

# 1 Introduction: theorizing and studying institutional work

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THE concept of institutional work describes "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 215). Institutional work represents an exciting direction for institutional studies of organization, not because it represents a "new" idea, but because it connects a set of previously disparate ideas, and in doing so points to new questions and opens up space for new conversations. Institutional approaches to organization theory have traditionally focused attention on the relationships among organizations and the fields in which they operate, providing strong accounts of the processes through which institutions govern action. The study of institutional work reorients these traditional concerns, shifting the focus to understanding how action affects institutions. Connecting, bridging, and extending work on institutional entrepreneurship, institutional change and innovation, and deinstitutionalization, the study of institutional work is concerned with the practical actions through which institutions are created, maintained, and disrupted. The concept of institutional work highlights the intentional actions taken in relation to institutions, some highly visible and dramatic, as often illustrated in research on institutional entrepreneurship, but much of it nearly invisible and often mundane, as in the day-to-day adjustments, adaptations, and compromises of actors attempting to maintain institutional arrangements. Thus, a significant part of the promise of institutional work as a research area is to establish a broader vision of agency in relationship to institutions, one that avoids depicting actors either as "cultural dopes" trapped by institutional arrangements, or as hypermuscular institutional entrepreneurs.

The overarching aim of this book is to present a series of chapters which will collectively articulate a research agenda for the study of institutional work. We approach that aim in two main ways. First, the chapters in this book explore both the conceptual core and the

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INSTITUTIONAL WORK - ACTORS AND AGENCY  
IN INSTITUTIONAL STUDIES OF  
ORGANIZATIONS

1-27



boundaries of the idea of institutional work. Through both theoretical discussions and empirical research, the authors in this volume provide explicit and implicit articulations of these issues, revealing both considerable agreement and significant conflict especially with respect to the term's conceptual boundaries. Second, the book provides a set of empirical works that can serve as exemplars for scholars undertaking the study of institutional work. The research described in this volume demonstrates the importance of rich, detailed case studies in understanding the practical actions of individual and organizations, as well as attempting to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions, as well as showing the value of examining a wide range of empirical contexts, across sectors, geopolitical boundaries, and time frames.

The study of institutional work has the potential not only to positively affect scholarly discussions within the institutional community, but also to generate conversations which might bridge the interests of those who study institutions and organizations, and those who work in them. Although institutional theory has become a standard point of reference in contemporary textbooks of organization theory (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin & Suddaby, 2008), it has largely failed to affect the practical discussions of organizational managers and members outside the academy (Miner, 2003). We believe this is a shame and a waste; much of the appeal of an institutional perspective is its "realistic" treatment of organizations – as more than production machines or economic actors. The institutional perspective has brought to organization theory a sophisticated understanding of symbols and language, of myths and ceremony, of decoupling, of the interplay of social and cognitive processes, of the impact of organizational fields, of the potential for individuals and groups to shape their environments, and of the processes through which those environments shape individual and collective behavior and belief. These are critically important issues for those working in organizations to understand, and yet these issues have for the most part remained trapped within the confines of academic text and talk. Our hope is that shifting the focus to the practical work of actors in relation to institutions will help lead to an easier and more compelling translation of institutional ideas into non-academic discourses.

In this introductory chapter, our aim is to examine some key issues with respect to the concept of institutional work, both in terms of how we might usefully elaborate and refine our conception of it, and how it relates to broader issues in institutional studies of organization. In

first proposing the concept (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), our primary goal was to develop an inductive, empirically grounded understanding of the terrain that might be mapped using the concept of institutional work. With that accomplished, we now turn to developing a more systematic, theoretical exploration, in order to provide a more nuanced and detailed description of the concept. We present this chapter in four main sections. First, we review the role of actors, agency, and institutions in institutional studies of organization. Second, we elaborate the concept of institutional work. Third, we theorize the notion of institutional work by situating it in terms of a set of key issues and concepts. Finally, we provide an overview of the book; for each chapter, we discuss the main issue it addresses, and the perspective it adopts on that issue.

### Actors, agency, and institutions

The interplay of actors, agency, and institutions has come to occupy a dominant place in institutional studies of organization (see Barilana & D'Ambo in this volume for an excellent discussion of the evolution of these issues). Although neo-institutional writing on organizations began with a strong emphasis on the cultural processes through which institutions affected organizational practices and structures (Hinings & Greenwood, 1988; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and led to patterns of isomorphism within fields of activity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983), more recent work has focused significantly on the processes through which actors affect the institutional arrangements within which they operate (Beckett, 1999; DiMaggio, 1988; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Hensmans, 2003; Lawrence, 1999; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). We believe that these two orientations have each been associated with somewhat stylized representations of the relationships among actors, agency, and institutions: early work suggested a dominant impact of institutions on organizational structure and practice, and a limited role for agency; in contrast, more recent work, organized significantly under the rubric of institutional entrepreneurship, has portrayed some actors as powerful, heroic figures able to dramatically shape institutions. In this section, we discuss these approaches to the relationship between actors, agency, and institutions, and explore the potential for the concept of institutional work to provide an alternative approach that draws on the strengths of the traditional views without suffering from their overstated positions.

The initial concern of neo-institutionalism was to explain organizational isomorphism that could not be explained by competitive pressures or efficiency motives (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). Consequently, researchers focused on the ways in which institutions shape the behavior of organizational actors. From this perspective, agency was a secondary consideration, understood either as a reaction to institutional pressures (and thus seen in processes of adoption, decoupling, and ceremonial display), or not seriously considered at all. Where it was considered explicitly, the scope and extent of agency was understood as dependent on the influence of the social context and the interactions among organizational actors. In work that has extended this approach to the global level, Meyer and his colleagues have documented how agency as a social construction developed in contemporary societies (e.g. Frank & Meyer, 2002; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Frank and Meyer argue that the decline of the nation state, and economic and cultural changes in post-war societies led to the rise of generalized actorhood of individuals and the increase of specializing identities claims. Both the profusion of individual roles and identities are viewed as special cases of common underlying institutional processes (2002: 90). In this view, institutions not only influence how agents will act, but which collective or individual actor in a society will be considered to have agency and what such agents can legitimately do. In this regard, those works might be considered as belonging to a form of radical constructivism as agency had no ontological status by itself.

The neo-institutional approach came under increasing criticism on several fronts for developing an oversocialized view of agency. Perrow (1985) argued that institutional authors ignored power relations and had gone "overboard" with their emphasis on myths and symbols. DiMaggio (1988: 3) criticized institutional research as being "frequently laden with 'metaphysical pathos' – specifically, a rhetorical defocalization of interest and agency," and called for the explicit incorporation of agency into institutional theory, and the study of how actors pursue their interests in the face of institutions. Oliver offered a syncretic approach, combining strategic approaches with new institutionalism to analyze how actors develop specific strategies depending on their institutional environment (Oliver, 1990) or react to institutional pressures (Oliver, 1991). Other authors joined the chorus, calling for the injection of agency into institutional theory (Beckert, 1999; Hoffman &

Ventresca, 2002; Hirsch, 1997; Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997a, 1997b; Lawrence, 1999).

Partly in response to these calls, a body of literature has emerged that examines "institutional entrepreneurs" – organized actors "who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones" (Maguire, Hardy & Lawrence, 2004: 657). The focus of this literature has been primarily on the strategies used by actors to change institutional arrangements rather than just comply with them. While this research has provided valuable insights, such work tends to overemphasize the rational and "heroic" dimension of institutional entrepreneurship while ignoring the fact that all actors, even entrepreneurs, are embedded in an institutionally defined context. Institutional entrepreneurship has thus been criticized as a *deus ex machina* within institutional theory, used to explain institutional change as the outcome of attempts by a few rational and powerful actors (Delmestri, 2006: 1536–1537). Meyer (2006: 732) even suggests that such a view of institutional entrepreneurship as belonging to a particular "species" of actors more rational than others, and downplaying their institutional embeddedness, is unable to offer a viable endogenous explanation of institutional change within the tenets of institutional theory.

DiMaggio and Powell (1991: 23–24) suggest that one way to develop a more balanced view of the relationship between actors and institutions would be to draw from the practice approach that has emerged since the 1970s. A significant focus of research and writing in this tradition is on explaining the relationship between human action and the cultures/structures in which actors are embedded (Bourdieu, 1993; Giddens, 1984). A practice perspective contrasts with both structuralist views derived from Parsons and Saussure, in which human action is limited to an enactment, or execution, of rules and norms, and a voluntaristic view of agency whereby actors have unlimited freedom and capacity to invent new arrangements (Ortner, 1984). In their exploration of practice as a micro-foundation for institutional research, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) provide detailed analyses of how such a perspective might apply.

Despite the power of their analysis, however, relatively little work has taken up its call. We suggest this may be for two reasons. First, the focus of their analysis, and indeed of most practice-oriented writing, is on the micro/individual level. In contrast, institutional studies of organization have tended to accentuate the role of collective actors, and interactions



among actors, especially in terms of creating and transforming institutional arrangements (Garud, Jain & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings, 2002; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Second, the temporal orientation of action in practice-oriented writing tends toward either relatively short term "moves" that fulfill "practical functions" in everyday life (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; de Certeau, 2002), or longer term but stereotyped forms (Ortner, 1984: 150). Again, this contrasts with institutional approaches, in which the temporality in question tends to be of an intermediate nature – long enough for social action to influence institutional structure or for institutional structures to change and thus affect social action, but short enough for those rhythms of change not to be overwritten by the *longue durée* of history.

Thus, in looking across the relatively brief history of neo-institutionalism, we see two key tensions with respect to the issue of agency, one concerned with the degree of agency attributed to organizational actors, and one concerned with the degree to which a practice approach can adequately describe the relationship between agency and institutions. We introduced the notion of institutional work in an effort to help overcome these tensions by defining an area of institutional research that highlights the middle ground of agency and connects the insights of practice theory with institutionalists' traditional concerns for collective action and social change (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The concept of institutional work is based on a growing awareness of institutions as products of human action and reaction, motivated by both idiosyncratic personal interests and agendas for institutional change or preservation. The aspiration of the concept of institutional work is that, through detailed analyses of these complex motivations, interests, and efforts, institutional research will be able to better understand the broad patterns of intent and capacity to create, maintain, and alter institutions.

### Conceptualizing institutional work

In our original discussion of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 215), our aim was to provide a starting point for understanding the connections among a broad range of studies and to point toward some significant gaps in our understanding of how actors and institutions interact with each other. Most central to our definition of institutional work is its "direction." If one thinks of institutions and action as existing in a recursive relationship (Archer, 1995; Barley & Tolbert,

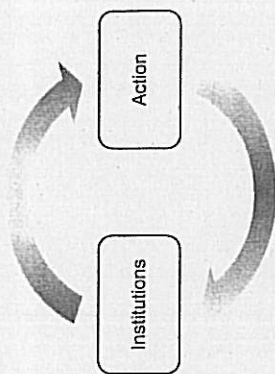


Figure 1.1 The recursive relationship between institutions and action

1997; Fairclough, 1992; Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004), in which institutions provide templates for action, as well as regulative mechanisms that enforce those templates, and action affects those templates and regulative mechanisms (see Figure 1.1), then we are centrally concerned in the study of institutional work with the second arrow, that from action to institutions. We neither deny nor ignore the effect of institutions on action, and indeed those effects are crucial to understanding the nature of institutional work, but our analytical focus in the study of institutional work, unlike most institutional studies of organization, is on how action and actors affect institutions.

Our interest in developing an institutionally situated understanding of the effect of actions on institutions led us to argue that the study of institutional work should be oriented around three key elements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006): (1) it would "highlight the awareness, skill and reflexivity of individual and collective actors" (219); (2) it would generate "an understanding of institutions as constituted in the more and less conscious action of individual and collective actors" (219); and (3) it would identify an approach that suggests "we cannot step outside of action as practice – even action which is aimed at changing the institutional order of an organizational field occurs within sets of institutionalized rules" (220).

We went on to propose three broad categories of institutional work: creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions. Based on a review of institutional studies published in *Organization Studies*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and *Academy of Management Journal*, over a



fifteen-year period, we identified forms of institutional work that had been examined empirically for each of those three categories. As we discussed at the time,

[a]lthough relatively few articles within the now voluminous body of empirical research in neo-institutional theory focus solely on institutional work, a significant number of them provide descriptions of institutional work, some directly as they examine the rise and fall of various institutional arrangements, and others in the context of background empirical material intended. (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 220)

Based on this survey, we argued that the practices associated with creating institutions represent the category of institutional work most extensively examined in the literature. This work builds primarily on the notion of institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988; Eisenstadt, 1980), to explore the kinds of actors who attempt to create new institutions, the conditions under which they do so, and the strategies they employ (Garud *et al.*, 2002; Greenwood *et al.*, 2002; Hargadon & Douglas, 2001; Lawrence, 1999; Lounsbury, 2001; Maguire, Hardy & Lawrence, 2004). We identified ten forms of institutional work associated with creating institutions, which broke roughly into three types: "overtly political work in which actors reconstruct rules, property rights and boundaries that define access to material resources"; "actions in which actors' belief systems are reconfigured"; and "actions designed to alter abstract categorizations in which the boundaries of meaning systems are altered" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 221).

The second category of institutional work that we proposed – maintaining institutions – has received relatively little empirical or theoretical attention. Although institutions are often defined as phenomena which are self-reproducing, either because of their taken-for-granted status (Phillips & Malhotra, 2008; Scott, 2001), or because of their association with regulative mechanisms which ensure their survival (Jepperson, 1991; Lawrence, Winn & Jennings, 2001), we argue that the institutional work of maintaining institutions is both necessary and overlooked. As demonstrated in this volume (Hirsch & Berris, this volume; Frank & Washington, this volume; Zilber, this volume), even powerful institutions require maintenance so that those institutions remain relevant and effective. In our previous survey of the empirical literature, we found six forms of institutional work, three that "primarily address the maintenance of institutions through ensuring adherence to rules systems," and

three that "focus efforts to maintain institutions on reproducing existing norms and belief systems" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 230).

Our third category of institutional work – disrupting institutions – has been the subject of institutional concern since the early work of Selznick, and gained significant attention following Oliver's (1992) discussion of deinstitutionalization. Despite this long history, however, the practices associated with actors attempting to undermine institutional arrangements is not well documented, outside the indirect processes associated with creating institutions. In our survey of empirical work in the area, we found relatively little in terms of concrete descriptions of actors disrupting institutions. What we did find fell into three forms: "work in which state and non-state actors worked through state apparatus to disconnect rewards and sanctions from some sets of practices, technologies or rules"; attempts to "disrupt institutions by disassociating the practice, rule or technology from its moral foundation"; and "undermining core assumptions and beliefs" which stabilize institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 235–237).

### Theorizing institutional work

We believe that our original definition and categories of institutional work provide a broad but useful direction for studying and further theorizing this concept. At the same time, however, they leave several key issues unexamined and others underspecified. In this section, we aim to refine our understanding of institutional work by exploring its relationship to several important issues – accomplishment and unintended consequences, intentionality, and effort. In doing so, we seek to strike a balance. On the one hand, we want to specify the concept so that its core meaning and boundaries are clear and distinguishable. For the study of institutional work to advance, construct definition and clarity are important so that its meaning does not diffuse to the point of uselessness. On the other hand, the community of scholars interested in the concept of institutional work is broad, with a range of interests and approaches, as shown in the chapters contained in this volume. Within this community, there is significant diversity with respect to the questions we ask, and consequently the aspects of institutional work that we highlight. Thus, our aim in trying to refine the concept is to narrow the notion of institutional work, so that it more clearly points at specific phenomena, while at the same time ensuring that the definition includes



important forms of institutional agency that the previous definition may have excluded (or at least steered us away from considering).

### *Institutional work, accomplishment, and unintended consequences*

A critical issue for the study of institutional work is the distinction between "creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions" and the "creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions." The former describe a set of activities, whereas the latter describe a set of accomplishments. Either set could be (and often is) the focus of institutional studies of organization, but we argue that it is the former set which is at the core of the study of institutional work. This distinction is important for at least two reasons. First, exploring a set of activities leads to a very different set of questions and answers than does exploring a set of accomplishments. Why, how, when, and where actors *work at creating* institutions, for instance, describes a distinctly different (and we would suggest broader) arena of inquiry than does asking those questions about the *creation* of institutions. Studying the institutional work of creating institutions could, of course, include the investigation of the forms of institutional work and the supporting factors that are likely to lead to successfully creating new institutions (Garud *et al.*, 2002; Maguire *et al.*, 2004), but this is only one potential issue that could be examined within the domain of institutional work aimed at creating institutions. Other, relatively neglected issues include understanding which actors are more likely to engage in institutional work, what factors might support or hinder that work (independent of its success or failure), why certain actors engage in institutional work while others in similar contexts do not, and what practices constitute the range of ways in which actors work to create institutions. Such questions push us toward the examination of institutional work as practice rather than as part of a linear process (with the tendency to see such a process as a continuum of steps and stages). This is an important shift for institutional studies of organization because, despite the injection of actors and agency that we have suggested marks a major stream of work in this area, relatively little is still known about the concrete practices employed by actors in relation to institutions.

The second implication of focusing on the activities rather than the accomplishments is that it brings back into focus some important ideas

that have largely disappeared from most institutionalist discourse. One of these is "unintended consequences." Particularly notable is this concept's relative neglect in research on actors' effects on institutions (Beckert, 1999; DiMaggio, 1988; Greenwood *et al.*, 2002; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, 1999; Maguire *et al.*, 2004). Although there are occasional admissions of unintended consequences in these studies, the general image of institutionally oriented action that emerges is highly successful with respect to creating intended institutional effects. We suggest that this tendency stems from a focus on charting processes that connect action to institutional effects, rather than on understanding the sets of practices that connect actors to institutions and have variably intended and unintended results with respect to those institutions. Institutional work aimed at creating institutions may create institutions, but it might also fail to do so; it might affect unanticipated institutions in unintended ways, including disrupting those institutions or creating ones very different from those originally conceived of by the actors involved.

Thus, we argue that a focus on activities allows for an account of the relationship between institutions and action that is well suited to the "muddles, misunderstanding, false starts and loose ends" (Blackler & Regan, 2006: 1843) that often characterize this relationship. Consistently with recent research on institutional change (Blackler & Regan, 2006) and organizational fields (Meyer, Gaba & Colwell, 2005), the study of institutional work offers an invitation to move beyond a linear view of institutional processes – to account for, and reflect on, the discontinuous and non-linear processes that take place (see Zietsma & McKnight, this volume, for an empirical illustration of this). Because it points to the study of activities rather than accomplishment, success as well as failure, acts of resistance and of transformation, the concept of institutional work may contribute to a move away from a concentrated, heroic, and successful conception of institutional agency.

### *Institutional work and intentionality*

Focusing on activity, rather than accomplishment, pushes us to consider the issue of intentionality in the study of institutional work. Our original definition of institutional work included the phrase "purposive action," which suggests a high degree of conscious intentionality. This relatively simple association, however, may belie a significant complexity. Here,



we first consider the meaning of intentionality, broadening our understanding of it based on a relational understanding of agency, and then examine the role of this broader conception of intentionality in identifying and understanding institutional work.

At a fundamental level, the question is whether conscious intentionality exists or not. Two antinomic approaches are often opposed (e.g. Emirbayer, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). On the one hand, objectivists and structuralists suggest that actors' actions follow predefined models and relations they might not be aware of, thus denying any "real" intentionality and possible deviance (Wrong, 1961). On the other hand, subjectivists and constructivists insist that social reality is a contingent and ongoing achievement of actors who constantly construct their world in interested and strategic ways. From a practice perspective, however, there is a desire to move beyond this objective/subjective divide in social sciences (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Giddens, 1979, 1984; Ormer, 1984; Scharzki, Knorr Cetina & von Savigny, 2001). The work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) presents a relational view of agency (see Battilana & D'Aunno, this volume, for a more complete and nuanced account of this perspective), which usefully complicates simplistic notions of intentionality by suggesting three sets of cognitive processes that describe distinct modes of intentionality, each of which is associated with a different temporal orientation. One form of intentionality, they argue, can be associated with the past, and is "manifested in actors' abilities to recall, to select, and to appropriately apply the more or less tacit and taken-for-granted schemas of action that they have developed through past interactions" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 975). Thus, even habitual action can be understood as intentional, since there are always multiple habits and routines from which to choose at any given moment. The second form of intentionality they articulate is present-oriented, and "lies in the contextualization of social experience," which involves deliberation with others (or sometimes, self-reflexively, with oneself) about the pragmatic and normative exigencies of lived situations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 994). In contrast, future-oriented intentionality involves "the hypothesization of experience, as actors attempt to reconfigure received schemas by generating alternative possible responses to the problematic situations they confront" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 984). Clearly, the notion of hypothesization is closest to traditional understandings of intention, with its goal-directed, future orientation. We argue, however, that each

of these processes – schematization, contextualization, hypothesization – describes a kind of intentionality, where actors relate their actions to their situations. Together, these forms of intentionality provide a useful range of images to consider with respect to the intentionality of institutional work. They suggest that what the intentions of those engaged in institutional work might look like will vary significantly depending on their temporal orientation.

This broader understanding of intentionality encourages us to consider what role actors' intentions play in institutional work. To do so, we build on our discussion of activities and accomplishments to consider two potential ways of defining the boundaries of institutional work, each with distinctive implications for the role of intentionality. The first approach defines institutional work as work that is motivated significantly by its potentially institutional effects. This would describe the efforts of actors to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions. From this perspective, intentionality is central to the determination of what constitutes institutional work: without intentionality, actions may have profound institutional effects but still not be institutional work. An alternative reading of institutional work includes all human action that has institutional effects. At the extreme, such an understanding would support the notion that the speaking of the English language in a predominantly English-language country would constitute institutional work, since it serves to reproduce the dominance of that language, and may through cumulative effects also serve to transform the language over time. More subtle examples of this conception of institutional work, however, include the activities of scientists who, through their curiosity-driven, basic research, establish the processes or materials which later innovators use to develop commercial products that go on to topple existing institutionalized designs, and establish new market leaders.

The choice among these approaches has significant implications for how one studies institutional work and the potential impacts of the concept for institutional theory. We argue that the latter approach – defining the scope of institutional work based on its effects – is the more conservative: it aligns well with traditional institutional approaches and concerns, but shifts their scope and orientation by highlighting the role of relatively less visible micro-processes, relationships, and action. Such an approach may be particularly appropriate if one is primarily interested in explaining the evolution of institutions, since it highlights the



role of action in those processes, regardless of whether that action was intended, or even remotely conceived of, as having those effects. Perhaps the easiest way to understand this is by looking back at Figure 1.1: if one's scholarly spotlight is on the "Institutions" box, and "Action" is intended as an explanation (or partial explanation), and/or a consequence, then one might not care so much about the intentionality of actors (or adopt the perspective that intentionality is unknowable and consequently irrelevant to scientific study).

In contrast, including intentionality in the definition of institutional work aims may push us toward a more radical shift in our approach to understanding institutions and organizations. This approach points to a focus on institutional work itself as the primary object of analysis. So, looking back again at Figure 1.1, if one's research focuses on the "Action" box, then one is likely to be interested in the intentionality of that action, both the degree to which it is connected to the institutions in which it is embedded, and the degree to which it is motivated to affect those same or other institutions. Most studies of institutional entrepreneurship, for instance, have been relatively institution-centric: they have tended to make the focus of their inquiry the explanation of institutional change, with human action being the primary explanatory factor. In contrast, a work-centric approach to institutional entrepreneurship would still focus on the arrow running from action to institutions, but might begin with a set of actions or practices which were "aimed" at creating or transforming some set of institutions, and then explore them as interesting social phenomena in and of themselves (why and how they occurred), along with their potential impacts or lack of impacts on institutions (see Martí & Mair, this volume, for an extensive discussion of a work-centric approach to institutional entrepreneurship). Such an approach is hardly free from problems, of course – assessing and inferring intentionality raises a host of complex and potentially problematic issues. So, while we believe that addressing the issue of intentionality is critical to the advancement of institutional work as a research area, we do not expect consensus in this domain.

### *Institutional work and effort*

The third issue we address here is the relationship between institutional work and "effort." Although not generally a central issue for institutional, or even organizational, studies, the concept of effort might

provide a useful dimension along which to characterize potential instances of institutional work, and perhaps to discriminate between them and other forms of institutionally related action. Our interest in the idea of effort comes from our desire to explore the notion of "work" from an institutional perspective. The notion of work can be understood to have quite different connotations from action, which is generally used as a broader, more inclusive term. In particular, there is a connotative connection between work and effort. Dictionary definitions of work make this clear, defining work as "activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a result" (*OED*, 2007). Moreover, as this definition makes clear, the notion of work connects effort to a goal, and thus institutional work can be understood as physical or mental effort done in order to achieve an effect on an institution or institutions. Effort varies, of course, in both degree and kind, and so suggests a range of forms of action we might recognize as institutional work.

For instance, we can draw on Scott's three pillars of institutionalization to point to a variety of kinds of effort associated with institutional work. Institutions embodied in routines rely on automatic cognition and uncritical processing of existing schemata, and privilege consistency with stereotypes and speed over accuracy (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; DiMaggio, 1997; Scott, 2001). Actors can routinely enforce institutions without being aware that they are socially constructed. Thus, moving beyond the automatic cognition associated with these kinds of institutions involves a level of cognitive effort as actors shift, even subtly, toward a more complex, reflexive, slow, and self-controlled form of thought (Metcalf & Mischel, 1999). This effort is necessary for agents to see information that contradicts the existing schemata and become aware that institutions are not natural and "taken for granted" but are social constructions. This kind of effort can also imply the potential for questioning the taken-for-grantedness of routines and assumptions, and thus the possibility of institutional change. In contrast, institutions supported by regulative and normative mechanisms involve more or less well-established laws, rules, or codes of conduct. Institutional work aimed at these kinds of institutions requires of actors not only a personal effort to move beyond taken-for-granted routines, but also an involvement in political and/or cultural action (Fligstein, 1997; Greenwood *et al.*, 2002; Rao, 1998). The effort suggested in such cases relates to forms of social action necessary to create, maintain or



disrupt the regulative or normative bases of institutions (Lawrence *et al.*, 2001).

Variation in degrees of effort also points to a way of understanding the range of actions which might be considered institutional work. This may be clarified by focusing on a single institution, and exploring the various forms of action which may be involved in maintaining it. The institution of marriage in the United States and Canada has undergone significant transformation over the past decade, with the local legalization of same-sex marriages occurring in several jurisdictions (sometimes temporarily so), and the threat of legal challenges to the ban on polyamorous marriage. Within this context, we can compare two sets of practices, both of which serve to maintain the institution of heterosexual marriage: the wedding of a man and a woman; and the operation of a "pro-family" group, such as the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada or Abiding Truth Ministries. Clearly, the institution of heterosexual marriage is fundamentally dependent for its maintenance on male-female couples getting married to each other. And, clearly, getting married is not a trivial exercise – indeed weddings can be expensive, stressful, highly effortful events. The effort associated with a wedding, however, has relatively little to do with the institution of marriage (stemming instead from institutionalized ideas of what constitutes a proper, contemporary wedding). The more the idea of marriage is cognitively institutionalized for actors, the more their actions are likely to be defined by a sphere of taken-for-granted routines (Berger & Kellner, 1964). People might just get married because that is the way it should be done and consider the related effort as necessary and a taken-for-granted obligation. In contrast, the operation of a pro-family organization is a complex, effortful affair, which is made so directly by its relationship to the institution of marriage and its aim of maintaining that institution in its "traditional" form. The effort performed by a "pro-family" group, such as the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada or Abiding Truth Ministries, implies that its members have moved beyond considering marriage as "just" taken for granted and are aware of the fragility of it as an institution, and the need to act to maintain and, possibly, reinforce it. If we were to take the relationship between institutional work and effort seriously, it would seem that the managers of pro-family organizations are working significantly "harder" to maintain the institution of marriage than is the typical male-female couple planning and executing their wedding.

Our point here, as with intentionality, is not to declare one set of activities institutional work and the other not, but to point out the implications of considering effort when examining institutional work. And, as with intentionality, we believe that the potential importance of considering effort as a dimension of institutional work may depend significantly on one's focus, either on institutions (in relationship to action) or on actions (in relationship to institutions). We argue that the notion of effort is particularly important for studies in which the point of departure is institutional work itself – understanding the conditions and motivations that lead to it, the practices and strategies that constitute it, and its effects, intended and otherwise. In such studies, the effort associated with institutional work might help to clarify its relationship to the institutions at which it is aimed, as well as its relationship to the institutional context within which it occurs.

Considering effort also opens new perspectives for connections between research on institutional work and critical research on emancipation. Emancipation – i.e. "the process through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions" (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992: 432) – is one of the main topics of the critical management agenda which "seeks to probe taken-for-granted assumptions for their ideological underpinnings and restore meaningful participation in arenas subject to systematic distortion of communication" (Levy, Alvesson & Willmott, 2003: 93). In a critical view, this implies informing individuals of the institutionalized mechanisms of domination, helping them to reflect on those mechanisms and eventually develop the capability of changing those institutions. In other words, it aims at helping individuals to become able to perform institutional work. Critical authors also acknowledge that emancipation comes at a cost and that effort is necessary (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). All this suggests potential avenues of collaboration between critical research and works on institutional work to understand better the forms of this effort, its origins and mechanisms.

### Institutional work: theorizing and studying

The chapters in this book offer exemplars of how management scholarship can creatively engage with and illuminate the construct of institutional work. The chapters are organized in two broad parts. The first part is comprised of four chapters (Battilana & D'Aunno; Kraatz, Marti &



Mair; and Hargrave & Van de Ven), each of which addresses a distinct element of institutional work and, at the same time, raises important questions about how future research might further reveal the construct. The second part consists of six empirical applications of institutional work. The empirical chapters reflect the temporal stages of institutional work; two chapters (Zietsma & McKnight and Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen) examine the work associated with creating institutions, two chapters (Zilber and Trank & Washington) analyze the work of actors engaged in maintaining institutions, and two chapters (Hirsch & Bermis and Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen & Van de Ven) examine the interplay of creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions.

#### *Essays on institutional work*

Batilana and D'Aunno offer an in-depth analysis of an issue central to institutional analysis, and of particular importance for the institutional work project: the paradox of embedded agency. They situate it within the larger debate about dualism between agency and structure in social sciences and review the existing works addressing the paradox in institutional theory. In particular, they show that research on the enabling conditions in institutional theory accounts for field-level and organization-level conditions but does not address the central issue of the individual-level enabling conditions for strategic action despite institutional pressures, and thus the central paradox of embedded agency. Batilana and D'Aunno address this issue and set foundations for a theory of human agency consistent with the institutional work project. They draw from the works by Emirbayer (1997) and Emirbayer and Mische (1998) to develop a relational perspective. In this view, agency has three dimensions – iteration (habit), projection (imagination), and practical evaluation (judgment). Batilana and D'Aunno show how those three dimensions articulate with the different types of institutional work: creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions. Thus, they show that institutional work may involve a wide range of levels of self-consciousness and reflexivity, as well as a wide range of temporal orientations.

Kraatz examines the institutional work of leadership. Drawing from institutional theory's historical roots, Kraatz's chapter reminds us of Selznick's core contribution to institutional theory – that organizations become institutionalized and leaders are the key agents of that process. Kraatz skillfully reviews Selznick's work to identify the institutional

work of organizational leadership. He identifies seven categories of institutional work: symbolic manipulation, creating formal structures, making value commitments, creating coherence, maintaining integrity, making character-defining choices, and self-transformation. Embedded throughout the chapter is the core understanding that organizations are inherently political structures and that, in order to enact institutional work, leaders must transcend their narrow administrative role and technical functions to see organizations as underpinned by core-value structures. Perhaps the key insight of Kraatz's chapter is the observation that organizations are the often forgotten sites of institutional action.

The location of institutional work is also an important aspect of Marti and Mair's chapter on institutional change in the developing world. These authors challenge the dominant view of agency in institutional theory by shifting the focus away from powerful, centrally positioned actors to those on the margins of industrialized society. Concentrating instead on the perspective of marginal actors, Marti and Mair expose us to what are for most of us invisible elements of institutions and institutional work. Marti and Mair introduce the term "provisional institutions" to capture the clearly instrumental view of institutions shared by actors who use established institutional structures to alleviate institutionalized outcomes, such as poverty. Such actors, Marti and Mair observe, engage in institutional work in a relatively experimental manner and adopt strategies of institutional work that are more minimalist, incremental, and delicate than the existing literature on institutional change would suggest. This chapter usefully challenges our taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of institutional change and sensitizes the researcher to the importance of perspective and context in fully understanding how institutions are created, maintained, and changed.

Hargrave and Van de Ven also challenge traditional assumptions concerning the relationship between agency and institutions in their examination of institutional work. Most critically, they explore the issues of contradiction and dialectics in relation to institutional work, and offer an image of institutional work as the creative embrace of contradiction. They argue that the relationships among categories of institutional work and institutional actors which have been presented as primarily oppositional – creating and disrupting institutions, incumbents, and challengers – are never so simple. Drawing on the writing of Saul Alinsky, the famous Chicago community organizer, Hargrave and Van de Ven argue that effective institutional work often involves the

skillful combination of creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions, and that the strategies of different institutional actors are often highly interdependent. Full of insight, this chapter offers significant value to those interested in how skilled institutional actors effect change and stability. With their focus on dialectics, contradiction, and innovation, Hargrave and Van de Ven open up the study of institutional work to a much broader range of images and actors.

### *Studies of institutional work*

#### *Creating institutions*

Zietsma and McKnight explore the episodic, temporal nature of institutional work in the formative stages of an emerging organizational field. Through a longitudinal study of Canadian forestry, Zietsma and McKnight systematically analyze the ongoing interaction of established forestry corporations and environmental activist groups. Their key finding is twofold; first, they observe that institutional work involves iterative phases of conflict and cooperation, which they term "collaborative co-creation" and "competitive convergence." Like Marti and Mair, above, the authors in this study view institutions as both relatively instrumental and provisional structures. A second key finding is that the iterative nature of institutional work means that the outcomes of these efforts are rarely unilateral. Rather, institutions are the compromised product of the "detritus" of episodic bouts of conflict and compromise. Zietsma and McKnight's study skillfully exposes the process by which purposive action produces unintended consequences. Their results, however, suggest that the end product still strongly reflects the key values and interests of the dominant players. Significantly, they also observe that moments of institutional creation, maintenance, and change, while theoretically distinct, are empirically coterminous and, during the term of their study, they observe instances of each category of institutional work.

Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen account for what could be termed "Scandinavian institutionalism" and characterize its main features. Their chapter contributes to the advance of research on institutional work in two regards. First, with an ironic twist they document the birth and development of Scandinavian institutionalism as an illustrative case of institutional work. In doing so, they account for the creation and development of the SCANCOR institution, a unique transnational

initiative to exchange and confront ideas between North American and Scandinavian scholars. Second, they present the main characteristics of Scandinavian institutionalism and the potentially important contribution it can bring to research on institutional work. They indicate that Scandinavian institutionalism has analyzed how agents respond to institutional pressures and adapt and mediate them through loose coupling, sense-making, and modification of ideas when implemented in specific settings (translation). The authors demonstrate that Scandinavian research has already developed a tradition to analyze agency in institutional theory, actors' responses to institutional pressures, as well as empirical methods to conduct intensive, rich, process-oriented, and qualitative approaches. Thus, as the authors point out, Scandinavian institutionalism can make a very strong contribution to research on institutional work. This chapter is also a call to build bridges between different research traditions as much can be learned by doing so. Scandinavian institutionalism is a good example as it appears to have developed powerful analysis in relative isolation, probably due to language as Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen suggest, since research in this tradition is often published in Scandinavian languages.

#### *Maintaining institutions*

Zilber's study investigates how elite agents use stories to ensure the diffusion and maintenance of organizational values by building on her celebrated study of a rape crisis center in Israel. She makes several important contributions. First, she offers researchers a detailed framework to analyze the articulation between meta-narratives at the societal level, their translation into more local versions by the organizational elite, and the appropriation of both meta-narratives and organizational stories by individual organizational members to construct their own personal life stories. She develops a rich, multi-level framework to analyze narratives at different levels, distinguish, and connect them. While she uses this framework empirically to investigate institutional maintenance, it opens avenues for new research on other kinds of institutional work as well. Second, she goes into much detail about her research method. She gives very clear indications in what is already considered an exemplary piece of qualitative research, thus providing guidelines for researchers willing to follow the same approach. In particular she discusses how researchers can collect "life stories" and use them as very rich material for analysis. Finally, she shows in a very



clear and subtle way how the organizational elite translate meta-narratives as well as the political aspects of such a translation. She thus provides a clear link between narrative analysis and institutional work, and makes a strong case for the political use of narratives in institutional work.

Trank and Washington present a multiperspectival investigation of the institutional work of legitimating organizations, such as accreditation bodies and professional associations, to maintain their own legitimacy and that of the institutional arrangements for which they are responsible. In this case, the authors explore the work of the AACSB in maintaining the legitimacy of university business school accreditation, as well as the work of a range of different university business schools in response to this institution. This study provides a transparent and important example of how the study of institutional work can intersect with traditional institutional concerns for the structuration of organizational fields and the institutionalization of language and practice across organizations. It goes beyond traditional images of diffusion and isomorphism, however, by revealing the practices through which central agents work to maintain the impact of institutions in the face of competing sources of social and cultural capital, and the various responses by field members to that work. Trank and Washington also demonstrate the importance of attending to field-level heterogeneity in order to understand the interplay of different institutional strategies and organizational identities: they show how the AACSB recognized the diverse audiences for its work, including not only universities, but employers, students, and the media, and how the differential resources available to different business schools led to their adopting or failing to adopt AACSB materials.

#### Creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions

Hirsch and Berniss describe what they refer to as "institutional 'dirty' work" that is aimed at preserving institutions through strategic decoupling. Drawing on the fascinating case of the transformation of the Czech Republic from a communist to a capitalist state, Hirsch and Berniss show how central actors engaged in a wide range of creative forms of institutional work to both transform and maintain key institutions. Several contributions emerge from their study. Hirsch and Berniss propose a novel form of institutional work – the preserving of institutions, which they argue "entails the actions undertaken by actors searching for ways to carry over norms from the previous regime into

the construction of the new institutional order." This concept bridges across previously conceived of categories of institutional work, to show the links among the forms of action associated with creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions. Hirsch and Berniss also connect the work of preserving institutions to the notion of decoupling. This chapter also points the way to work that integrates the material and symbolic in studies of institutional work – they show how the transformation (and maintenance) of the Czech Republic depended on the skillful combination of financial and cultural resources. Critically, Hirsch and Berniss point to the importance of cultural and historical sensitivity in examining institutional work – theirs is a study that shines a light on the backstage work of skilled and interested actors to explain the drama that unfolded on the global political stage.

Jarzabkowski, Mathiesen, and Van de Ven conclude the book with a study which provides an integrated view of institutional work in the face of institutional pluralism. The authors draw on a real-time, longitudinal case study of a utility company to examine the creating, maintaining, and disrupting of institutions that occur in response to opposing market and regulatory logics. This chapter draws on an explicit consideration of a practice-theoretic approach to institutional work which provides the foundation for several significant contributions. First, it contributes to our understanding of how actors work to maintain institutions, particularly in organizations operating in pluralistic environments which energize the internal institutional politics, and where maintaining institutions may demand creatively combining strategies for creating and disrupting institutions. Their chapter also adds significantly to our understanding of the dynamics of institutional pluralism: focusing on the practical work of organizational actors points to the complex moves associated with creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions in pluralistic environments, where creating institutions may be a means of establishing space for action, and mutual adjustment between logics is a key coping strategy.

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