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Hokyu Hwang and Jeannette A. Colyvas

*Journal of Management Inquiry* 2011 20: 62 originally published online 15 November 2010

DOI: 10.1177/1056492610387705

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# Problematizing Actors and Institutions in Institutional Work

Journal of Management Inquiry  
20(1) 62–66  
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DOI: 10.1177/1056492610387705  
http://jmi.sagepub.com



Hokyu Hwang<sup>1</sup> and Jeannette A. Colyvas<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The growing popularity of institutional work suggests a broad agentic turn in institutional approaches to organizational studies. We briefly describe the contribution of the evolving institutional-work research agenda. Then, we identify two problematic areas in this line of research: the privileged causal status of “actors” and the under-theorized nature of institutions. We suggest that re-engagement with insights of the earlier, foundational work in neo-institutional theory would benefit this emerging research agenda.

## Keywords

institutional theory, actor(s), institution(s), institutional work

Institutional work represents a significant reorientation in institutional theory. The broad embrace of institutional work attests to recent interests in agentic accounts of institutional change. In this commentary, we briefly describe what we see as the contribution of this perspective. We then problematize the ways in which actors and institutions are conceptualized in institutional work. We suggest that elaborating the constructedness of actors and theorizing variation across institutional settings would help enrich the institutional-work research program.

In the midst of the growing popularity of institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Hwang & Powell, 2005), Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) developed the idea of institutional work, reviewing a vast amount of empirical literature inspired by institutional approaches to organizational studies. Institutional work soon became an umbrella concept and a rallying point around which scholars interested in agentic accounts of the emergence, maintenance, and disruption of institutions coalesced. The recent publication of *Institutional Work* nicely sums up contemporary efforts in this line of research (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). If the main intellectual agenda guiding the studies inspired by institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988) has been understanding how interested actors (directly) shape the emergence of new institutional arrangements, the current focus on institutional work extends the theoretical and empirical agenda beyond the creation of institutions to the rest of the life cycle of institutions, including persistence and deinstitutionalization. At the same time, by identifying and cataloguing diverse forms of strategic and purposive action, the recent literature motivated by institutional work brings “actors” to the center stage of institutional theory as the principal driver of institutional change as well as the stabilizing guardian of institutions.

In the introduction to the above-mentioned edited volume and in the article prepared for the present dialogue, Lawrence,

Suddaby, and Leca (henceforth LSL) further elaborate on the initial idea in a couple of ways. First, institutional work now includes emphasis on “effort” and goes beyond the main preoccupation with success or accomplishment in the institutional entrepreneurship literature. In doing so, LSL reject “the notion that the only agency of interest is that associated with ‘successful’ instances of institutional change” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011, p. 52). This helps avoid the success or selection bias implicit in the concept of institutional entrepreneurship. Second, particularly in the article prepared for the present dialogue, LSL explicitly attempt to “bring individuals back into institutional theory.” They do so with a particular theoretical intent: Individuals are actors endowed with the capacity “to transcend the totalizing cognitive influence of institutions” or “to resist and often challenge the conforming pressures of institutions” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011, p. 54). In this account, individual actors can reflexively distance themselves from totalizing institutional influences or pressures and can decide “how they might interpret the range of legitimate action available to them” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011, p. 54). In short, the theoretical status of individuals shifts from just “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” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011, p. 55).

<sup>1</sup>University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Northwestern University, Evanston, IL

## Corresponding Author:

Hokyu Hwang, School of Organisation and Management, Australian School of Business, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia  
Email: hokyu.hwang@unsw.edu.au

Although institutional work represents one of the most active and thriving frontiers in institutional theory, it also reflects a significant departure in emphasis or even theoretical reorientation in at least two fundamental, interrelated ways: (a) Actor identities and interests are largely taken for granted and not problematized and (b) institutions are undertheorized. Attending to foundational insights along each of these dimensions would greatly enrich the institutional work agenda.

## Problematizing Actors

Embedded agency informs and motivates much of the theoretical agenda of institutional work. Institutional construction and embeddedness of actors—one of the core insights of neo-institutionalism—suggest that certain entities acquire identities and interests and become actors under particular institutional contexts. This, in turn, implies that any explanation of institutional change would require diverse analytical strategies involving causal processes operating at multiple levels. In this section, we sketch out how problematizing actors could help open up the institutional work perspective.

### *Institutional Embeddedness of Actors*

One of the core original insights in neo-institutionalism is the constitutive influence of institutional rules on actors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Dobbin, 1994a; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Powell, 1991; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Jepperson, 2002a). Especially, in the strong, phenomenological version of neo-institutional theory advocated by Meyer and his colleagues, actors—whether individual or collective—are firmly embedded in institutional environments so that institutionalized rules, located in “‘cultural’ foundations for society, render the relation between actors and action more socially tautological than causal” (Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1994, p. 18; see also Meyer, 2010). In this sense, actor identities are “scripts” that define roles and link actors with legitimate repertoire of actions, interests, and purposes in particular social domains (Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2006, 2009). That is, actor identities emerge and develop in particular institutional and historical contexts.

Understanding and specifying conditions for the emergence of actors broadly as well as in particular social domains, indeed, have been one of the flourishing areas in this line of research. Meyer and Jepperson (2000) argued that the historical and cultural devolution of agency has constructed nation-states, organizations, and individuals as actors in modern society. Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) described how recent public sector reforms in several European countries as well as in Australia and New Zealand transform public entities into organizational actors with clear identities and boundaries. Kruecken and Meier (2006) analyzed how universities are being recast as organizational actors under globalization. Similarly, Hwang and Powell

(2009) demonstrated how heightened professionalism in the U.S. nonprofit sector reconstructs informal, often voluntary associations into rationalized actors. Colyvas (2007) also showed that scientists and academic researchers became entrepreneurs with the commercialization of basic research.

As LSL acknowledge, embedded agency is an important theoretical starting point of institutional work. Elaborating which entities become actors and how their interests develop and materialize in particular institutional settings would reveal the constructedness of “interested actors.” Furthermore, this would help ease the unfortunate dichotomy between heroic actors and “cultural or institutional dopes,” by specifying how certain entities become skillful actors capable of institutional work (Fligstein, 2001; Garfinkel, 1967; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Strang & Sine, 2002).

### *Toward Diverse Analytical Strategies*

The main analytical focus of empirical studies inspired by institutional work emphasizes how actors create, change, and disrupt institutions. This reverses the main causal structure of institutional explanation, which, according to Jepperson (1991), features by definition institutions as causes. Instead, institutions are featured as dependent variables. That is, actors, rather than being the creatures and derivatives of larger institutional forces, are creators, maintenance workers, and destroyers of institutions. This reversal of causality, which has been one of the main developments in institutional research in the past two decades (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008), poses significant challenges to the overall institutional agenda.

The most glaring is the privileged analytical status of micro-to-macro mechanisms of social and institutional change, particularly with the insertion of individuals as change agents—or simply the problem of analytical individualism. However, the causal primacy given to strategies or purposive action of lower level social units (individuals and organizations) as the primary mover of institutional change may have the unintended consequence of crowding out other types of analytical approaches. This analytical move obscures macro-to-macro explanations illuminating the pervasive and diffuse nature of institutional and structural influences (see Jepperson & Meyer, 2007, for a similar observation on Coleman’s [1986] famous boat). Institutions, no doubt, emerge, evolve, persist, change, and decline. Accounting for institutional evolution could benefit from a full arsenal of diverse analytical strategies, including micro-to-macro mechanisms. The success of institutional thinking does not necessarily have to result in the convergence of analytical strategies (Davis & Marquis, 2005), as most interesting empirical work would have to rely on multiple analytical strategies and imageries, particularly given the constructed nature of actors. In addition, as Jepperson (1991) cautioned, “Successful influence attempts by

a delimited ‘actor,’ carrying a specific ‘interest,’ represent only one category of possible social change explanations, and successful change arguments need not be limited to it” (p. 158).

### Undertheorized Institutions

If actor identities and interests are not fully problematized, institutions are undertheorized in institutional work. In their article, LSL define institutions as “those (more or less) enduring elements of social life that affect the behavior and beliefs of individuals and collective actors by providing templates for action, cognition, and emotion, nonconformity with which is associated with some kind of costs” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011, p. 53). Although institutions can be “more or less enduring,” it is not clear which types of institutions are more susceptible for different kinds of institutional work. Given that maintaining and disrupting institutions are a significant part of the agenda, this lacuna opens up an opportunity for further theorization.

### Variation Across Institutional Contexts

In his classic piece on institutional analysis, Jepperson (1991) contrasted “action” and “institution” as two different ways of social reproduction: “A social pattern is reproduced through action if persons repeatedly (re)mobilize and (re)intervene in historical process to secure its persistence” (p. 148). Institutions, in contrast, are reproduced in the absence of such actions and can be reproduced through people—individually or collectively—carrying out scripted and legitimated routines. The existence of institutional work aimed at maintenance suggests that not all institutions are self-reproducing in this way. The focus on the kinds of actors and their institutional work could be usefully complemented by an analysis of institutional characteristics that render certain types of institutional work more plausible or even necessary. For instance, how would social patterns that require maintenance or institutional work for reproduction differ from other institutions that are more self-reproducing? Similarly, institutions that are frequent targets of interruptions and mobilization can be fruitfully differentiated from more totalizing institutions that are less susceptible or immune to transgressions. Moreover, theorizing institutions could inform how different forms of institutional work—creation, maintenance, and disruption—are related to one another. For instance, emerging institutions or institutions that are more vulnerable would perhaps be more likely to elicit attempts at maintenance or defense. Theorizing institutions can then help identify the scope of institutional work and its generalizability across different institutional contexts.

Whereas institutions can be *more or less* susceptible to (different kinds of) institutional work, rules of institutional

environments determine what types of actors can exist as well as what they can do, by creating and endowing certain categories of actors as capable of performing institutional work (Meyer, 1994; Powell, 1991). One systematic way is to map how “collective sovereignty and collective functions” are rationalized and institutionalized in different polity types (Jepperson, 2002b; Meyer, 1992; Jepperson & Meyer, 1991, pp. 214-217). In liberal societies, individuals are apotheosized as the carrier and agent in the pursuit of the collective good. In statist societies, however, tasks and activities contributing to collective ends are more centrally controlled and performed by state actors.

Dobbin’s (1994b) comparative historical work on railroads is a classic example in this line of research. Delving into the variation in industrial development across polity types, Dobbin argued that industrial strategies resemble the character of political culture, which shapes how industrial problems are perceived and frames the kinds of solutions that can be envisioned. In France, the main question regarding the railway was “How could the nation plan a rational and coherent network of rail line?” (Dobbin, 1994b, p. 105). Concentration of political authority in the center in France allowed state technocrats the control of railway planning. However, in the United States and Britain, this was hardly the case. In Britain, private planning rather than state planning was the preferred solution. In short, institutional contexts can fundamentally shape relevant actors and their strategies in pursuit of seemingly identical industrial projects.

In a similar vein, scholars in the past two decades have examined how the expansion of due process and other types of employment practices in response to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the federal mandate for equal employment opportunity and affirmative action have fundamentally transformed the American workplace (Dobbin, 2009; Dobbin, Sutton, Scott, & Meyer, 1993; Edelman, 1990; Edelman, Uggen, & Erlanger, 1999). In this typically American story, the administratively weak federal state, while making clear its mandate for equal employment opportunity, left unspecified the kinds of mechanisms that would bring about desired outcomes (Sutton & Dobbin, 1996). This created much ambiguity among employers, who then struggled to find appropriate responses. The unlikely heroes emerging from this story were the personnel professionals who experimented with and advocated for various human resource management practices. Moreover, the fragmented and weak U.S. state made the law unpredictable because citizens have so many different venues for influencing the law. This propelled corporations to anticipate how the relevant law would change and to stay ahead of (perceived) legal changes. This gave much authority to personnel professionals to create elaborate internal legal codes in U.S. corporations (Dobbin, 2009). In contrast, Dobbin (2009) argues,

The French legal system doesn't permit expansive reinterpretation or significant regional variation. In consequence, in France firms did not play the game of trying to guess where antidiscrimination laws would move . . . and firms did not build their own elaborate internal legal codes. (p. 7)

Again, institutional contexts determine what sorts of actors would perform what kinds of institutional work.

## Conclusion

Institutional work opens up a set of important questions regarding the relationship between actors and institutions. The research program also signals a significant reorientation from a foundational neo-institutional agenda. Renewed engagement with insights regarding the institutional construction of actors and the importance of institutions in generating a variety of actors capable of performing institutional work would enrich the institutional work research program.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Mike Lounsbury, John Meyer, Nelson Phillips, Walter Powell, David Suarez, and Roy Suddaby for their comments on earlier drafts.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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### Bios

**Hokyu Hwang** is a lecturer in the School of Organisation and Management at the Australian School of Business, University of New South Wales. His research focuses on the consequences of organizational and global rationalization. His recent publications include "The Rationalization of Charity: The Influences of Professionalism in the Nonprofit Sector," with Walter W. Powell (*Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2009) and "Global Rationalization and 'Organization' as Scripted Actorhood," with Gili Drori and John W. Meyer (*Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, 2009). He received his PhD in sociology from Stanford University.

**Jeannette A. Colyvas** is an assistant professor in the School of Education and Social Policy, and (by courtesy) Sociology, and a faculty associate in Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University. She holds a PhD from Stanford University, and her research interests include the intersection of science and commerce; comparing public, private, and nonprofit forms of organizing; and institutional change. Her published work has appeared in diverse journals such as *Management Science*, *Research Policy*, *Minerva*, *Sociological Theory*, and *Research in Organizational Behavior*. Her current research examines university-industry interfaces, focusing on the translation of basic science into commercial application and the ramifications for careers, identities, and public science.