

ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS—BRINGING MEANING, VALUES, AND CULTURE BACK IN: INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL RESEARCH FORUM

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This special issue had its roots in a symposium organized by Tammar Zilber and Roy Suddaby for the Academy of Management 2003 annual meetings in Seattle. The symposium was titled “Reclaiming the Symbolic in Institutional Theory” and represented an effort to refocus research attention on the phenomenological aspects of institutions. At the time, we were aware of a growing interest in understanding institutions as, largely, cognitive-cultural constructions, or what Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez termed “phenomenological macro-institutionalism” (1997: 146). Institutions, in this view, involve collectively shared scripts, frames, and taken-for-granted assumptions (Boli & Thomas, 1999), and actors (individuals, organizations, or states) attain their agency substantially as a result of their embeddedness in culture (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Modern organizations themselves thus reflect the intensive cultural rationalization of the contemporary world in their constitutive structures.

The symposium was also organized out of concern that, despite giving much lip service to the socially constructed basis of institutions, most contemporary research has adopted an essentialist view. That is, instead of casting institutions as relatively contingent creations of human cognition, emerging research has tended to identify universal properties of institutions and to study them and their organizational impacts in realist, if not outright functionalist, terms. In a follow-up symposium organized at the 2004 annual meeting of the Academy, Lynne Zucker noted in her concluding

comments as symposium discussant that, although organizations have become the dominant social institution, we must be vigilant, as researchers, to avoid their reification.

That same motivation was the basis for this special research forum, “Organizations and Their Institutional Environments—Bringing Meaning, Values, and Culture Back In.” Our interest, as guest coeditors for the forum, was in expanding the key insight of Meyer and Rowan (1977) that much of organizational reality—including formal and informal structures, and practices such as budget and decision making—is based on myths and ceremonies elaborately constructed from prevailing and highly rationalized expectations of how an organization *should* function (Brunsson, 2002). Much research had been devoted to attempting to describe how institutionalized structures and practices move through time and space. More research was needed on understanding *why* these structures and practices are made to appear legitimate or *how* elements of the broader social environment become manifest and elaborated inside organizations. That is, we wanted to focus research attention on the symbolic, cultural, and value-based elements of a modern environment that so privileges the expansion of organizations.

Clearly, the call for renewed attention to institutional environment and the need to get back “inside” organizations as cultural reflections of these environments resonated with the neoinstitutional research community. We received nearly 100 submissions, and over 200 members of our community

took part in the process of review that resulted in the 12 articles in this special research forum. We thus see this issue of the *Academy of Management Journal* as a collective achievement. We also feel that it is important to reflect on what these 12 articles reveal about the current theoretical conversation that constitutes institutional theory.

The submissions ran the gamut of epistemological and ontological positions but carried forward a common focus on the relationship between organizations and their institutional environments. The works that comprise this issue reflect a high degree of diversity, in levels of analysis, empirical contexts, and methodological approaches.

It is useful to reflect on how and whether the original intent of this research forum has been realized. That is, how do the articles that comprise this issue effectively bring meaning, values, and culture back into the study of institutions? More specifically, does the research reflected in these 12 articles succeed in clarifying a distinct research agenda for institutional theory within organizational analysis? If so, what is that research agenda, and how do we, as a community of researchers, best move to progress it?

We address these questions in the balance of this introductory essay. We begin with a recapitulation of the motives for this special issue. We then offer a brief summary of the articles and an assessment of the degree to which they forward the original mission. We then critically assess the special forum pieces with a focus on their manifest and latent content and their lacunae. We conclude with a discussion of the future of organizational institutionalism.

THE INSTITUTIONAL TRADITION IN ORGANIZATION THEORY: MEANINGS, VALUES, AND CULTURE

Institutional theory has made a distinct impression on organizational research. The central contribution of institutional theory to the understanding of organizations is, largely, a foil to economic rationality. As Lincoln claimed, the core idea of the institutional tradition is the observation that “social structures and processes tend to acquire meaning and stability in their own right rather than as instrumental tools for the achievement of specialized ends” (1995: 1147). Such meanings tend to be organized in wider social environments and reappear as stabilizing and constituting organizational forms.

A key element of the institutional tradition is an understanding that institutions and indeed, organizations, are the product of common understandings and shared interpretations of acceptable norms of collective activity. It is the attribution of meaning

and significance to routine technical activities that Selznick identified as an essential element of the process of institutionalization, whereby social structures such as organizations become “infused with value beyond the technical requirements at hand” (1957: 17). For early institutionalism, thus, organizations were relatively precarious and temporary social constructions that acquired order, stability, and reality as a result of growing, environmentally supported “taken-for-grantedness” by their participants.

The taken-for-grantedness aspect of institutionalization captures the phenomenological roots of institutional theory. Institutional pressures exist only to the degree that internal and external participants believe in them and engage in the institutional work necessary to perpetuate them. Organizations arise and grow permeated with norms, values, and meanings drawn from broader society because the individuals who populate organizations do so holistically—that is, as participants in broader social discourses and institutions.

With the massive cultural rationalization of modern society, organizations have become entrenched and routinized in society, and institutional theory, consequently, has become entrenched in organization studies. But, as a result, scholars’ awareness of the contingent nature of organizations (and the environment of institutions) has receded. There is a tendency to assume the reality of organizations and to invert their causal relationship with their institutional or social environment. That is, instead of seeing organizations as the product of socially prescribed, rationalized meanings and institutional pressures, they increasingly tend to be seen as reified social structures that exert agency and pressure on their institutional environments.

The waning influence of meanings, value, and culture as institutional theory migrated to organization studies is, perhaps, best captured by Stinchcombe (1997), who argued for the assumptive primacy of values in institutionalism. Institutions are able to exert pressure on organizations, Stinchcombe argued, not because they have the “right answer” but “because institutions embody a value that the people also accept” (1997: 8). Stinchcombe thus placed values and meaning at the causal core of institutions and expressed concern that, as organization theory adopted an institutional lens, institutional theory lost sight of the “guts of institutions”—that is to say, lost its primary focus on values, meanings, and culture.

The point of departure for this special research forum was therefore our concern that as institutional theory has become a dominant explanatory mechanism for organizations (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008), it has become threatened

by a loss of coherence (Suddaby, 2010), deviating from treating organizations as a dependent variable to treating them as an independent variable. The question we address in the following section, thus, is the extent to which the articles that comprise this forum have succeeded in reasserting the primacy of institutions (values, meaning, and culture) in their causal relationship with organizations.

Contributions: The Manifest Content

The contributors to this issue clearly take seriously the call to reinsert meanings and values in their examination of organizations and their institutional environments.

Several of the articles, for example, address the contestation of meanings and how such contestation generates new social categories. Hardy and Maguire (2010) examine the discursive contestation of meanings that led the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants to except the insecticide DDT as a dangerous chemical. Similarly, Khaire and Wadhvani (2010) demonstrate how a new commercial art category was created for Indian art by reinterpreting historical constructs in ways that enhanced subjective agreement about the existence of the category and the value of the art in that category. And Meyer and Höllerer (2010) analyze the struggle over the meaning of shareholder value as the construct moved across national and cultural boundaries. In all these instances, the broad expansion of cultural rationalization tends to expand the organizational society, and make it more complex.

The articles also take seriously the notion that *symbols*, *rituals*, and *myths* are important mechanisms for maintaining institutional elements within organizations. So, for example, Dacin, Munir, and Tracey (2010) show how the performance of rituals of formal dining at Cambridge University contribute to the institutional maintenance of the British class system. Rojas (2010), in a historical analysis of the 1968 Third World Strike at San Francisco State College, illustrates how symbolic resources can be leveraged to legitimate authority in a context in which traditional authority structures have collapsed. Finally, Kraatz, Ventresca, and Deng (2010) and Marquis and Huang (2010) underscore the primacy of *values* in processes of institutional change.

The articles are also attentive to the ways in which organizations strive to balance the technical and social demands of their environments through *decoupling*. MacLean and Behnam (2010) describe the creation of a “legitimacy facade” in a financial services organization that enabled a short-term

technical advantage but generated a long-term loss of legitimacy. Tilcsik (2010) offers insight into the antecedents of decoupling through a case study of a post-Communist government agency.

Finally, several of the forum articles introduce *identity* as a key mechanism for integrating the contradictions and conflicts created by the multiple pressures of the institutional environment. Several link institutional logics to identity. Lok shows how investors, subject to conflicting meanings of the term “shareholder value,” reworked their identity to make sense of competing logics. Battilana and Dorado (2010), similarly, demonstrate the same role for identity work in reconciling tensions from the institutional environment, but at the organizational rather than the individual level of analysis. And Creed, DeJordy, and Lok (2010) analyze how Protestant ministers adjusted their occupational identity to accommodate contradictions between their role in the church and their marginalized sexual identities. These studies demonstrate that the ways in which individuals and organizations respond to institutional pressures appear to be one of the clearest triggers or signals of identity.

Contributions: The Latent Content

Collectively, thus, the articles offer an explicit focus on the symbolic aspects of institutionalization. At the same time, they also contain some latent themes that seem to reflect emerging interests in neoinstitutionalism. We identify three themes that are spread, somewhat unevenly, across the work in this special forum. First, there is a clear focus on *processes* of institutionalization, rather than on the outcomes of institutional dynamics. Second, the articles articulate a more nuanced and complex notion of agency. Finally, most of them adopt an interesting form of intertextuality in which institutionalism is supplemented with adjacent or related theoretical perspectives. We elaborate each of these observations below.

Process. Much recent research in organizational institutionalism has focused on the outcomes of processes of institutionalization rather than on trying to understand the processes themselves. So, for example, substantial effort has been devoted to demonstrating the empirical fact of isomorphism, the mechanism of the adoption and the diffusion of practices (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). Peripheral to this research is an equivalent effort to understand the motivations for isomorphism, the elaboration of adoptive practices inside organizations, and the processes by which one can make sense of, or justify, mimetic behavior.

The articles here, however, demonstrate keen attention to process. Of the 12 works, 8 develop process models that show how organizations respond to, and interact with, institutions and institutional pressures. Hardy and Maguire (2010), for example, describe how the production, distribution, and consumption of texts in an organizational field create opportunities for the creation of new narratives that inspire institutional change. Marquis and Huang (2010) offer a new construct, “exaptation,” to capture the process by which a gap emerges between the historical conditions under which an organizational practice or capability was founded and current demand conditions. Indeed, all of the articles presented in this forum are characterized by a distinct interest in the dynamics of institutionalization over time. Institutions are portrayed here, not as passive or disinterested entities, but rather as active and engaged wielders of power.

Agency. The articles also reflect a much more nuanced depiction of agents and agency than is evident in much of the recent research on institutional entrepreneurship. The authors reject the “hypermuscular” depiction of organizations as active resistors to institutional pressures and, instead, present images of agency that are much less strategic or purposive than prior depictions. So, for example, Kraatz et al. (2010) describe how relatively mundane and routine organizational changes can produce secondary, but significant, unintended consequences. As well, the articles offer a model of agency in which power is more distributed or embedded in larger social networks or structures. Tilcsik (2010) thus offers an account of agency that originates in decoupling practices but is mediated by long-term, and unintended, changes in demography.

The articles also offer a more complex description of the role of structure in institutional processes. Hardy and Maguire (2010) problematize structure as a form of discursive restraint and observe that it was the discursive structure of United Nations conferences that created an opportunity for institutional change.

These studies generally avoid the trap of identifying “heroic” actors as agents of institutional change. Lok (2010) describes the role of nonentrepreneurial actors engaged in everyday work as key factors in the reproduction and translation of new institutional logics. Creed et al. similarly focus on “institutionally marginalized” actors. And both Khaire and Wadhvani (2010) and Rojas (2010) contextualize their case studies in so broad a range of actors that it becomes difficult to identify a single heroic agent in their complex interplay. In fact, several of the articles (i.e., MacLean and Behnam; Kraatz et al.; Lok; and Creed et al.) avoid focusing

on the “heroic act” and instead analyze the power of everyday or mundane acts or policies that exert extraordinary influence on institutional practices. Thus, in addition to defocalizing the heroic actor, these studies also extend notions of important events for building institutions beyond foundings and major events.

All the articles, however, reveal an emerging focus on the role of *individual* actors and their engagement with, and reaction to, institutional pressures. The contributions identify a range of individuals—bureaucrats, insurance agents, college presidents, microfinance entrepreneurs, ministers, Cambridge students, policy makers, art critics and historians, institutional shareholders, analysts and shareholders—and their capacity to influence institutions. This set of research studies broadens the scope and range of actors who have access to and power over institutional practices.

Intertextuality. Most of the articles herein supplement the institutional theoretical lens with an additional theoretical perspective. Identity theory is particularly popular, used by Lok; Creed et al.; and Battilana and Dorado. Rojas draws on theories of power and authority; Dacin et al. incorporate cultural sociology and ritual theory; and Marquis and Huang build on imprinting theory. Perhaps unsurprisingly, several authors (Kraatz et al.; MacLean and Behnam; and Tilcsik) go shopping in the closet of the “old institutionalism” by focusing on decoupling. The trend serves to reinforce Colvaas and Powell’s (2006) observation that institutional theory is a “big tent” that can accommodate a broad range of supplemental disciplines and perspectives.

Context. Context is a strong presence in these articles. This is reflected, in part, by the geographic diversity of their empirical contexts. These works include studies of a former Soviet bloc country, Bolivian microfinance, British university students, an international convention on pollutants, modern Indian art, U.K. investors, and Austrian media, in addition to studies of U.S.-based organizations. The diversity of organizations studied also shows the strong presence of context. The organizations run the gamut from traditional for-profit corporations to nongovernmental agencies (NGOs) and academic institutions. So the research represented in this special research forum reflects substantial expansion in the sites and types of organizations subject to institutional influence.

The notion of context, however, also extends to include the important role that geography and organizational type hold in determining how organizations respond to institutional pressures. This is perhaps most apparent in those studies that illus-

trate conflict over the meaning and interpretation of institutional logics (i.e., Tilcsik; MacLean and Behnam; Kraatz et al.; Battilana and Dorado; Lok; Creed et al.; and Meyer and Höllerer). In these seven contributions, we can observe that context is not a constant or passive variable. Rather, it is shaped by prior and local institutionalized patterns that relevant stakeholders can support, change, or use to further their interests.

Lacunae

The content of the articles that comprise this special research forum thus suggests some optimism that the original expectations embedded in our call for papers have been met. Yet there are some interesting insights to be gained by examining what the articles do not address. We see three key gaps in the collection and one interesting rhetorical trend. First, we question the degree to which the word “actor” has become taken-for-granted. Second, and on a similar note, we note that the “organization” has not only become taken-for-granted but has assumed a highly causal position in relation to the broader institutional environment. Third, we note that the empirical context of the studies in this special issue, although commendably broad, overlooks the dominant organizational form: the publicly traded, for-profit corporation. Finally, we offer some comments on the emerging rhetorical style of these articles.

Actorhood. One theme that unites the studies herein is their emphasis on “actorhood” as a key construct. The word “actor” appears in all of them and ranges from a low of a single appearance in one article (MacLean and Behnam) to a high of over 70 instances in another (Hardy and Maguire). Its median use is 47 times per article. The notion of actor thus is central in the collection.

None of the articles, however, defines the term. The absence of a definition is an important lacuna in that it suggests that the construct is so taken-for-granted by our research community that it does not need a definition. This, in turn, indicates an assumptive primacy about the nature of agency in processes of institutionalization and reactions to institutions without any effort to analyze or understand how actors are constituted.

Earlier we acknowledged that the included works offer a sophisticated and nuanced notion of agency. We add to this acknowledgement, however, the caveat that, in these articles, a significant element of agency is effectively being attributed to a black box. Actors may well be influential elements of institutional agency, but we must also develop an understanding of how institutional

pressures might affect how these actors and their actorhood are socially constructed. One core insight common to several sorts of institutional theory is that much of the expanded social control in the modern world is achieved through the construction of properly tamed actors (e.g., Miller and Rose [2008], following Foucault). The agentic modern organization is a prime instance.

Organizations. The articles thus also seem to reflect a high degree of taken-for-grantedness about organizations and their causal relationship with the institutional environment. Early institutionalism described organizations as somewhat tenuous and often temporary products of institutional pressures. Viewed this way, institutions might be viewed as independent variables and organizations as dependent variables. Indeed, this view is consistent with our original call for papers, which highlighted seeking to understand the effect of institutional pressures on organizations.

The work in this forum, however, tends to focus on elaborating the independent variable—institutions—but pays little attention to elaborating the dependent variable—organizations. This suggests that, as with the term “actor,” institutional researchers have largely accepted a shared, but unarticulated, assumption as to what an organization is, how it is constituted, and how it incorporates and elaborates institutional pressures. The lack of explication of the organization and its relationship to the institutional environment thus presents another black box.

Corporations. An early critique of institutional theory was that it was effective in addressing issues in government organizations, schools, and other not-for-profits but offered little insight into the world of competitive, for-profit corporations. Thankfully, this criticism has waned as institutional research has moved beyond its early empirical focus.

The majority of the articles in this special issue, however, suggest a return to these familiar empirical haunts. Three of the studies (Kraatz et al.; Rojas; Dacin et al.) examine academia; one examines Protestant ministries (Creed et al.); one, a government organization (Tilcsik); and one, NGOs (Hardy and Maguire, 2010). Although the balance of the works study commercial organizations, either directly or indirectly, they do not focus directly on the largest for-profit corporations that dominate the landscape of strategy or finance research, firms that have been described as the dominant institutional form for organizing (Fligstein, 1987). The extension of rationalist cultural models to a rapidly expanding global society has created enormously expanded global economic organizations with some distinctive properties.

The return to familiar empirical sites is not an obvious problem for institutional research, yet it

suggests the possibility that institutional insights are more accessible in some empirical contexts than others. Moreover, it holds present the possibility that, when institutional researchers set out to adopt a new path of exploration, there is a compelling and accessible pull to these familiar empirical contexts.

Rhetorical trend. An emerging trend we note is the “scientization” and “formalization” of the research in this volume. That is, the typical manuscript seemed to include a lengthy and elaborate literature review with a considerable number of honorific citations. Now this may reflect trends in management scholarship more broadly, and the competition for space in a limited set of elite forums. It may, however, also be an expression of a lack of paradigmatic consolidation of institutional theory that is such that considerable effort must be expended to stake out the intellectual terrain for a given set of observations. Although institutional theory may be a big tent, its composition of distinct subcommunities requires authors to clearly signal their affiliation with a specific interpretation of canonical texts. This may not, in itself, be unusual in an academic discipline, but it suggests a potential danger, that organizational institutionalism may soon suffer from an overly complex and burdensome theoretical “overhead” that may threaten or stifle new empirical observation.

Future Directions

These special research forum articles represent a significant new direction for institutional research. In this direction, organizations are viewed as constructs that interpret and elaborate institutional pressures. The new research is attentive to process, particularly the process by which organizations attach meaning and value to social pressures exerted by their social environment. The new research also is heavily reliant upon qualitative methods. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, given that viewing institutions as phenomenological constructs necessitates using interpretive research tools. The work herein thus partly reflects a return to the tradition of richly contextualized case studies used in early institutionalism. These articles’ authors are, however, also attentive to questions of how the findings might be generalized to broader contexts, and some of them creatively and effectively mix methods, an achievement that we view as a positive and exciting new direction for institutional research.

Fully realizing the potential of this new research direction requires critical evaluation of the ways in which institutional research has, itself, become institutionalized. That is, we as scholars must care-

fully examine the key constructs within institutional theory with a view to deconstructing the taken-for-granted assumptions we may have about organizations, actors, and institutions. These constructs should be reevaluated and defined in the context of the fresh perspective that this special research forum brings to bear on institutional theory. In large part, doing so involves an understanding of organizations as interpretive systems or filters through which we interpret and elaborate values, symbols, and meanings that exist at broader social levels. This fresh perspective also involves understanding agency less as action and more as the act of interpretation. The challenge ahead is for researchers to build on the progress of these articles by extending our understanding of organizations as mediators and lenses of their institutional environments, and the reciprocal co-construction of organizations and their institutional environments.

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