



Institutional Work: Current Research, New Directions and Overlooked Issues

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Abstract

The study of institutional work has emerged as a dynamic research domain within organization studies. In this essay, we situate the papers published in the Special Issue. We first review the evolution of institutional work as a scholarly conversation within organization studies. We then introduce the papers in the Special Issue, focusing in particular on where they fit into the current scholarly conversation and how they move us in important new directions. Finally, we discuss a set of neglected issues that deserve further attention.

Keywords

institutional work, institutions, materiality, reflexivity, work

Introduction

Institutions and work have long been central topics in organization studies, though with rather different trajectories. Writing on the relationship between organizations and institutions stretches back to Weber and Marx, was an important concern of the post-Second World War organizational sociology of Selznick (1949, 1957) and Stinchcombe (1968), and was reborn in the 1970s and 1980s (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) under the rubric of neo-institutionalism (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Since then, an institutional lens has informed a wide swathe of

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organization studies, with different emphases and understandings of institutions brought to bear on a rich array of issues, spanning multitude of social levels, from the individual actor to the world polity, and everything in between (see Greenwood, Oliver, Suddaby, & Sahlin, 2008). For more than three decades, the role of institutions in shaping organizational life has been a central concern in organization studies.

Although work organizations are by far the dominant kind of organization examined in organization studies, scholarly attention to work itself has been a rather more mixed affair. Studies that have focused explicitly on traditional forms of work were typically not found in mainstream organization studies journals, but have primarily been published as part of the sociology of work, in themed journals such as *Work, Employment and Society* and *Work and Occupations*. Over the past couple of decades, however, there has been an increased attention to work, in part focusing on the emergence of technicians as an important part of the workforce (Barley, 1996; Barley & Kunda, 2001), but more broadly incorporating new forms of ‘work’ that involve efforts to shape facets of organizational life that run alongside narrow task concerns. Phillips and Lawrence (2012, p. 223) describe this second shift in attention as a ‘turn to work’, and enumerate fifteen kinds of work in organizations, including emotion work, identity work, boundary work, strategy work, practice work and values work, many of which, they argue, have ‘become important areas of scholarship despite being largely unknown or unexplored just a few years ago’. What connects these kinds of work is that they ‘involve actors engaged in a purposeful effort’ to manipulate some social-symbolic facet of the context in which they operate (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012, p. 224).

The turn to work described by Phillips and Lawrence (2012) also motivated the call for this Special Issue, which was originally devoted to exploring the intersection of institutions and work in organizations. The focus of the vast majority of submissions, and hence of the Special Issue, was ‘institutional work’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In this introductory essay, we review the intellectual context of the papers published in the Special Issue, first by recalling the evolution of institutional work as a scholarly conversation within organization studies. We then present the papers in this Special Issue, highlighting where they fit in the current scholarly conversation, and how they move us in important new directions. Finally, we highlight some still neglected areas that deserve further attention.

Previous Research on Institutional Work

The theorization and study of institutional work is still emerging, and is clearly based on a bottom-up approach (Zilber, 2013), moving from ‘outli(ning) the terrain of an emerging object of institutional inquiry’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 220) to a ‘more nuanced and detailed description of the concept’ (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009, pp. 2–3). The definition of institutional work as ‘the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215) highlights three main aspects: it depicts institutional actors as reflexive, goal-oriented and capable; it focuses on actors’ actions as the centre of institutional dynamics; and it strives to capture structure, agency and their interrelations (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009).

The study of institutional work has emerged as a wide-ranging scholarly discussion, which can be broadly separated into research that focuses on *how* institutional work occurs, *who* does institutional work, and *what* constitutes institutional work.

The issue of *how* institutional work occurs has been examined in terms of the typology of creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions, as scholars extended – based on empirical

explorations – our knowledge of the varieties of institutional work. Research on creating institutions has continued to focus primarily on institutional entrepreneurship, drawing on the concept of institutional work only peripherally (Garud, Hardy, & Maguire, 2007; Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011). A few recent exceptions, however, testify to the promise of exploring the creation of institutions from a work perspective. Slager, Gond, & Moon (2012, p. 763), for example, conceptualize standardization as institutional work and identify three types – ‘calculative framing, engaging and valorizing’ – that ‘support the design, legitimation and monitoring processes whereby a standard acquires its regulatory power’. Perkmann and Spicer (2008, p. 811) examine the role of institutional work in the institutionalization of management fashions, arguing that ‘fashionable management practices acquire permanence when they are anchored within fieldwide institutions’ and identifying ‘political work’, ‘technical work’ and ‘cultural work’ as critical to this process. Jagd (2011) and Taupin (2013) examine the ‘justification work’ by actors who develop moral arguments to support their institutional projects and the complex debates that ensue. More substantive connections have been made to the concept of institutional work in research on deinstitutionalization and institutional change. Maguire and Hardy (2009, p. 148), for instance, explore the institutional work associated with the deinstitutionalization of DDT, showing how actors engage in ‘disruptive’ and ‘defensive’ institutional work. Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) explore institutional work in the context of field-level change, arguing that two kinds – practice work and boundary work – are critical to this process. Symon, Buehring, Johnson and Cassell (2008) explore institutional work in an academic context, focusing on the ‘rhetorical institutional work’ of qualitative researchers who seek to position the dominance of quantitative research as an ‘illegitimate institutionalization’ and the practice of qualitative research as ‘legitimate resistance’. Most closely associated with the concept of institutional work has been research focusing on how actors work to maintain institutions. Whereas, previously, the role of actors purposive efforts in maintaining institutions was relatively neglected, there has now emerged a stream of research and theory devoted to understanding the dynamics of this kind of institutional work (Dacin, Munir, & Tracey, 2010; Dover & Lawrence, 2010a; Riaz, Buchanan, & Bapuji, 2011; Trank & Washington, 2009; Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zilber, 2009).

A second significant theme in recent research on institutional work has been an exploration of *who* engages in institutional work. A prominent answer to this question is: professionals and other actors associated with the professions. The relationship between institutional work and the professions has been explored in terms of how they connect to broader institutional change in societies (Suddaby & Viale, 2011) as well as the role of institutional work within professional service firms (Empson, Cleaver, & Allen, 2013; Singh & Jayanti, 2013). In a review of previous research on professions and institutional change, Suddaby and Viale (2011, p. 423) describe four ‘dynamics through which professionals reconfigure institutions and organizational fields’: using ‘expertise and legitimacy to challenge the incumbent order’; using ‘their inherent social capital and skill to populate the field with new actors and new identities’; introducing ‘nascent new rules and standards’; and managing ‘the use and reproduction of social capital within a field’. Currie, Lockett, Finn, Martín and Waring (2012) illustrate the use of institutional work by professionals as a response to organizational changes that threaten their power. In this study situated in the UK’s National Health Service, specialist doctors responded to the introduction of new nursing or medical roles by working to ‘supplant threat of substitution with the opportunity for them to delegate routine tasks to other actors’ and co-opt ‘other professionals outside the professional elite, but relatively powerful within their own professional group’. Lefsrud and Meyer (2012) show that institutional work among opposed professionals can also involve the very construction of

expertise as a resource – as parties assert their own expertise while attacking fellow professionals as non-experts.

Another answer to who engages in institutional work has come from research focused on actors at the top of organizations. Kraatz (2009, p. 59) argues that interest in institutional work was foreshadowed by Selznick's (1957) *Leadership in Administration*, in which 'he developed a powerful theory of the institution which granted a central role to a particular type of institutional worker: the leader or "statesman"'. Although previous research on institutions and organizations has, according to Kraatz (2009), overlooked the importance of leaders, they play an important role in shaping organizations as institutions through their distinctive institutional work. The potential importance of organizational leaders is echoed in Rojas' (2010, p. 1264) exploration of how a college president engaged in institutional work that reshaped the organization's structure and norms in ways that provided him with 'extensive powers'. The political nature of institutional work is reinforced in Riaz and colleagues' (2011) study of the role of elite actors, and especially bank executives, in shaping public discourse during the 2007–2010 financial crisis.

Research also considered actors without the expertise of professionals or status of top executives, providing directions to understand when actors engage with institutional work. One such direction is to consider the interactions among individuals. Dorado (2013) highlights the power of the collectives in doing institutional work. Considering the case of commercial micro-finance in Bolivia, she shows how group dynamics might be what motivates, inspires and enables individuals to engage in institutional work. Another direction is to pay attention to context. Van Dijk, Berends, Jelinek, Romme and Weggeman (2011) suggest that the existence of micro-institutional affordances is what allows actors to deploy institutional work in order to legitimize radical innovation within companies.

Finally, there has emerged a stream of work that has explored, analytically, *what* constitutes institutional work. These developments of the conceptualizations of institutional work tend to focus in particular on its relationship to agency. Battilana and D'Aunno (2009, p. 47) examined this issue in detail, drawing on a relational, multi-dimensional understanding of agency that includes habit, imagination and practical evaluation (Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). They argue that although institutional work may be intentional, 'what those "intentions" might look like will vary considerably depending on the dimension of agency that dominates the instances of institutional work one considers' (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009, p. 49). The relationship between agency and institutional work was further explored by Zundel, Holt and Cornelissen (2012, pp. 102–103) who argue that the study of institutional work faces a 'double bind': 'agents' activities and thoughts are observed and acknowledged in conceptual juxtaposition to their institutional context', but 'the closer any study gets to the "rough ground" of the phenomena, the less apparent [the juxtaposition] becomes: just where does the individual stop and institution start?'. They attempt to address this dilemma in a study of institutional work in *The Wire*, a US television show, by developing 'a processual analysis' in which 'institutional phenomena are not stable but characterized by regenerative and degenerative cycles of influence that afford or restrict room for maneuver' (Zundel et al., 2012). Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013) extend the emphasis on relational views of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) in institutional work, integrating a concern for institutional complexity. Drawing on a study of banking lawyers in global law firms, Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013) develop a relational model of institutional work that 'situates institutional work in the practical work through which individuals encounter contradictory institutional practices, negotiate adaptations that facilitate task accomplishment, and reconstruct their underlying institutional logics'.

Introducing the Special Issue: New Directions in Institutional Work Research

The papers in this Special Issue build on the rich literature on institutional work reviewed above and chart new directions for its exploration. We first introduce the papers in terms of their focus on institutional change or maintenance, and then discuss the new directions they suggest.

The first three papers of the Special Issue focus on cases of institutional change. Gawer and Phillips (2013) studied Intel Corporation as the computer industry moved from a supply chain logic to a new platform logic. In this period, their analysis shows, Intel Corporation was engaged in both internal and external institutional work, contributing to the field-level change while also striving to adapt to this change internally. Helfen and Sydow (2013) examine the institutional work done to establish International Framework Agreements on global labour standards. Their analysis explores interorganizational negotiations as the site of intense institutional work. Jones and Massa (2013) explore the institutional work associated with the transformation of a novel practice into a 'consecrated exemplar'. Drawing on a comparative case study centring on Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple, they argue that this transformation was associated with two legitimation processes, termed institutional evangelizing and adaptive emulation.

The final three papers focus on how institutions are maintained, rather than transformed. Micelotta and Washington (2013) study the ways by which actors in the professional services sector in Italy managed to counter governmental efforts at reform, highlighting the role of repair work and exploring its triggers and enabling conditions. Raviola and Norbäck (2013) reveal a complex dynamic involving change and maintenance of institutions, by following the efforts of journalists in an Italian newspaper to implement the integration of print and online news. Finally, Martí and Fernández (2013) explore the institutional work involved in the maintenance of oppression and resistance through a re-reading of studies of the Holocaust through the lens of institutional work.

New directions

The papers in this Special Issue, while building on previous research and theorizing, also advance the conversation around institutional work in several ways. The first is the examination of multiple kinds of institutional work with different aims or effects within the framework of the same study. Institutional research has tended to examine single institutional processes, such as diffusion (Green, 2004; Kennedy & Fiss, 2009), institutional entrepreneurship (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Hardy & Maguire, 2008), deinstitutionalization (Ahmadjian & Robinson, 2001), or legitimation (Stryker, 2000; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). In contrast, research drawing on institutional work as an orienting concept has begun to develop more integrative models of institutional dynamics that allow us to appreciate the varieties of work – aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions – within the same context (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010).

Studies in this Special Issue attend to organizational processes that incorporate multiple forms of institutional work and in so doing produce important insights with respect to the relationships among these different forms. Helfen and Sydow (2013) expose the messiness of institutional work in their study of the efforts to establish International Framework Agreements on global labour standards. Their study highlights the complex nature of such negotiations, involving both contestation and cooperation (Zilber, 2007), and resulting in stagnation, modification or creation of proto-institutions (Lawrence, Hardy, & Phillips, 2002). Micelotta and Washington (2013) study the ways by which actors in the professional services sector in Italy managed to counter governmental

efforts at reform. They portray institutional maintenance as repair work, and explore its triggers and enabling conditions. Their study is unique in capturing both efforts at change *and* maintenance, and explores the resilience of institutions – a central theme in early institutional studies, which was somewhat lost later on as neo-institutional theorists focused on change. Finally, Gawer and Phillips' (2013) study of Intel Corporation examines both institutional logics and institutional work, more typically studied separately and using different research designs (Zilber, 2013), thus highlighting the potential explanatory power of integrating multiple forms of institutional work at different levels of analysis.

A second contribution of papers in the Special Issue is to explore the importance of materiality in institutional work. The concept of work implies the use of tools. Whittington (2003, p. 120), for instance, argues that adopting a practice perspective on organizational strategy suggests a need to understand 'the common tools and techniques of strategizing and organizing and how are these used in practice'. More generally, understanding the role of material objects in relationship to institutions has been recognized as an important but under-examined issue (Smith, 2001; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Dover and Lawrence (2010a), for instance, argue that material objects and institutions have a complex relationship with each other, with the gradual breakdowns in performance and reliability of both requiring interrelated forms of maintenance work.

Jones and Massa (2013) point to the critical role of materiality in the instantiation, diffusion and institutionalization of novel ideas, suggesting that considering artifacts, and their representations, could be a way for researchers to account for institutional work. In a complementary manner, Gawer and Phillips (2013) insist on material artifacts as instantiation of institutions and institutional logics. Their study suggests that the design of artifacts is a form of institutional work that supports the intended institutional project. Raviola and Norbäck (2013) also make materiality a central dimension of institutional work. Drawing on Battilana and D'Aunno's (2009) conceptualization of agency in institutional work, and Callon's notion of agencement (2009), they show how actors engaged into institutional work can use artifacts that instantiate established institutions to facilitate the transition between past habits and the elaboration of new habits for the future. Those contributions, then, are invitations to explore further the multiple means by which agents interact with institutions, including discourse, social relations, symbols as well as material artifacts.

A third contribution of papers in this Special Issue is connecting institutional work to new theoretical traditions. Institutional work comes out of the neo-institutional tradition in organization studies, but its focus on the goal-directed efforts of actors in their work to affect institutions opens up the relevance of a wide range of potential theoretical combinations. Martí and Fernández (2013), for example, connect the study of institutional work to the sociological literature on power, and especially on oppression and resistance. Although power and institutions may be intimately related (Lawrence, 2008), how their relationship plays out in empirical contexts has been seriously under-examined. Martí and Fernández's analysis of the institutional work of oppression and resistance in the Holocaust provides an insightful examination of a question that is only beginning to surface – how institutional work is carried out both as a means of achieving and as a form of expressing power (Rojas, 2010). Helfen and Sydow (2013) introduce another theoretical lens to the study of institutional work with their integration of the strategic negotiations literature from industrial relations (Walton & McKersie, 1991). The integration of strategic negotiations research illustrates a powerful direction for the study of institutional work, in which theories of specific forms of purposive action are leveraged to better understand how, when and why actors work to shape institutions.

Overlooked Issues in the Study of Institutional Work

Despite the compelling, innovative research on institutional work in this Special Issue, there remain important issues that have been under-examined. Concluding our introduction to the Special Issue, we would like to highlight three avenues for further developing our scholarly conversation about institutional work. The first issue stems from the distinction between research that focuses on the connections between institutional work and institutional outcomes, and research that focuses on the work itself. The definition of institutional work as purposive action aimed at affecting institutions leaves aside the issue of whether those efforts are successful in shaping institutions, have no effect on them, or have significant but unintended consequences (Lawrence et al., 2009). And yet, studies of institutional work, including most of the submissions to the Special Issue, tend to concentrate on its connection to intended effects, basing their analyses largely on retrospective accounts embedded in interviews and archival data. Focusing on these questions using these methodological approaches limits our ability to uncover and understand the messy day-to-day practices of institutional work. The limits of retrospective analyses are highlighted by Raviola and Norbäck's (2013) paper, the only one in this Special Issue based on an ethnographic study. This paper highlights the mundane, ordinary ways in which institutions are embodied at a micro level and how actors engage with them in their day-to-day activities. Their ethnographic methods allowed them to attend to the experience of individuals as they engaged in, and were subjected to, institutional work. In conjunction with other allied streams of institutional research that have examined 'inhabited institutions' (Hallett, 2010; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) and the role of emotions in institutional processes (Voronov & Vince, 2012), and as was called for in essays and book chapters (Lawrence et al., 2009; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011), we need to attend to the experience of individuals as they engage in, and are subjected to, institutional work (for exceptions, see Dacin et al., 2010; Zilber, 2009). As suggested by Raviola and Norbäck's (2013) study, using less-used research methods – those capturing social action in vivo and in situ in particular (Locke, 2011) – may help to shed new light and raise new theoretical questions in the study of institutional work.

A second issue concerns our understanding of the effort that institutional work demands. Actors engaged in institutional work are often depicted as experts skilfully manipulating their institutional environment, but this view might underestimate the cognitive and emotional efforts necessary for actors to gain reflexive awareness and engage in work to maintain, disrupt and create institutions. Although some current research on institutional work tends to include any action with institutional effects, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) and Lawrence et al. (2009) originally emphasized reflective purposefulness as a defining characteristic of institutional work. Such reflective purposefulness is, however, difficult to capture – empirically and conceptually (Zilber 2013). Rather than abandoning the notion of reflexivity, we suggest it can be a central issue for empirical analysis, focusing in particular on how such reflexivity is developed. Raviola and Norbäck (2013), for instance, suggest that the instantiation of institutions in the form of artifacts can be used by actors to develop their reflexivity rather than reduce it. Thus, examining the experience of actors engaged in institutional work may help us explore the boundaries of the concept and provide clarity to its core characteristics.

The reflexive dimension of institutional work also points to actors' responsibility and morality when engaging in institutional work. Exploring the Holocaust as an extreme case, Martí and Fernández (2013) point to the importance of morality in the institutional work to support, or resist, oppressive institutions. But morality goes beyond attending, as researchers, to the moral implications of the institutional dynamics we document and attempt to explain. Morality, as Martí and Fernández (2013) remind us, is also relevant to our own work as scholars. Our practices of

knowledge production, dissemination and consumption; our choices of research questions, cases and methods (e.g. where are the janitors and mechanics?) – all carry moral implications. We need to be more reflexive regarding the consequences of our choices and the (dis)service they bring to our various constituencies, in academia and beyond. Thus, we join recent calls (Dover & Lawrence, 2010b; Munir, 2011) for research on institutional work and institutional theory to engage beyond the academic community, where it was initially developed, and connect to practical issues so that such research would increase its practical relevance. The study of institutional work, with its focus on actors and their day-to-day efforts, is especially fitting, and potentially fruitful, in this regard.

Concluding Remarks

We thank all the people – authors, reviewers and the editorial and administrative team at *Organization Studies* – involved in the collective effort behind this Special Issue. While the current volume holds only six papers, we hope that the projects and ideas presented in the many submissions we were unable to publish will keep on developing, and will be disseminated through other channels and enrich the conversation around institutional work and institutional theory more generally.

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