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978-0-521-51855-0 - Institutional Work: Actors and Agency in Institutional Studies of Organizations

Edited by Thomas B. Lawrence, Roy Suddaby and Bernard Leca

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1 *Introduction: theorizing and studying institutional work*

THOMAS B. LAWRENCE, ROY SUDDABY, AND
BERNARD LECA

THE concept of institutional work describes “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 215). Institutional work represents an exciting direction for institutional studies of organization, not because it represents a “new” idea, but because it connects a set of previously disparate ideas, and in doing so points to new questions and opens up space for new conversations. Institutional approaches to organization theory have traditionally focused attention on the relationships among organizations and the fields in which they operate, providing strong accounts of the processes through which institutions govern action. The study of institutional work reorients these traditional concerns, shifting the focus to understanding how action affects institutions. Connecting, bridging, and extending work on institutional entrepreneurship, institutional change and innovation, and deinstitutionalization, the study of institutional work is concerned with the practical actions through which institutions are created, maintained, and disrupted. The concept of institutional work highlights the intentional actions taken in relation to institutions, some highly visible and dramatic, as often illustrated in research on institutional entrepreneurship, but much of it nearly invisible and often mundane, as in the day-to-day adjustments, adaptations, and compromises of actors attempting to maintain institutional arrangements. Thus, a significant part of the promise of institutional work as a research area is to establish a broader vision of agency in relationship to institutions, one that avoids depicting actors either as “cultural dopes” trapped by institutional arrangements, or as hypermuscular institutional entrepreneurs.

The overarching aim of this book is to present a series of chapters which will collectively articulate a research agenda for the study of institutional work. We approach that aim in two main ways. First, the chapters in this book explore both the conceptual core and the

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boundaries of the idea of institutional work. Through both theoretical discussions and empirical research, the authors in this volume provide explicit and implicit articulations of these issues, revealing both considerable agreement and significant conflict especially with respect to the term's conceptual boundaries. Second, the book provides a set of empirical works that can serve as exemplars for scholars undertaking the study of institutional work. The research described in this volume demonstrates the importance of rich, detailed case studies in understanding the practical actions of individual and organizational actors attempting to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions, as well as showing the value of examining a wide range of empirical contexts, across sectors, geopolitical boundaries, and time frames.

The study of institutional work has the potential not only to positively affect scholarly discussions within the institutional community, but also to generate conversations which might bridge the interests of those who study institutions and organizations, and those who work in them. Although institutional theory has become a standard point of reference in contemporary textbooks of organization theory (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin & Suddaby, 2008), it has largely failed to affect the practical discussions of organizational managers and members outside the academy (Miner, 2003). We believe this is a shame and a waste; much of the appeal of an institutional perspective is its "realistic" treatment of organizations – as more than production machines or economic actors. The institutional perspective has brought to organization theory a sophisticated understanding of symbols and language, of myths and ceremony, of decoupling, of the interplay of social and cognitive processes, of the impact of organizational fields, of the potential for individuals and groups to shape their environments, and of the processes through which those environments shape individual and collective behavior and belief. These are critically important issues for those working in organizations to understand, and yet these issues have for the most part remained trapped within the confines of academic text and talk. Our hope is that shifting the focus to the practical work of actors in relation to institutions will help lead to an easier and more compelling translation of institutional ideas into non-academic discourses.

In this introductory chapter, our aim is to examine some key issues with respect to the concept of institutional work, both in terms of how we might usefully elaborate and refine our conception of it, and how it relates to broader issues in institutional studies of organization. In

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first proposing the concept (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), our primary goal was to develop an inductive, empirically grounded understanding of the terrain that might be mapped using the concept of institutional work. With that accomplished, we now turn to developing a more systematic, theoretical exploration, in order to provide a more nuanced and detailed description of the concept. We present this chapter in four main sections. First, we review the role of actors, agency, and institutions in institutional studies of organization. Second, we elaborate the concept of institutional work. Third, we theorize the notion of institutional work by situating it in terms of a set of key issues and concepts. Finally, we provide an overview of the book; for each chapter, we discuss the main issue it addresses, and the perspective it adopts on that issue.

Actors, agency, and institutions

The interplay of actors, agency, and institutions has come to occupy a dominant place in institutional studies of organization (see Battilana & D'Aunno in this volume for an excellent discussion of the evolution of these issues). Although neo-institutional writing on organizations began with a strong emphasis on the cultural processes through which institutions affected organizational practices and structures (Hinings & Greenwood, 1988; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and led to patterns of isomorphism within fields of activity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983), more recent work has focused significantly on the processes through which actors affect the institutional arrangements within which they operate (Beckert, 1999; DiMaggio, 1988; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Hensmans, 2003; Lawrence, 1999; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). We believe that these two orientations have each been associated with somewhat stylized representations of the relationships among actors, agency, and institutions: early work suggested a dominant impact of institutions on organizational structure and practice, and a limited role for agency; in contrast, more recent work, organized significantly under the rubric of institutional entrepreneurship, has portrayed some actors as powerful, heroic figures able to dramatically shape institutions. In this section, we discuss these approaches to the relationship between actors, agency, and institutions, and explore the potential for the concept of institutional work to provide an alternative approach that draws on the strengths of the traditional views without suffering from their overstated positions.

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The initial concern of neo-institutionalism was to explain organizational isomorphism that could not be explained by competitive pressures or efficiency motives (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). Consequentially, researchers focused on the ways in which institutions shape the behavior of organizational actors. From this perspective, agency was a secondary consideration, understood either as a reaction to institutional pressures (and thus seen in processes of adoption, decoupling, and ceremonial display), or not seriously considered at all. Where it was considered explicitly, the scope and extent of agency was understood as dependent on the influence of the social context and the interactions among organizational actors. In work that has extended this approach to the global level, Meyer and his colleagues have documented how agency as a social construction developed in contemporary societies (e.g. Frank & Meyer, 2002; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Frank and Meyer argue that the decline of the nation state, and economic and cultural changes in post-war societies led to the rise of generalized actorhood of individuals and the increase of specializing identities claims. Both the profusion of individual roles and identities are viewed as special cases of common underlying institutional processes (2002: 90). In this view, institutions not only influence how agents will act, but which collective or individual actor in a society will be considered to have agency and what such agents can legitimately do. In this regard, those works might be considered as belonging to a form of radical constructivism as agency had no ontological status by itself.

The neo-institutional approach came under increasing criticism on several fronts for developing an oversocialized view of agency. Perrow (1985) argued that institutional authors ignored power relations and had gone “overboard” with their emphasis on myths and symbols. DiMaggio (1988: 3) criticized institutional research as being “frequently laden with ‘metaphysical pathos’ – specifically, a rhetorical defocalization of interest and agency,” and called for the explicit incorporation of agency into institutional theory, and the study of how actors pursue their interests in the face of institutions. Oliver offered a syncretic approach, combining strategic approaches with new institutionalism to analyze how actors develop specific strategies depending on their institutional environment (Oliver, 1990) or react to institutional pressures (Oliver, 1991). Other authors joined the chorus, calling for the injection of agency into institutional theory (Beckert, 1999; Hoffman &

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Ventresca, 2002; Hirsch, 1997; Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997a, 1997b; Lawrence, 1999).

Partly in response to these calls, a body of literature has emerged that examines “institutional entrepreneurs” – organized actors “who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones” (Maguire, Hardy & Lawrence, 2004: 657). The focus of this literature has been primarily on the strategies used by actors to change institutional arrangements rather than just comply with them. While this research has provided valuable insights, such work tends to overemphasize the rational and “heroic” dimension of institutional entrepreneurship while ignoring the fact that all actors, even entrepreneurs, are embedded in an institutionally defined context. Institutional entrepreneurship has thus been criticized as a *deus ex machina* within institutional theory, used to explain institutional change as the outcome of attempts by a few rational and powerful actors (Delmestri, 2006: 1536–1537). Meyer (2006: 732) even suggests that such a view of institutional entrepreneurship as belonging to a particular “species” of actors more rational than others, and downplaying their institutional embeddedness, is unable to offer a viable endogenous explanation of institutional change within the tenets of institutional theory.

DiMaggio and Powell (1991: 23–24) suggest that one way to develop a more balanced view of the relationship between actors and institutions would be to draw from the practice approach that has emerged since the 1970s. A significant focus of research and writing in this tradition is on explaining the relationship between human action and the cultures/structures in which actors are embedded (Bourdieu, 1993; Giddens, 1984). A practice perspective contrasts with both structuralist views derived from Parsons and Saussure, in which human action is limited to an enactment, or execution, of rules and norms, and a voluntaristic view of agency whereby actors have unlimited freedom and capacity to invent new arrangements (Ortner, 1984). In their exploration of practice as a micro-foundation for institutional research, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) provide detailed analyses of how such a perspective might apply.

Despite the power of their analysis, however, relatively little work has taken up its call. We suggest this may be for two reasons. First, the focus of their analysis, and indeed of most practice-oriented writing, is on the micro/individual level. In contrast, institutional studies of organization have tended to accentuate the role of collective actors, and interactions

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among actors, especially in terms of creating and transforming institutional arrangements (Garud, Jain & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings, 2002; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Second, the temporal orientation of action in practice-oriented writing tends toward either relatively short term “moves” that fulfill “practical functions” in everyday life (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; de Certeau, 2002), or longer term but stereotyped forms (Ortner, 1984: 150). Again, this contrasts with institutional approaches, in which the temporality in question tends to be of an intermediate nature – long enough for social action to influence institutional structure or for institutional structures to change and thus affect social action, but short enough for those rhythms of change not to be overwritten by the *longue durée* of history.

Thus, in looking across the relatively brief history of neo-institutionalism, we see two key tensions with respect to the issue of agency, one concerned with the degree of agency attributed to organizational actors, and one concerned with the degree to which a practice approach can adequately describe the relationship between agency and institutions. We introduced the notion of institutional work in an effort to help overcome these tensions by defining an area of institutional research that highlights the middle ground of agency and connects the insights of practice theory with institutionalists’ traditional concerns for collective action and social change (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The concept of institutional work is based on a growing awareness of institutions as products of human action and reaction, motivated by both idiosyncratic personal interests and agendas for institutional change or preservation. The aspiration of the concept of institutional work is that, through detailed analyses of these complex motivations, interests, and efforts, institutional research will be able to better understand the broad patterns of intent and capacity to create, maintain, and alter institutions.

Conceptualizing institutional work

In our original discussion of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 215), our aim was to provide a starting point for understanding the connections among a broad range of studies and to point toward some significant gaps in our understanding of how actors and institutions interact with each other. Most central to our definition of institutional work is its “direction.” If one thinks of institutions and action as existing in a recursive relationship (Archer, 1995; Barley & Tolbert,

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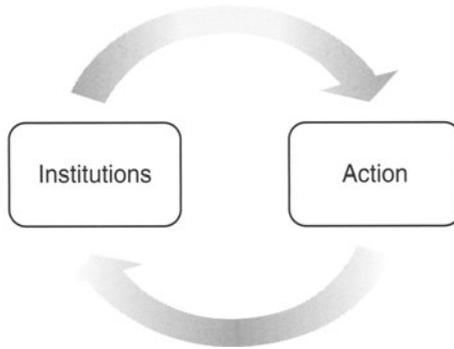
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Figure 1.1 The recursive relationship between institutions and action

1997; Fairclough, 1992; Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004), in which institutions provide templates for action, as well as regulative mechanisms that enforce those templates, and action affects those templates and regulative mechanisms (see Figure 1.1), then we are centrally concerned in the study of institutional work with the second arrow, that from action to institutions. We neither deny nor ignore the effect of institutions on action, and indeed those effects are crucial to understanding the nature of institutional work, but our analytical focus in the study of institutional work, unlike most institutional studies of organization, is on how action and actors affect institutions.

Our interest in developing an institutionally situated understanding of the effect of actions on institutions led us to argue that the study of institutional work should be oriented around three key elements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006): (1) it would “highlight the awareness, skill and reflexivity of individual and collective actors” (219); (2) it would generate “an understanding of institutions as constituted in the more and less conscious action of individual and collective actors” (219); and (3) it would identify an approach that suggests “we cannot step outside of action as practice – even action which is aimed at changing the institutional order of an organizational field occurs within sets of institutionalized rules” (220).

We went on to propose three broad categories of institutional work: creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions. Based on a review of institutional studies published in *Organization Studies*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and *Academy of Management Journal*, over a

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fifteen-year period, we identified forms of institutional work that had been examined empirically for each of those three categories. As we discussed at the time,

[a]lthough relatively few articles within the now voluminous body of empirical research in neo-institutional theory focus solely on institutional work, a significant number of them provide descriptions of institutional work, some directly as they examine the rise and fall of various institutional arrangements, and others in the context of background empirical material intended. (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 220)

Based on this survey, we argued that the practices associated with creating institutions represent the category of institutional work most extensively examined in the literature. This work builds primarily on the notion of institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988; Eisenstadt, 1980), to explore the kinds of actors who attempt to create new institutions, the conditions under which they do so, and the strategies they employ (Garud *et al.*, 2002; Greenwood *et al.*, 2002; Hargadon & Douglas, 2001; Lawrence, 1999; Lounsbury, 2001; Maguire, Hardy & Lawrence, 2004). We identified ten forms of institutional work associated with creating institutions, which broke roughly into three types: “overtly political work in which actors reconstruct rules, property rights and boundaries that define access to material resources”; “actions in which actors’ belief systems are reconfigured”; and “actions designed to alter abstract categorizations in which the boundaries of meaning systems are altered” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 221).

The second category of institutional work that we proposed – maintaining institutions – has received relatively little empirical or theoretical attention. Although institutions are often defined as phenomena which are self-reproducing, either because of their taken-for-granted status (Phillips & Malhotra, 2008; Scott, 2001), or because of their association with regulative mechanisms which ensure their survival (Jepperson, 1991; Lawrence, Winn & Jennings, 2001), we argue that the institutional work of maintaining institutions is both necessary and overlooked. As demonstrated in this volume (Hirsch & Bermiss, this volume; Trank & Washington, this volume; Zilber, this volume), even powerful institutions require maintenance so that those institutions remain relevant and effective. In our previous survey of the empirical literature, we found six forms of institutional work, three that “primarily address the maintenance of institutions through ensuring adherence to rules systems,” and

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three that “focus efforts to maintain institutions on reproducing existing norms and belief systems” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 230).

Our third category of institutional work – disrupting institutions – has been the subject of institutional concern since the early work of Selznick, and gained significant attention following Oliver’s (1992) discussion of deinstitutionalization. Despite this long history, however, the practices associated with actors attempting to undermine institutional arrangements is not well documented, outside the indirect processes associated with creating institutions. In our survey of empirical work in the area, we found relatively little in terms of concrete descriptions of actors disrupting institutions. What we did find fell into three forms: “work in which state and non-state actors worked through state apparatus to disconnect rewards and sanctions from some sets of practices, technologies or rules”; attempts to “disrupt institutions by disassociating the practice, rule or technology from its moral foundation”; and “undermining core assumptions and beliefs” which stabilize institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 235–237).

Theorizing institutional work

We believe that our original definition and categories of institutional work provide a broad but useful direction for studying and further theorizing this concept. At the same time, however, they leave several key issues unexamined and others underspecified. In this section, we aim to refine our understanding of institutional work by exploring its relationship to several important issues – accomplishment and unintended consequences, intentionality, and effort. In doing so, we seek to strike a balance. On the one hand, we want to specify the concept so that its core meaning and boundaries are clear and distinguishable. For the study of institutional work to advance, construct definition and clarity are important so that its meaning does not diffuse to the point of uselessness. On the other hand, the community of scholars interested in the concept of institutional work is broad, with a range of interests and approaches, as shown in the chapters contained in this volume. Within this community, there is significant diversity with respect to the questions we ask, and consequently the aspects of institutional work that we highlight. Thus, our aim in trying to refine the concept is to narrow the notion of institutional work, so that it more clearly points at specific phenomena, while at the same time ensuring that the definition includes

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important forms of institutional agency that the previous definition may have excluded (or at least steered us away from considering).

Institutional work, accomplishment, and unintended consequences

A critical issue for the study of institutional work is the distinction between “creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” and the “creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions.” The former describe a set of activities, whereas the latter describe a set of accomplishments. Either set could be (and often is) the focus of institutional studies of organization, but we argue that it is the former set which is at the core of the study of institutional work. This distinction is important for at least two reasons. First, exploring a set of activities leads to a very different set of questions and answers than does exploring a set of accomplishments. Why, how, when, and where actors *work at creating* institutions, for instance, describes a distinctly different (and we would suggest broader) arena of inquiry than does asking those questions about the *creation* of institutions. Studying the institutional work of creating institutions could, of course, include the investigation of the forms of institutional work and the supporting factors that are likely to lead to successfully creating new institutions (Garud *et al.*, 2002; Maguire *et al.*, 2004), but this is only one potential issue that could be examined within the domain of institutional work aimed at creating institutions. Other, relatively neglected issues include understanding which actors are more likely to engage in institutional work, what factors might support or hinder that work (independent of its success or failure), why certain actors engage in institutional work while others in similar contexts do not, and what practices constitute the range of ways in which actors work to create institutions. Such questions push us toward the examination of institutional work as practice rather than as part of a linear process (with the tendency to see such a process as a continuum of steps and stages). This is an important shift for institutional studies of organization because, despite the injection of actors and agency that we have suggested marks a major stream of work in this area, relatively little is still known about the concrete practices employed by actors in relation to institutions.

The second implication of focusing on the activities rather than the accomplishments is that it brings back into focus some important ideas