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Public Relations and Neo-Institutional Theory

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Abstract

This special section seeks to enrich research on the field by using neo-institutional theory to describe, explain and understand the activities, processes and dynamics of public relations. By this we open up for a wider understanding of public relations, its preconditions, its performances and its consequences for shaping the social. We argue that public relations could be analyzed as an institutionalized practice with certain set of governing mechanisms including taken-for-granted activities, rules, norms and ideas. Here neo-institutional theory is well situated as it is a tradition where communication is put at fore in the understanding of organizations, institutions and society. Another argument for this is recent developments where public relations and other forms of organizational communication have been examined as a major dimension of organizing in some of the more profound works among neo-institutional theorists.

The article starts with a discussion of earlier work in the tradition of neo-institutional theory where a lot of attention was paid to the governing mechanisms of institutions and how they control the behaviour of actors. A perspective leading to some fundamental challenges where the primary objections were raised against the over-determinism neo-institutional researchers ascribed institutions. Taking these objectives seriously has served as a source of extensive theoretical and empirical puzzles characterizing many of the contemporary efforts – most of them explicitly emphasizing the role of communication and symbolical/rethorical means as essential in all institutional processes. Among these we find three streams we find relevant and fruitful for analyses of public relations: *institutional logics*, *translation* and *institutional work*. These themes are further developed in text and discussed in relationship to what implications they have on public relations research. How an employment of the logic can help us gain a more profound understanding of public relations and communication as an institutional practice. How public relations function as a carrier and translator of institutions.

How public relations is used to challenge and re-shape the foundations on which social actors interact with each other.

Keywords: Public relations, neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, translation, institutional work

Introduction

Public relations is as a social activity. Organizations are embedded in social environments and governed by structural pre-conditions and therefore public relations as other practices are created, altered, performed through organization-environment relations. In other words, public relations is a part of social webs that enables and constrains the practice. At present, this is often overseen in the analyses of public relations. Here a management perspective prevails with focus on ideas of rationality, predictability and unbounded agency where goals, means and outcomes predominantly are seen as results of the organizational considerations, strategies and abilities. Although this instrumental perspective on public relations has produced a significant amount of theories and insights, the field is facing a danger of becoming theoretically underdeveloped (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Ogata Jones, 2003; Zoch, Collins, & Fussell Sisco, 2007) and relatively disconnected from important disciplines such as sociology and organization studies.

To address these issues this special section seeks to enrich research on the field by using neo-institutional theory to describe, explain and understand the activities, processes and dynamics of public relations. An attempt in line with recent effort to introduce sociological perspectives on public relations (Edwards, 2012; Ihlen, Ruler, & Fredriksson, 2009; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011). By the utilization of neo-institutional theory we open up for a wider understanding of public relations, its preconditions, its performances and its consequences for shaping the social. Rather than limiting it to “/.../the management of communication between an organization and its publics” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6) we argue that public relations could be analyzed as an institutionalized practice with certain set of governing mechanisms including taken-for-granted activities, rules, norms and ideas that constitute what can be described as a logic of public relations (cf. Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). But it is also a perspective enabling a more thoughtful analysis of public relations -

both in its institutional form (i.e. public relations as an institution in its own right) and as a tool applied by other institutions (i.e. state, politics or business) - as involved in construction and reproduction of social orders.

The usefulness of neo-institutional rests on the circumstances that is a tradition where communication is put at fore in the understanding of organizations, institutions and society and as such a tradition offering analytical tools, concepts and methods well-situated for the analyses of public relations. Another argument is recent developments where public relations and other forms of organizational communication have been examined as a major dimension of organizing in some of the more profound works among neo-institutional theorists (cf. special issues of *Organization Studies* 32(9), and *Management Communication Quarterly* 25(1)). Here, we would argue that a cross-fertilization is mutually beneficial as public relations scholars can contribute with deep and extensive knowledge and understanding of communication activities – i.e. activities that can be found at the center of all institutional processes (Suddaby, 2010). By letting the neo-institutional perspective influence the theoretical reasoning in the field of public relations there is a scope to make contribution to the more general theories of organizing.

This is not to say that there is a lack of studies using neo-institutional theory to analyze public relations. As it is one of the main approaches in organizational theory (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008) and used as framework in a number of other fields of social sciences such as political science, sociology and economics, there are examples of studies paying attention to public relations as an phenomenon in other fields (cf. Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Hooghiemstra, 2000; Pallas, 2007; Suchman, 1995). There are also examples of studies in the in the field of public relations where neo-institutional theory has been used as an analytical framework - even though most of them are conceptual (cf. Fredriksson & Pallas, 2011; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011; Sandhu, 2009; Wæraas, 2007;

Wehmeier, 2006) or limited to a single concept and often without explicit connection to the theoretical roots of the neo-institutional research (cf. Bartlett, Tywoniak, & Hatcher, 2007; Christensen & Langer, 2009; Molleda & Moreno, 2008 and others).

In this special section we would like to further develop the linkages between the field of public relations and the neo-institutional research in order to introduce new insights as well as making the PR-field more theoretically relevant to other disciplines. In the rest of this introductory text we shortly pinpoint the foundations and major arguments on which the neo-institutional approaches rest and we outline three areas where we found the “marriage” between Public Relations and neo-institutional analysis as most interesting and promising. These areas relate to three significant contributions within the neo-institutional theory namely the discussion on institutional logic ((Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), translation of institutional ideas(Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005) and institutional work (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009b).

Foundation of Organizational Neo-institutionalism

The neo-institutional turn spins off from a key question that occupied minds of researchers studying formal organizations; why do organizations with different goals and origins - such as large multinational companies, local research-based companies, municipalities, government agencies, schools, art museums, universities, hospitals and political parties - look so alike? This question followed empirical observations suggesting that organizations set up similar administrative positions, build similar management and reporting systems and hire management consultants, and they all tend to develop increasingly complex organizational structures.

What the scholars discovered was that formal structures were not as influential on factual organizational behavior as they first thought. Moreover, different parts of the formal structures were only loosely connected to each other and to the organizations' activities. The

studied organizations tended to ignore formal rules and major part of their decisions “remained on paper”. Connected to the fact that evaluation and control systems of the organizations often were undermined or diffused the obvious question started to emerge - why and how do formal structures emerge in the first place?

The answers offered by the neo-institutional theorist stated that formal structures first and foremost reflect public understanding and interpretation of social reality. Structural elements are manifestations of institutional rules, norms and ideas that function as rationalized myths – meaning that they are implemented for legitimacy reason rather than mainly due to their impact on efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Thereby organizational quest for legitimacy becomes one of the corner arguments in the neo-institutional theory (Suchman, 1995; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983).

The organizational neo-institutionalists then suggested that decision-making in organizations is guided by two conflicting logics – the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness. The logic of consequences describes a search for the most rational and technically efficient behavior. The logic of appropriateness, on the other hand, refers to decision-making as reflecting social and moral standards as they are expressed by the surrounding environment (March & Olsen, 1984; Sevón, 1996). From this comes the central postulate of neo-institutionally theory that appropriate and legitimate decisions in organizations are institutionally defined rather than purely based on rational and technical arguments.

What makes organizations strive for legitimacy and institutional support? An important contribution to the legitimacy argument made by the neo-institutional theorists is a suggestion that the mechanisms that force organizations to differentiate them-selves from others (for example for competitive reasons) are not the major source of support granting organizations long-term survival. Rather, such a long-term support comes from actors like

governments, NGO's, media and professions – that is actors that emphasize adaptation to 'rationalized myths' expressed in prevailing and dominant rules, norms and values (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). It is these actors that create and proliferate the myths by way of their involvements in shaping the regulative (cf. legal rules), normative (cf. norms and practices) and cognitive (cf. ideas and models) aspects of the social reality (Scott, 2001).

In the neo-institutional theory these myths are connected to a process of *isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), i.e. a constraining and enabling process (e.g. influencing the organizations' choice and implementation of strategy) that lead organizations and/or their parts to become similar to other organizations working within the same institutional environment. As this process is (mainly) unconscious, unintended and self-governing it explains why strategies that are rational for individual organizations can at the same time be irrational if compared with other segments of populations that have embraced the same strategy. In other words, institutional pressures make strategic choices problematic as these choices reflect and are based on widely spread and dominant assumptions across the field in which organizations operate. The isomorphic forces are also problematic as they create conflicts and contradictions that organizations find difficult to cope with. Technical activities and requirements are often not comparable with the desire to follow institutional rules and norms. In addition, institutional rules and norms rest in a number of different principles and they commonly "interfere" with each other (cf. Decin 1997).

Together these contradictions and conflicts make effective coordination and control difficult. Organizations deal with such challenge by variety of "confidence rituals" where they (re)present them-selves as strategic, self-confident, content and honest - reinforcing the assumption that everything is as it seems. Put differently, there is a strong interest in organizations to "promise" confirmation to the variety of institutional pressures and to make formal decisions supporting this confirmation - however, often without a corresponding

action. The organizations also try to avoid or minimize auditing and other forms of evaluations since such activities threaten to reveal the conflicts and inconsistencies that are dealt with by way of creating informal organizational structures (Brunsson, 2002; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The neo-institutional research has thereby challenged the dominant assumption about organizations - that is to say, an idea that organizations are actors and as actors they seek to behave consistently in terms of talk, decisions and activities they undertake (e.g. walking the talk).

Recent developments in neo-institutional theory

Over the years that followed the seminal works of Meyer and Rowan and DiMaggio and Powell the neo-institutional research faced some fundamental challenges. Primary objections were raised against the over-determinism that the neo-institutional researchers ascribed institutions. By treating social actors as *cultural dopes* parts of the neo-institutional theory struggled with rejecting the notion of agency (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Suddaby, 2010). Thereby the neo-institutionalists found it problematic to explain not only how institutions change over time but also lacked explanations for the variations they observed while studying how institutions get spread and implemented in organizations. Taking these objectives seriously has served the neo-institutional theorists as a source of extensive theoretical and empirical puzzles characterizing many of the contemporary efforts – most of them explicitly emphasizing the role of communication and symbolical/retorical means as essential in all institutional processes. Among these we find three streams of neo-institutional research we find relevant and fruitful for analyses of public relations. The three streams are:

- Institutional logics – focusing on the character and dynamics of field level practices as constituted through language and vocabularies of practice - theories, frames and narratives (cf. Loewenstein & Ocasio, 2005; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012)

- Translation – introduction and implementation of managerial ideas and models into organizations and their behavior through symbolical and narrative representations (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005; Sevón & Czarniawska, 1996)
- Institutional work – actions taken by individuals and organizations in creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions. To a large extent activities resting on rhetorical and discursive strategies (Brown, Ainsworth, & Grant, 2012; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011).

In the following we will describe these three streams of theoretical developments followed by an discussion on how they can be applied for analyses of public relations.

Organizational practice as guided by institutional logic

One of the central concepts in neo-institutional theory is the notion of organizational field. Based on empirical observations the concept reflects the mutual awareness that arise within a group of organizations that are involved in same or similar activities, that share common interests, or that are dependent on/compete for same resources. Key suppliers, resource and product consumers, investors, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products are examples of organizations that are generally included in such a context (cf. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The mutual awareness among the organizations also leads to an increased number of interactions and to an emergence of clearly defined inter-organizational structures and activities. The structures influence the interaction and cooperation between the organizations creating thereby (new) dominant positions, relations and networks (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). In the language of neo-institutional theorists the interactions and the subsequent increase in communication between the organizations constitute at the aggregated level a recognized institutional order (a field).

This field is organized around rational and politically defensible “a set of material practices and symbolic constructions – which constitutes its organizing principles and which

is available to organizations and individuals to elaborate” (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248). Such a set of practices and symbolic constructions – or a logic – guide not only the ends to which the actors’ behavior should be directed, but they also define means by which these ends are achieved. They provide organization and their members with vocabularies of motives and with a sense of self (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 251).

Following and developing such a view on institutional logics Thornton and Ocasio argue that the principles on which logics rest instruct actors “how to interpret organizational reality, what constitutes appropriate behavior, and how to succeed” (1999, p. 804). They also develop their definition of institutional logics with respect to values, assumptions and material aspects: “we define institutional logics as the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (1999, p. 804).

Traditionally the institutional theory has regarded logics as exclusive, that is to say attention has been paid to occurrence of a dominant logic and its signifying material and symbolical features as being challenged by a competing logic. Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, and Lounsbury (2011) argue in contrast to such a statement that organizations exist in a complex institutional context where a number of (sometimes) competing logics co-exists (see also Goodrick & Reay, 2011). Thus, interactions and practices within and between organizations can – and often are - be influenced by different logics. For example representatives of a particular profession (e.g. surgeons) may be guided by different set of values, symbols and practices when they interact with actors outside their own profession such as nurses, medical technicians or insurance companies. Here, we see the diversity of institutional logics enabling different forms of interaction and organizational practices in

organizations and institutional fields leading to institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Thornton et al. (2012) suggest in their latest contribution that such a complexity is better to be understood and explained if we make a distinction between societal logics and field-level logics. The first one represent different 'interinstitutional' systems derived from broad societal institutions such market, corporation, profession, family, religion and state (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Field-level logics (stakeholder logic, publishing or editorial logic) are embedded in societal-level logics but they reflect meso-level processes in which the societal logics are rejected, modified or combined to hybrid forms. One of the core arguments of their writings is that institutional logics are embodied in material activities as much as they are expressed and constituted in symbolical representations such as theories, frames and narratives (Loewenstein & Ocasio, 2005; Thornton et al., 2012).

- Theories – are “abstract and systematic forms of symbolic representations with internal coherence” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 152) provides general guidelines for how higher-level orders should be organized and operated. Theories are thereby characterized by relatively low instrumentality in that they influence or reflect specific organizational practices or behavior. Rather they serve as a source of political (i.e. interest-driven) support creating and changing field-level preconditions for - let say - introduction of a new practice within corporate communication.
- Frames - invoke institutional logics more concretely but without being necessary inclusive in their legacy of these logics. Thus, frames explicitly mobilize schematic categories through which a wide variety of actors form their identity and make sense of their believes and behavior vis-à-vis the surrounding world. As the most concrete symbolic construction and expression of institutional logic we find

narratives. These can be described as stories that organize the fragmented parts of an actor's social life into a coherent account. These operate at the level of organizational rather than institutional practices and they provide actors with relatively well-defined meaning and references that relate to explicit challenges or problems.

- Narratives - function as a bridging tool between theory and practice. They combine focus on material practices with their connection (through the processes of sense-giving and sense-making) to the higher-level symbolic constructions. Thereby they have a central role in construction and modification of institutional logics (cf. Nigam & Ocasio, 2010).

Moreover, the constitutive process through which institutional logics emerge is based on linking practices and symbolic representations - i.e. theories, frames and narratives (Loewenstein & Ocasio, 2005; Thornton et al., 2012). Such a linkage is funneled through communication, language and vocabularies that rather than being pure rhetorical devices operate as providing (cognitive/schematic) categories that typify and guide the actors in organizing and theorizing their activities and practices (cf. Weick, 1995).

In sum, the notion of institutional logic directs our attention towards the importance of different types of symbolical representations in order to understand how the material practices – both at the level of organization and fields – are constructed and spread. The emphasis on institutional processes as dependent upon and embedded in symbolical representations and communication is thereby also central for connecting behavior organization both as individual actors and as collective to emergence and modification of social orders.

Translation of managerial ideas

The translation theories, originally developed in the sociology of science (Callon, 1986; Serres, 1982) and the actor network approaches (Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005; Latour, 1986,

1996), refer to translation as the process through which different institutions in their more operationalized forms such as field-level practices, models and ideas (i.e. accounting, CSR, integrated communication or TQM) are modified as they travel (i.e. become legitimate, popular and get widely spread) across different organizational and institutional contexts (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). Two the classical examples are here spread of management models to other non-business sectors via the popular media (Mazza, 1998), or introduction of American corporate model to the post-war Western Europe which was facilitated or hindered by a number of influential actors that translated the model into the specific context of each country (Djelic, 1998). The translation literature includes concepts like *recombination*, *editing*, *accretion* and *hybridization*, whereby it seeks to emphasize the performative role of those who produce, diffuse and adopt such institutional ideas and models (Hedmo, Sahlin-Andersson, & Wedlin, 2005b).

Attention to and selection among institutional ideas and models, i.e. those presented as leading to favourable outcomes, is conditioned by the perceived resemblance with, or a desire to resemble, those that legitimate and create conditions for successful existence (Boyer, Charron, Jurgens, & Tolliday, 1998; Hedmo, Sahlin-Andersson, & Wedlin, 2005a; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). Translation is thus not simply motivated by copying promising recipes; it also includes ambition to transform – that is to say to choose and adjust the imitated idea or model to specific contexts, needs, predispositions and expectations. By using concept of analogical thinking Sevón emphasizes the organizations' quest for uniqueness while being bounded by appropriate forms of behaviour mediated through the existing models and ideas (Sevón, 1996). Analogy refers here to the process of local construction of problems – say within an organization - and a subsequent comparison with solutions undertaken by other organizations facing similar problems. The identified discrepancies between models

(institutions) and own conduct then provide energy to act to reduce these differences (Boxenbaum, 2006).

But there seems to be also other motives to translate. Decreasing legitimacy for certain organizational form (cf. Forssell & Jansson, 1996), identity crises (cf. Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000) or external pressures like professionalization of labour forces (cf. Powell, White, Koput, & Owen-Smith, 2005) might also awake organizational effort to imitate and transform prevailing institutional models, ideas and practices. Absence or inadequate perception of own identity, identification of internal problem or weak external support, motivates organization to screen relevant environments for appropriate and successful practices and models. However, these processes are not to be seen as solely motivated by internal identification of the problem at hand. Rather, the problem definition is influenced by external actors like business consultancies, management schools, media etc. (Hedmo et al., 2005a; Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). Translation is thereby a concept reflecting search for solutions to organizational (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) as well as field (cf. Boxenbaum, 2005; Wedlin, 2006) problems and those problems are defined and solved in on-going interactions between different actors sharing common or overlapping institutional environments (cf. Morrill, 2005; Scott, 2003).

One of the central points in the translation perspective is the focus on the active role of actors who are engaged in creation, diffusion and implementation of global ideas and models into the local (e.g. organizational) contexts. These actors can be understood as an institutional source of organizational change. That is to say, they motivate organizations to pay attention to certain external ideas and models, as well as they are actively involved in helping organizations in modifying and equipping these models with new attributes that are tailored to the local settings (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). In the translation theories these actors and their involvement in the introduction and modification of ideas is understood as rule-based

symbolic and narrative process. By following the rules for translation the media, consultants, academics and other actors provide organizations with conditions – in terms of constructing powerful symbolic representations and narratives - for certainty in dealing with the global models and ideas. These actors enable rule-based imitation of successful and legitimate solutions, as well as they are helpful in adaptation of these ideas into the local context (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996).

Sahlin-Andersson (1996) introduced the idea of rules that are constraining the process of translating models and ideas into and within specific organizational contexts. In order to become a legitimate the idea or model needs to be presented in a such way that it is perceived as solving specific problems, at the same time as such a model is expected bear witness of general qualities that have already been proven as legitimate and successful in other significant organizations. Thus, these rules balance the translating and packaging of the idea so its content is perceived as tailor-made to fit specific challenges in specific organisations, and the necessity to imitate elements that makes the idea recognizable and desirable also from a perspective of its resemblance with other organizations' successful implementation.

Translation is – by way of using these rules - characterized by a relatively high degree of predictability and regularity rather than by continuous search for exclusivity and originality. There are three sets of rules suggested in relation to translation, namely rules concerning *context, formulation and logic*. An idea arrives from a different context and as such it is hardly directly applicable to the receiving organization. Therefore, during the translation process the time- and space characteristics of an idea tend to be omitted or downplayed. The managerial idea is striped from the specific conditions from which it originated or from the settings where it was successfully used earlier. Also institutional context and scale - such as prevailing regulations or professional norms commanding certain

professional conduct (cf. Scott, 2003) - is downplayed or disregarded (cf. Forssell & Jansson, 1996).

The idea is also presented differently depending on the specific characteristics of the new context. Such a presentation or *formulation* is therefore more connected to symbolical materialization of an idea, i.e. verbal or written documentation, illustrations, labelling etc., than to its factual employment. Organizations translate an idea by formulating its form and content so it appears clear and explicit with respect to the local prerequisites and interests. An successful formulation of an idea or model generalizes those aspects of the idea that contradict, or discredit, the new settings in which the idea or model is to be introduced. Reformulation of an idea may thereby change not only its form, but also its focus, content and meaning. Adaptation of the ideas is taking place under condition of rational organizational reasoning or *logic*, i.e. the new idea is presented and used in accordance to logical arguments valid in the new organizational and institutional settings. Translation can be therefore described as performative practice guided by identification of an appropriate reasoning (cf. Sevón, 1996). Following appropriate logic enhances thereby interpretation and translation of an idea in relation to new context/situation given the appropriate and legitimate set of norms and prevailing institutions.

From the above we can conclude that when institutional pressures (in terms of a new field-level practice or management model) are about to be introduced in specific organizations they are dependent on variety of communicative activities/strategies and symbolical representations that transform these practices and models into concrete objects (i.e. strategy plans or internal assessments guidelines) invoking meanings and physical resources in the specific context. The models, practices and ideas need to be (by following certain “editing” rules) codified, transcript or otherwise symbolically and dramaturgically shaped, so they can

be perceived as designed with a specific organization in mind and motive the organization to change their behaviour.

Institutional work

The interplay between institutions, actors and agency are at fore in neo-institutional theory and has been a central issue in theoretical as well as empirical work (see Battilana & D'ahunno, 2009 for an overview). As mentioned above much attention has been paid to the governing mechanisms of institutions and how they affect the behavior of actors. As a reaction more recent developments have put forward the idea of institutional entrepreneurship a conceptualization where actors are given a central position in effecting, transforming and maintaining institutions and fields (DiMaggio, 1988; Hoffman, 1999; Hwang & Powell, 2005). Here agency is seen as essential as “new institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources (institutional entrepreneurs) see in them opportunities to realize interest that they value highly” (DiMaggio, 1988, p. 14). However in their ambition to restore agency the usage of the concept tend to magnify the strategic realms and the liberties of actions of actors leading to a conceited idea of actors as heroes on steroids (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2011, 2009b).

To balance the ideas of cultural dopes and heroes on steroids and offer realistic views on the interplay between institutions, actors and agency Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) coined the concept institutional work defined as “The purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions.” (p. 215). Hereby the notion of institutional work emphasizes the formation and transformation of rules, norms, ideas and practices, rather than achieving specific and general goals and priorities. These kinds of actions build on collaborative arrangements and structures; deep and extensive interactions; and rich, relevant and continuous flow of information as necessary activities in supporting new forms of organizational behavior to become legitimate and spread - that is to

say institutionalized. By this the concept acknowledges the intentional and knowledgeable capacity of organisations to deal with their institutional environments without losing track of the institutional conditions they are embedded in. Organizations are dependent on resources available in specific institutional contexts. Thus, although the actors' work is intended to shape the processes, by which a specific institution is created and implemented, these actors aren't autonomous or independent of the very context that constrains their activities (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009a; Lawrence et al., 2011).

But institutional work can't be limited to calculated activities with outspoken and clearly defined intentions and goals. To a large extent organizations are involved in routinised activities, activities guided by emotions and/or activities governed by different interests and by that multifold. Therefore the conceptualization of institutional work is also an attempt to open up for the analysis of failures and/or unintended consequences. Investigations of institutional entrepreneurship and other forms of agency with ambitions to create, change or disrupt institutions tend to focus on successful attempts were actors accomplish to establish new rules, norms or ideas for practices and innovations. However as it is pointed out by Lawrence et al. (2009a, 2011) to often the intentions of actors aren't accomplished or the activities carried through cause unintended consequences.

Here there are two distinctions one has to keep in mind. First the one between activities and results – organizations perform a number of different activities to create, maintain and disrupt institutions but the intentions are not always accomplished. Therefore it is important to uphold the distinction between, creating/creation, maintaining/maintenance and disrupting/disruption of institutions (Lawrence et al., 2009a). Secondly the one between intended and unintended consequences – when organizations undertake institutional work they often do this with certain effects in mind, they want to achieve particular goals. However institutions are complex systems and rests on an intricate set of interactivities and therefore it

is difficult to foresee what certain activities will lead to. This is amplified by the fact that actions taken by one organization or a group of organizations often will be contested by other organizations increasing the complexity. Here it is also important to bear in mind that organizations' deliberate activities are embedded in a wide variety of routines and unconscious structures i.e. the taken for granted dimensions of institutions.

Institutional work takes a number of different forms but it is possible to point out three different aims:

- Creating institutions – Institutions do not arise by coincidences they are the results of activities undertaken by actors with certain interests and with abilities to establish rules, norms and beliefs supporting their ambitions. In general it is a process shifting between co-operations and conflicts between actors with differing interests often with bilateral effects (Zietsma & McKnight, 2009).
- Maintaining institutions – often institutions are seen as self-reproducing as they are taken for granted but also because they are protected by persistent mechanisms as laws, regulations and norm systems. However in retrospect it is certified that lasting institutions (i.e. the church etc.) are upheld by extensive abilities to reproduce these belief systems and norms. Activities where narratives are of great importance (Hirsch & Bermiss, 2009; Zilber, 2009).
- Disrupting institutions – the disruption of one institution is to a large extent intervened with the creation of another institution(s). However this set of activities can't be limited to replacements. There are numerous examples where existing institutions aren't replaced by new institutions but substituted by a transformation of others already existing institution(s) (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

In practice institutional work is performed by the use of different forms of activities, ranging from attempts to create, uphold and/or remove legislation to much more sublime doings where the striving for disassociations of moral foundations for practices, technologies,

rules and/or normative standards are just two examples. Table 1 covers 18 different forms of work identified by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) in their overview of empirical studies supporting the theory of institutional work.

Table 1 about here

The forms of work described above include a wide variety of means, activities and practices expressing the diversity of institutional work. However a general feature is the importance of communication - institutional work is to a large extent performed by the use of words, imagery and other symbolic means (Hirsch & Bermiss, 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby, 2010; Zietsma & McKnight, 2009). To be able to re-make the connections between practices and their moral and cultural foundations, associate new practices with established sets of practices, technologies, rules and norms or present examples that shows the normative foundations of an institution, communication is essential. It is by talking, writing, naming, giving titles actors are able to give materialistic conditions social meaning and thereby institutional status (Lawrence et al., 2011).

Implications for public relations research

In the begging of this paper we addressed the need to enhance the linkages between research on public relations and neo-institutional theory. By a closer examination of recent developments in the latter we have identified what we understand as three major and most promising strands in line with this ambition.

Starting with the notion institutional logic there are several possible directions in which public relations research can be further developed. The employment of the concept can help us gain a more profound understanding of public relations and communication as an institutional practice - i.e. practice that is widely spread and that is based on a set of governing

mechanisms including taken-for-granted activities, rules, norms and ideas that can together be described as a public relations logic. This logic has its own qualities defining public relations as an autonomous institutional activity that seems to be: a) distinctively distinguishable from, and b) constitutive for other parts of the social (cf. Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; L'Etang, 2004). Moreover, we can assume that the field of public relations is rather heterogeneous and hybridized in its nature (as it is populated by politicians, journalists, management consultants, academics and other professions with rather conflicting values and interests) and here the theory of institutional logic can help us understand and analyze how this complexity come to fore and how it is affecting the field's structuration and its *modus operandi*. (cf. Johansen 2001). The institutional logic perspective can offer important input in our discussion about the characteristics, status and role of public relations in relation to other institutional practices/fields.

As for the concepts of translation and institutional work we believe that two major interrelated sets of questions would deserve more systematic efforts. Both of these efforts build on an understanding of communication as determining social institutions (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby, 2011). In such view, the social order and its constitutive elements – norms, rules, values and practices – are both constructed and imposed on social actors (i.e. organizations as well as their members) through symbolical and communicative means and activities. Public relations is then to be understood as a carrier and translator of these institutional elements as well as their maintainer and creator.

In relation to the role of public relations as a carrier and translator of institutions there is a need to explain how discursive and communicative activities are involved in organizational change. That is to say, how are for example managerial ideas and models introduced and translated to and within organizations if we understand these ideas as

embedded in discursive structures and supported by variety of communication strategies (cf. von Platen, 2011)?

Analogically, the conceptualization of institutional work within the public relations research can be fruitful in analyzing of the mechanisms that allow the field to successfully challenge and re-shape the foundations on which social actors interact with each other. A more concrete challenge relates to an increased understanding of how public relations is involved in institutional change by way of proliferation and construction of symbolical and discursive representations such as theories, frames and narratives. Thereby the field can direct its theoretical and empirical analysis towards public relations as involved in normative construction of the social.

Headline

Text where the other articles are presented and commented in line with the framework presented above

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