Functionaries: A Distributional Approach to Institutional Analysis

Abstract

This paper outlines a distributional approach to institutional analysis, reconceptualizing institutions as *distributions* of knowledge and activity across people. We argue that institutionalization and institutional change are best understood by focusing on actors with the requisite knowledge and motivation to keep institutional patterns going, fix them when they go awry, or transform them when required, here called *functionaries*. The distributional approach allows us to distinguish between two main types of institutional change often conflated in the literature: Content-based and formal change. Content-based change, the one most often discussed, involves the importation, recombination, or expansion of specific patterns of activity. In contrast, formal change, often neglected in the literature, refers to shifts in the distribution of knowledge and activity within an institution, leading to dynamics of centralization and decentralization of institutional patterns. In this way, the distributional approach highlights the role of functionaries in both institutional stability and change, providing a micro-level perspective on institutional dynamics.

Keywords: institutions, theorizing, functionaries, change, entrepreneurship.

Introduction

Institutional theories stress a complementarity between the objective and the subjective (Martin, 2001). Objectively, institutions are repeated behavioral patterns, downstream consequences, and related self-correcting mechanisms (Jepperson, 1991). Subjectively, institutions are schemas, skills, and habits (broadly, knowledge) enabling such systematically patterned conduct (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). The typical strategy for integrating the two poles is the "dialectic of institutionalization" (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The story goes like this. First, institutions emerge via people's creative activity. However, eventually, the patterns become habitualized, externalized, typified, and transmitted as taken-for-granted realities to the next generation. Finally, the patterns become sedimented, with everyone assuming this is how things are done (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). Despite its undeniable theoretical appeal, this model leaves us with a widely acknowledged conundrum for institutional theory (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). Once institutionalized, actors will *reproduce* patterns: they see the pattern externalized by other actors, internalize it, and then externalize it themselves, providing more evidence of the pattern to different actors. Nevertheless, aside from error and exogenous shocks, the theory cannot convincingly account for how these patterns change (Clemens & Cook, 1999), nor does it provide a credible account of how the patterns are maintained in the face of inevitable decay (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

To address this and other foundational issues, we expand on recent rethinkings of the conceptual underpinnings of institutional and organizational theory (Bitektine et al., 2020; Cardinale, 2018; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). We develop a productive way forward by elaborating the classic imagery of a "dialectic of institutionalization." Specifically, we examine the implications of the relatively neglected image of institutions as *distributions* of knowledge and expertise across people (Carley, 1991, p. 332; Reay, 2010). We argue that institutionalizing any set of patterns involves a reorganization or radical change in the distribution of activities and knowledge.

The sociological take on institutions departs from observing more or less regular patterns of activity persisting across generations. In Hughes's classic statement, what all usages of the term "institution" in sociology have in common is the idea of "some sort of establishment or relative *permanence* of a distinctly social sort" (1936, p. 180, italics added). The notion of "permanence," is less prominent than other core sociological ideas, such as anomie, bureaucracy, alienation, and modernity. Nevertheless, all the classical theorists dealt with it in some form (Lizardo, 2022). The creation, maintenance, destruction, and regeneration of some sort of permanence in social life are the core problems that institutional theory is meant to solve. For people, social life *feels* as if it were built on regularities routinely identified and engaged with (Martin, 2001). These are durable enough that people come to expect them, more or less, across distances, people, and time (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). These observations inspire a "minimalist" definition of institutions: A persistent, more or less permanent, pattern of practices, cognitions, and feelings endowed with self-correcting tendencies in cases of deviation (Durkheim, 1895/1982, p. 47; Jepperson, 1991, p. 145; Martin, 2001, p. 194).

A concern with permanence and "self-correction," however, has the danger of leading analysts to emphasize the top-down aspects of institutions that seem to constrain people's actions and cognitions and which, in some settings, seem to mysteriously go on independently of people. This objectifying view corresponds to the folk phenomenological stance toward those institutional patterns that have acquired obdurate durability and permanence. In this case, people often (but not always) perceive such regularized patterns as "out there," independent of their activity (Martin, 2001, p. 194). People presume the pattern will continue, even when some stop actively instantiating it. The institutional pattern feels like it "hangs above" social life, constraining people's actions (Durkheim, 1895/1982). Following this hunch, some analysts emphasize the "macro" aspects of institutions, particularly those that helped explain the origins of homogeneity, equilibrium, and "isomorphism" across fields of striving (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Institutions came to be conceived mainly as "sedimented reifications" (Tolbert & Zucker,

1996), grounded in well-established habits and pre-reflexive heuristics, losing their connection to agency, reflexivity, process, and human activity more generally.

Institutional entrepreneurs identify contradictions and opportunities in existing institutional orders, sometimes pushing institutional patterns in transformative directions. This emphasis on institutional work puts the focus squarely on the routine activities of people within institutions, refusing to consider macro-patterns as either "unpeopled" or *self*-reproducing: The persistence of institutional patterns and their possible transformation *takes work*.

In this way, a concern with the micro-foundations of institutions has eclipsed previous emphases on top-down regular or cognitive-constitutive aspects of institutional patterns (Harmon et al., 2019; Powell & Rerup, 2017). In this sense, actors and actorhood have made a comeback, with recent strands in institutional theorizing focusing on how actors operate *within* and *across* institutional boundaries (Bitektine et al., 2020; Voronov & Weber, 2020). Finally, inhabited institutionalism puts the spotlight on the lived experience and subjective lifeworld of people within institutions, pointing to processes by which people embody institutional patterns and reproduce and transform them via episodes of everyday interaction (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021).

The distributional approach we propose fits within this recent stream of theorizing in institutional theory (e.g., Zilber, 2009), borrowing core imagery and theoretical inspiration while aiming to develop critical thematic and conceptual elements that remain under-theorized. Notably, the distributional approach theorizes institutional *processes* as established patterns, focusing on the routine work of upkeep and maintenance and, every so often, on the transformation of those patterns, localizing the origins and motivations of institutional entrepreneurs, and providing strong microfoundations for processes of institutional emergence, maintenance, and change. Here, we are less interested in adjudicating between different lines (or variants) of institutional theory (e.g., Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021).

Instead, our distributional approach is broadly ecumenical, drawing liberally from classic sociological institutionalism (including neo-and contemporary inhabited institutionalism approaches), agency-centric work on institutions from management and organizational studies (inclusive of embedded agency and institutional work perspectives), and relatively under-exploited lines of thinking in the classical tradition of social-phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and Weberian sociological theory. Our primary aim is to contribute to recent work emphasizing a naturalistic approach to the social ontology of institutions, grounded in empirical research across various arenas of institutional life.

Institutions as Distributions

Our point of departure, drawing on social phenomenology (see, e.g., Reay, 2010; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973), conceptualizes institutions primarily as *distributions*—of knowledge, activities, or specific "structures of feeling"—across a population, which may or may not correspond to explicitly recognized boundaries, such as those separating nations, institutional "sectors," or societal "spheres." While not typically theorized explicitly, many central phenomena of interest to institutional theorists emerge as byproducts of the uneven distribution of knowledge within institutions and the contingent "accumulation" of pockets of institutional activity and expertise in specific domains. Distribution implies that some institutional activities are thus "insulated" away from other people's attention or inspection at particular sites where a lot of the institutional work happens (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Reay, 2010). In the distributional approach, knowledge and activities are rarely homogeneously bounded within distinct institutional spheres or sectors (Thornton et al., 2012), with spillover and mixing being the norm and neat boundaries separating pure logics from one another the exception (if ever the empirical case).

Two Forms of Institutional Expertise

For the distributional approach to do the relevant conceptual work, we must distinguish

between two kinds of institutional expertise: *contributory* and *interactional*. We borrow this distinction from the work of Harry Collins and collaborators in Science and Technology Studies (e.g., Collins and Evans 2008). While often conflated in institutional analysis, distinguishing these two forms of expertise is crucial for identifying core institutional actors and patterns of institutional change. In what follows, we outline the primary conceptual differences between these forms of institutional knowledge.

Interactional Expertise

Most people have various levels of *interactional* expertise relative to most well-established institutional patterns (Weber 1913/1981, pp. 177-8). This knowledge-by-acquaintance is typically *declarative* (Lizardo, 2017) so that a person could pass as a "member" by overtly displaying (in talk or other public performance) such knowledge to an interested stranger (e.g., about how financial banks—superficially—work). Interactional expertise suffers from the "knowledge illusion," in that most people radically overestimate the knowledge they have about everyday institutional functioning, mainly because they have meta-knowledge that even though they may not possess the relevant knowledge, such know-how and more intricate understanding of the underlying institutional workings is indeed possessed by relevant specialized others out there, in a (distributed) "community of knowledge" (Rabb et al. 2016).

Contributory Expertise

Far fewer people will have *contributory* expertise to keep institutions going (Weber, 1913/1981). In contrast to interactional expertise, contributory expertise relies on non-declarative "knowledge-how" to maintain and reproduce institutional patterns (Lizardo, 2017). This knowledge is *tacit* because it is hard to put into context-free, easily communicable formats (Gascoigne & Thornton, 2014). This last feature also makes it hard to transfer contributory knowledge across pockets of institutional order and activity. In this way, the "vertical insulation"—in Reay's (2010) terms—of knowledge across individuals, with the requisite expertise encoded in implicit schemes of practical action, perception, and cognition (Bourdieu,

1980/1990), contributes to the typical state of "horizontal" insulation of knowledge and activities across settings, ecologies, and fields constitutive of most institutional orders.

Functionaries

Notably, the division between interactional and contributory experts in the population implies that all (centralized) "institutions" rely on a small cadre of contributory experts, which we refer to as *functionaries*. In using this term, we take inspiration from Alfred Weber's (1910/2007) much-neglected popular essay "*Der Beamte*" (typically translated into English as the "civil servant," "official," or "functionary"). While we borrow Alfred Weber's term, we do not subscribe to the substantive theory described there, in which an impersonal bureaucratic, machine-like apparatus absorbed dedicated officials and threatened to reduce all social life and all social action to that of colorless, robotic automata. In fact, we see this vision of (one facet of) institutionalization in the form of a mechanical self-reproducing apparatus as the one we wish to dispel, an image that is produced and reproduced by the very *invisibility* of the maintenance and repair labor of functionaries.

In this last respect, while in the contemporary world, functionaries are *usually* found ensconced within hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations, there is no one-to-one mapping between functionaries as a type of institutional actor and any particular organizational form or structure. Functionaries can exist within many organizational forms (collegial, hierarchical, network-like) and, within an organization, can occupy various roles, functions, and levels. Functionaries may even exist outside, betwixt, and between organizations, occupying various interstitial positions in "linked" inter-organizational ecologies or may even exist as "avatars" of one institutional order ensconced within another (Abbott, 2005).

Similarly, while many functionaries use their contributory expertise, as we will see later, to exercise a particular form of authority or domination, functionaries are not *necessarily* in the business of exercising power, authority, or domination over others, except when that exercise of power and authority is crucial to the type of institutional pattern they are in the job of

maintaining or repairing. In the end, whether functionaries are concentrated within particular forms of organization, tend to occupy specific positions or roles within organizations, or exercise particular forms of power, authority, or domination are empirical (and sometimes historical) questions, not ones to be decided from the armchair via definitional fiat.

What, then, are functionaries? Rintamäki et al. (2024, pp. 2–3) define functionaries as "elite actors responsible for the operation of the institution," noting that "functionaries are not only capable of socializing, maintaining traditions, and enforcing rules; they are also capable of making changes within an institution to defend the institution from unwanted disruption and deviant activities and practices." We endorse most aspects of this definition. However, whether functionaries are "elites" is itself an empirical question (in most cases, they are not elites, and in fact, may even "low status" according to society-wide metrics of prestige). It is, instead, the central role functionaries play in institutional maintenance, repair, and transformation that qualifies them as functionaries. Every academic in an American University who knows who *really* runs the department (typically a middle-aged woman with no advanced degrees) will have an idea of what we are talking about here.

In terms developed earlier, functionaries can be considered a special class of individuals who have extensive contributory expertise in the production and repair of institutional patterns within a given institutional domain of activity. This practical knowledge results from actively partaking in the (re)production process. Thus, functionaries (1) actively maintain a pattern and, as a result, develop (2) specialized contributory knowledge, allowing them to maintain the pattern and repair it when it is subject to natural processes of entropy and dissipation (Zucker, 1988) or is actively disrupted by maintainers of other patterns, such as professional armies. They use this knowledge to adapt administrative practices to maintain the institution's phenomenological relevance for the broader, non-specialist public. Otherwise, functionaries can radically repurpose these practices to create a new set of patterns. Compared to the rest of the population that does not satisfy these criteria, this class of actors is significantly smaller.

At the risk of oversimplification, the two criteria mentioned earlier highlight the role of functionaries in institutional stability and institutional change. We argue that, in maintaining these patterns, functionaries ensure they are confronted and "felt" by the majority of the non-contributory population; thus, functionaries are the link between the work of core actors in institutions and the typical externalizing phenomenology of the (non-functionary) folk. As a result, most of the population so affected comes to experience these as objective, durable, and stable, and even feels like they "live" in them; this generates the sense (among non-contributor interactional experts) that the pattern would persist even if no particular people were tending the ship. These are the traditional "container" institutional "sectors" of classical institutional theory, with the "power container" of the state being probably the most (experientially) typical one for most humans in recorded history (Giddens, 1987). Nevertheless, the (Western Catholic) "church," especially during counter-reformation efforts, was not far behind (Gorski, 2000). It is no wonder that states (or, more experientially likely, their armies) are also the source domain for so many abstract "social structures" that somehow stand opposed to "agency" (Martin, 2009).

The distributional approach invites us to consider institutionalization processes as dynamic and grounded in human cognition, feeling, activity, and materiality (Haack et al., 2019). Rather than thinking of institutionalization as establishing a static order (of activity, thinking, or feeling), the distributional approach proposes social, cultural, and material *entropy* as the norm (McDonnell, 2016). Most institutional "work," therefore, is (literally) closer to "housekeeping": Namely, the upkeep of institutional order from being overtaken by the inevitable "dirt," entropy, and disorder seeping in from the outside (Douglas, 1966). Even in so-called "high reliability" organizations (Vaughan, 2021), accidents, disruptions, and unanticipated consequences are "normal" (Perrow, 1999). All of this must be "continually countered by active intervention" (Zucker, 1988, p. 26), as even the observation of cultural stability is made possible by fleeting, incremental moments of creativity on the part of particular actors trying to maintain the semblance of a pattern (Taylor et al., 2019). Indeed, the

existence of committed "pattern reparation experts" may be a signal of the most potent form of institutionalization possible (Weber, 1913/1981).

However, our best-established theories typically ignore this housekeeping labor, consigning it to the realm of reproductive or repetitive work in favor of creative, agentic, or "entrepreneurial" work keyed to institutional change, innovation, and disruption. As Domínguez Rubio notes,

> Most modern theories and narratives of social and political change are told from the perspective of those who are in charge of imagining and producing the new…since they have been considered the only ones capable of productive political, economic, or social value. Meanwhile, the ordinary labor of the "others of creation"—e.g., housekeepers, cleaners, plumbers, care workers, mechanics, or [art] conservators—has been deemed irrelevant since it plays a "merely" reproductive role and therefore lacks any creative (and with it political, economic, or social) value (2020, p. 37).

In this paper, we argue that the dichotomy separating actors in charge of difference (innovation, creativity, or disruption) and repetition (repair, conservation, housekeeping) is misleading, as both functions are likely to be taken up by functionaries, and the latter is arguably more vital for the everyday life of institutions and organizations. For instance, committed institutional repair experts are likely, in their attempt to "fix" the malfunction, to produce "more" (but also perhaps a bit different) instances of the same pattern (Hilbert, 1987). We propose that, in the modal case, (contributory) knowledge and activity necessary to (re)produce patterns of regularized conduct are unevenly distributed and concentrated in a set of people who engage in the relevant reproductive activity. Note in this respect that while the "repair labor" (as a form of "institutional work") of institutional functionaries can be very much conspicuous and overt—especially when there are explicit threats to their authority and discretion (Micelotta & Washington, 2013)—our emphasis here is on the large part of the repair labor iceberg that remains safely out of the view of most people.

Two Kinds of Institutional Distribution

The distributional hypothesis implies that no single person can actively maintain all regular patterns of conduct, nor can they be a contributory expert in every possible pattern. Similarly, it is unlikely that every person will know how to produce all patterns and actively maintain them (Collins and Evans, 2008). Thus, the activities and knowledge-producing patterns are *unevenly* and *lumpily* distributed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 157–158; Carley, 1991, p. 332); people can participate in an institution without having "full knowledge" of all the regulatory, technical, and normative details that make it work. As Max Weber once noted,

> No ordinary consumer today has even proximate knowledge about the production techniques of the goods he uses daily; most do not even know of which materials and by what industry these goods are produced. The consumer is interested only in those expectations of practical importance for him regarding the performance of these artifacts. The same applies to social institutions such as the monetary system. The money user does not know how money actually acquires its remarkable singular qualities, for even the specialists argue strenuously about that (Weber 1913/1981, pp. 177–178).

Institutional patterns can be exhaustively accounted for by looking at the distribution of three elements: activity (Haslanger, 2018), knowledge (Reay, 2010), and structures of feeling (Williams, 2015). Patterns are maintained when those with the requisite contributory knowledge are committed to furthering the activity necessary to carry out the pattern, reinforcing the relevant patterns of thinking and doing and buttressing particular ways of seeing and feeling. We can focus on one critical formal characteristic of this distribution: its spread or concentration, yielding two ideal-typical patterns of institutionalization: *Decentralized* and *centralized*.

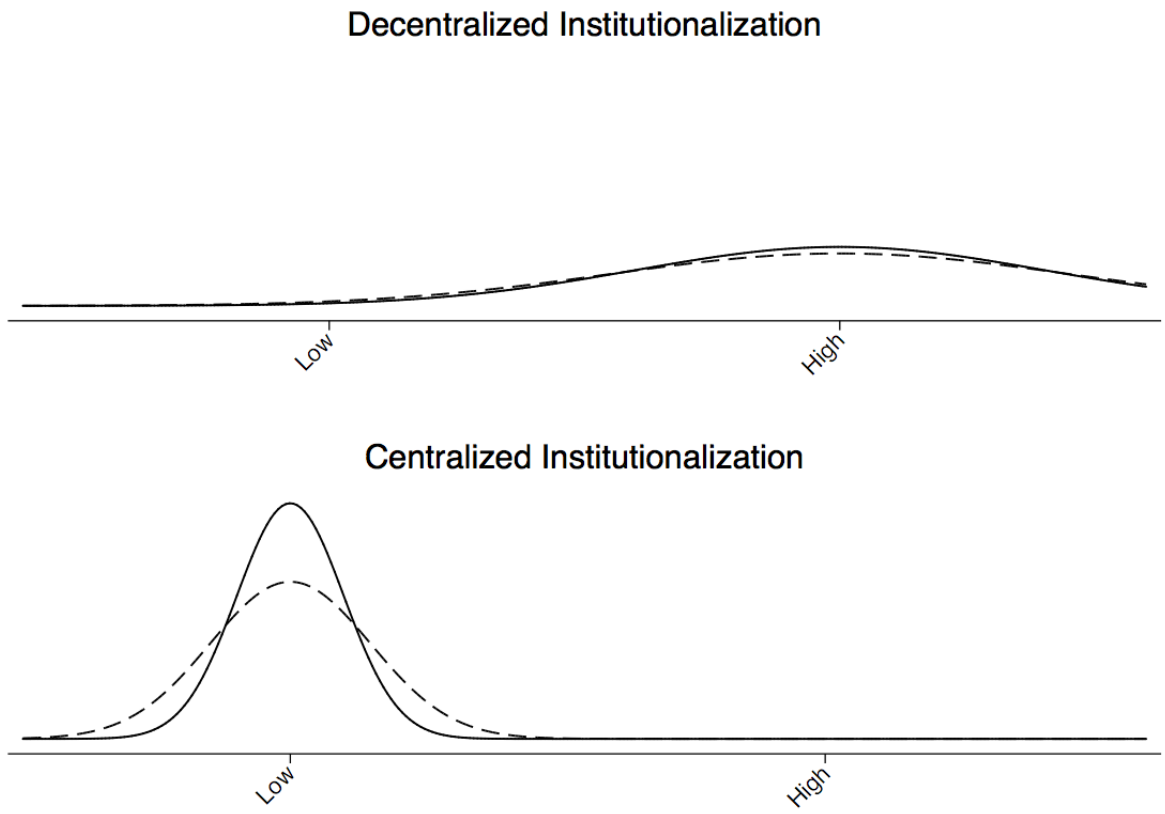

Figure 1. Ideal-Typical Distributions of Institutionalization

Note: The dashed line is the distribution of knowledge (i.e., contributory expertise). The solid line is the distribution of activity.

Decentralized Institutionalization

We begin with the (limiting) case of decentralized institutionalization, namely, when a set of patterns is maintained *evenly by most of the people* to whom the pattern can be ascribed. The theoretically interesting cases of decentralized institutionalization, which require deep expertise and commitment, are exceptional. Another set of commonplace instances, in which the pattern requires trivial amounts of energy and knowledge, is of lesser theoretical interest. Accordingly, we focus our discussion on the former kind.

For various reasons, pure cases of decentralized institutionalization are atypical. First, individuals have limited time and energy (McPherson, 2004). If most people contribute an equivalent amount of their day to reproducing a set of patterns, these patterns are

decentralized. The telling question is, if a person is selected at random, what is the probability they devote a significant portion of their day to cultivating whatever activities, feelings, and cognitions constitute a pattern? If the probability is high, this is a case of decentralized institutionalization. Second, individuals face knowing and learning limitations at a contributory level; we can only be experts at a few things. Here, the most economical form of knowledge is "knowing that" a pattern exists, being able to refer to it in a summary fashion, and perhaps maintaining minimal "interactional" expertise. "Knowing how" to produce a pattern (i.e., contributory expertise) is much more time and effort-intensive. One way to simplify this limiting factor is to conceive of knowledge as the extent to which an individual has the skills necessary to reproduce a set of patterns when required. If a person is selected at random, what is the probability that they know nearly everything there is to know about producing a pattern? Again, if this probability is high, this is decentralized institutionalization.

These two constraints suggest four propositions. First, the persistence of decentralized patterns is confined to a relatively small group, and nearly everyone in the group engages in the same activities and has similar knowledge. Therefore, if someone stops reproducing a pattern, any other member could replace them (i.e., minor specialization and high redundancy), paralleling Durkheim's (1933) argument for what constituted the strength (and weakness) of "mechanical" solidarity; mechanical solidarity is strong (in the interpersonal sense) but brittle in the macro-societal sense as groups can splinter off and sustain an alternative set of patterns on their own independently of the larger group they split off from (Breiger & Roberts, 1998). For instance, the pattern known as the "Cambridge University Boat Club Race" approaches the ideal-typical decentralized institution pattern; accordingly, most maintenance of this pattern does not require specifically designated functionaries or custodians; instead, predictable and routine instances of breakdown are repaired by members of the community acting in concert using various normalizing, negotiating, and social control strategies (Lok & de Rond, 2013).

Second, when a set of patterns extends beyond a few people, consistency will be

significantly reduced, and the relative "cost" of enacting the pattern (in terms of time and energy commitment) will increase. This type of institutionalization would exhibit much heterogeneity over space and time, but we may also see "the reinvention of many wheels" (Simon 2013:235). As noted earlier, the exception is when the pattern is easy to learn and enact. For example, nearly everybody in the West contributes to maintaining the "handshake" pattern for greeting people (a pattern radically disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic). The same goes for any low-cost coordination games and conventions in the philosophical tradition, like driving on the right-side of the road (Lewis, 1969). These practices are institutionalized in a decentralized way. They are exceptional because the number of contributory "experts" can be staggeringly large. In this respect, practices subject to decentralized institutionalization at scale, such as speaking one of the modern national languages (Anderson, 1991), are likely to be seen as "shallow" rather than "deep" (Sewell, 1992).

Third, those who devote most of their life and day to expertise-greedy decentralized patterns, and where the group maintaining the pattern is both small and highly identified with it, will also feel a strong sense of insider-outsider boundaries (Douglas, 1966). For decentralized institutionalization, the primary boundary is between "believers" and "nonbelievers." The primary boundary mechanism of interest is proselytization (or how nonbelievers are incorporated into the pattern) and excommunication (or how waning believers—or "free riders"—are removed from the group). The "outsiders" or "non-believers," however, are minimally impacted by the activity of "insiders," if at all.

Finally, the *objective* fact of the matter regarding whether a pattern is institutionalized in a decentralized manner may not correspond to people's *intuitions* in this respect. That is, the folk may think something is decentralized when, in fact, it is centrally institutionalized. The most conspicuous example, as argued by Putnam (1975), is the semantics of language with regard to natural kinds (and perhaps every kind of term). Most people believe that the semantic content of most terms is maintained in a largely undifferentiated pool of knowledge maintained by *every*

individual in the linguistic community. However, as Putnam argued, even for seemingly consensual natural kind terms (like "gold"), the ultimate meaning that fixes references may, in the end, be maintained by a select pool of "experts" (functionaries in our terms) to which the folk ultimately defer. There is thus a "division of linguistic labor" for fixing the references of terms subject to technical definitions as to their underlying essences (e.g., "generalized personality disorder") to which the folk do not have direct access; so even in the case of language—as intimated by Weber—institutionalized follows the centralized pattern.

Money is another social kind that is subject to both types of formal institutionalization dynamics. Consider local currencies (a.k.a. complementary currencies or LETS) (Grover, 2006; Lietaer & Dunne, 2013; Werner, 2008). These are often explicitly institutionalized in a decentralized manner, requiring almost full participation by the user population in maintenance and repair. Within the relevant population of a local currency system, a large proportion of the people engage in activities necessary to reproduce local currencies. Accordingly, decentralized institutional maintenance systems should exhibit much greater volatility, which is what we observe. For instance, how local communities structure their currency varies across space. For example, the Complementary Currency Resource Center (2016) tracks twenty-three different kinds of currency systems. Also, maintaining currency systems over time is often very uncertain. As Chris Sunderland, co-founder of the Bristol Pound, notes, "It is relatively easy to launch a local currency. It's much more difficult to sustain it" (Kermeliotis, 2014). Although in an already established local currency, more are required to maintain the currency if the system is to be successful (i.e., persistent): a greater proportion of the relevant population must continually engage in maintenance and proselytization. A challenge that even the longest-running local currency in the US, the *Ithaca Hour*, eventually failed to overcome (Khromov, 2011; Maurer, 2005). Therefore, this form of institutionalization runs into commitment and collective action problems.

Centralized Institutionalization

Centralized institutionalization occurs when a set of patterns is maintained by only a few people, with a much larger number affected by the patterns but with only interactional expertise in them (Weber, 1913/1981). Thus, we can recast our question: if a person is drawn at random, what is the joint probability they do not devote most of their day to sustaining a pattern, but at the same time know about the existence of the pattern? If the probability is high, this is a case of centralized institutionalization. The distribution of contributory expertise is likely even more unequally distributed than activity, familiarity, or feeling, typically because knowing how to produce a set of patterns is embodied in a few people, but also because no single person knows how to produce the entire set of patterns.

Even *within* the subset of people who actively contribute to enacting the pattern, knowledge of how to reproduce the patterns is itself cognitively "distributed" in Hutchins's (1995) sense, such that "running" an institution is closer to steering a large naval vessel than driving a car. Not one contributory expert is sufficient to sustain an institutional pattern. Actors may specialize in one fragment of the total pattern or another, and together, these specialists can produce the complete set of patterns, standing in contrast to decentralized institutionalization, in which nearly everyone in the relevant population has more or less comparable knowledge about a set of patterns (e.g., "call mom on mother's day"). We argue that this centralized institutionalization is likely to be the modal type, especially related to the most durable and historically significant sets of patterns, such as markets, politics, art, and science.

We propose three propositions regarding centralized institutionalization. First, unlike decentralized institutionalization, the number of people affected by centralized patterns can be enormous, even without losing consistency over time and space (Giddens, 1984), making the pattern more likely to persist. Second, although the boundary that divides insiders and outsiders remains important, centralized institutionalization includes a significant boundary between the "laity" and the "functionaries"—or, those who devote most of their time and

knowledge to a pattern and those who only devote a minimal amount (Weber, 1921-1922/1978, p. 251). It is here that most people can "take it for granted" that patterns will persist, yet they do not know how to sustain them (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). As C. Wright Mills once put it, "[E]veryone knows somebody has got to run the show… [o]thers do not care, and besides, they do not know how" (Mills, 1956, p. 294). For most, the insider-outsider boundary is less salient, and people are likely to feel that the pattern has a life of its own. Thus, while incorporating new people into the laity (through proselytization) remains an important mechanism, removing deviant actors from the laity (through excommunication) is less significant for centralized institutionalization. Instead, recruiting, training, and retaining functionaries—and cultivating a functionary's "ethos"—are the most effective organizational mechanisms of interest in centralized institutionalization (Schneider 1987; March and Simon 1993).

Consider national currency systems. The US Dollar (USD), for instance, is likely used by nearly all occupants of the United States. Although most U.S. residents use this currency, few actively engage in the processes that produce it, or even know how to produce the national currency if given the opportunity. Most know little about how national currencies are created, how our phones can interact with bank computers to transfer money into our accounts, how ATMs are stocked with cash and able to reconcile with distant banking centers, or what is needed for our checks to transfer money between two legally and geographically unconnected banks. Furthermore, our continued use of national currency does not confer this knowledge, and even among fiscal and monetary experts, it is unevenly distributed. Taking the printing of monetary notes as one aspect of the production of national currencies, a single company – De La Rue – plays a role in printing paper currency for the majority (about 140) of the nearly 200 nation-states[1] on the globe and of the 18-25 billion banknotes printed by private companies, De La Rue prints over a third of it (De La Rue plc, 2020; Tovey, 2015).

[1] The number of recognized nation-states varies depending on the source.

Functionaries in Centralized Institutions

The contributory activity of experts sustains institutional patterns, with the limiting case being everyone's expertise in a low-cost, maximally decentralized pattern (Collins & Evans, 2008). As noted earlier, in decentralized pattern maintenance and repair, contributory expertise and pattern-maintenance activity are (roughly) evenly distributed. With centralized maintenance and repair, the majority engage the downstream outcomes or products (as either "goods" or "bads") of the institution but are not involved in their creation and upkeep. Therefore, only interactional expertise is required from most, leaving the contributory role to a smaller set. By isolating the modal process of institutional upkeep and repair to a relatively small number of contributory experts, we can also derive tractable, observable microfoundations for well-researched meso-level mechanisms of institutional maintenance (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). This section details some of these micro-level, centralized institutionalization mechanisms, focusing on the few experts who keep institutions going, which we refer to as functionaries. This last task is crucial in institutional analysis, given the critical role centralized institutionalization plays in differentiated societies and the significance of "professionally mediated" institutionalization in the literature (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991).

Maintenance and Repair

Centralized institutionalization occurs when particular groups with extensive contributory expertise, embodied primarily in tacit knowledge, are responsible for maintaining a pattern. The practical knowledge of functionaries results from their recurring role in the (re)production process. Pattern maintenance requires a source of *motivation* for functionaries to "carry out" the pattern repeatedly and reliably (Abrutyn & Lizardo, 2022). Substantively, contributory institutional experts may be motivated to do so under two conditions. First, there is a felt *moral* obligation to the pattern, or otherwise an expected payoff for recreating the pattern. Second, contributory experts may sustain the pattern because they believe other

experts are committed to their maintenance; that is, they have a "third-order belief" that the pattern is seen as desirable (Correll et al., 2017). In centralized institutionalization, pattern maintenance does not require the majority to be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to maintain and repair the pattern. The motivation for pattern upkeep is an essential source of variation (and distinction) among functionaries. As a result of their motivated commitment to the pattern, functionaries develop specialized contributory expertise, enabling them to maintain and repair it. In this sense, the meso-level practices of embedding and routinizing (e.g., Currie et al., 2012)—i.e., the extension of the moral obligations and motivations for maintaining institutional patterns into day-to-day life (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006:230)—may constitute unique burdens for functionaries.

Repair is required when the pattern becomes vulnerable to undirected processes of entropy and dissipation (McDonnell, 2016; Zucker, 1988). Alternatively, the pattern could be actively disrupted by other functionaries (e.g., newcomers) interested in maintaining different patterns, or seeking to replace dominant ones, the core agonistic dynamic animating the various sociological traditions of field theory (Kluttz & Fligstein, 2016). In either case, functionaries use their expertise to either adapt administrative practices to preserve the phenomenological relevance of the pattern for the more extensive set of non-specialists (i.e., laity) or otherwise radically repurpose these practices to create a new set of patterns—forms of creative adaptation and repurposing that that are elsewhere called "enabling work" (Riehl et al., 2018; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Compared with people who do not meet these criteria, contributory institutional experts are a much smaller group. In this way, the distributional approach highlights the role of functionaries in institutional stability *and* institutional change. This section delineates the role of functionaries for stability—i.e., the development, maintenance, and repair of patterns. The next section examines patterns of institutional change initiated by functionaries. In their role as pattern-maintainers, functionaries ensure most large-scale institutional patterns, from militarized policing to routine taxation (Lawrence and

Suddaby, 2006), are confronted and "felt" as real by the non-contributory majority. As a result, most people affected by the pattern experience it as objective, durable, and stable regardless of whether they approve of the pattern or not. They even feel like they "live in" it, generating the sense (among non-contributors) that the pattern would persist even if no particular people were operating the ship.

Pattern Reification

In an early intervention into the discourse on "measuring culture," Swidler and Jepperson (1994) argued that cultural elements lie on a continuum from *living* to *dead*. Some are highly contested and contestable (and therefore living); others are highly institutionalized and taken for granted (and therefore dead). In making this argument, they suggest, in passing, a distinction between "most people" and "specialists" as it relates to institutions:

> Perhaps some *specialists* directly debate, manage, or reiterate the defining rules that make an entity a university: judges who must decide whether some organization calling itself a university can really claim tax exemption, state legislatures attempting to enhance the stature of their state colleges by renaming them. Codified in charters and laws are articulated rules that make a set of relations a university, a corporation, or a marriage. But for *most people* these are simply objective structures, not matters of 'culture'. Our point is that they are indeed culture, but culture *congealed* in forms that require less by way of *maintenance*, ritual reinforcement, and symbolic elaboration than the softer (or more 'living') realms we usually think of as cultural (Jepperson & Swidler, 1994, pp. 362–363, italics added).

In this passage, Swidler and Jepperson provide a vivid picture of both the phenomenological feel of centralized institutional patterns (as congealed, dead, or static) and their strong dependence on the hidden-from-view labor of functionaries that belies that status since, from the functionaries' perspective, institutions are live, fragile, and always dependent on someone (namely, themselves) "showing up." Centralized institutions thus lead a double life. Malleable, vulnerable, and in constant flux from the viewpoint of the small group of pattern-maintaining functionaries, congealed, big, powerful, and just "out there" for most of

us. Centrally institutionalized patterns require Weberian "specialists" (whether they are truly "without spirit" (Weber, 2001, p. 124) is an empirical question) who engage in direct and deliberate pattern maintenance (see also DiMaggio 1988:14). For functionaries, the patterns will seem more "living" and perhaps "softer," "malleable," "fragile," and far less taken for granted. For "most people," the same patterns are taken-for-granted objective structures, sometimes decried (e.g., courts, the IRS), but typically ignored or kept in abeyance until they become relevant.

In *Economy and Society*, Weber ([1922] 1978:221, 234–36, 251, 425–65, 948–52, 967–88, 1314–1447) identifies numerous historical examples of functionaries maintaining institutional patterns in statecraft, military, private enterprise, charitable organizations, and religion. For Weber, the critical distinction between the functionary and the laity was the form of expertise commanded by the functionary. What linked all the distinct functionaries together, however, was a committed purpose in institution maintenance: Namely, to act as the bureaucratic vehicles via which "objective" tasks are carried out:

> Bureaucratization offers above all the optimum possibility for carrying through the principle of specializing administrative functions according to purely objective considerations. Individual performances are allocated to functionaries who have specialized training and who, by constant practice increase their expertise. "Objective" discharge of business primarily means a discharge of business according to calculable rules and "without regard for persons." (Weber 1922/1978, p. 975 original emphasis omitted)

Interestingly, in carrying out tasks perceived by the laity to be "objective"—and sometimes even seemingly "disinterested" (Bourdieu, 1994/1998)—functionaries also work to perpetuate the notion that institutions are discrete entities "out there" in the world—containers, substances—that exist above and beyond people and their upkeep and repair activities; in Meyer and Jepperson's (2000, p. 116) memorable words, in "enacting" institutional patterns, functionaries pull off the trick of seeming to be "agents of no real principal." While people exposed to institutional patterns tend to reify them as objective entities more or less spontaneously, functionaries (in service of their duties) seek to generate this same impression

more strategically.

Institutional Work

Besides knowledge and motivation, the other way in which we may distinguish functionaries from the laity is in the *work* functionaries carry out to ensure that the majority of non-specialists rely on these patterns and "take them for granted" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). We point to two general (but not exhaustive) types of "institutional work" (Simon 2013) by which functionaries achieve pattern maintenance: (1) *administrative work*, whereby the functionaries handle the background, often mundane task of keeping the machinery of institutionalization operational and producing the expected physical evidence that the institution continues to function (e.g., sending and reading emails, disseminating forms, replenishing office resources, etc.), and (2) *regulative/coercive work*, whereby the functionaries exert "coercive pressure" on non-specialists and, more exceptionally, other non-compliant functionaries—whether physical or "psychic" as noted by Weber (1913/1981, p. 163)—when the required adherence to the pattern (however minimal) is slipping or is being directly or indirectly challenged.

Institutional upkeep work includes both passive reminders of social expectations (such as when a university administrator emails faculty and staff about codes of conduct when representing the university off campus), legal structures such as formal rules and laws, and perhaps even physical force or violence, a task which, naturally, may be delegated to its own set of functionaries or "violence specialists" (Collins 2008). In this last respect, we should not equate "institutionalization" with the *lack* of regulation or coercion regarding the maintenance of that pattern among the laity—as in some strands of "cultural-cognitive" institutionalism (Scott, 2013, p. 79ff). This tendency is counterproductive, given that most institutional theories, from Durkheim onward, highlight the importance of regulative work in maintaining institutional patterns through meso-level practices such as policing, deterrence, and mythologizing (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006:230). That said, the mundane tasks and physical evidence involved in administrative work are often overlooked in institutional theory, yet they

are proportionally more significant for institutional stability.

If functionaries devote most of their activities to reproducting and upkeeping one set of patterns, it follows that they cannot devote the same amount of time to reproducing other sets of patterns (Shi et al. 2017). Thus, becoming a functionary places one on a specialized occupational trajectory, and these trajectories sustain the patterns. The relatively totalizing role of "the priest" as the primary functionary in the Catholic Church is an extreme but clear expression of this tendency. We may also predict that, unlike the lay majority, who can take both the pattern's existence and persistence for granted, functionaries are likely more intimately aware of the practical and ethical complexity of pattern maintenance and the importance of their active role in this maintenance.

In centralized regimes, only a few people maintain central forms of knowledge and activity; without these few, the contributory expertise may be lost entirely; this could be simple, like the proper pronunciation of the ineffable Tetragrammaton (Wilkinson, 2015), or more extensive, such as much of Ancient Athenian religious practice. As only Athenian priests knew the proper way to perform ritual speeches, this contributory knowledge was lost, and only residual traces of their activities were documented. Priests are noted in the written record for "their specialist role as ritual speakers on behalf of the *polis*, rather than in an attempt to preserve the content of their speech" (Hitch, 2011, p. 118). While serving lifelong tenures is one strategy for continuity (e.g., typical in the Athenian priesthood), specialized socialization mechanisms are needed to pass on expertise lest it dies with those few (Simon 2013).

Similarly, there may be "dirty little details" involved in maintenance, and functionaries decide at their discretion that the laity need not know of such unpleasantries, especially if such knowledge threatens the laity's "belief" in (the unproblematic functioning of) the institution (Bourdieu, 1980). Centralized institutions develop bifurcations of knowledge into "esoteric" (what few know) and "exoteric" (what "everybody" knows) kinds. The former includes technically complex (and probably banal) knowledge, and the latter involves morally or ethically

compromising knowledge about the "real workings" of the institution, to which only a few insiders are privy. Horizontal knowledge-insulation processes keep esoteric knowledge from the prying eyes and ears of the laity (Reay, 2010). Functionaries thus may possess exclusive views to the backstage where "the sausage is made." Revelation of this insider knowledge to the laity can disrupt (and, in extreme cases, pose existential threats to) the pattern. For instance, dramatic deconversion and disaffiliation processes among Catholics following the revelations of decades of pedophilia among priests (e.g., Almási-Szabó, 2024) show that no pattern, however old and robust, is invulnerable to "loss of faith" among those who engage it mainly via interactional expertise.

Functionaries must also be recruited, motivated, and retained. Even if someone learns what is necessary to perform as a functionary, the set of patterns would still decay without a critical mass of people with this knowledge being *motivated* to engage in the activity. The job of specialized pattern maintenance performed by functionaries could be carried out in a purely perfunctory, ritualistic way, driven primarily by the extrinsic motivations provided by the institution to keep functionaries from shirking their repair and maintenance work (Merton 1940). However, it is unlikely that institutional patterns could be adequately maintained if all functionaries operated this way. Instead, as Weber argued, successful centralized institutional patterns are likely to be maintained and repaired by functionaries who develop an appropriate "ethos" concerning the pattern (McDonnell, 2020, p. 9ff). Functionaries that do not develop such an ethos may leave the field or fail to maintain the patterns.

Furthermore, if the social conditions for the production of this ethos are weakened, the recruitment of properly motivated functionaries can be disrupted, as work on priestly vocations suggests (Fishman, Gervasoni, and Stater 2015). In addition, institutional patterns maintained (and spread) by "true-believing" functionaries will have a competitive advantage over patterns being supported for largely ritualistic or extrinsic reasons. These latter patterns may appear dominant yet "collapse" rapidly in the face of competition from patterns fostered by alternative

cadres of true-believing functionaries. Especially if the latter is also committed "evangelizers" (Stinchcombe, 2002), and news about this spread among the laity (e.g., aided by very public acts of others enacting different patterns and challenging the old patterns), negating their previous belief in the externality and obduracy of the old pattern in the population at large (Kuran, 1991).

Institutional Change

The distributional approach and the concept of the functionary offer several implications for how we approach institutional change (Clemens & Cook, 1999). This topic has, of course, received considerable attention in the literature. In the typical story, institutional entrepreneurs break out of the dialectic of institutionalization – e.g., by straddling "domains" or exploiting "contradictions" and the like (see Rao et al., 2005) – altering the already established pattern. In a variant of this story, entrepreneurs operate at the "interstices" (Morrill 2006) of a much "larger" institution or even "larger" institutional or bureacratic field (McDonnell, 2020). Non-entrepreneurs more or less mindlessly reproduce a practice, even when it is not in their "best interest" to do so (Goldenstein & Walgenbach, 2019). In this literature, via their structural position, the entrepreneur either possesses a heroic perspective of the field or possesses a high capacity to "apprehend institutional contradictions" and can thus identify viable pathways for change—as opposed to the more clearly antagonistic practice of "disruption" (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006:235)—and accumulate the resources necessary to instigate change (Voronov & Yorks, 2015); this cascade may lead to "endogenous" institutional change; namely the alteration of dominant patterns by institutional insiders "from within" (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006).

By acknowledging the importance of functionaries operating across or at the interstices of multiple institutional domains, the distributional approach draws attention to a relatively undertheorized set of processes that account for institutional change. We outline three theoretical implications. We define entrepreneurship as the concerted effort by a functionary to mobilize knowledge in the service of producing more or less permanent change in an existing

set of patterns. This definition of entrepreneurship is general enough to encompass all forms, whether economic, especially as developed in neo-Schumpeterian and Kirznerian approaches in Austrian economics (Kirzner, 1997), or cultural or "institutional" kind (Battilana et al., 2009; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). In the distributional approach, an act of entrepreneurship happens if those reproducing a set of patterns change one or more of the patterns, combine existing ones with a new set of patterns, or expand the pattern's reach to those previously unexposed (Rao & Giorgi, 2006). Non-distributional imageries rely on the notion of "logic" and "logic-blending" to account for institutional change (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). For instance, Rao and Giorgi argue that what is involved in institutional entrepreneurship is "exploit[ing] the pre-existing logic within the social system, or import[ing] a logic from a different domain" (2006:270). In the distributional approach, change is not conceived as the alteration of a "logic" (or template, code, recipe, etc.) abstracted from action, cognition, and feeling, but rather as the modification of particular local practices and expertise. This proposition follows from the grounding of institutionalization in the functionary's routine activities and accrued contributory expertise. Functionaries are less likely than the laity to "take for granted" the production of a pattern of conduct; what is "dead culture" for the laity is very much "alive" for the functionary (Jepperson & Swidler, 1994). Therefore, those at the heart of institutional activity (and often the most intrinsically committed) will also be those most likely to alter the pattern of conduct, often in service of a pattern's reproduction.

In the distributional approach, the extent to which a pattern has "changed," or how novel a particular pattern may be, cannot be established by comparison to some global standard because there is no "global" set of institutional containers (e.g., "the state," "the economy," "religion," and so on) to be ostensibly pointed to. A pattern's novelty (or lack thereof) is based on a (temporally, spatially, and socially) situated perspective; what is novel here may be old news over there. The extent to which someone is entrepreneurial matters only for those already familiar, even if only minimally, with the local patterns, implying that, despite being vulnerable

to volatile church/sect dynamics (Troeltsch 1992), decentralized institutions are unlikely to experience entrepreneurship as practical innovation. Even though we expect far more pattern variability in decentralized institutionalization, the relevant actors are unlikely to perceive a potential entrepreneurial "project" as new or useful. Since there are very few stable and unique positions in a decentralized field, it is unlikely (but not impossible) that the pre-existing activities and knowledge structures defining the field are even perceived as inefficient or problematic in the first place. In contrast, centralized institutions are far more likely to generate the phenomenological experience of entrepreneurship and "permanent revolution" associated with endogenous change (Bourdieu, 1998-2000/2017). There is a role complementarity between the functionary and the entrepreneur.

Functionaries are structurally and culturally equipped to see "cultural holes," opportunities, and contingencies should they arise. Second, with highly centralized distributions of contributory expertise and activity, only a relatively small number of functionaries need to alter their activity to generate significant institutional change. The innovation travels quickly among functionaries and is later imposed on the (complacent) majority, with or without their knowledge. Opposition from the laity occurs only when changes in the pattern of conduct require changes in the interactional expertise they have previously gained.

Two Types of Institutional Change

In the distributional approach, the most socially consequential types of institutional change are those that affect the *distribution of knowledge and activity*. However, most contemporary institutional theories focus on *content-based mechanisms* to account for change—here, we borrow the Simmelian distinction between *form* and *content* (Lizardo, 2019). Thus, while non-distributional approaches focus on the transformation of substantive contents, distributional approaches bring attention to changes in the relative insulation of knowledge, cognitions, and structures of feelings, focusing on processes of knowledge redistribution and

re-organization (on the horizontal plane) and processes of knowledge redescription and explicitation (on the vertical plane).

Substantive Change

From the content-based perspective, institutional change happens when established logics, worldviews, or schemas are (1) brought into places where they were absent before (Rao & Giorgi, 2006), (2) when new logics are produced by blending two pre-existing ones ("hybrid logics") (Wry et al., 2014), or when new people are exposed to a pre-existing set of logics or worldviews (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). These substantive mechanisms are importation, recombination, and expansion, respectively (see Figure 2, right).

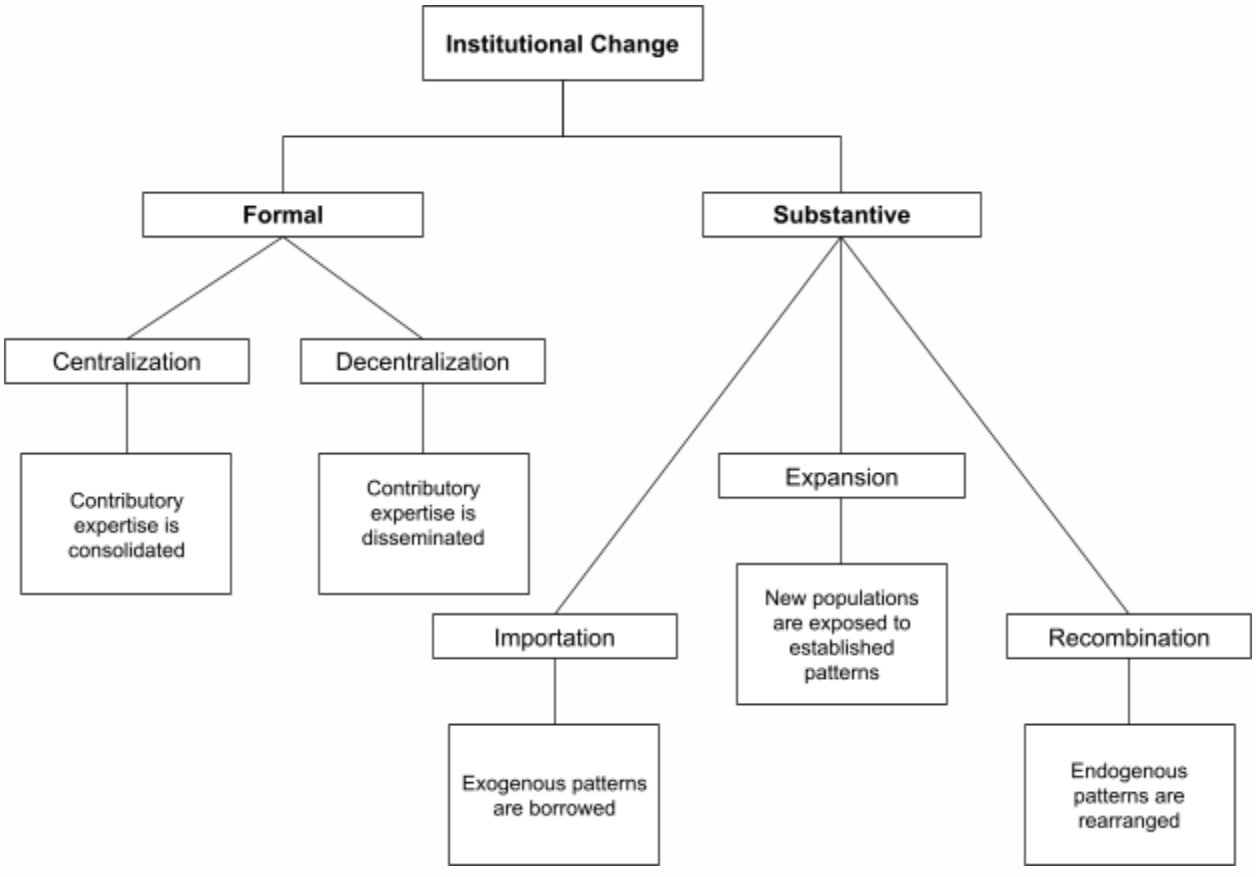

Figure 2. Types of Institutional Change

For example, in a study of education publishing, Thornton and Ocasio (1999) find that the dominant "editorial logic" (characterized by reputation and professionalism) of the 1950s and 1960s was displaced by the importation of a "market logic" (marked by market position and financial performance) during the 1970s and onward. In the distributional approach, this amounts to the establishment of new patterns by a new cadre of functionaries unfamiliar with the old patterns, requiring retraining incumbent functionaries or recruiting new functionaries already possessing the new contributory expertise.

Recombination involves "blending" (rather than replacing) the new "logic" with the old "logic" (Lounsbury et al. 2021). Recombination is commonly construed as a "shock" introduced to the field in question, where the shock can be either internal (Rao et al., 2003) or external (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005). From a distributional perspective, recombination occurs when a new pattern of conduct emerges from "mixing" two or more pre-existing patterns by a given set of functionaries—typically a pattern endogenous to the field with a pattern exogenous to it. Thus, recombination leads to two or more groups of functionaries joining to maintain the emergent pattern or retraining an existing group of functionaries into a hybrid order. Incumbent functionaries may be reluctant to adopt new contributory expertise, especially when external shocks prompt recombination beyond their immediate control.

Expansion involves the adoption or diffusion of a pattern of conduct by new populations, or the forced assimilation of new populations, who are now impacted by an exogenous pattern of conduct they had no say in creating (Lounsbury et al., 2021). Diffusion is a critical concern in the "world society" tradition (Meyer et al., 1997), whereby patterns that emerge in one location (typically the West) serve as "models" adopted by governmental and non-governmental organizations around the globe. Commensurate with the distributional approach, this literature suggests that the "adoption" of new institutional contents (Rogers, 2010) is achieved via the demographic transfer of those already with contributory expertise or the systematic training of a local cadre of functionaries who then serve as "carriers" of world cultural patterns (Kalberg,

2004). The spread of a pattern of conduct also occurs, for example, with state territory expansion, whereby people are (more or less) forced to acquire at least minimal interactional knowledge necessary to navigate new requirements.

Formal Change

As noted, non-distributional approaches tend to emphasize "content-based" mechanisms in accounting for institutional change to the neglect of changes emerging from the "formal" (distributional) properties of the knowledge and activities that institutions depend on (see Figure 2, left). These kinds of institutional change are as likely to feature innovation, contestation, creativity, and conflict as the substantive mechanisms highlighted in recent discussions. The two kinds of formal institutional change naturally track our two types of steady-state institutionalization. First, a previously centralized set of patterns may become increasingly decentralized. The second goes in the reverse direction: A previously decentralized pattern comes to be "hoarded," expanded, and refined by a set of incipient functionaries, creating a bifurcation among people separating the functionaries from the laity.

Centralized to Decentralized

The transition from centralization to decentralization is perhaps the most drastic form of institutional change, as demonstrated by the well-worn example of the Protestant Reformation and the spread of literacy in early modern Europe (Eisenstein, 2005). The centralization and hierarchy of the Catholic Church led many to overlook that, as Weber argues, "the Reformation meant less the entire removal of ecclesiastical authority over life than the replacement of the previous form of authority by a different one" (1905/2002, p. 2 original emphasis). Medieval Catholicism is exemplary of centralized institution. Control of the majority of the relevant population involved "an extremely relaxed, practically imperceptible, and scarcely more than formal authority." As Weber argues, being Catholic made far fewer demands on the everyday lives of followers. Most of the (ritual) work of producing the "Catholic Church" was

consolidated in the hands of far fewer functionaries and kept away from the masses. Should members of the laity directly challenge institutional patterns, designated authorities (e.g., the Pope and Cardinals) will ensure mechanisms are in place to enforce compliance and repair the pattern, "punishing heretics, but treating sinners gently" (Weber, 1905/2002, p. 2)).

Protestantism, in contrast, was founded on the "repudiation" of distant and relaxed control in favor of "an infinitely burdensome and earnest regimentation of the conduct of life [*Lebensführung*], which penetrated every sphere of domestic and public life to the greatest degree imaginable" (1905/2002, p. 2). Most members of the relevant population had to invest considerable time and effort in training to maintain the new pattern, a key signature of decentralized institutionalization. No activity, even previously "profane" ones (most importantly, for Weber, work and industry), escaped the implications of the pattern – "penetrat[ing] every sphere of domestic and public life" (Weber, 1905/2002, p. 2). Work went from being a "curse," and a "burden," and thus outside of *la vie religieuse*, in the old pattern, to being a central part of the new pattern in the form of a "calling." Although many knew how to reproduce the patterns of conduct that they thought made up their faith, they likely also felt it to be potentially fragile, requiring everyone to have the extrinsic or intrinsic motivation necessary to devote time to its reproduction, requiring "strong" (and for some unbearable) social monitoring and control systems precisely designed to punish "shirkers" who were not doing their fair share of institutional upkeep (Iannaccone, 1994), a mechanism quite absent (because superfluous) in Catholicism.

Centralized institutional distributions like Catholicism incorporate many people with relatively high fidelity to the original patterns of conduct. Despite the contemporary Catholic Church boasting a membership of one billion (counting three-times-a-year members), a Catholic should be able to attend mass in Vatican City, Manila, Madrid, or Boston and identify a few dramatic differences in overall conduct. In contrast, even as most significant (especially "mainline") Protestant denominations have retained the trappings of centralized pattern

maintenance, evidence of "institutional legacies" (Greve & Rao, 2014) of their decentralized origins is abundant. For instance, identifying core "Protestant" practices and beliefs is relatively problematic (Green, 1996; McNeill, 1926; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). Even within more delimited denominations, such as contemporary Evangelicals (Dayton & Johnston, 2001; Guth et al., 1988), the services of one Evangelical church are likely to differ from those of another Evangelical church in the same city in significant ways (e.g., the relative participation of women). Finally, while both Protestantism and Catholicism are subject to controversy over practice, interpretation, scriptural reading, and values, only in Protestantism do we observe periodic "schisms" and "church-sect" split dynamics, whereby a new set of actors, having all the knowledge to produce the pattern among themselves decide to "pack it up" and choose the "exit" option to form a new (labeled) pattern (Troeltsch, 1992).

Decentralized to Centralized

Contemporary attempts to "democratize" access to and the production of scientific knowledge represent an incipient (and obviously not yet successful) attempt to decentralize a centralized pattern (McCormick, 2009). However, the *longue duree* of Western science followed the opposite path, beginning as a decentralized gentlemanly hobby among a set of (usually aristocratic) equals (non-experts made many early scientific discoveries in their spare time), and turning into the unwieldy, anti-democratic, centralized "Golem" that it is today (Collins and Pinch 1998). Indeed, the decentralized nature of early Western science has led historians of science to frequently question what, exactly, they are historians *of* (Daston & Most, 2015, p. 382), when Western science began (Lindberg, 2008, p. 1), and the extent to which conceptions of what constituted "Western science" was the product of classification practices within the Western world specifically or was influenced by global perceptions of Western science, especially in nineteenth-century Egypt and China (Elshakry, 2010, p. 102).

The functionaries in the early decentralized era of Western science mainly were American and British Protestant missionaries who incorporated Western science into their

proselytization—British missionary John Fryer started one of the first science magazines in China in the late 1870s, for instance (Elshakry, 2010).[2] These missionaries are exemplars of functionaries during a period of decentralized institutionalization: experts who maintain patterns of little consequence for "outsiders," but whose entrepreneurial goal is to expand the cultural power of their set of patterns to larger populations, so that participation will evoke similar meanings across those populations (Lizardo, 2016).

Now consider modern "bureaucratized" Western science, with contributory expertise typically reserved for highly-trained professional scientists. Being seen as a credible scientist stems, foremost, from educational attainment: the ability to work in science flows from academic training, leading to a tight coupling between the supposed ability to conduct science and credentialism, or at least using academic credentials as a "closure" mechanism to limit employment opportunities to select status groups (Tholen, 2020, pp. 286, 289). People can be divided into those who possess a high level of contributory expertise in the pattern (the scientists, data analysts, engineers, professors, etc.) and those who now depend on these functionaries to "see" the particular pattern (whether wanted or unwanted) reproduced. This newly formed "laity" may only possess interactional expertise with respect to the new, more complex pattern and cease being contributory participants (as they were in the decentralized stage).

Centralization and Hierarchy

Centralization and bifurcation of people into functionaries and laity imply an increase in "hierarchy." In the distributional approach, however, hierarchy and centralization are analytically distinct. Knowing that a pattern is centrally institutionalized tells us that its maintenance also depends on any given configuration of power relations. The concentration of expertise and responsibility for institutional upkeep, maintenance, and repair on functionaries

[2] Protestant missionaries were even one of the early adopters of the "Western science" label itself (Elshakry, 2010, p. 102expertise typically reserved for highly trained)

is not equivalent to the concentration of authority in the same group (Weber [1922] 1978:948–9).

Centralized institutionalization may result in a traditional hierarchy in which the majority is at the will of a powerful minority because they have monopolized the means of producing a set of patterns, as was likely the case with the emergence of historical state systems (Mann, 1986). Alternatively, the majority may afford the leisure of ignoring how certain institutionalized patterns are maintained and appreciate the various outputs produced by functionaries. Some of these downstream goods, such as the outputs of human resource offices, may even serve a hierarchy-attenuating function. However, functionaries may realize that, as the few with the requisite knowledge, they can use their unique position to gain power (Dobbin & Sutton, 1998), providing an incentive to further manipulate knowledge distribution in their favor. For instance, priests' monopoly over the "literacy" pattern and its functional use for large-scale coordination and the "disciplining" of large populations by state authorities gave this class more power than we might otherwise expect (Giddens, 1987).

Conclusion

We examine the relatively neglected image of institutions as *distributions* of knowledge and expertise across people (Carley, 1991, p. 332; Reay, 2010). Specifically, we argue that institutionalizing any set of patterns involves a reorganization or radical change in the distribution of activities and knowledge. We contrast this "formal" approach to the analysis of institutions and institutionalization with the substantive imagery dominant in the literature, where change occurs via the creative recombination and bricolage of institutional elements by agentic actors who bridge institutional boundaries or occupy the interstices of institutional spheres.

Notably, the distributional approach is concerned with theorizing institutional *process* over established patterns, puts its focus on the routine work of upkeep, maintenance, and, every so often, the transformation of institutional patterns, localizes and theorizes the origins and

motivations of institutional entrepreneurs, and aims to provide strong micro-foundations for processes of institutional emergence, maintenance, and change. Our proposed approach is broadly ecumenical, drawing liberally from classic sociological institutionalism (including neo-and contemporary institutionalist approaches), agency-centric work in management and organizational studies (inclusive of embedded agency and institutional work perspectives), and relatively under-exploited lines of thinking in the classical tradition of social-phenomenology and Weberian sociological theory.

In the distributional imagery, patterns of institutionalization can be exhaustively accounted for by considering the distribution of two elements: Activity and knowledge. First, (contributory) knowledge and activity necessary to (re)produce patterns of regularized conduct are *unevenly distributed* and often concentrated in the hands of specialists or, following Alfred Weber (1910/2007), *functionaries*. Second, two steady-state distributional outcomes are empirically likely, which we refer to as *centralized* and *decentralized* institutionalization. Decentralized institutionalization is constrained to relatively small communities (due to a bottleneck in knowledge acquisition and behavioral commitment). It is subject to "church/sect" dynamics, which guarantee field-like dynamism but also lead to instability. Centralized institutionalization can enjoy economies of scale is relatively low cost, can be embodied in habits and routines, and remains largely in the background of attention for the laity making up part of the "common sense" of how things get done. The upkeep role of functionaries (e.g., a literate priesthood) builds the "big" centralized institutions (e.g., religion, debt economies, the state) for long temporal scales (e.g., millennia). Functionaries are central to the distributional formulation, underscoring their role in the ongoing "upkeep" of institutions and offering a new perspective on the routine affinity between stability and change.

A Distributional Research Agenda

In practice, a research agenda for a distributional approach to institutional analysis can be divided into the (1) formal and (2) substantive aspects of institutionalized patterns of

conduct, followed by a consideration of the (3) intellectual and practical significance of studying functionaries. First, analysts must specify whether patterns of interest are centralized or decentralized, as this determines whether we seek out functionaries (as in most current work in organizational studies of expert and professional fields) or whether those sampled at random are equally suited as informants. For instance, Small's (2004) study of "Villa Victoria" could be seen as an examination of decentralized patterns maintaining a particular "narrative" of the neighborhood; as such, local sampling of lay informants was adequate.

There is also the question of whether studying centralized institutions (or the centralization of a previously decentralized institutional pattern) ipso facto means that we must study power-dynamics and hierarchy. As noted, before, centralization is empirically distinct from hierarchy. A movement toward either centralization or decentralization can be accompanied by either a decrease or intensification of hierarchical distinctions, raising the question: Under what circumstances those who monopolize contributory knowledge—and therefore considerable influence over patterns—are both at the bottom of a hierarchy, thus engaging in institutional reproduction and their subjugation simultaneously? In the standard container/substance approach, this is most people, most of the time—save for the few heroic change agents. In the distributional approach, however, this becomes a critical empirical question.

Second, both centralized and decentralized patterns must deal with recruitment and training (Schneider 1987). However, some decentralized patterns are greedy, requiring a lot of time and energy from all (Shi et al., 2017); the continuous addition of new members to the fold and the placement of procedures and safeguards ensure that new members are trained to reproduce the pattern (e.g., "socialization"). Protestant evangelicalism is a prototypical example of this (Smilde, 2007). Similarly, turnover and retention will be a concern for the persistence of both kinds of institutionalization (Shi et al., 2017), but for centralized patterns, turnover matters primarily for functionaries. The majority can come and go—e.g., immigration and

emigration for nation-states—without much change. However, demographic shifts among functionaries pose a prime threat to institutional persistence, such as the Catholic priestly recruitment crisis (Fishman et al. 2015). Thus, research should examine the mechanisms by which functionaries are retained, particularly after investing time and resources to acquire contributory knowledge. In addition, deinstitutionalization and even the "death" of some institutions could be recast as studies of the failure of mechanisms for recruiting, socializing, and retaining functionaries (Schneider 1987).

As bottlenecks of institutional reproduction and change, a primary question is where functionaries come from—also a classic Weberian question. Such a question dovetails with the renaissance study of elites in sociology (e.g., Khan, 2012), in particular, those considering the educational and career pipelines of functionaries: how certain people get these positions and what sort of contributory knowledge they acquire along the way, but also what happens when contributory experts may be "overproduced" for the currently available roles. Although presidents, prime ministers, and CEOs are perhaps more typical functionaries—and of primary concern for power-elite theorists—they are not always the most consequential, as we must also look to "the captains of their higher thought" (Mills, 1956, p. 4). Thus, scrutinizing "pipelines" is of utmost importance for a distributional approach, not only for quintessential cases of centralized institutionalization but also for maintaining (and changing) the myriad decentralized patterns. In this way, the distributional approach also has implications for other areas of sociology. Consider, for instance, mass incarceration in the United States. Rather than consider this trend as precipitated by changes in intangible logics or templates, recent research has revealed that prosecutorial discretion—that is, the directed and "free" activity of flesh and blood functionaries—played a crucial role in the rise in rates of incarceration (Pfaff, 2017), a pattern not confined to the United States (Luna & Wade, 2012). The same discretionary activity by a new breed of functionaries is also largely responsible for recent decarceration trends.

What the distributional approach entails, however, is that real institutional change is not

an abstract process of swapping one logic or template for another but of constraining the activity of functionaries (by using other functionaries) and reforming the organizations in which functionaries acquire their contributory knowledge and hone their upkeep and maintenance activities.

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