpretive agency with which individuals interact with institutional scripts and roles. Although the individuals in these studies largely adhered to culturally and organizationally prescribed requirements, they did so in a context that granted them a degree of latitude and choice in how they might interpret the range of legitimate action available to them.

All this work points to the possibility of significantly shifting our understanding of the individual in institutional studies of organization from being an accomplice to social processes of institutionalization and structuration to an agent

whose motivations, behaviors, and relationships are of direct, rather than indirect, interest and attention. Studies of institutional work could locate the individual at the intersection of contemporary understandings of intentionality (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and the wide range of possible relationships between individuals and institutions. Although exploring this intersection could be done through a wide range of approaches, we would like to discuss one as an illustration of how institutional work might engender alternative forms of institutional research.

We suggest the development of what could be described as “institutional biography”—the exploration of specific individuals in relation to the institutions that structured their lives and that they worked to create, maintain, or disrupt. Such an approach might build on Viale and Suddaby’s (2009) notion of institutional portfolios, exploring an individual’s access to and influence on institutions, and adding an examination of the events, relationships, and circumstances that shaped their connection to those institutions. Although such an approach might seem consistent with the literature on institutional entrepreneurship, we suggest two important shifts. First, institutional entrepreneurship research has tended to begin with institutions rather than with individuals (see Fligstein’s [1997] discussion of Jacques Delors for an important exception). Studies have worked from, for instance, changes in the treatment of HIV/AIDS treatment (Maguire et al., 2004) to the emergence of Java as a computing standard (Garud et al., 2002) and shifts in the nature of professional accounting (Greenwood et al., 2008), each time foregrounding the institutional change as the object of explanation rather than the experience or motivation of the individuals involved. Second, to the degree that institutional entrepreneurship research has examined individuals, it has tended toward either a structural determinist or a hagiographic lens, accounting for agency through a set of structural characteristics (Maguire et al., 2004) or through the special skills of the agent (Fligstein, 1997). The distinctive advantage of a biographical lens is that it complicates the subject. Good biography portrays the social structural influences, the opportunities for agency, and the successes and failures of the individual to shape their world. Good institutional biography would need to meet the additional demand of investigating lives of interest not because of the great institutional changes accomplished but because of the complex, reflexive, and recursive relationship they expose between an individual and a set of institutions.

Reexamining the Relationship Between Agency and Institutions

The concept of institutional work insists on the need to consider the permanent recursive and dialectical interaction between agency and institutions. This invites researchers to not only account for the institutional embeddedness of actors

but also for their capacity to reflect on this embeddedness, relate to their own self, and develop conscious intentionality. Agency is neither just an effect of the actors’ institutional embeddedness nor isolated from this embeddedness. It is an ongoing activity whereby actors reflect on and strategically operate within the institutional context where they are embedded. Along with the role of individuals discussed above, reexamining the relationship between agency and institutions leads us to focus on two neglected issues.

The first is the importance of *emergence* within institutional processes. Recent work has insisted that institutional processes are nondeterministic and nonlinear (Blacker & Regan, 2006; Meyer, Gaba, & Colwell, 2005). These characteristics make traditional institutional analyses highly problematic, whether they focus on tracing forward the institutionalization of a new practice or tracking backward the role of specific agents in effecting an institutional change. We argue, however, that a focus on institutional work fits nicely with emergent institutional processes. An institutional work highlights how and why actors work to interpret, translate, transpose, edit, and recombine institutions, and how those actions lead to unintended adaptations, mutations, and other institutional consequences. Key issues in the study of institutional work are understanding how and why institutional work occurs and with what effect, and so tracing that work alongside changes in institutions could provide insight into the recursive relationship between forms of institutional work and patterns of institutional change and stability (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Examining institutional work in the context of emergent institutional processes points to the actions of those who affect, or attempt to affect, institutional processes at both the general and the local levels. As such, it echoes concerns from social movement research, but where social movement researchers might highlight the importance of collective action, research on institutional work would examine how individuals change institutions both as parts of and alongside social movements. Similarly, research on institutional work might capitalize on and extend Scandinavian research on sense making and translation (Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009). Thus, the study of institutional work offers a way to develop a deeper analysis of institutional processes as fluid and uncertain, and helps account for variation within institutional processes, a central concern of current institutional research (Lounsbury, 2008).

The second issue that the study of institutional work highlights with respect to agency is the need to examine it as a distributed phenomenon. Agency from an institutional work perspective is something often accomplished through the coordinated and uncoordinated efforts of a potentially large number of actors. Distributed agency invites researchers to explore how individual actors contribute to institutional change, how those contributions combine, how actors respond to one another’s efforts, and how the accumulation of those

contributions leads to a path of institutional change or stability (Garud & Karnøe, 2003). Delbridge and Edwards (2008) offer such an account of institutional change in the superyacht industry, explaining this change as resulting from a variety of actions of multiple actors engaging with different institutional arrangements. They suggest that researchers should consider the various contradictory and complementary institutional work done by the different actors as well as consider the actions of the multiple actors involved in institutional processes, considering distributed agency lead researchers to consider the multiple levels at which those actors operate. Adopting a distributed agency perspective on transnational law making, Quack (2007) argues that legal professionals affect the process both at the practical and political levels, with the institutional work at different levels supporting each other.

Work as a Bridge Between Critical and Institutional Views of Organization

We believe that an unnecessary and unhelpful gulf exists between research in institutional and critical traditions of organization studies. Where serious consideration of the relationship between these traditions has been undertaken, the results have been tended toward pessimism (Cooper, Ezzamel, & Willmott, 2008; Lounsbury, 2003). Institutional and critical approaches are cast as emanating out of distinctly different concerns and emphasizing divergent explanations of social structure. Cooper et al. (2008), for example, argue, "Institutional theory is conservative insofar as it inclines to naturalize the status quo and shies away from (critical) theories that, in contrast, problematize the status quo as oppressive" (p. 674). Writing from an institutional perspective, Lounsbury (2003) similarly contrasts the two approaches: "Critical theorists aim to highlight agency and action within a disorderly world, while institutionalists alternatively theorize actors as embedded in durable, historically embedded social structures" (p. 212).

The study of institutional work, we believe, represents an opportunity to significantly deepen the connections between institutional and critical approaches, both theoretically and ideologically. From a conceptual perspective, the problem of connecting critical and institutional research revolves around the relationship between structure and agency—integrating the "emphasis on disorder and hidden voices" (Cooper et al., 2008) highlighted by critical organization theory with the focus on durable, powerful structures represented in institutional studies or organization, while avoiding the "flip-flop" between deterministic structures and heroic agency that Cooper et al. (2008, p. 676) associate with institutional theory. A focus on institutional work, we believe, represents a potentially valuable way forward in this regard. The study of institutional work focuses on situated practices of actors reflexively engaged with the institutions that surround

(penetrate) them. Thus, it suggests neither determinism nor heroism and is potentially sensitive to both the oppressive-ness of social, cultural, and material structures, and the potential for emancipation from some of those structures some of the time. Critics insist that institutional research has tended to develop a disembedded view of agency where institutions themselves are relatively neglected in understanding the possibility of agency, particularly the subjectification of the actor whereby people become bound to the roles in which they are subjected (Cooper et al., 2008).

If we take as a starting point for this rapprochement the notions of intentionality and effort that we have argued are central to the study of institutional work, then we can begin to see how a critical institutional approach might emerge. Beginning with intentionality, a critical view of institutional work might investigate the conditions under which different forms of intentionality in relation to institutions might emerge. Such research might, for instance, examine the conditions associated with the restriction of intentionality to habit and those that might engender a movement toward either practical or projective forms of intentionality (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Emancipation from this perspective might involve the transformation of forms of intentionality, from those focused on the past (habit) to those focused on alternative futures (projective). Such a view would neither ignore the importance of enduring structures in shaping action nor ignore the potential for actors to become aware of and wrestle with the impacts of those structures. Exploring these issues might open the door to an institutional theory that problematized the status quo as well as attempted to explain it.

Moving to the notion of effort, a critical view of institutional work might engender an engagement with the nature of embeddedness and particularly the relationship between embeddedness and emancipation. A key lever in this regard could be the notion of effort that is central to the concept of institutional work. Effort from this perspective might be allied with the idea of struggle—in this case, a struggle on the part of individuals and groups to step out of their established roles, adopt a reflexive stance, and engage in the institutional work necessary to transform the conditions under which they live and work. An important step in this direction is provided by Marti and Mair's (2009) research on entrepreneurship under conditions of extreme poverty, in which they argue that agency "goes beyond new ways of *doing* things and implies new ways of *seeing* things" (p. 93). Marti and Mair argue that institutional research has tended to overlook the work of actors who are "powerless, disenfranchised, and under-resourced, who seemingly have no choice other than compliance, are also doing important institutional work" (p. 101). The institutional work of these actors, they argue, is distinctive from that of powerful, organized actors, relying on strategies that are more experimental, nonaggressive, enhancing of institutions, focusing on challenging denigrating myths and traditions, building

provisional institutions, and navigating across institutional logics. Although not explicitly grounded in critical theory, Marti and Mair's research illustrates the potential for a focus on institutional work to bridge institutional and critical concerns and points to an important route through which to connect critical and institutional approaches, by directly examining the efforts of actors to emancipate themselves through the building of alternative institutional arrangements.

Concluding Thoughts

In sum, the notion of institutional work encourages researchers to adopt a different point of view toward their object of inquiry. Researchers are encouraged to shift their gaze away from the "organizational field" and large-scale social transformations, and attend more closely to the relationship between institutions and the actors who populate them. This will demand a more holistic account of institutional action that moves beyond simple dyadic relationships and discrete logics, toward the assumption that actors, at any given time, are subject to pressures from many different institutions and are often responding locally, creatively, incrementally, and more or less reflexively. An institutional work perspective attends more closely to practice and process than to outcome—asking "why" and "how" rather than "what" and "when." Finally, the construct of institutional work defocalizes agency by shifting attention away from dramatic actions of the heroic entrepreneur to the small worlds of institutional resistance and maintenance in which institutionalization and institutional change are enacted in the everyday getting by of individuals and groups who reproduce their roles, rites, and rituals at the same time that they challenge, modify, and disrupt them.

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