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## Actors and Actorhood in Institutional Theory

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Debates on institutions in organizational analysis have been longstanding and, despite the diversity of perspectives, they have been generally informed by an effort to explain the interaction between human agency and the normative structures underpinning institutional behaviour. The three Point - Counterpoint papers presented here seek to reflect on what actorhood means in institutional theory. More specifically, they ask: How do people experience institutions? How do they internalize and enact particular institutional arrangements? How they construct and communicate the institutional orders they are part of?

The article by **Voronov** and **Weber** (2020) argues for putting people at the centre of understanding and evaluating institutions. The authors develop a phenomenological perspective on actorhood that fully acknowledges the ‘humanity’ of *persons*, conceived as “humans with a reflective capacity and sense of self, who engage with multiple institutions through the performance of institutional roles.” The authors maintain that other perspectives on micro-foundations are limiting, conceptually and normatively, because they reduce human beings to *actors*, entities that are constituted as roles within a particular institution, and imply either a duality of institution and actor, or the complete absorption of human experience into institutional roles. The paper maintains that at the level of the person, people routinely partake in diverse institutions that pertain to different domains of life and thus develop meta-institutional experience. There is never a perfect fusion between the person and the role, but rather social performances of variable authenticity.

The ontological distinction between person and actor has important implications for our understanding of individual experiences of institutions. Phenomenologically, emphasis is placed on people’s encounter with institutions (Patriotta, 2016, 2020), which implies that “the alignment between a person and a particular institutional order... is treated as an empirical question.” Actorhood emerges through the test of practice whereby actors experience situations that connect them not only to the institution but to their own sense of selves.

As Alvesson and Wilmott (2002: 626) have pointed out, in comparatively stable or routinized life situations, institutions project hegemonic discourses that are generally accepted and provide reliable sources of identification. Under these circumstances, the duality of actor and person is unproblematic. When breakdowns occur, however, individuals experience institutions as ‘present-at-hand’, as overwhelming entities interfering with their thoughts and feelings (Heidegger, 1962/1927). The ‘situational’ actor becomes disconnected from the ‘holistic’ person (Mead, 2015/1934; Patriotta, 2020), which might generate feelings of existential anxiety and biographical discontinuity (Giddens, 1991). As a consequence, the duality of person and actor is exposed, and individuals need to take palpable steps to repair the situation, for instance, in the form of identity work. Franz Kafka’s novels possibly constitute the most effective illustrations of how bureaucracy – depicted as an invisible institution - can suppress humanity by reducing a person to a role. In more recent times, Harry and Meghan’s spectacular exit from the institution of British Royalty provides a stunning example of how tensions between actor and person can dramatically affect one’s lived experience and lead to withdrawal from institutional membership.

Overall, a phenomenological perspective on actors and acthood goes beyond the claim that institutions are inhabited by people and their interactions (Hallett and Ventresca, 2006) in that it suggests that actor’s agency (actorhood) is inscribed in the broader person’s agency (personhood). As a result, everyday institutional behaviour emerges from the person-actor nexus. The proposed perspective acknowledges that institutions are not simply animated through the actions of actors that are themselves constituted by the institution. Rather, they are inhabited by people with natural rights and dignity that institutional actors cannot have. From this standpoint, institutional analysis should pay greater attention to people’s lived experience within institutional orders rather than being solely concerned with an understanding of how institutions work.

The article by **Bitektine, Haack, Bothello, and Mair** (2020) questions the widespread assumption of the recent institutional theory that actors “inhabit” or are “embedded” in institutions. Instead of seeing actors as “placed within institutions”, the authors provocatively suggest that it is rather the inverse: institutions inhabit actors. While much of institutional theory focuses on institutions as a context for actorhood - understood as individuals’ perceptions, judgments, and actions, the analysis most often stops at the conclusion that individuals “internalize” institutions and become carriers of those institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Glaser, Fast, Harmon, & Green, 2017; Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997). Yet, it is not clear how those

institutions become part of, and come to dominate one's cognition and emotions. As a result, the micro-level mechanisms by which institutions penetrate and inform people's everyday experience remain unexplored.

The authors propose that institutions spread from actor to actor in a contagion-like fashion with the help of communication and actorhood models, conceived as transmission mechanisms. Communication includes both discursive and material practices that transmit institutions through processes of framing, sensegiving and persuasion. These processes shape individuals' perceptions, judgments and behaviour by establishing a cognitive/emotional resonance with competing institutional logics and belief systems (Giorgi, 2017). Actorhood models refer to the cultural templates of acceptable behaviour that define the roles that individuals and organizations can legitimately pursue in a given social context (Meyer, 2010). These actorhood models are typifications of norms, roles, behaviours, responsibilities and other cultural elements required for legitimate action. They come as bundles of rights and obligations that are either voluntarily adopted because they contain an appealing identity element (e.g. being a doctor) or are imposed on a person (e.g. being a wife or mother in a pre-arranged marriage). The choice or imposition of an actorhood model leads to the internalization of the manifold institutions that the model contains.

The metaphor of institutions inhabiting actors has important theoretical implications. First, as Mary Douglas (1986) has pointed out, institutions do not have a mind of their own; rather, the human mind is a microcosm of institutions and people are inhabited by institutional norms that they themselves have made. Second, transmission mechanisms act as a form of institutional reproduction. People interact on the basis of shared actorhood models that reflect the institutionalized social order. Ongoing interactions enact institutions and, in so doing, also sustain the formal ordering of society. Third, pushing the boundaries of research on microfoundations of institutions, this perspective suggests a research agenda that looks at individual actorhood not as the lowest, elementary unit of institutional analysis, but as the outcome of a complex socio-cognitive process that occurs in individuals' "minds and hearts" and then transpires in their judgments, discourse and actions. Different actors can be inhabited by multiple and often conflicting institutions, which may generate tensions between institutional norms and actors' cognition (Glaser et al., 2017).

The article by **Vaara** and **Meyer** (2020) challenges the two perspectives presented above by arguing that institutions are not inhabited by actors or vice-versa; rather institutions and actors

are co-constituted in and through communication. Communication consists of dialectical processes of externalization, objectivization and internalization that lie at the core of the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman, 1966). From this perspective, institutions are the social background to communicative action, a culturally transmitted and a linguistically organized stock of interpretative patterns (Habermas, 1992). Furthermore, the authors enrich the social constructivist perspective through current developments in social semiotics, which view communication as a multimodal process ((Höllerer et al., 2019; Kress, 2010).

The authors' argument is articulated in four core points. First, rather than advocating a kind of rhetorical institutionalism which emphasizes the agency of actors and their strategies at the expense of institutionalized practices and discourses, the authors argue for a 'strong' communicative approach to institutions where institutions provide a structure for communication but are also constituted, sedimented, and transmitted by discourses. Second, the authors highlight the multimodality of communication that exceeds the exchange of words to include, for example, visual and material artefacts. Third, communication involves the politics of meaning and the unfolding of institutional processes through discursive struggles (Meyer and Höllerer, 2010; Slavich. et al., 2020; Vaara and Tienari, 2008). Fourth, technology and social media play a critical role in shaping institutional interaction in contemporary society. The 'social' in the social construction of reality is increasingly mediatized and we need to understand better the consequences of this for processes of institutionalization and de-institutionalization.

A communicative perspective on actorhood and institutions is particularly salient in a world that is multimodal, mediatized and 'more-than-human' (Nimmo, 2011). These features allow for new modes of social construction that rely on heterogeneous assemblages of people, material artifacts, norms and discourses (Lanzara and Patriotta, 2007; Latour, 2005). For example, post truth policy and the fabrication of fake news have emerged as new communication strategies whereby reality is constructed (and deliberately distorted) by appealing to emotions and relegating facts to the background. Fake news and other content are propagated by means of algorithms that sort out reality, translate everyday human behavior into analytics and influence choices accordingly (Curchod et al., 2020; Kellogg et al., 2020; Lindenbaum et al. 2020). In a world of mediatized storytelling, facts are true insofar as they have a strong network of interactions backing them. Finally, this perspective emphasizes a focus on signs (not actors) as unit of analysis. Signs are motivated conjunctions of form and meaning aimed at communicating

a particular message to an intended audience (Kress, 2010). They constitute semiotic resources that provide the building blocks for the symbolic construction of social realities (Slavich et al. 2020). From this perspective, institutions are constructed through sign-making, actors are “sign-makers” and communicative acts are “semiotic moves” that express the sign-makers’ interests (ibid.). Decoding signs – the task of semiotics - is therefore essential in order to gain empirical access to institutionalized meanings.

Overall, the three papers suggest that institutions are ridden with tensions between actors and persons, inhabiting and being inhabited, and facts and representations. Actorhood can be a form of compliance as well as resistance against the pull of institutions. That is to say, institutions allow us to affirm who we are as well as define who we are not. From this perspective, actorhood is a position-taking process in which individuals continuously adjust between identification with an institution and opposition to it (see Patriotta, 2020). This tension is effectively captured by Erving Goffman:

*‘Without something to belong to, we have no stable self.... Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks’ (Goffman, 1961, 305-320).*

The three papers in the point-counterpoint not only identify research opportunities, but also highlight potential tensions and unresolved issues in institutional theory. Furthermore, by drawing attention to gaps in empirical research on institutions and organizations, these papers will help to develop and test theoretical foundations for future research on management and organizations. Perhaps more importantly, the three papers suggest that actorhood emerges in the cracks of institutions. Whether we characterize individuals as inhabitants (Voronov and Weber), carriers (Bitektine et al.), makers (Meyer and Vaara) of institutions, future research will have to focus on the cracks and scrutinise the processes occurring at the intersection between human agency and the often-opaque institutional backgrounds against which agency is exercised.

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