Theor Soc (2008) 37:421–426
DOI 10.1007/s11186-008-9071-3

Theorizing the institution: foundations, duality, and data

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Published online: 10 July 2008

Abstract Although a central construct for sociologists, the concept of institution continues to elude clear and full specification. One reason for this lack of clarity is that about 50 years ago empirical researchers in the field of sociology turned their gaze downward, away from macro-sociological constructs in order to focus their attention on middle-range empirical projects. It took almost 20 years for the concept of the institution to work its back onto the empirical research agenda of mainstream sociologists. The new institutional project in organizational sociology led the way. Since then, scholars in this tradition have achieved a great deal but there is still much more to accomplish. Here, future directions for research are considered by reviewing how the concept of the institution has come to be treated by mainstream philosophers, sociologists of science and technology studies, and social network theorists.

Introduction

An institution is a hard thing to pin down. There is a fairly common list of exemplars that often get pointed to. Searle (this issue) lists "money, property, government, and marriage" as classic examples. There is also something of a collective consensus that institutions represent the more enduring features of social life, that they tend to be reproduced and that they serve to structure and organize social action, and hence are the most important constituent components of society. But beyond this, there is less consistency in how we speak of institutions or how we define them. When you

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consider that the concept of *institution* is one of sociology's key constructs, this lack of clarity is something of a surprise.

We think this state of affairs is at least partly due to the fact that the concept of institution went missing for a long while from the public discourse and research practice of sociologists. Frustrations with Talcott Parsons, as well as excitement over new methodological breakthroughs, led key figures in many social science disciplines—both qualitative and quantitative—to turn their backs on grand theory, orienting themselves instead toward various types of middle range work on individuals, groups, and organizations, much of it focused on imagining possibilities for greater empirical traction and more solid phenomenological grounding of insights gained from new sociological research (Merton 1968; Cicourel 1964; Blau and Duncan 1967; but also Garfinkel 1967). This meant that the theorists who spoke about society and its logic became increasingly distanced from most empirical researchers who were busily trying to come up with plausible theoretical frameworks for working with data. Major (middle-range) breakthroughs began occurring all across the social sciences. In sociology, such sub-fields as demography, stratification research, social networks, organizational science, social psychology, and many others saw significant advances in the development of empirical models (both qualitative and quantitative) of data that had good face validity and actually explained things. But with very few exceptions, empirical scholars stayed focused on processes and structures within a given institutional level (and below). The relationship between different institutions and the relation between institutional fields and what Bourdieu (1991) calls the field of power were generally not targeted for empirical study. The concept of institution became an increasingly invisible medium, like water for fish. Institutions were everywhere and nowhere in the social sciences.

The properties of the institution have increasingly taken on analytic importance thanks to a more recent generation of scholars. The new institutionalists in organizational sociology explicitly began to re-theorize institutions and their effects. The genesis of this research tradition is often traced back to a few classic papers published by John Meyer and his colleagues some 30 years ago (e.g., Meyer and Rowan 1977). From there the endeavor fairly quickly blossomed into an expansive and nuanced research paradigm that linked sophisticated empirical work to a shared collective understanding about how to make sense of organizational fields (for examples, see Greenwood et al. 2008, and Scott, this issue). Aside from going on to become the dominant paradigm for organizational sociology, this new institutionalist project has also achieved success precisely because it has come to provide a template for other sub-disciplines of sociology and other areas of social science to tackle questions that move above the middle range without positing a determinate social structural totality.[1]

A post middle-range research orientation can entail many things. On the one hand, it may involve explicitly taking the measure of qualities that are defined and

[1] DiMaggio and Powell 1991 provide a preliminary assessment of these kinds of resonances. For a more contemporary review see the chapters collected in Greenwood et al. 2008. Friedland and Mohr (2004) trace the rise of cultural sociology during this same time period and link theories of institutions to concepts of culture.

theorized as delimited features of social institutions. But it may also show up as a result of efforts to systematically connect institutional fields together, looking at articulations between and among different institutions or between the institutional and the meta-institutional levels of social organization (Friedland and Alford 1991). It might also mean simply developing tighter articulations to the dominant scholarship in social theory. For a long time, empirical research and social theory were loosely coupled at best. More recently scholars have been making efforts to develop the empirical groundings for grand theoretical constructs. In some cases, (e.g., James Coleman 1990, or Harrison White 1992) this has meant reinventing grand theory from the perspective of a particular methodological orientation. But in the new institutional tradition the work has progressed along a more normal science sort of pathway. A smattering of new visionary statements, followed by a surge of empirical work, new critiques, new trajectories, new data projects, new findings, new visionary statements—mix, repeat! This has been the tradition in the new institutional project and the work has become extremely sophisticated, professionally successful, and, what is even better, genuinely insightful.

W. Richard Scott who, probably more than anyone else almost since its beginning, has anchored the social and theoretical center of this invisible college, uses his contribution to this special issue to reflect back over the last 30 years of institutionalists' work and to tell how the "institution" as an object of research was re-constituted again and again, as new and different theoretical and methodological challenges were encountered, side-stepped, or surmounted.[2] As Scott explains, one of the best things about this body of work is that it has most of the features of a healthy normal science. Data are collected in smart and honest ways, insights from empirical work are applied to explain how things work, theories are connected to research findings, and, increasingly, identifiable qualities of social institutions themselves are becoming the object of explicit investigation. Thus he describes the changing conceptualization of institutions, the move to recoup an effective theory of agency, the turn toward identifying more substantive institutional effects, and the development of more effective means of measuring institutional processes. He describes the emergence of the institutional field as a key research construct, the rise of studies that illuminate how institutions constitute rationalities—as opposed to the other way round—and of how change in institutional fields (not only increasing isomorphism and stability) are being theorized, measured, and explained.

But, Scott's article tells us more about where the institutionalists have been over these last 30 years and less about where they are headed. This then leads us to ask the question: What then is the future of institutional analysis? For, after all, if the new institutional project is just now approaching adulthood, we naturally want to know what kind of career it will come to pursue and we must also wonder what it will accomplish before it reaches retirement or dies.

For help in thinking about these questions, we turn next to three articles that take us out and away from the core of the new institutional project pointing us in three

[2] The question of institutions was the topic of the 2003 Cultural Turn Conference (http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/ct) organized by Friedland and Mohr at UC Santa Barbara. All of the authors in this special issue were keynote speakers at that conference.

rather different directions. First, outside of the social sciences all together, we look at the concept of institution as it has been formulated by the modern analytic philosopher John Searle, the premier philosopher working in the field today. Searle began writing in a serious way about "institutions" more than a decade ago (1995) and he has continued in a variety of essays up to and including his current contribution to hone and to refine his approach. There are (at least) two important intellectual contributions for social scientists in Searle's work on institutions. The first is his demonstration that you can derive the concept of institution analytically, from first principles, as it were. For Searle, the question of social institutions can be cast as a problem in the philosophy of language. It can be specified philosophically without the gathering of empirical data (and in that sense it is genuinely analytic rather than synthetic). By some reckonings this makes philosophy more important than sociology in the great chain of analytic being.

But of more interest is Searle's assertion that institutions are the foundational base of his conceptual project. Here the challenge is to articulate the philosophical relation between the social sciences and the natural sciences As the title of his essay indicates, his goal is to establish a "Social Ontology," which is to say the constitution of the human that is distinct from yet consistent with scientific knowledge derived from an endeavor such as physics. The institution is ontologically subjective, yet epistemologically objective. An institution in Searle's formulation results from a particular kind of speech activity that produces social commitments in the material world, "these include rights, responsibilities, authorizations, obligations, permissions, and entitlements among others. Just to have a general term I call all of these "deontologies" from the Greek word for duty. Recognized deontologies are what make human society possible" (Searle, this issue).

Although it is gratifying to have Searle acknowledge the ontological specificity of institutional facts that depend on representations that become socially real, it is less than comforting for a sociologist to realize that Searle's approach privileges language over other bodily or technical experiences or practices. And further that Searle's philosophical approach brackets instituting, that is, the conditions under which status functions are successfully attributed, an empirically tractable problem. Searle's work provides sociologists a conceptual template, but his abstract linguistic foundationalism likely limits its utility as a program for the comparative study of institutions.

The next article,"Technology and Institutions: Living in a Material World," by Trevor Pinch, is an example of how other social scientific sub-disciplines are looking to the new institutionalists for guidance in theorizing institutional processes. Pinch, who is a central figure in the sociology of science and especially in an invisible college known as SCOT (the social construction of technology), begins his article with a provocative question that once again reminds us just how elusive the notion of institution remains. He asks whether technologies are institutions. If they are, then are they different in some particular way or are all institutions akin to technologies? Behind these concerns is the deeper question of how materiality matters. As someone who studies technology, Pinch begins with the material world. What matters for Pinch—what is to be analyzed, understood, and explained—are things in the world, objects that exist in human-given form, material constructions we call technologies.

In his article, Pinch applies his approach to describe the case of the MOOG electronic music synthesizer built and marketed by Bob Moog, during the 1960s and 1970s. Pinch highlights the ways in which technology, even though it is just inert material, is nonetheless alive with human intention, experience, and meaning. Pinch argues that it is a mistake to imagine that either material objects or cultural forms are in any sense logically prior or, indeed, truly separable from one another. As he demonstrates with the history of the Moog, human experience is constituted through the active building, engaging, and changing of the material environment. But there is a duality in this since, at the same time, no fashioning of material substance can occur that is not always already cultural.

The last article takes up again this question of duality and projects it onto something like an overarching design for empirical research. "How to Model an Institution" by Mohr and White is similar to the article by Pinch in the sense that it reflects a reaching across the disciplinary matrix, in this case from the field of social networks, a sub-discipline of sociology. The second author, Harrison White, once again represents a foundational member of the invisible college. Identified by Mullins (1973) as the leading figure in the social networks project about the same time that the new institutionalism was just getting off the ground, White is the author of a number of classic articles and books in the field and he also, for a long while, helped anchor the training function of this invisible college.

About the same time that Searle was beginning to think seriously about institutions, White began making a cultural turn. In *Identity and Control* (1991) White started to rethink key analytic features of sociology, recasting them in terms of a relational approach to human agency and institutions. In this respect, White's work represents a rejection of the more positivist leanings that have traditionally characterized some elements of the social networks project. In this later work White develops a vocabulary that explains how both cultural and social dimensions of institutions, both meanings and practices, stories and networks, rhetorics and institutions are mutually constitutive and dually ordered in a fashion that is quite similar to the way Pinch describes the duality of institutions and technology. In the article, Mohr and White define institutions as "linkage mechanisms that bridge across three kinds of social divides—they link micro systems of social interaction to meso (and macro) levels of organization, they connect the symbolic with the material, and the agentic with the structural." They apply these ideas to case studies of several institutions—Indian castes, American academia, rock and roll music, and ancient Christianity.

Together the articles assembled here capture some of the broad variety of contemporary scholarly projects that are seeking to treat institutions, once again, as central objects of theory and empirical investigation. Looking back 30 years now since the re-birth of the institutional project, we can agree with Scott, much has been accomplished, much has been learned, but still, as we noted earlier, an institution is still a hard thing to pin down. Our hope is that these essays will contribute to the ongoing reconstruction and advance of an effective social science of institutions.

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