



Neo-Institutional Theory and Organization Studies: A Mid-Life Crisis?

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Mats Alvesson

Lund University, Sweden, University of Queensland, Australia and City, University of London, UK

André Spicer

City, University of London, UK

Abstract

We trace the development of neo-institutional theory in *Organization Studies* from a marginal topic to the dominant theory. We show how it has evolved from infancy, through adolescence and early adulthood to being a fully mature theory, which we think is now facing a mid-life crisis. Some of the features of this mid-life crisis include over-reach, myopia, tautology, pseudo-progress and re-inventing the wheel. To address these problems, we argue that institutional theorists should limit the range of the concept, sharpen their lens, avoid tautologies and problematize the concept. By doing this, we think institutional theorists could develop a narrower and more focused conception of institutions.

Keywords

development, identity, institutional theory, midlife crisis

Introduction

Neo-institutional theory is one of most prominent schools of thought within organization studies at present. According to Vogel's (2012) bibliometric analysis, neo-institutional theory was a very small 'college' of thought during the 1980s, it became a marginal college during the 1990s, and transformed into the second largest in the field during the 2000s. Since 2010, neo-institutional theory has gone on to dominate the field. During this time, neo-institutional theory has been well represented in the journal *Organization Studies*. From the founding of *Organization Studies* in 1980 to 2016, 125 articles have appeared in the journal which feature some variant of the word 'institution' in the title. That is nearly 9% of the total 1,399 articles published since the journal was founded. Not all of these pieces are directly inspired by neo-institutional theory, but the majority

Corresponding author:

Mats Alvesson, Dept of Business Administration, Lund University, PO Box 7080, S 220 07 Lund, Sweden.
Email: Mats.Alvesson@fek.lu.se

are. Six of the 20 top cited articles in the journal can be classified as neo-institutional theory (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Garud, Hardy, & Maguire, 2007; Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007; Oliver, 1992; Reay & Hinings, 2009; Scott, 2008).

Despite its popularity, some neo-institutional theory insiders have begun to ask searching questions. Davis (2010, p. 705) observes, 'a half-dozen paradigms maintain hegemony year after year, facing little danger that new evidence will pile up against them, with (neo-institutional theory) as the head of the class'. Others have pointed out that neo-institutional theory 'is creaking under the weight of its own theoretical apparatus' (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011, p. 52; see also Willmott, 2011). Still others have complained that 'institution' has become a 'vapid umbrella term' which means everything and nothing (Haveman & David, 2008, p. 588; David & Bitektine, 2009). The introduction to a landmark handbook on the topic points out that 'we need to ask whether its power to explain organizational phenomena is withering in the light of its rather splintered proliferation' (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008, p. 31).

In this paper, we will trace the development of neo-institutional theory in *Organization Studies*, explore some of the current pitfalls which the theory faces and suggest ways these pitfalls might be overcome. We will begin by following the development of neo-institutional theory in the pages of *Organization Studies* from its infancy, to adolescence, early adulthood and into middle age. We then look at some specific questions which neo-institutional theory must face as part of its mid-life crisis. Finally, we will outline some potential ways which these challenges might be resolved.

A History of Institutional Theory in *Organization Studies*

There are a number of historical accounts of the development and growth of neo-institutional theory in organization studies. One of the most influential is W. Richard Scott (1987, 2008) which used a development model to understand the birth, growth and increasing maturity of the field (see also Greenwood et al., 2008). Using this scheme, we will explore the papers which have been published in *Organization Studies* since the founding of the journal in 1980 and consider the contributions as well as divergences these articles have made to core debates.

Infancy: 1977–1983

According to most accounts, neo-institutional theory was born in 1977. The birth was marked by the publication of path-breaking papers by John Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977) and Lynn Zucker (1977). These classic papers were later joined by DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) analysis of isomorphism. At the heart of these three papers is the argument that organizations adopted new structures and practices not because they were particularly effective or efficient, but because they gave the organization a sheen of legitimacy. These papers also asked fundamental questions about what an organization is, suggesting that formal structures are a matter of 'myth and ceremony' which create an image of rationality and a sense of legitimacy.

The early years of institutional theory coincided with the early years of *Organization Studies* as a journal, which was founded in 1980. The journal itself was founded with a mission to develop a particularly European approach to the study of organizations. So, it is not surprising to see that with the exception of a few minor mentions (e.g. Morgan, 1981; Jick & Murray, 1982), there is little evidence of neo-institutional theory in the earliest years of the journal. There were, however, papers which engage extensively with the 'old institutionalism'. For instance, Ganesh (1980) examined the process of institution building. This paper is remarkable because many of the concerns it raised about how activists establish new institutions remain the quarry of institutional theorists 30 years later. There is also evidence that many concerns which would later become part of neo-institutional

theory were already being discussed in the journal from its founding. For instance, in their analysis of the debates about power in organization studies, Walsh, Hinings, Greenwood and Ranson (1981) discussed the role which values play in establishing consensus across entire industries, and how this consensus can be challenged by activists within the industry. This is a theme which two of the co-authors of the paper, Bob Hinings and Royston Greenwood, would return to years later using the language of neo-institutional theory.

Alongside these debates about institutional theory, there were attempts to connect with deeper traditions in European social theory such as the work of Max Weber and Robert Michels (e.g. Lammers, 1981). There was also some empirical analysis of 'institutional arrangements'. For instance, one study of the diffusion of medical innovations in French hospitals notes the role which institutionalized categories of medical specialism play in explaining which techniques spread and which do not (de Kervasdoué, 1981). Another study pointed out the role societal-level institutions played in explaining the different organization of manufacturing units in France, Western Germany and Great Britain (Maurice, Sorge, & Warner, 1980). This kind of work points to a long tradition of cross-country comparisons that highlights the role institutions play which would later flourish in the pages of *Organization Studies* (e.g. Streeck, Seglow, & Wallace, 1981).

During the infancy of neo-institutional theory in the United States, we saw a rather more diverse version of institutional theory appearing in the pages of *Organization Studies*. It connected with core concerns in North American neo-institutional theory such as the search for legitimacy. But it also brought a distinctive approach associated with cross-national comparison and debates in European social theory. What is perhaps even more striking is that many of the themes dealt with in these early papers continue to be rehashed to this day. For instance, the question of how occupational categories are institutionalized is still being addressed 30 years on.

Adolescence: 1983–1991

During its adolescence, North American institutional theory moved from being largely theoretical conjecture to gaining greater empirical support. During this time, researchers used mainly quantitative data-sets to explore processes of institutionalization such as the implementation of merit-based personnel selection in US municipalities (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). They also did comparative work which looked at the relative strength of institutionalization processes in different sectors of the economy (e.g. Tolbert, 1985). Finally, they began to establish some of the mechanisms which drive institutionalization, such as professional networks (Baron, Dobbin, & Jennings, 1986).

Within the pages of *Organization Studies* during this period there were some studies which drew on classic statements of neo-institutional theory (e.g. Sunesson, 1985; Withane, 1988). Papers also appeared which empirically substantiated neo-institutional theory. For instance, Orru, Hamilton and Suzuki (1989) looked at how the distinctive pattern of interlocking directorates in the Japanese corporate world are driven by 'institutionalised decorum that sets up patterns of normative expectations' (p. 551). A qualitative study of Swedish municipalities expanded on the ideas of neo-institutional theory by showing how organizations would often engage in reform processes in an attempt to symbolically display that change has occurred, in the hope of gaining legitimacy (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989). There were also studies which questioned some central assumptions in neo-institutional theory. For instance, in a study of protestant churches in overwhelmingly catholic Brazil, Nelson (1989) showed how organizations are not only driven by a process of isomorphism (organizations copying practices from the wider environment and over time becoming more structurally similar). He uncovered two other paths which they can take – rejection, whereby a dominant organizational model is actively repudiated during a process of organization building, and substitution, where other models are blended with a dominant logic. This study showed that the

rational-bureaucratic model is not dominant in all parts of the world and charismatic as well and traditional kinship-based structures are likely to be important. It is interesting to note that many of the themes raised in this study would be ‘discovered’ more than two decades later under the guise of research on ‘institutional complexity’ (Greenwood et al., 2008).

Alongside work which made explicit reference to neo-institutional theory are studies which develop many of the themes found in institutional theory but don’t make explicit reference to this work. For instance, Greenwood and Hinings (1988) developed the concept of organizational archetypes and considered how these can change and develop over time. There were also studies which explored processes of rationalization. For instance, Alfred Kieser’s (1987) paper examined rationalization in medieval monasteries. The paper showed how rational organization of work spread in monasteries and created an increasing iron cage which it was difficult to escape. Similarly, Jon Miller’s (1991) study of colonial missionaries in West Africa explored the establishment of a rational organizational structure and the stubborn inability of these structures to adapt to the instrumental demands of the environment they found themselves in. This created what Meyer and Zucker (1989) called a ‘permeant failing organization’ which persisted nonetheless.

The adolescence of institutional theory in *Organization Studies* did not involve the same sudden growth of empirical studies seen in North American journals. There was some empirical substantiation, but there was also refutation (e.g. Nelson, 1989) as well as blending with other traditions (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989). In addition, indigenous traditions such as Weberian studies of rationalization (e.g. Kieser, 1987; Miller, 1991; Shenkar, 1984) continued to yield insights.

Young adulthood: 1991–2008

During 1991, neo-institutional theory took its first steps beyond adolescence with the publication of the so-called ‘orange book’ (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). This effectively configured the field of neo-institutional theory and created an identity of the institutional theorist. The book sparked a boom in studies inspired by neo-institutional theory. Many of these studies progressively extended the scope of neo-institutional research to new phenomena such as whether hospitals performed particular medical procedures (Goodrick & Salancik, 1996). Some work pursued core institutional questions such as how organizations construct and maintain legitimacy (e.g. Suchmann, 1995). Other work sought to blend institutional theory with major theoretical traditions such as network theory (e.g. Westphal, Gulati, & Shortell, 1997) and population ecology (Baum & Oliver, 1991). There was also a broadening of the agenda with the introduction of new concepts such as ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002), ‘institutional logics’ (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) and ‘institutional work’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The result was a thriving and well-established research agenda.

Between 1991 and 2008 there was a rapid rise in papers inspired by neo-institutional theory. In the 21 years prior, there had only been a handful of articles which made any significant reference to neo-institutional theory. In the following 16 years, there were over 40 articles which engaged with neo-institutional theory. Many of the studies published earlier in this period confirmed existing ideas in neo-institutional theory (e.g. Durand & McGuire, 2005; Laurila & Lilja, 2002; Washington, 2004; Wicks, 2007). For instance, a study of national-level sports organizations found that there was increasing isomorphism (Slack & Hinings, 1994). Similarly, a study of medical responses to HIV/AIDS found that practices which were in line with existing institutions, particularly those institutions favoured by powerful actors, were more likely to be adopted (Montgomery & Oliver, 1996). Finally, a study of US auditors found that rather than there being a strict decoupling of symbolic and instrumental processes in organizations, there was better evidence of what they called ‘loose coupling’ (Dirsmith, Fogarty, & Gupta, 2000). Each of these

studies incrementally extended and adapted core tenets of institutional theory. Much of it pointed to the complexities and processes of resistance involved in dynamics of institutionalization (e.g. Symon, Buehring, Johnson, & Cassell, 2008).

Alongside incremental extension, some papers broke new ground. Four strands of work stand out. The first was a seminal paper by Barley and Tolbert (1997) which brought together neo-institutional theory with structuration theory. This paper helped to create a foundation for studying non-isomorphic change in institutional fields. The second was a classic paper by Christine Oliver (1992) which looked at the largely ignored process of de-institutionalization and suggested some factors which may explain it. The third classic paper to appear during this time was one of the first to introduce the notion of 'institutional entrepreneurship' into debates (Beckert, 1999). This inspired further work that explored how actors went about creating new institutions (Dorado, 2005; Garud et al., 2007; Munir & Phillips, 2005). A special issue of the journal carried studies of institutional entrepreneurship in a range of empirical settings such as the Dutch concrete industry (Vermeulen, Büch, & Greenwood, 2007), European cross-border regions (Perkmann & Spicer, 2007), climate change policy regimes (Wijen & Ansari, 2007) and labour regimes in the manufacture of soccer balls (Khan, Munir, & Willmott, 2007). A further strand of research explored the role of discourse in the construction and maintenance of new institutions (e.g. Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Maguire & Hardy, 2006; Munir, 2005; Zilber, 2007). The final area was the study of the role which institutional logics play in shaping a particular practice in an organization – which in this case was performance appraisal in academic institutions (Townley, 1997). Much of this research was field-level analyses which highlighted the role of various actors in creating and establishing new institutions. This broad theme was exemplified in Lounsbury and Crumley's (2007) study of how active money managers became common in the US mutual fund industry. This paper combines a number of theoretical traditions from within institutional theory (such as studies of institutional entrepreneurship) and beyond (in particular, practice theory) to explore how new practices spread through a field. The paper is also exemplary of work published in *Organization Studies* as it uses a longitudinal qualitative analysis.

Alongside these papers, there were a number of papers which continued to develop a theory of institutions based around the study of national business systems. These studies were largely comparative in scope and showed how different configurations of national-level economic institutions could shape the characteristics of firms (e.g. Mayer & Whittington, 1999). For instance, one study explored how national-level institutions could shape processes of innovation within firms (Hage & Hollingsworth, 2000; Whitley, 2000). This research showed, for instance, that institutions could persist despite significant changes such as the collapse of the socialist economic system in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s (Whitley, Jeffrey, Czaban, & Lengyel, 1996). It also explored how firms sought to balance the contending forces of global and local institutions (e.g. Morgan & Quack, 2005). This work provided an extension of earlier work which appeared in *Organization Studies* looking at national differences. It also highlighted the importance of more formalized regulative institutions (such as national laws) and normative institutions alongside the cultural cognitive institutions which had been the focus of much neo-institutional research.

This period also marked the continuation of critiques and alternative conceptions of institutions. For instance, in a widely cited critique of neo-institutional theory, Hasselbladh and Kallinikos (2000) took neo-institutional theory to task for ignoring the process of institutionalization and not accounting for the constitution of actors and objects which are entailed in processes of institutionalization. They suggested that studies of governmentality inspired by the work of Michel Foucault provided an alternative language to understand these processes. Other alternative theoretical frameworks which were put forward for understanding institutions included arguments for drawing on the work of Alistair MacIntyre (Moore & Beadle, 2006), Torsten Veblen (Hodgson, 2007),

Erving Goffman (Shenkar, 1996), Antonio Gramsci (Levy & Scully, 2007) and Margaret Archer (Mutch, 2007). There were also papers which sought to connect neo-institutional theory back to the work of Max Weber (Greenwood & Lawrence, 2005).

Between 1991 and 2008, neo-institutional theory became a major theoretical tradition in the pages of *Organization Studies*. The second half of the period witnessed the emergence of new strands of work which explored issues of institutional change as well as how processes of institutionalization were resisted. This effectively created an intellectual template for much of the work which would come later.

Middle age: 2009 onwards

By 2008, institutional theory had reached middle age. That year a thick handbook of organizational institutionalism was published. In the same year, Scott (2008) published a review paper which concluded that during the preceding decade or so the field had shown ‘substantial signs of increasing maturity’ (p. 438). Vogel’s (2012) bibliometric review found that neo-institutional theory had become the second most dominant strand of theorizing in organization studies during the 2000s. The theory had become a vast field with multiple different debates and many sub-disciplines.

A similar story can be found in the pages of *Organization Studies*. From about 2008 onwards, neo-institutional theory became one of the most dominant theories within the pages of the journal. Nearly half of all the papers published on the topic in the journal’s 37-year history were published in the last ten years.

One widely cited piece published at the beginning of this era is Reay and Hinings’ (2009) analysis of shifts in health care in Alberta. Following the rise of the institutional logic of ‘business-like health care’ in the field, they show how it came into conflict with a ‘medical-professional’ logic of health care. This paper showed that instead of one logic supplanting another, there was a kind of ‘uneasy truce’ between the two logics. The paper shows the mechanisms through which this truce was maintained. Like other classical work on institutional theory in *Organization Studies*, this paper uses longitudinal, quality inquiry to draw out some of the dynamics involved in melding together different logics.

Many of the other articles which have appeared during recent years consist of work on existing themes in institutional theory. For instance, there are papers looking at ever-green topics such as how institutions shape the adoption of new managerial techniques in the healthcare sector (Finn, Currie, & Martin, 2010), the institutionalization of new teaching philosophies within public schools (Segal & Lehrer, 2012), how universities comply with increasingly institutionalized global standards (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013) and the extent to which law firms comply with local standards (Muzio & Falconbridge, 2012). Each of these research questions reflects some of the concerns which can be found in classic papers about institutional theory published over 30 years ago.

There has also been a growing body of research which explored specific sub-themes within the wider institutional literature. These included studies of institutional work (Currie, Lockett, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2012; Gawer & Phillips, 2013; Helfen & Sydow, 2013; Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013; Martí & Fernandez, 2013; Rainelli Weiss & Huault, 2016; Raviola & Norback, 2013; Slager, Gond, & Moon, 2012), institutional logics (Currie & Spyridonidis, 2016; Reay & Hinings, 2009) and institutional entrepreneurship (e.g. Buhr, 2012; Dorado, 2013).

As well as extending debates which were established during the previous decade, there have been some studies which opened up new sub-themes within the institutional theory literature. Two notable strands of literature here are studies of institutional plurality and complexity (Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014; Yu, 2013) as well as work on inhabited institutions (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013; Hallett, 2010).

The debate about neo-institutional theory has continued to be extended and branch off in different directions, resulting in the proliferation of concepts. Some new concepts proposed in the pages of *Organization Studies* include ‘institutional spectatorship’ (Lamertz & Heugens, 2009); ‘institutional trust’ (Bachmann, Gillespie, & Priem, 2015; Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011) ‘institutional continuity’ (Sminia, 2011), ‘micro-institutional affordances’ (van Dijk, Berends, Jelinke, Romme, & Weggeman, 2011), ‘institutional evangelizing’ (Jones & Massa, 2013), ‘patchy institutions’ (Quirke, 2013) and ‘collaborative institutional agency’ (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2016).

As if all these new concepts were not enough, institutional theory has also been blended with other theories such as social networks, cognitive frames and institutions (Beckert, 2010), elites (Zald & Lounsbury, 2010), linguistic tropes (Sillince & Barker, 2012), rhetoric (Brown, Ainsworth, & Grant, 2012), framing (Guérard, Bode, & Gustafsson, 2013; Werner & Cornelissen, 2014), identity (Dhalla & Oliver, 2013), boundary work (Helfen, 2015), emotions (Moisander, Hristo, & Fahy, 2016), translation (Pallas, Fredriksson, & Wedlin, 2016) and project management (Tukiainen & Granqvist, 2016).

Continuing the heterodox tradition of *Organization Studies*, there have remained a few studies which have proposed alternative conceptions of institutions based on entirely different theoretical traditions such as actor network theory (Czarniawska, 2009), comparative institutional theory (Mtar, 2010), studies of total institutions (Clegg, e Cunha, & Rego, 2012), process theory and notions of becoming (Bjerregaard & Jonasson, 2014) and Luhmann’s systems theory (Deroy & Clegg, 2015).

All this research presents a sprawling picture of what institutional theory actually is. It seems to be a study of almost anything – from Japanese housewives (Leung, Zietsma, & Peredo, 2014) to the Holocaust (Martí & Fernandez, 2013). There is an increasing morass of conceptual terms and neologisms. And the theoretical base is vast – ranging from social movement theory to project management by way of Aristotle. Given the fact that it covers such a wide territory, we might expect to find some novel and exciting insights. However, looking at volumes of text is rather disappointing compared to the sheer amount of conceptual effort and empirical work which seems to have gone into the area. It is seldom easy to remember a clear idea or insight after having read yet another paper on neo-institutional theory. It is time to take a more critical look at institutional theory.

Problems with Neo-Institutional Theory

As neo-institutional theory has become one of the dominant theories in organization studies, it has also created some important problems – it has become increasingly vague with unclear boundaries. This has introduced confusion about whether it is a lens or a particular phenomenon – or a whole range of very different phenomena. Some consequences include increasingly tautological claims, a sense of pseudo-progress and frequent repetition of earlier insights. The end result is a body of research which seems to produce much more heat than light.

Everything or nothing?

The rapid expansion of institutional theory has made it increasingly fragmented. As a result, the meaning of ‘institution’ has become increasingly vague. Some time ago, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) noted that it ‘is often easier to gain agreement about what (an institution) is *not* than what it *is*’. Now this situation has changed. It is also difficult to agree what an institution is not – because institutions have become everything. Anything from medical procedures (Montgomery & Oliver,

1996) to how maximum security prisoners think about themselves (Brown & Toyoki, 2013) can now be labelled as an institution.

There is seldom any clear hint about what is meant by institution, beyond being something that is 'social'. When the term institution is defined, it is done so in broad and vague ways. Scott (1995), for instance, defines institutions as 'cognitive, normative and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behaviour' (p. 33). Meyer and colleagues (1987) see institutions as 'cultural rules'. Fligstein (2001, cited in Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 216) refers to 'rules and shared meanings ... that define social relationships, help define who occupies what position in those relationships and guide interaction by given actors' cognitive frames ...'. Lounsbury and Crumley (2007) define institution as 'sets of material activities that are fundamentally interpreted and shaped by broader cultural frameworks such as categories, classifications, frames, and other kinds of ordered belief systems' (p. 996).

Looking at each of these definitions, we see a wide variation. Some emphasize cognitive and cultural components (Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987), while others focus on the behavioural and structural aspects (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). Some definitions incorporate the rules and meanings that define social relationships (Fligstein, 2001, in Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) while others focus on sets of material activities (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007). Often a number of complicated concepts such as 'culture', 'meaning', 'material practices', 'rules', 'legitimation' are mentioned together, seldom with any further clarification. Even key concepts, such as 'legitimacy', remain quite vague. Does institution mean that something is acceptable, there is an absence of contestation, a broader positive sentiment, passive or active support, conformity or moral rightness, or absence of doubts and mixed feelings?

This lack of precision allows the inclusion of almost any empirical content into a research programme (Czarniawska, 2008). Most constructs in the institutionalist vocabulary are so vague that they can be used for many purposes. An institutional logic may be about the operation of a computer company (Gawer & Phillips, 2013), changes in French business schools (Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014), the move from Korean to US style of management (Bjerregaard & Jonasson, 2014), medical professionalism and business-like health care in Canada (Reay & Hinings, 2009), community and market (Venkataraman, Vermeulen, Raaijmakers, & Mair, 2016) and active money management in the Eastern United States (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007). One might ask 'is there anything that is not an institutional logic?' (Fine & Hallett, 2014, p. 1786). Institutional work is also a similarly all-purpose construct. It can be used to describe acts as different as mounting a protest, passing a law or copying a strategy from another organization (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Simply turning up at work can be seen as form of maintaining the institution of paid labour/employment. A physician being nice to a patient may do the same for the institution of a profession.

Although the reach of these constructs may appear impressive, the analytical clarity and empirical sensitivity generally are not. Core concepts are used loosely and with little precision (David & Bitektine, 2009). As these concepts become more general and cover a greater territory, their explanatory power weakens. As a result, they can become broad catch-all terms which can mean almost anything and nothing. Such vague definitions of institution create significant problems for researchers. Including so much in a definition means that it becomes far too heavy a burden to carry when undertaking empirical work and analysis. Reasoning does not work if the analytics are 'too clumsy'. This problem can be seen in a study by Currie and Spyridonidis (2016), who refer to institutions as, among other things, taken-for-granted social prescriptions but then go on to study a new policy initiative in the context of different groups in a hospital setting. Most issues here seem to be explicit and obvious for the people involved, so what is taken for granted becomes hidden from sight, despite the continued use (and overuse) of a key concept of an institution.

A theoretical lens or a phenomenon?

According to some accounts, institutional theory is ‘a lens’ (Lawrence et al., 2013, p. 1023), that ‘has proven to be useful and practical’ (Cloutier & Langley, 2013). Others argue that institutions are a distinct phenomenon out there in the ‘real world’ (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013). According to this approach, institutional theory is not a lens which allows a specific way of seeing, but a more or less accurate mirror of reality. Moving between these two perspectives can create confusion.

To illustrate this point, consider the example of institutional work. According to its proponents, institutional work is the ‘purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and undermining institutions’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). Looking at this definition, it is possible to imagine institutional work offering a theoretical ‘lens’ which can be used to look at nearly any kind of purposeful action. Following this logic, the mailman reliably delivering letters maintains the institution of the post office; a doctor delegating work to a nurse is preserving the institution of the elite medical profession (Currie et al., 2012); a social entrepreneur giving a PowerPoint presentation to financiers is doing institutional work as well (Slager et al., 2012). Instead of looking at matters so expansively, it is possible to see institutional work as a distinct type of activity which exists out there in the world and is somehow different from other activities. If this was the case, it would be possible to distinguish between institutional work and non-institutional work. For instance, while driving trucks, repairing a machine or serving a customer might count as plain old work, creating sets of rules, promoting a new model for an industry or criticising dominant ideas about a particular type of organization might count as ‘institutional work’.

In most cases, it is unclear whether institutional theory is a lens or a mirror. This creates confusion. Seeing institutions as mirroring something out there in the real world certainly makes sense if we are talking about something like the United Nations, a university or a psychiatric hospital. But it seems to be stretching it if we talk about some kind of diffuse practice like the design of digital cameras (Munir, 2005) or the way people view prisoners (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). This reminds us that if we wanted to adopt a more serious conception of an institution, it would need to be more narrow. But there are also problems with adopting a ‘lens’ approach. First, the lens of institutional theory is rather blurry. Second, it is difficult to know which lens is used when researchers refer to a very poorly specified concept of the institution. Each of these problems leave the budding institutional theorist with some serious issues.

Tautologies

A major problem with institutional theory is that it is riddled with tautologies. This is because the definitions of the key concept – institution – includes so much that it can’t really be related to something outside of the definition. One example is Scott’s view of professions. He sees professionals as ‘the most influential, contemporary crafters of institutions’ (Scott, 2008, p. 223). Whether ‘institutions’ like the market or the community match this idea seems questionable, but let us not dwell on that. But ‘normative controls are built into the role systems and identities associated with membership in a profession’ (Scott, 2008, p. 225). Most researchers would probably say that a profession is an institution. Are professionals really the crafters of an institution? Or are they crafted by it? Or is a profession an institution? Following this logic, seeing professionals as institutional agents really means seeing ‘institutions as institutional agents’. The exact boundary between a tautology and a statement that actually is informative is hard to specify, but Scott, like so many other institutional theorists, has problems drawing clear boundaries.

A more troubling problem is that all-embracing definitions of institutions, and allied terms like institutional logics, include so much and tend to be tautological. For instance, Thornton et al.

(2012) discuss ‘institutional orders’, including family, religion and so on. These seem to do the same things as logics. But they also claim that they ‘shape how reasoning takes place and how rationality is perceived and experienced’ (p. 3). All these orders influence individual and organizational behaviour. So do institutions (p. 4). Our point is that institutions, logics and order seem to do the same thing. Following this logic, an institutional order is an ‘order order’. Lounsbury and Crumley (2007) see institutions as, among other things, ‘ordered belief systems’ (p. 996). What’s more, an institutional logic seems to be very close to an institution. It is difficult to imagine an institutional ‘non-logic’. The logic of an institution is the logic of a logic. We think such tautologies illustrate a broader problem with the over-packaged use of the term institution: it leads to slippery and often confusing reasoning.

Pseudo-progress

As institutional theory has extended its reach, advocates have adopted contradictory positions. In the early stages of the evolution of institutional theory, researchers emphasized field-level analysis. These early institutional theorists saw organizational-level dynamics as a reflection of macro forces which created isomorphism through taken-for-granted assumptions. The image of the cultural dope was central. During the 1990s, many institutional theorists made a 180-degree shift. Instead of looking at institutionally constrained actors, they began seeing actors as reflexive, goal-oriented and capable (Lawrence et al., 2013). Instead of looking at stability, they began looking at change. Instead of focusing on uniformity, they attended to variability. Instead of examining a single institution, they began to look at two or more institutions/logics. Instead of examining macro patterns, they focused on micro-dynamics.

One could of course praise institutional theorists for their dynamism. The problem is that this approach can make the ‘institutional’ aspect vague and you can also create the impression of adding something but a twist in any direction. Institutional theory remains the *claimed* fixed frame, at least on the level of legitimation. However, it is modified by adding new concepts and approaches. Unfortunately, the result has been an increasingly scattered project. Often the only thing institutional theorists share is the use of the same signifier – ‘institution’. Often researchers set up their work by claiming that institutional theory has so far not studied a particular topic – whether that is micro-dynamics, change, variation, emotions, entrepreneurship, whatever. The authors then conclude that the study contributes to institutional theory. But this contribution would often seem like common sense to a researcher working in other parallel fields or simply more widely read and interested in the phenomenon rather than adding to institutional theory.

To illustrate this point, let’s take a look at three institutional theory studies published in *Organization Studies*. In one widely cited paper, Oliver (1992) identifies antecedents to de-institutionalization. The latter is a ‘delegitimation of an established organizational practice or procedure’ (p. 564). But these antecedents are the same as what are typically identified as drivers of any organizational change – increases in workforce diversity, changes of power, new societal values and regulations, increased competition, mergers and so on. It is uncertain what is novel in this for a person familiar with the organizational change literature. But within neo-institutional theory it appears as a significant contribution.

In another frequently cited paper, Reay and Hinings (2009) set out to understand how competing logics could coexist for long periods. Their key finding was that ‘actors maintained their separate identities in pragmatic collaborations that allowed them to accomplish work and meet professional responsibilities’ and that these collaborations ‘supported the on-going existence of competing logics’ (p. 623). The fact that there are different logics at work might be important news for institutional theorists, but is it all that surprising for most others? This has been a standard

insight since the invention of the division of labour and multiple departments and functions in organizations which sometimes collaborate, sometimes engage in conflict and sometimes work in splendid isolation. That people in the health sector (and elsewhere) consider both economic constraints and medical service is hardly novel. Nor that they sometimes emphasize their separate identity and sometimes collaborate. As a contribution beyond the boundaries of institutional theory, it does not seem that remarkable. But when it is framed within institutional theory, it becomes an important insight.

The same problem can be seen in a paper by Currie and Spyridonidis (2016) which

‘show(s) evidence of mutual adjustment between interdependent actors in the face of institutional complexity ... powerful agents (doctors and executive managers) enable agency for relatively less powerful agents (CHF nurse consultants), by transferring a degree of power to them. At the same time, the less powerful actors are cognizant of, and take care to align with, the logic held by their powerful counterparts, deploying strategies to minimize local conflicts in order to enhance their power.’ (Currie & Spyridonidis, 2016, p. 93)

However, a brief look at industrial sociology since World War Two will show that it is not so surprising that powerful actors sometimes support less powerful actors and those less powerful actors try to adjust and be co-operative.

There is a risk that when studies frame their contribution as wholly directed at neo-institutional theory, it masks the possibility that the study repeats what is already known more broadly. By not asking too many questions, it is possible to create a sense of pseudo-progress – a sense that the field is moving forward even when it is just repeating insights which might have come many decades earlier under a new label. But given the volume of people working within institutional theory, they have the protection of an enormous and powerful research community. It shields those on the inside from critical questions about what contributions they are making beyond neo-institutional theory (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014).

Re-inventing the wheel?

Despite the enormous amount of work which has already been done, institutional theorists always seem to find something new to say, or at least something new to other institutional theorists. For instance, Lawrence et al. (2013) claim that power and institutions have ‘been seriously under-examined’ (p. 1028). Currie and Spyridonidis (2016) claim that institutional theorists are ignorant of how actors translate logics into action in everyday life.

The problem however is that these issues are only really novel with respect to institutional theory. Studies that are not labelled as ‘institutional’ are often excluded. For instance, Lawrence et al. (2013) and Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) only include a couple of general writings and almost exclusively refer to publications safely within the domain of (what is labelled) institutional theory. Using the ‘I’ word means a reference is ‘in’. Not using it means it is ‘out’. But if we consider areas like power, organizational culture, change and experiences of work, there are already enormous literatures. As these often do not explicitly refer to ‘institutions’, they are neglected. The fact that this research often neglects what ‘institutional’ theorists do not refer to becomes a non-issue. With this narrowing scope, myopia often follows. This means that institutional theorists have almost completely neglected overlapping areas of research such as cultural studies of organizations (e.g. Hatch, 2012), that is, until someone comes up with the bright idea of relating institutions and culture (which is a bit tricky as institutions are often defined so that they include or are even viewed as culture, i.e. cultural rules, although without clarifying what is meant by culture).

Recent critical treatments of institutional theory suggest new topics need to be pursued. For instance, Suddaby (2010) identified topics such as categories, language, work and aesthetics as ripe for further investigation. Others suggest practice (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013), behavioural regularities (Barley & Tolbert 1997), power (Willmott, 2011) or emotions such as shame (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014). Cloutier and Langley (2013) identify four blind spots that they believe have not been addressed within the institution theory perspective: micro-level processes, struggles over legitimacy, the moral element of institutions and material objects. The options are endless. Researchers can easily launch their favoured recipes for how to improve or expand neo-institutional theory. Why not motivation, identity, learning, conflict, leadership, followership, resistance, gender, ethnicity and innovation? An ‘institution’ can be related to almost everything, from cultural ideas to behaviours, from conformism to entrepreneurship, from isomorphism to diversity, from stability to change, from fields to work, from broad social forms (profession, family) to specific techniques and treatments (psychotherapy). By spotting gaps and identifying new topics for further investigation, institutional theorists often end up repeating insights which can be found elsewhere in social science.

Most research published in the social sciences is narrowly incremental, adding marginal footnotes to existing findings. Often the result is pseudo-progress. The norm of finding and filling gaps within a particular literature is a major problem in overcrowded disciplines, where it is difficult to have anything really new and interesting to say (Alvesson, Gabriel, & Paulsen, 2017; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Institutional theory is certainly not alone in this. Calling for endless studies of institutions may keep institutional theorists busy, but it does not necessarily lead to wider contributions to human knowledge.

Solutions

In the previous section, we raised a number of important problems with institutional theory. In this section, we consider how these issues might be dealt with.

Clarify and limit the range of concepts

To address the vagueness of institutional theory, researchers should clarify what an institution is and, more importantly, what it is not. Perhaps institutional theorists should heed Clifford Geertz’s (1973) advice and cut concepts down to size so that they cover less and reveal more. It is difficult to get broad agreement around what institutional theorists mean when they refer to an institution and what they don’t. Consensus and policing around concept use are difficult and not without their drawbacks. But it might be possible for researchers to clarify which understandings of an institution they agree with and specify what an institution is *not*. An abstract definition is insufficient. Work is needed to zoom in on the meaning of a concept. Clarification, discussion, examples and references to which definitions one agrees with and those which take a different view are part of all this. Giving hints about what is *not* an institution may also be helpful. Some questioning of the concept of ‘the institution’ could be beneficial. This might help researchers to stop using a vague and confusing concept like ‘institution’. It also might mean they start using other concepts and possibly become more innovative.

Sharpen the lens

A good lens sharpens vision. Given its broad, vague and abstract character, institutional theory often does not achieve this goal. To deal with this problem, it might be possible to sharpen the theoretical lens through the use of metaphors (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011). This would involve

asking what are the metaphors lurking behind ideas about the institution. Are institutions seen as prisons, organisms, geographic landscapes, facades, stencils or something else? This approach could be extended by exploring different metaphors selectively. To do this, researchers could ask when they rely on a particular metaphor, what do they miss or neglect? For instance, if we focused on seeing institutions as a kind of facade, you could explore what kind of facades are assumed. Are institutions like film-sets, building cladding or renovations? Are they gold-plating or simply protecting from harsh storms in the wider environment?

It is important to avoid the common problem in neo-institutional theory of rapidly and mindlessly moving between metaphors (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011). Instead institutional theorists need to focus on a specific root metaphor (Morgan, 1980) or any other clear image or gestalt of what is being addressed. For instance, institutional theorists might look at institutions as cultural rules (Meyer et al., 1987), sources of meaning (Scott, 2008), as norm-setters (Barley & Tolbert, 1997), or organized procedures (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). One could point to the distinctiveness, variation and clash between these different root metaphors and sharpen concept use and analytical focus.

Sharpening the lens through explicit use of metaphors also entails accounting for what institution is not. Through this dual tactic, the fundamental problem of institution being everything and nothing, covering so much and revealing so little, may be effectively counteracted.

Avoid tautologies

Institutional theory covers a wide range of phenomena. This provides strength in generalization, but comes with risks. For a general theory, it is important to separate out elements and avoid a priori lumping them together. For instance, it is an open question whether historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices are necessarily integrated, whether they form assumptions, whether values and beliefs hang together, whether these necessarily provide meaning to people's activity, and if they are key for the reproduction of their lives and experiences. There is always the chance that social and material life is more fragmented than this definition suggests. It could be that presumed links are weak or non-existent. Issues that are thought to hang together may often be best considered as separate or in conflict. What appears to be one and the same phenomenon may in fact be different phenomena, externally related or even non-related (Davis, 1971). This suggests that reasoning which includes too many components needs to be avoided, or at least more rigorously and carefully examined. Various aspects combined through over-generalized concepts – like the notion of 'institutions' – need to be unpacked.

Transcend the box

For institutional theorists to move beyond their myopia, they should try to make contributions which are not exclusively couched in the vocabulary of institutional theory. A possible solution here is for institutional theorists to *step outside the box* by referring to a broader range of research. They could also connect with historical traditions such as 'old institutionalism'. One cannot cover everything, but it is possible to explore whether insights from institutional theory chime with findings in other areas of research. This could help to generate more generalizable findings which may appeal to people who are not necessarily institutional theory insiders.

Problematicize

Rather than looking for increasingly narrow gaps within the literature, researchers could problematicize some of their assumptions. This means calling into question core assumptions such as

isomorphism, institutional myths and institutional logics. Researchers could ask how people relate to pressures for conformity and about the importance of legitimacy – and how this may not be something unitary but ambiguous, contradictory and fragmented in a pluralist society. An empirical exploration of such questions could prove to be illuminating.

A problem is of course that, given that neo-institutional theories now are all over the place, it is not easy to identify the field-level assumptions to problematize. Instead problematization may need to focus on specific sub-fields when and if identifiable. But ideas about one specific institutional logic or the homogeneity of favoured entities may for example be challenged by ideas that there are, in specific contexts, no such things as ‘professions’, family logic or a uniform institutionalized myth, but a plurality behind these labels.

Put a ban on ‘institution’

A more radical idea would be to institute a ban on the signifier ‘institution’, at least for a time period. This (temporary) ban would force researchers to be more precise and make it difficult to hide under this overused signifier. A more constrained idea is that journals could have the policy of only publishing articles on institution if they really say something novel and the label institution is used in a clear and distinct way. Of course, the concept of ‘institution’ is like any scientific label ‘institutionalized’ and then to be used routinely and with limited reflection. It aids an army of academics who are eager to get published by repackaging their research on almost any phenomenon into something that sounds impressive and ‘theoretical’. Other examples of similar scientific labels include discourse, leadership, entrepreneurship, strategy, resistance and knowledge. They may over time have become so flooded with meanings and any use triggers so many diverse and ambiguous associations that they become increasingly useless for ‘real’ knowledge production. Starting anew in language use can fuel innovations and sharpen description and analysis.

Conclusion

Institutional theory has been a fixture in the pages of *Organization Studies* since the founding of the journal in 1980. Over those four decades, there have been significant changes in how an institution has been conceptualized. Up until about 2000, there were many strands of institutional theory. These include Weberian studies of rationalization and comparative studies of institutions. After 2000, neo-institutional theory became increasingly dominant and indeed institutionalized, at least as a label – or as a legitimating structure, as Meyer and Rowan (1977) may refer to it.

Neo-institutional theory has offered a range of important contributions and has drawn attention to the link between the individual organizational and broader field and societal environment. However over time these contributions have become increasingly patchy. This has created some significant problems for institutional theory including increasing vagueness, greater confusion about whether the focus was a theoretical lens or a phenomenon, more tautological claims, a narrow theoretical scope and a tendency to reinvent the wheel.

Each of these problems has a tendency to blunt the insights which might be provided by institutional theory, as so impressively expressed by Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983). We have suggested some ways of remedying these problems such as clarifying core concepts, sharpening the theoretical lens by engaging root metaphors, avoiding tautologies, transcending a narrow theoretical reference point, and problematization. By doing each of these things, we think it may be possible to make (post-)institutional theory more insightful and a little less confusing.

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Author biographies

Mats Alvesson is at the Department of Business Administration, Lund University, Sweden and also affiliated at University of Queensland Business School and Cass Business School at City, University of London. He has recently published *The Stupidity Paradox* (with André Spicer), *Reflexive Leadership* (with Martin Blom and Stefan Sveningsson) and *Return to Meaning* (with Yiannis Gabriel and Roland Paulsen).

Andre Spicer is a Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Cass Business School at City, University of London. His most recent books are *Business Bullshit* and *Desperately Seeking Self Improvement*. He is currently studying scepticism.