

BEYOND CONSTRAINING AND ENABLING: TOWARD NEW MICROFOUNDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

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In this article I argue that the quest to establish microfoundations for institutional theory is hindered by two assumptions on which it currently rests: that structure simply constrains and enables action and that agency is mostly associated with reflexivity. I unpack these two assumptions and propose alternative microfoundations on which (1) structure not only constrains and enables action but also actively orients it toward some possibilities over others, and (2) the pre-reflective dimension of agency is explicitly theorized. It thus becomes possible to bridge long-standing divides within institutional theory, opening up avenues for further developing its microfoundations.

After a long period of oscillating between competing positions on the primacy of structure or the primacy of agency, institutional theory seems to be converging toward the view that both agency and structure matter. But what, exactly, is the solution being settled on? Despite considerable progress in recent years, two assumptions may be hindering the quest for the microfoundations of institutional theory: that structure constrains and enables action and that agency is mostly associated with reflexivity. In this article I aim to unpack the issues involved and propose a solution.

Action within institutions has always been a vexed question in institutional theory. Literature in the old institutionalism (e.g., Selznick, 1949, 1957) assumed strategic actors who evaluate means in view of ends but whose ability to choose means and ends is limited by individual, organizational, and societal factors. In the new institutionalism scholars shifted the emphasis from discursive consciousness, where actors reflectively choose means in view of ends, to practical consciousness, where institutions provide “preconscious understandings that actors share” (DiMaggio, 1988: 3) and, thus, restrict possibilities for action within a range compatible with those

understandings (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Meyer, 1983; Zucker, 1977).

But practical consciousness, in turn, came under fire for leaving little room for agency—namely, that by focusing on institutional constraints, it neglects that actors may be able to exercise agency and change the institutions in which they are embedded (DiMaggio, 1988; Holm, 1995). And while practical consciousness is itself not devoid of agency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Meyer, 2008; Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987; Powell & Colyvas, 2008), it was nevertheless felt that something was lost in the shift from the old to the new institutionalism: an understanding of the purposeful, strategic action associated with the means-ends framework. Thus, DiMaggio and Powell (1991: 22) called for a “theory of practical action” providing microfoundations that do justice to both the pre-reflective, taken-for-granted aspect of action that results from embeddedness within institutions and the more reflective, strategic aspect of action that is based on an explicit understanding of institutions.

Early attempts to reintroduce strategic action, following DiMaggio (1988), showed that actors are able to reflect on the institutional constraints they are subject to, and they are able to use—and possibly change—them to their advantage (see Hardy & Maguire, 2008). This literature was criticized for taking agency too far, portraying institutional entrepreneurs as overly rational and disembodied from the institutions in which they act (Delmestri, 2006; Meyer, 2006).

Many strands of institutional theory, including institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009), institutional work (Lawrence,

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Suddaby, & Leca, 2009), institutional contradictions (Seo & Creed, 2002), and institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012), have aimed to reconcile actors' embeddedness with their ability to change (or maintain) institutions. Such attempts differ considerably but are broadly based on the idea that while institutions constrain action, they also enable it (Giddens, 1984). Much of this work can be seen as exploring the *enabling conditions* for change (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Battilana et al., 2009).

Despite considerable progress, the quest for the microfoundations of institutional theory is unfinished, and two assumptions seem to be responsible for this. The first concerns the view of structure as constraining and enabling action, inspired by Giddens (1984) and widely adopted across institutional theory (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Meyer, 2008; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Scott, 2013; Thornton et al., 2012). In particular, while this view allows for how structure constrains (makes some actions impossible) and enables (makes some actions possible), it has little to say about how structure *actively orients* in the sense of making actors more inclined to settle on some actions out of the many that are made possible by structure. Many institutional theorists might agree that structure does more than merely enabling and constraining. More specifically, they might agree that what is called "enabling" encompasses the idea not only that structure provides possibilities for action but also that it actively induces actors to pursue some of those possibilities rather than others. Yet institutional theory does not make this distinction explicit, much less theorize it. As a result, it tends to juxtapose structural constraint ("constrain") and purposeful action ("enable"). Hence, we are left wondering if action within the space of enabled possibilities is still influenced by structure and, if so, through what mechanisms such influence operates.

Theorizing this influence requires addressing the other assumption—that is, that agency is mostly associated with reflexivity. In contrast to the impression one gains from much of the literature mentioned above, it has long been recognized that habitual action is not devoid of agency. Starting from Aristotle's category of *hexis*, which Aquinas translated as *habitus*, later appropriated by Husserl and then Bourdieu, habitual action has long been seen as a pre-reflective but creative mobilization of skills, developed through past

experience, to tackle unfolding situations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Héran, 1987). While some of these authors are routinely cited, this pre-reflective dimension of agency has often gone unnoticed, and its implications are largely unexplored.

Institutional theorists have taken steps in this direction in work that problematizes the association of institutional change with reflexivity (Lawrence et al., 2009). For example, following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), some researchers have paid increasing attention to the different dimensions of agency associated with creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009) and with dealing with conflicting logics (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Others have shown that institutional change can be an unintended outcome (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007), and especially that it might result from actors' attempts to solve specific problems arising in day-to-day activities, without a plan to change institutions (Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012; see also Feldman, 2000; March 1981; Orlikowski, 1996; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). However, much of this research subtly continues to associate agency with reflexivity. For example, actors' "situated improvisations" are still seen as expressing purposiveness, which is aimed at "getting the job done" rather than at changing institutions. And while some of this work acknowledges that habitual action has an agentic component (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013), we now need to theorize it explicitly. In particular, I will show that the reflective dimension of agency emphasized by this literature works together with a pre-reflective dimension, which orients actors toward some possibilities over others.

To overcome the shortcomings associated with the aforementioned assumptions, we need microfoundations that (1) reconcile the reflective aspect of action implied by the means-ends framework with the pre-reflective aspect emphasized by practical consciousness, while doing justice to the agentic dimension of the latter, and, on this basis, (2) theorize the orienting effect of structure as distinct from the enabling (and constraining).

To start building such microfoundations, I begin with the observation that, in the course of their day-to-day doings, actors are often neither *choosing* a course of action among alternatives posited as such nor being *forced* (structurally

constrained) to act in a certain way. Rather, they are often *drawn* toward some courses of action over others. I introduce Husserl's (1991) concept of "protention" as a useful means of capturing this idea of a propensity toward taking some courses of action rather than others. I then show that this propensity can be theorized as resulting from dispositions that actors develop by acting in the social positions they occupy. More specifically, I distinguish between the positions actors occupy at a given moment and their history of positioning, each of which is associated with a different mechanism through which actors are embedded in structure. I go on to show that those mechanisms work together at all times and that such a dual mechanism of embeddedness can reconcile the reflexivity implied by the means-ends framework and the pre-reflective component of agency expressed by protention.

The approach just described ascribes a role to structure—the imprinting of dispositions that orient action—not captured in standard accounts of structure as constraining and enabling action. It is therefore necessary to redefine and make more precise how structure impinges on action, which I do by building a view of structure as *orienting* action, as well as constraining and enabling it.

I conclude by showing that this model has wide-ranging implications for the microfoundations of institutional theory, with ramifications for research on the paradox of embedded agency, institutional complexity, and institutional change, among others. More generally, this model suggests a route to address the long-standing problem of how action is influenced by the structure within which it unfolds while remaining partially autonomous from it. It therefore has implications for research in organizational and social theory more widely.

SETTING THE SCENE

Before looking at the literature in more detail, in this section I define the key terms used in this article. Social structure has been defined in many ways, but very broadly it tends to be seen as comprising either "recurrent patterns of interaction" or the mechanisms that cause them (Martin, 2009: 7). The mechanisms and patterns differ widely but usually refer, with varying emphasis, to social positions (Bourdieu, 1990; Linton, 1936), relations (Granovetter, 1985), and

rules (Searle, 2011)—or sometimes combinations of rules and resources (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992).

Institutions are usually understood to be forms of social structure (Jepperson, 1991; Scott, 2013)—that is, relatively regular patterns of social action or the mechanisms that produce such patterns (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008; Jepperson, 1991), which "give stability and meaning to social life" (Scott, 2013: 56). Following Jepperson, we can take the difference between institutions and social structure to flow from the fact that "institutions are those social patterns that, when chronically reproduced, owe their survival to relatively self-activating social processes" (1991: 145). So we can take institutions to be forms of social structure that have achieved the state ("institutionalization") of not requiring "recurrent collective mobilization" in order to be reproduced (Jepperson, 1991: 145). In this view institutions have to do with the presence of mechanisms that make reproduction relatively automatic, although it is now widely recognized that acquiring, maintaining, or losing the status of institution is also the result of the institutional work of individuals (Lawrence et al., 2009).

The very broad definitions of institutions and social structure provided above are necessary to capture the variety of viewpoints expressed across the literature I consider in this article. However, when I turn to proposing new microfoundations, I adopt more specific definitions. In particular, I focus on social structure instead of institutions and then on a specific understanding of structure, based on social positions. In fact, I am interested in how actors engage with the structure in which they are embedded, irrespective of whether (and to what extent) it is institutionalized. This also makes it easier to draw on work in social theory that does not refer specifically to institutions but, rather, to structure more generally.

I also keep action and agency distinct. Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), by action I simply mean *what actors do*, and by agency I mean *actors' engagement with structure, through which they reproduce and transform structure*. The idea is that action results from structure and how actors engage with it (i.e., agency). For example, take Peter, a mathematics graduate student who is about to enter the job market. Settling on a given job is an instance of action. This action results from structure—that is, the positions Peter currently occupies and those he has occupied across

his life—and agency—that is, how Peter engages with structure in the process of settling upon a given job, including how he forms his goals, evaluates the means, and pre-reflectively draws on past experience.

For the purposes of what follows, it is important to define agency as an engagement with structure, rather than “an actor’s ability to have some effect on the social world—altering the rules, relational ties, or distribution of resources” (Scott, 2013: 94). We can thus avoid “the notion that the only agency of interest is that associated with ‘successful’ instances of institutional change” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011: 52), doing justice to the fact that actors can be agentic irrespective of whether they change social structure (Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009; Battilana et al., 2009). Therefore, in the running example of Peter the mathematician, I focus on what he does as a result of positioning and do not consider whether his action changes structure.

Another crucial distinction is that between the reflective and pre-reflective components of agency (reflective and pre-reflective agency henceforth). In particular, I consider two ways of engaging with structure, building on Husserl’s (1991) distinction between project and protention.¹ For Husserl, project refers to the visualization of alternatives posited as such—that is, as distinct possibilities. Here I refer to project more broadly to include the reflective engagement with structure underlying such visualization. In particular, by

¹ Husserl (1991: 144) distinguished between expectation and protention. However, protention is also an expectation in the common sense of the word, although of a pre-reflective kind. To avoid ambiguity I follow Bourdieu (2000) and call expectation “project.” It is also important to note that Husserl (1991) made this distinction when discussing the subjective experience of time. Bourdieu (2000) used it to express the experience typical of action based on the habitus. This is itself a “reading” (Myles, 2004), meant to distinguish “practical” action, based on the habitus, from the reflective action that social analysts often attribute to actors. In this article I go a step further and consider explicitly what mechanisms underlie the two kinds of experience. I show that this provides a useful distinction between the types of agency associated with action based on schemas, emphasized by the new institutionalism, and action based on the means-ends framework. This distinction is at the appropriate level of abstraction for the present argument, which is about agency and structure. In fact, it transcends the details of specific theories of reflective and pre-reflective action developed after Husserl, which are not essential at this level of abstraction, while being in principle compatible with those theories. As a result, the insights of this article could potentially be explored in the context of those theories as well.

project I mean the reflective engagement with structure whereby actors visualize means in view of ends. For example, Peter acts by project when he evaluates different possibilities, such as available jobs.

Project is a common assumption across theories of action based on the means-ends framework. For example, rational choice theory, which postulates the conscious evaluation of possible actions and their consequences, assumes project (Samuelson, 1947; Savage, 1954). So, too, do many theories of bounded rationality. For instance, Herbert Simon’s actors are “intendedly rational, but only *boundedly* so” (Simon, 1997: 88). While only a subset of the full set of actions may be visualized, actions in that subset are posited as such—as *alternative actions* that ought to be evaluated. Another version of project can be found in the institutional logics view (Thornton et al., 2012). Here logics are seen as providing toolkits for action (Swidler, 1986) from which actors choose means in view of ends, which are themselves influenced by logics. While these approaches differ in many ways, especially as to how they conceive of means and ends, they all rely on the evaluation of possible actions in view of ends posited as such—hence, on project.

Protention is understood by Husserl (1991) as the pre-reflective anticipation of something forthcoming but perceived as emanating from the present (see also Bourdieu, 2000). In Husserl’s (1960: 45) example, when we see a cube, some faces remain hidden, but we can imagine them as if we saw them. Because we know what cubes look like in general, we do not explicitly consider that hidden faces could look different from what we expect, much less posit alternatives as such. Rather, we pre-reflectively anticipate what the hidden faces look like. We anticipate something that we cannot see but that appears to us as almost visible.

I show that we can use protention to capture the fact that, in many situations, actors neither consciously choose a course of action among alternatives they posit as such nor are forced (structurally constrained) to take one. Actors are often drawn toward some courses of action rather than others. For example, when jazz musicians improvise, the musical phrases they produce come naturally to them, with a sense of inevitability (Sudnow, 2001). While appearing inevitable to the musician—and often to the listener—those phrases are not predetermined. It

is impossible to know a priori what notes will be performed, and they will never be quite the same, even when a piece is performed live countless times. Neither is there an attempt to visualize all the possibilities. At any moment the next phrase is not explicitly chosen among possibilities posited as such. Rather, it follows a grammar provided by internalization of music theory, of the genre being played, of aesthetic conventions on what phrase would go well after another, and so forth.

In this article I use protention more broadly, to include the pre-reflective engagement with structure underlying the fact that some courses of action appear as self-evident. In particular, I show that these courses of action result from a pre-reflective transposition of schemes, developed through experience in social positions, to tackle unfolding situations. Protention is therefore a pre-reflective engagement with structure, and the agentic dimension lies in the extraction of pertinent schemes and their application to current situations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Héran, 1987; Sewell, 1992). In the example of Peter, protention is expressed in the fact that out of all the actions possible at any given moment, Peter is drawn toward some of them, which are not “chosen” among actions posited as such but are pre-reflectively anticipated as something forthcoming, appearing so “real” that it seems already there, emanating from the present (Bourdieu, 2000: 207). For example, while Peter is aware that many jobs are potentially open to him, his previous training might make academic jobs appear as self-evident so that he is drawn toward taking one of them.

I show that we can use protention to capture the kind of agency underlying action based on schemes, which is typical of the new institutionalism. Project, in contrast, captures the kind of agency underlying the means-ends framework, which is the focus of the old institutionalism and the more recent work emphasizing (reflective) agency. The distinction between project and protention thus goes to the core of this fundamental divide in institutional theory and provides the building blocks for overcoming it through a view of action that accounts for both project and protention.

The distinction between project and protention allows us to make more precise the effect of structure on action, and specifically the idea, widely accepted in institutional theory, that structure constrains and enables action—that is, that each “of the various forms of constraint are . . .

also, in varying ways, forms of enablement. They serve to open up certain possibilities of action at the same time as they restrict or deny others” (Giddens, 1984: 173–174). For example, Peter takes for granted that he needs a job, since in our society most people cannot decide not to work. Social structure precludes the possibility of making a living without working. That is, *structure constrains: it restricts the set of possibilities for action*. At a given point in time, different jobs are potentially open to Peter. So social structure makes several possibilities viable. *Structure enables: it opens up possibilities for action*.

Although the constrain and enable approach sometimes hints at the fact that structure may have a role in guiding Peter’s action, this role is largely left untheorized. In this article I argue that structure not only constrains and enables but also actively orients actors toward some courses of action over others. *Structure orients: it makes a given actor more likely to settle on some possibilities out of those it enables*. Table 1 summarizes the definitions provided above.

TWO ASSUMPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

From the beginning, action within institutions has been a central theme of institutional theories of organizations. For example, for Selznick (1949), actors are strategic, in that they evaluate and choose means in view of ends, but “the free . . . adjustment of means and ends is effectively limited” (1949: 255) by individual factors (actors develop views and habits), organizational factors (“goals or procedures tend to achieve an established, value-impregnated status” [1949: 256]), and societal factors (anyone who acts in society is “committed to using forms of intervention consistent with the going social structure and cultural patterns” [1949: 257]). Nonetheless, for Selznick (1957), such constraints should be actively managed by organizational leaders, who need to set goals and, through “institutional embodiment of purpose” (1957: 62), design organizations whose “character” makes them capable of achieving those goals.

Selznick’s approach came under criticism for relying on such a means-ends framework, influenced by Parsons’ (1937) theory of action (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997; Scott, 2013), in which action “remains rational in the sense that it comprises the quasi-intentional

TABLE 1
Definitions

Concept	Definition
Social structure	Recurrent patterns of interaction or the mechanisms that cause them
Institutions	Forms of social structure that are reproduced through relatively self-activating processes
Action	What actors do
Agency	Actors' engagement with structure, through which they reproduce and transform structure
Project	A reflective engagement with structure, whereby actors visualize means in view of ends
Protention	A pre-reflective engagement with structure, whereby courses of action appear as self-evident
Enable	Structure opens up possibilities for action
Constrain	Structure restricts the set of possibilities for action
Orient	Structure makes a given actor more likely to settle on some possibilities out of those it enables

pursuit of gratification by reasoning humans who balance complex and multifaceted evaluative criteria" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991: 17). And although Selznick recognized elements of taken-for-grantedness (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997: 412), such as individual habits and societal cultural patterns, he still conceptualized them as influencing means and ends.

New institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Meyer, 1983; Zucker, 1977) shifted the focus from discursive consciousness, based on the explicit evaluation of means and ends, to practical consciousness, which emphasizes cognitive schemes and taken-for-grantedness. As a result, it highlighted a different kind of constraint on action. Institutions came to be seen not as affecting the means or ends of a discursively reasoning agent but, rather, as shaping the "preconscious understandings that organizational actors share" (DiMaggio, 1988: 3), thereby concealing possibilities outside those understandings.

But practical consciousness, in turn, came under critical fire for leaving little room for agency, thus making it difficult to explain institutional change (DiMaggio, 1988; Holm, 1995). However, practical consciousness need not be thought of as being devoid of agency. For example, DiMaggio

and Powell made clear that "habit must not be seen as a purely passive element in behavior, but rather as a means by which attention is directed to selected aspects of a situation" (1991: 19; see also Powell & Colyvas, 2008). More specifically, Meyer et al. proposed that action be seen as an "enactment of broad institutional scripts" (1987: 13; see also Meyer, 2008), and Friedland and Alford insisted that logics are "available to organizations and individuals to elaborate" (1991: 248). Yet this dimension of agency, which broadly corresponds to the pre-reflective agency expressed by protention, has received little attention in much of the subsequent work on the microfoundations of institutional theory. And despite acknowledging pre-reflective agency, DiMaggio and Powell (1991: 27) argued that the microfoundations must also do justice to the more reflective, strategic aspect of action that is based on an explicit understanding of institutions.

In early work in institutional entrepreneurship, following DiMaggio's view that "new institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources see in them an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly" (1988: 14), institutional theorists tried to reintroduce agency by emphasizing action driven by conscious reflection (see Battilana et al., 2009, and Hardy & Maguire, 2008). This approach was criticized for overemphasizing agency and underplaying embeddedness in institutions (Delmestri, 2006; Meyer, 2006). The tension between agency and institutional embeddedness has become known as the "paradox of embedded agency" (Holm, 1995; Seo & Creed, 2002): how can actors embedded in institutions be reflective about those institutions and, hence, depart from what they allow in the first place and potentially change them?

Many strands of institutional theory, including institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009), institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2009), institutional contradictions (Seo & Creed, 2002), and institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012), have aimed to portray actors as relatively autonomous from institutions by striving to reconcile embeddedness with the ability to be reflective and change (or maintain) institutions. Such attempts take many forms but broadly follow the idea that institutions constrain but also enable action (Giddens, 1984), and much of this research can be seen as studying the enabling conditions for change (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Battilana et al., 2009). Conditions at the field level include

exogenous changes (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Holm, 1995), institutional contradictions (Seo & Creed, 2002), varying degrees of institutionalization (Dorado, 2005; Fligstein, 1997; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996), and the plurality of logics (Thornton et al., 2012). Conditions concerning the social positions of organizations (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, 1999) and actors (Battilana, 2006) have also been considered.

For example, Seo and Creed argued that contradictions between institutions “enable a shift in partially autonomous social actors’ collective consciousness from a unreflective and passive mode to a reflective and active one” (2002: 231). By making reflexivity possible, “contradictions transform the embedded social actors into the change actors of the very institutional arrangements” (2002: 223). In the institutional logics approach, the idea is that the plurality of accessible logics affords agents some degree of autonomy of action from structure so that “ordinary individuals or organizations can act outside the confines of their immediate institutional environments” (Thornton et al., 2012: 106).

The aforementioned work has yielded important insights, but further progress requires addressing two widely held assumptions: that structure constrains and enables action and that agency is mostly identified with reflexivity.

“Structure Constrains and Enables Action”

The view of structure as constraining and enabling action, principally inspired by Giddens (1984), has been highly influential in institutional theory (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Meyer, 2008; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Scott, 2013; Thornton et al., 2012), as well as organizational theory more widely (e.g., DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Orlikowski, 1992, 2000). But it suffers from a key limitation, which is that it is typically left unclear what “enable” means. In many cases it looks as if what is intended is that structure makes some actions possible. For example, take again the view that contradictions between institutions “transform the embedded social actors into the change actors of the very institutional arrangements” by making them aware of possibilities for action that were not apparent before (Seo & Creed, 2002: 223). It is unclear if, when choosing among such possibilities, actors are still influenced by

institutions or whether they can act in a fully reflective fashion.

Many institutional theorists would probably agree that “enabling” includes not only that structure opens up possibilities for action but also that it actively encourages actors to settle upon some of those possibilities rather than others. For example, for Selznick, through institutionalization “a particular *orientation* becomes so firmly a part of group life that it *colors* and *directs* a wide variety of attitudes, decisions, and forms of organization” (1957: 138–139, emphasis added). Similarly, for Scott, institutions provide “stimulus, *guidelines*, and resources for acting” (2013: 58, emphasis added). Friedland and Alford see logics as organizing principles of action that are “available to organizations and individuals *to elaborate*” (1991: 248, emphasis added). And Pache and Santos (2013) suggest that different degrees of identification with a given logic *predispose* actors to respond differently to other logics.

Yet institutional theory falls short of making the distinction between enabling and orienting apparent, let alone theorizing the latter. As a result, the two are likely to be confused. For example, work on institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012) displays an intuition of the orienting effect, in that it explicitly mentions that structure guides action. But the question here is what exactly “guiding” means. In fact, we are told that institutional logics “not only constrain, but also enable behavior” (Thornton et al., 2012: 78). In other words, there is no distinction between enabling, narrowly defined as creating spaces of possibilities, and guiding, which in this article I understand as orienting toward some of those possibilities rather than others.

Therefore, it remains unclear if, within the spaces of possibilities that structure enables, action is still influenced by structure (the “orienting”), or whether it is purely based on project—that is, on the reflective evaluation of means in view of ends.

Agency and Reflexivity

The other assumption is that agency can be broadly associated with reflexivity. This is evident in the widely assumed dualism between agency and reflexivity, on the one hand, and lack of reflexivity and lack of agency, on the other hand. For example, Seo and Creed sharply distinguished between “a unreflective and passive mode” and “a reflective and active one” (2002: 231).

Parts of the literature on institutional logics also posit a dualism between automatic attention, which leads to the reproduction of structure, and controlled attention, which "provides the capacity for individual agency" (Thornton et al., 2012: 93). And despite calls for refining the view of agency (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Hwang & Colyvas, 2011; Lawrence et al., 2009, 2011; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013), agency and reflexivity are still widely associated.

The first steps toward challenging this assumption can be found in work that has started breaking the association between reflexivity and institutional change. For example, Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) multidimensional view of agency has been mapped onto the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009) and onto the day-to-day practices of actors dealing with conflicting logics (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Moreover, it has been shown that institutional change can be an unintended outcome (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007). For example, building on March's early statement that much organizational change "takes place because most of the time most people in an organization do about what they are supposed to do" (1981: 564), Orlikowski showed that organizational change can result from "the situated practices of organizational actors as they improvise, innovate, and adjust their work routines over time" (1996: 63; see also Feldman, 2000). Smets et al. (2012) documented a case in which the situated improvisations of lawyers trying to "get the job done," without an intention to initiate broader institutional change, led to change at the field level. Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013: 1282) went on to argue that this approach can account for different types of agency, thus rebalancing the emphasis on purposiveness that underlies research on institutional entrepreneurship and institutional work (see also Hwang & Colyvas, 2011).

However, we need to take a further step and disentangle project and protention within action embedded in structure (including situated improvisations). This is highly consequential, because project and protention are associated with different mechanisms of embeddedness and with different effects of structure on action. Yet this distinction is not clear in the literature. For example, while Hutchins's (1991: 14) "local adaptations" to changing circumstances could be interpreted as an expression of project or protention, Orlikowski followed Giddens (1984) in

stating that organizations "have no existence apart from [action]" (1996: 66) and that "the ability to 'go on' [with the routines of social life] is continually enacted through people's everyday activity: it does not exist 'out there' (incorporated in external objects, routines, or systems) or 'in here' (inscribed in human brains, bodies, or communities)" (2002: 252). In this view improvisation is clearly an instance of reflexivity (i.e., project), rather than protention, which results from internalized and relatively stable dispositions. Other works explicitly recognize the presence of a habitual dimension that is "far from mindless, as it requires actors to recognize specific situations and choose appropriate behaviours from an almost infinite repertoire" (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013: 1281). However, the choice of behaviors is still seen as expressing reflexivity, in that actors constantly monitor what they do and can switch to other courses of action (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013: 1296). It thus remains unclear if there is also a pre-reflective propensity toward some courses of action, which is in play even when actors are aware of the existence of alternatives.

TOWARD NEW MICROFOUNDATIONS

To address the aforementioned limitations, we need microfoundations that (1) encompass both project and protention, doing justice to the agentic content of the latter, and, building on this, (2) theorize the orienting role of structure, as distinct from the enabling (and constraining). In the remainder of the article, I aim to take some steps in this direction.

Social Positions

In the approach developed in this article, I adopt a view of social structure emphasizing social positions. Social positions are "slots" into which actors can be fitted, and they are associated with expectations about what occupants of those positions should and should not do—that is, rights and responsibilities (Biddle, 1979; Linton, 1936). Such a general definition takes different forms in different parts of social theory. For example, Bourdieu defined social positions on the basis of differential access to socially valued resources, such as economic or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). In a similar fashion, critical realist studies have often invoked positions such as chef, CEO, or pensioner (Archer, 1988; Faulkner &

Runde, 2009, 2013) and have highlighted that positions lend people part of their identity. Giddens (1979: 117) also emphasized the connection between positions and identities but, unlike the authors considered above, tended to identify the former with the latter. Social positions have also been invoked in institutional theory. For example, Selznick (1949) related the views and habits of organizational actors to the positions they occupy within organizations and society more widely. In more recent work institutional theorists have argued that social positions may enable some actors to become institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana, 2006), facilitate access to information and exposure to different logics (McPherson & Sauder, 2013), and explain why different actors respond differently to competing logics (Pache & Santos, 2013).

By acting according to the expectations attached to the positions they occupy, actors develop the skill and propensity to act appropriately in those circumstances (Bourdieu, 1990). More specifically, they develop structures of cognition and action (Bourdieu's habitus) that reflect those positions. The skills I have in mind here should be interpreted broadly (Lizardo & Strand, 2010) to include the ability to classify experience appropriately (what is usually denoted as cognitive structures or schemes), as well as dispositions to act in ways that are attuned to the situation, although often in a pre-reflective way. In fact, structures of cognition and action are often formed at a pre-reflective level, "transmitted through practice . . . without rising to the level of discourse" (Bourdieu, 1990: 73–74). At other times they are at the level of discourse at first but are gradually forgotten as such and taken for granted. Symmetrically, pre-reflective habits can sometimes be brought to the level of discourse, such as when familiarity with the environment is broken (Garfinkel, 1967). My approach in this article is consistent with the "practice turn" in social theory (Knorr-Cetina, Schatzki, & von Savigny, 2001; Nicolini, 2013) in challenging the strict separation between cognition and action. The idea is not only that much action is based on bodily skills (Sudnow, 2001) that never rise to the discursive level but also that cognitive structures (Bourdieu, 1990) and even abstract thinking are based on patterns and dispositions developed at the level of the body (Lizardo, 2004; Piaget, 1970). It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these issues in depth, so from here on I use cognition and

action interchangeably and refer to both the mental and the bodily level.²

Every actor's habitus reflects the positions occupied over time. Therefore, while some aspects of individual habitus will be common across occupants of a given position, other aspects will differ as a consequence of the other positions occupied at each moment and over time. For example, Peter is a mathematics graduate student, trained to become an academic, but he is also a skier, a father, an Englishman, and so on. Peter's habitus will reflect aspects of being in all those positions, as well as in specific positions within them (e.g., an "apprentice" in academe, the captain of his skiing team, a middle-class person in his country, etc.). So his skills and dispositions will reflect his occupation of these positions in various forms and degrees. Peter's habitus will accordingly be similar, to some extent, to those of his fellow mathematicians, but also different because of the other positions they have occupied.

Project and Protention in Social Positions

Project and protention depend, to an important extent, on social positions. Here we need to distinguish between the positions that an actor occupies at a given moment and the actor's history of occupying social positions as reflected in the habitus.

Recall that project is the visualization of alternative possibilities of action within a means-ends framework. Current positions influence the possibilities that an actor visualizes, because positions are associated with rights and responsibilities,

² Social theory, including institutional theory, has long associated social positions with "roles" (Biddle, 1986; Linton, 1936; Parsons, 1951; Scott, 2013). Roles have variously been defined as social positions in their own right, as the patterned behaviors associated with those positions, and as the expectations about those behaviors. Whatever the definition adopted, role theories foreground the normative demands associated with occupying social positions (Scott, 2013) and largely assume that actors are aware of the expectations associated with the roles they occupy (Biddle, 1986) so that pre-reflective action is seen as a result of internalization of normative demands that were initially explicitly formulated. For the purposes of this article, the concept of skill is more useful than that of role, for two main reasons (see Lizardo & Strand, 2010). The first is that skills can also be acquired directly from practices, without ever rising to the level of discourse. The second reason is that, as is usual with normative approaches, role theories are based on the means-ends framework, which I aim to encompass within a broader approach.

which, in turn, inform means and ends. For example, by occupying the position of graduate student, Peter is required to teach and contribute to his group's research. At the same time he enjoys the right to a stipend and time for his own research. This position provides goals (such as making a living and contributing to a scholarly field) and the means to pursue them (a stipend, a scholarly position, and guidance from experienced scholars). The same holds for the other positions he occupies at each moment, such as father or captain of a skiing team. We can also see positions as shaping means and ends by exposing individuals to different logics, each of which provides actors "with vocabularies of motives and with a sense of self" (Friedland & Alford, 1991: 251; see also Thornton et al., 2012). Actors can be seen as being exposed to logics through education and work experience; as members of organizations that are, in turn, embedded in organizational fields; and as members of a society (Pache & Santos, 2013).

But project also depends on the history of positioning. The two mechanisms that may be particularly relevant here are problematization—that is, recognizing a situation as requiring a solution—and characterization—that is, defining possibilities for action by relating them to available "principles, schemas, or typifications from past experience" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 998). For example, imagine that Peter and John occupy a similar position of mathematics graduate student in the same research group and are developing a model together. Despite occupying similar positions, Peter might see an assumption of the model as unsatisfactory, whereas John might not. This could happen because of other positions they currently occupy—for example, because Peter is also working on a project where that assumption has been problematic. But it could also depend on the history of positioning, because Peter and John have come to study the same problem from different paths; unlike Peter, John may have trained in a field where that assumption is largely unquestioned. Something similar holds for characterization: while Peter might relate the assumption to an experience of models not working well, John might not. In summary, the possibilities that an actor visualizes by project depend on the actor's current position and history of positioning.

To understand how protention depends on positions, we need to take a deeper look at its underlying mechanism. Protention results from the pre-reflective "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1990:

66) that reflects actors' skills to act appropriately in given social positions. As discussed above, alternative possibilities are often explicitly visualized at first but gradually forgotten as such and taken for granted. In other cases they are transmitted directly at the pre-reflective level, without ever being explicitly articulated. This makes some courses of action appear with a sense of inevitability, without being chosen among alternatives posited as such.

However, far from being a mindless repetition of past action, protention reflects a generative process through which actors tackle the present by activating the flexible schemes acquired during the past (Héran, 1987: 393). More specifically, the mechanism lies in the *extraction of pertinent schemes from the habitus* and their *application to novel situations* (Héran, 1987: 394; see also Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, and Sewell, 1992).

Extraction of pertinent schemes refers to the process by which actors "locate correctly where [unfolding] . . . experiences fit" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 980) within the schemes that are part of their habitus. For example, upon hearing a few phrases, a musician will recognize chord progressions and make sense of rhythmic patterns. When she joins in the improvisation, she will rely on those schemes.

But finding pertinent schemes is not sufficient; one has to *apply them to the specific situation*. Because no situation is ever identical to a previous one, agency is required to constantly transpose existing schemes to problems that are more or less different from those for which the schemes were originally developed (Sewell, 1992: 77). In fact, there are endless phrases that are compatible with the schemes related to the harmony and rhythm of a musical piece, so the musician will need to narrow down the set of possibilities to the specific phrases that go well with the piece—for example, because they suit its style, fit the mood of the evening, or perhaps recall some elements of the main tune.

Therefore, positions and habitus alone are not sufficient for action. In each situation the actor needs to extract different schemes and can apply them in different ways. Agency is needed to move from positions and habitus to action—that is, to narrow down possible courses of action to one (recall that agency was defined exactly as the way the actor engages with structure in the process of coming up with action). But how is the narrowing down performed? Project captures the kind of agency whereby this happens reflectively: the

actor posits means and ends as such and narrows them down by choosing a course of action in view of ends. Protention captures the kind of agency whereby some courses of action present themselves as self-evident so that they are not chosen among alternatives posited as such. Hence, part of the narrowing down is pre-reflective. While the extraction and application of schemes occurs at a low level of reflexivity, generating an experience of inevitability, it has an agentic dimension captured by the aforementioned mechanisms and witnessed by the fact that "it still requires attention and engagement on the part of actors in order to narrow the possibilities for action" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 975). There is a further indication that this kind of action is agentic: it is impossible to tell a priori what phrases will be performed in a musical piece—they will be different every time the piece is played live, but always within a range given by the style (i.e., the habitus) of the musician. In fact, another musician would perform it differently, and listeners often recognize the musician even without having heard that specific performance before.

How does protention depend on current positions and the history of positioning? The history of positioning generates the experience that actors systematize by developing the habitus, which is a system of dispositions attuned to acting appropriately in those positions. Experience is, to some extent, specific to each individual because of the different positions occupied. Therefore, depending on their history of positioning, different actors have a protention toward different courses of action. For example, having occupied the position of a jazz musician influences which phrases present themselves as self-evident: a musician trained in another genre may be inclined to produce different phrases.

But protention also depends on current positions, because the situations an actor faces in each position make some schemes more pertinent than others. For example, imagine that our jazz musician is at a rock jam session, where she is recognized and invited to play. The rhythm and harmony of the piece being played might make other aspects of her style more pertinent so that her solo will sound different from a conventional jazz improvisation. Yet listeners may recognize it as not quite being the solo of a "native" rock musician.

In summary, protention expresses the dispositions developed through the history of positioning,

but it also depends on current positions, which tend to activate different parts of the habitus. Therefore, both project and protention depend on current positions and the history of positioning.

Rethinking Embeddedness

We can now unpack the mechanisms of embeddedness associated with project and protention and reconcile them by showing that they are at work together at each moment.

Project suggests that structure shapes the environment by creating possibilities and impossibilities (the ends) and only affects the actor by providing the means—for example, in the form of toolkits for action. Here actors are only "lightly touched" by their exposure to structure over time (Lizardo & Strand, 2010): structure does not enter the actors—that is, it does not modify them in any systematic or fundamental way. The embeddedness of action lies in *how the current environment (i.e., current positions) shapes means and ends at any given moment*.

Protention, in contrast, implies that the actor is modified by structure in a systematic way, by developing dispositions attuned to the positions occupied over time (Bourdieu, 1990). Such dispositions are relatively stable but updated by new experience, which is nonetheless filtered by (i.e., lived through) existing dispositions. By imprinting dispositions, structure creates a propensity toward some actions over others. Therefore, action cannot be reduced to choice among alternatives posited as such (project) but also reflects ways of being and acting that are relatively enduring, imprinted in the cognitive and bodily setup. This is the other, often neglected mechanism of embeddedness, which operates through protention.

The two mechanisms of embeddedness are based on different conceptualizations of the actor. Protention implies that the actor is not a "pure subject" (Bourdieu, 1990: 53), confronted with an external environment but only lightly touched by it. The individual habitus is itself a structure, shaped by the occupying of several positions across the actor's lifetime, and is *relatively enduring*. Because each habitus is the result of a history of positioning and acting, action does not depend only on the current environment but also on *individual history*—that is, on the socialization in a stratification of *previous positions* over time. So here, too, the agency involved has to do with

the selection of schemes. But this is not limited to the reflective selection of alternatives that are visualized and posited as such (project); it includes the pre-reflective transposition of internalized dispositions to tackle new situations.

For example, imagine that Peter, who was trained in decision-theoretic models based on rational choice assumptions, is confronted with new problems in his new job. Project emphasizes that the new position will influence his ends (e.g., what problems he is asked to address) and his means (e.g., he could choose analytical schemes from his previous work, from the current environment, etc.). If he is aware of other analytical schemes, he can reflectively choose them if he thinks they are better suited to the task. So the emphasis is on current positions, while previous positions, if considered, are seen as providing tools but no strong orientation.

Protention suggests that Peter has a propensity to transpose the rational choice approach to new problems: he will see rational choice problems everywhere, even if he is aware that other people use other approaches. Gradually, as he gets to know the new environment, he might see tensions with his tools, or realize that some colleagues would use different tools, but he cannot simply choose to switch to a different approach. Over time he might (or might not) acquire new dispositions and start thinking differently. But even then, the traces of his early training in rational choice models might still be visible (readers may often be able to tell if colleagues were originally trained in, say, sociology, psychology, or economics, even if they are now studying similar topics and with similar tools).

So the embeddedness associated with project would suggest that actors put in new positions would reflectively monitor their actions and adjust relatively seamlessly, or at least immediately search for appropriate tools. The embeddedness associated with protention predicts that actors will not immediately pick available tools but that their habitus may "misfire," at least for some time (Bourdieu, 1979, 1990; Lizardo & Strand, 2010). In other words, a new position does not induce an immediate response; rather, it triggers a gradual process of new socialization.

Project and protention are also associated with different kinds of motivation. Project is compatible with Foote's classic idea of identification as the basis of motivation, whereby "motivated behavior is distinguished by its prospective reference to

ends in view" (1951: 15). This approach often characterizes utilitarian theories, in which motivation derives from the utility obtained from the gratification of needs (Turner, 1987), and is implicit in models of action based on the means-ends framework. For example, Peter posits as such his objective to make a living and is motivated to find a job in view of reaching that objective.

Protention is associated with a different kind of motivation. For Bourdieu (1998), an important component of socialization is the internalization of the "stakes of the game" to the point of taking them for granted. Hence, once a course of action appears as self-evident through protention, the motivation to pursue it arises without the need for the actor to constantly posit ends as such.

For example, when Peter sees a prestigious tenure-track position being advertised, his immediate motivation to apply does not necessarily (or exclusively) stem from setting objectives and finding means to achieve them. It could be the result of having internalized the classification, widely shared in his academic field, about what institutions are more reputable and what career paths are more prestigious. In fact, it may well be that a teaching-oriented position or a college nearer his hometown would better suit his objectives and circumstances. And, of course, upon reflection he might reconsider his initial motivation to apply for the tenure-track position. But what matters here is that the appearance of an outcome as self-evident often carries a pre-reflective kind of motivation, which does not stem from positing ends as such.

The foregoing argument suggests that an actor's current and past positions influence both project and protention at each moment. Thus, we can account for both mechanisms of embeddedness: the current environment's shaping of means and ends, which are reflectively evaluated within a means-ends framework, and the propensity toward self-evident possibilities, which results from transposition of schemes from past experience to the current situation. We can therefore theorize action as being, at each moment, reflective yet embedded in structure. Moreover, we can make sense of how the two types of motivation are at work together.

Structure Constrains, Enables, and Orients Action

The argument I have developed so far has important implications for how structure impinges

on action. In fact, it attributes an effect to structure—the imprinting of dispositions that orient action—that is typically ignored (or at least left untheorized) in the view of structure as constraining and enabling. We therefore need to enhance that view by theorizing structure as not only constraining and enabling but also orienting action.

For example, given his current positions and history of occupying social positions, reflected in the habitus, Peter knows that there are many jobs open to him. Nonacademic possibilities might include finance, information technology, and school teaching. Academic jobs could be in mathematics departments or, potentially, in any discipline that requires mathematical skills. This is an instance of action by project: alternatives are posited as such and evaluated. This involves two effects. One is the enabling effect, which is emphasized in the writings in institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988), institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2009), and institutional contradictions (Seo & Creed, 2002). The other is what we could call the reflective component of the constraining effect. In fact, when Peter sees openings for full professors, he consciously rules them out since he knows he is not qualified to apply. In other words, he reflectively excludes some courses of action as not feasible.

However, protention is also at work. The underlying mechanism—that is, the transposition of schemes developed through past experience to address unfolding situations—leads to two effects. First, possibilities that fall outside those schemes are barely considered. For example, the possibility of not working for a living may not occur to Peter. This depends on transposition because, being brought up in social positions in which it is obvious that one has to work, he takes for granted that this is the case. Yet people brought up in different positions can indeed decide not to work and may conceive of that possibility. This is the constraining effect emphasized by early contributions in the new institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Meyer, 1983; Zucker, 1977). Specifically, this is a pre-reflective component of the constraining effect, in which some courses of action simply do not occur as possibilities.

The second effect of the transposition of schemes underlying protention is that out of all the viable possibilities, some options appear with immediacy, as if they were self-evident, so actors are

drawn toward them. Hence, it is likely that Peter will have a stronger propensity toward some possibilities than others, and specifically toward those compatible with his training in scrutinizing others' research, finding limitations, and thinking about how to improve on it, as well as teaching students, internalizing the academic etiquette, and so on. Peter's propensity to move toward these possibilities does not necessarily derive from estimating the cost of information about alternatives (e.g., Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000). Explaining his action on these lines would assume choice among possibilities posited as such. Rather, from the viewpoint I have been urging, the explanation has to do with the habitus and with propensities that are the product of having trained one's mind (and body) to master academic work—not unlike musicians (Sudnow, 2001) or pugilists (Wacquant, 2004). Such training imprints an inertia that derives from being in a trajectory and from the difficulty of switching to a different one. (Of course, people can and do change careers; the argument here is about orientation, not determination.)

The orienting effect introduced here is based on pre-reflective agency. By imprinting stable dispositions that work as generative principles of action, structure actively orients actors toward some possibilities rather than others. This orientation takes the form of a propensity toward some courses of action, which is neither the result of structural constraint nor a disembodied choice.

The view of structure as constraining, enabling, and orienting action can be articulated in two complementary ways. The one outlined above concerns alternative actions within a given domain, such as career choices. Structure constrains in precluding some possibilities (e.g., not to work), enables in making other possibilities viable (e.g., all jobs that are potentially open to Peter), and actively orients actors toward some of the viable possibilities rather than others (e.g., academic jobs that are more compatible with Peter's training).

But we can also think of the effect of structure in different realms of action. Peter may act largely by project when it comes to career choices, especially toward the end of his studies. As such, he may try to visualize the possibilities that are open to him, although within the constraints and orientation discussed above. In another domain of action, such as fashion, he may be much less reflective. While he might not read fashion magazines or think much about it, he might enjoy looking at the shop windows on his way to work

and take pleasure in choosing clothes. In this domain of action, Peter’s propensity can be interpreted as the transposition of aesthetic schemes developed in specific positions (Bourdieu, 1984). Here the orienting effect prevails, although structure is also enabling (he still evaluates clothes, if much less systematically than jobs) and constraining (Peter takes for granted that he needs to wear something, and indeed something socially acceptable, and reflectively excludes clothes he cannot afford). In yet other domains of action, Peter may be transposing dispositions that have never been brought to discursive consciousness. For example, when he walks to work, he knows that he is walking, but *how* he walks has never been the object of his reflection. Yet if he had taken Argentine Tango classes, he would have spent years just relearning how to walk and refining the technique. Here the constraining effect prevails, although there is some awareness that he is walking, and there is also transposition, to the extent that he adapts his way of walking to the circumstances that may arise.

The two interpretations of the effect of social structure—within and across domains of action—are complementary in that they overlap at any given moment. In fact, action in any domain requires action in some other domain. For instance, to be reflective about career choices, Peter needs to use language, which is a domain in which he acts in a largely pre-reflective way.

Overall, we obtain an image of actors who, at any given moment, face structural constraints, enjoy spaces of open possibilities that they

posit as such and consciously evaluate, and are pre-reflectively drawn toward actions that express the active orientation of structure.

Toward New Microfoundations

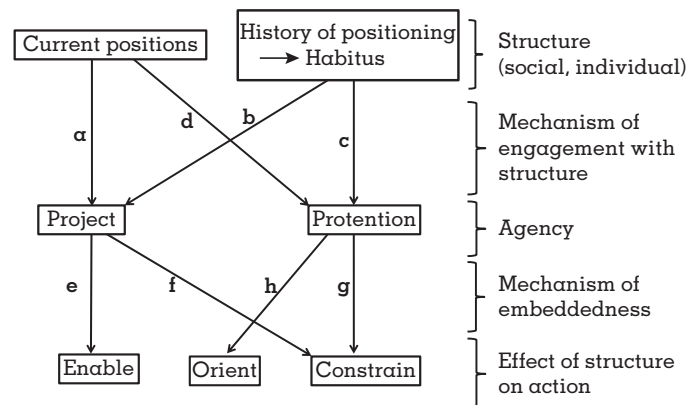
The model developed in this article is summarized in Figure 1. At any given moment we need to consider social structure (the positions that the actor currently occupies) and the actor’s history of positioning, which results in the individual structure of cognition and action (the habitus).

Action results from how actors engage with positions and the habitus. This engagement (i.e., agency) takes two forms. By project, actors select means in view of ends by engaging with current positions, which involve rights and responsibilities (a), and with their habitus, which influences the problematization and conceptualization of means and ends (b). By protention, actors engage with their habitus by pre-reflectively transposing schemes formed in previous positions (c), but they also engage with current positions, which make some schemes within the habitus more pertinent in view of the current situation (d).

At the level of the mechanism of embeddedness, project results in actors’ reflectively choosing courses of action in view of ends (e) and being aware of constraints (f). Protention results in some courses of action being barely considered (g) and in a propensity toward some courses of action out of the possible ones (h).

At the level of the effect of structure on action, project results in the enabling and the reflective

FIGURE 1
The Model



component of the constraining, while protention results in the pre-reflective component of the constraining, as well as the orienting. All of these effects are in play at each moment, within and across domains of action.

In this model action is neither determined by structure nor fully autonomous from it. In fact, action results from how the actor engages with (draws on) positions and habitus, through reflective and pre-reflective agency. This is achieved by keeping the level of structure (social and individual) and that of agency (project and protention) distinct. Protention draws on habitus but also on current positions. Project relies on current positions but also on habitus. That is, when Peter consciously evaluates jobs, he also draws on his habitus so that even within the enabling he is influenced by the embeddedness in previous positions. Conversely, when he engages in relatively habitual activities, he is also influenced by current positions, which make some schemes within the habitus more pertinent. Hence, action is partly reflective and partly pre-reflective at each moment (in all situations).

By integrating the reflective and pre-reflective components of agency, this model provides a route to further develop Bourdieu's theory of action. In fact, Bourdieu saw action as resulting from the encounter between the habitus, shaped by the actor's history of positioning, and the situation that the actor faces at each moment. The resulting action is not deterministic but expresses a creative mobilization of past experience to address unfolding circumstances (Bourdieu, 1990; see also Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Héran, 1987; Sewell, 1992), which corresponds to what I have called pre-reflective agency. Probably because Bourdieu's chief concern was to establish the pre-reflective yet not determined component of action, the role of reflective agency rarely takes center stage. To be sure, Bourdieu did consider reflexivity in several contexts—for example, to distinguish between practical action and the reflexivity that scholars attribute to actors (Bourdieu, 2000: 54–57), or as something that is made possible by some social positions but not others (Bourdieu, 1990: 62–65). However, the role of reflective agency within the overall theory of action, particularly its relationship with pre-reflective agency, was not discussed systematically by Bourdieu (e.g., Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 131; see also Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 983–984). By explaining how actors draw on

positions and habitus both reflectively and pre-reflectively, the model proposed here points to a route to integrate reflective agency within Bourdieu's theory of action.

A key implication is that while the habitus is shaped by the positions occupied over time, the shaping is not an *automatic* imprinting of dispositions attuned to positions; rather, it results from how the actor engages with individual and social structure over time, both reflectively and pre-reflectively. In fact, at time t the actor makes a decision by engaging reflectively and pre-reflectively with positions and habitus, as described by the constrain, enable, and orient model. This decision leads to occupying new positions, which results in an updated habitus at time $t + 1$. Hence, the new habitus is not the result of an automatic imprinting but of the actor's engagement with structure at time t . For example, if at the end of his job search Peter takes up a tenure-track position in a mathematics department (time t), after a few years (at $t + 1$) his habitus will be different than if he had taken an industry job (of course, his current positions will also be different). Hence, structure at $t + 1$ will constrain, enable, and orient his action at $t + 1$. And so on.

The above features allow the model to capture fundamental issues addressed by theories of identity (see Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin, 2010). While the durability of the habitus accounts for the stability of identity across situations (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Stryker, 1968, 2008), the model also considers current positions, thus taking into account the effect of the situation in eliciting responses from actors (e.g., Alexander & Knight, 1971). Moreover, project captures the fact that actors can reflectively shape their identity to some extent (e.g., McCall & Simmons, 1966). And protention expresses the pre-reflective component of the development of identity, which reflects the internalization of social expectations attached to the positions actors occupy (e.g., Stryker, 1968, 2008).

By bringing together project and protention, this model also reconciles the types of motivation attached to them. Protention, on the one hand, is associated with the motivation to pursue self-evident possibilities, which derives mostly from socialization in positions over time but also depends on current positions, which make some courses of action more pertinent. Project, on the other hand, reflects the motivation deriving from the pursuit of ends. It largely depends on current

positions but is also influenced by habitus through the problematization and conceptualization of means and ends. Action as a whole combines the two types of motivation.

For example, on the one hand, Peter is motivated to find a job by positing as such his need to make a living. This depends on his position of final-year graduate student, with a scholarship about to end. But it also depends on the habitus, which induces him to conceptualize finding a job as the way to make a living. On the other hand, his pre-reflective motivation to apply for academic jobs largely depends on the habitus, which makes those options appear as self-evident to him, without necessarily considering all alternatives explicitly. But it also depends on the current position of being in the job market, which makes the issue pertinent (if he already had a job, the problem of what jobs are available in that year might not occur to him at all). So this model suggests that action is motivated by reflective and pre-reflective aspects, both of which depend on positions and habitus.

Because project and protention operate at the same time, the constraining, enabling, and orienting effects of structure are at work in all situations, albeit with a different emphasis. When Peter looks for jobs, his reflective engagement with positions and habitus leads him to evaluate available options (enabling), which also involves the reflective aspect of constraining (e.g., excluding jobs for which he is not qualified). His pre-reflective engagement leads him to exclude some options (not working) and to be oriented toward some others (academic jobs). His narrowing down is partly pre-reflective (not working for a living just does not occur to him, and academic options appear as self-evident) and partly reflective (he will choose relatively reflectively among those options).

The same happens with jazz improvisation. The musician engages with positions and habitus to come up with action. Reflectively, she is aware that a great variety of possibilities exist. Pre-reflectively, she excludes options outside her training (constrain) and is oriented toward options that are closer to her style. Here the pre-reflective has more weight than in Peter's choice, since it narrows down possibilities so much that one course of action—the phrase she produces at any given moment—appears as inevitable.

The same mechanisms are at work in the case of the cube. In principle, I know that the hidden faces might look quite different from the ones I see. Yet I

normally rely so much on my previous experience of cubes that I barely consider that the hidden faces might have a different texture or color, and I am oriented to anticipate that they will look like those I see. Again, the pre-reflective has more weight in the narrowing down, but the same mechanisms of engagement with habitus and positions are at work. In fact, if I were in a different position—say, looking at a cube in a magic shop—I might be more inclined to expect some surprise from the hidden faces.

The orienting thus makes a range of possibilities (or, in limit cases, one possibility) self-evident so that the actor is pre-reflectively drawn toward it. This brings us to a core point of this article. I have argued that a key limitation of the enable and constrain approach is that it does not specify whether action within the enabling is still influenced by structure. This article theorizes how the enabling is still influenced by structure by proposing that the enabling and the orienting operate together.

The actor must narrow down available options to one course of action. In the enable and constrain approach, because pre-reflective agency is not explicitly theorized, we are left with the impression that the narrowing down is reflective so that all of the influence of structure is of the means-ends type. The actor is only "lightly touched" by structure, which shapes means and ends but provides no enduring orientation. In the constrain, enable, and orient model, part of the narrowing down is done pre-reflectively by protention, and part is done reflectively by project. Specifically, in relatively reflective realms, such as job search, much of the narrowing down is by project, whereas in more pre-reflective realms, such as jazz improvisation, much is done by protention. In this sense, action within the enabling is not purely reflective. Social structure influences means and ends but also shapes the habitus. The result is an internal differentiation of the space of possibilities that structure enables: not all possibilities are equally amenable to means-ends evaluation, but some present themselves as self-evident, drawing the actor toward them. So within the spaces enabled by structure, action is not purely by project but, rather, by project and protention together at all times.

Because project and protention depend on the encounter between positions and habitus, and habitus varies across individuals, differentiation within the possibility space varies across

individuals, too. And this is crucial for the microfoundations of institutional theory, as I discuss in the next section in more detail.

The foregoing argument has implications for classical decision theory and more generally for decision theory based on rational action theory, which deals with the problem of narrowing down a given set of possible actions to one course of action (see Samuelson, 1947, and Savage, 1954, for seminal formulations). In fact, these approaches fail to take into account that reflective choice occurs against a background of pre-reflective elements (Runde, 2002). This is because they assume that the set of possible actions is fully amenable to means-end reasoning and, therefore, that all the narrowing down takes place reflectively. This article shows that part of the narrowing down is performed pre-reflectively, by protention, and this results in an orientation toward some actions over others. By making it possible to disentangle means-ends reasoning and orientation within the narrowing down, this article provides a route for decision theory to account for the pre-reflective components of decision making. Moreover, because orientation depends on habitus and positions, the article points to a view of individual decision making that accounts for the actor's embeddedness in current positions and over time.

LOOKING AHEAD: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

The microfoundations proposed in this article reconcile insights that have long been seen as conflicting in institutional theory. In fact, they bring together the means-ends framework, which informs the old institutionalism and recent approaches that emphasize agency, and the practical consciousness introduced by the new institutionalism, while making explicit the agentic dimension of the latter (as called for by DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, and Powell & Colyvas, 2008). This model can therefore be seen as responding to DiMaggio and Powell's (1991) call for a theory of action that provides explicit microfoundations for the new institutionalism, as well as offering a route for reconciling old and new institutionalism (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997). Moreover, it unpacks and brings together the mechanisms of embeddedness implicit in the aforementioned approaches. Finally, it enhances the view of structure as constraining and enabling action by explicitly theorizing the orienting effect.

A crucial implication of these microfoundations is that they make it possible to solve the paradox of embedded agency. Recall that the paradox is about the *relative autonomy* of actors from their environment. To solve it, we need to show *how* action within institutions can be reflective and yet influenced by structure.

Approaches based on the enable and constrain view explain actors' autonomy on the basis of features of the environment. For example, for Seo and Creed (2002), contradictions between institutions enable shifts toward reflexivity. In the institutional logics view, the environment offers a plurality of accessible logics from which actors can draw building blocks for their action (Thornton et al., 2012: 106). But if the plurality of logics or institutions enables possibilities for action, is action within the enabling still influenced by structure, or is it fully autonomous from it?

As I suggested earlier in the article, many institutional theorists probably believe that structure has some influence even within the spaces of enabling. But if the orienting is not explicitly theorized as distinct from the enabling, it is difficult to account for such influence, let alone specify the mechanism through which it operates. The enable and constrain approach thus simply juxtaposes embeddedness (constrain) and autonomy (enable) but does not account for the influence of structure within the spaces of autonomy. Hence, we are left with the impression that actors will narrow down enabled possibilities to one course of action in a means-ends fashion—that is, in a reflective way. So the influence of structure has to do with constraining some options and enabling others, but within the spaces of enabled possibilities, actors are virtually autonomous from any further influence of structure. Thus, proponents of the enable and constrain view do not theorize how, within those spaces, actors are reflective yet embedded. Therefore, this view can only provide a partial solution to the paradox of embedded agency.

This leads to a further limitation. Because the enable and constrain approach puts the emphasis on the environment, it is not clear if, within the spaces enabled by structure, different actors would be oriented toward different courses of action. In other words, we have little indication of whether and how different actors would narrow down the possibility space differently.

The model proposed here offers a different explanation for the relative autonomy of action—one

based on the *encounter* between current positions (environment) and the *habitus*, which reflects each actor's history of positioning. In fact, the actor draws on current positions and *habitus*, both reflectively and pre-reflectively. As a result, the narrowing down of all enabled possibilities to one course of action depends partly on the evaluation of means in view of ends and partly on the fact that some possibilities present themselves as self-evident. If action were purely reflective, the actor would visualize all possibilities without any orientation toward some; all the narrowing down would be due to the conscious evaluation of means in view of ends. Instead, action within the enabling is influenced by structure, because part of the narrowing down is done pre-reflectively, through the orienting, so that not all of the enabled possibilities present themselves as equal: they are not equally amenable to conscious evaluation in view of ends. Protention thus introduces a differentiation within the possibility space. But protention largely relies on the *habitus* and, hence, on the relatively enduring modification of the actor resulting from embeddedness in positions over time. This explains why *even action within the enabling* is influenced by structure, despite being, to some extent, reflective.

The upshot is that the actor matters. Since action depends on current positions but also *habitus*, and since every *habitus* is unique, each actor faces a possibility space that is internally differentiated in a unique way. Therefore, different actors in the same position might be oriented toward different possibilities—because while they share current positions, they do not have the same history of positioning.

This solution to the paradox of embedded agency has important implications for empirical research in institutional theory, especially for work that crucially relies on embedded agency, such as institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988), institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2009), institutional contradictions (Seo & Creed, 2002), inhabited institutions (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006), and institutional complexity (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011).

For example, take institutional complexity—that is, where organizations “confront incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics” (Greenwood et al., 2011: 317). The model proposed here provides microfoundations for Pache and Santos's (2013) typology of actors' responses to

institutional complexity (see also Voronov & Yorks, 2015). In fact, this model theorizes the mechanism Pache and Santos call for, whereby “individuals become identified with a given logic” (2013: 31) and, thus, differ in their predisposition to respond to conflicting logics. The new microfoundations help us theorize predisposition through the orienting, which results from protention, which, in turn, depends on how actors have internalized given logics by developing their *habitus*. It would be difficult to explain predisposition within an enable and constrain approach, because the latter does not theorize mechanisms that can account for predisposition as distinct from reflective choice.

The new microfoundations can also help us explain the coexistence of reflexivity and propensity, which is often perceived as paradoxical in the institutional complexity literature. In fact, in studies at the individual (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Lok, 2010) and organizational (Pache & Santos, 2010; Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011) levels of analysis, as well as at multiple levels (Besharov & Smith, 2014), researchers tend to assume that logics are reflectively managed, and this has led to calls for the emphasis on reflexivity to be balanced with considerations of institutionalization, whereby the presence of contrasting prescriptions from multiple logics starts being taken for granted (Greenwood et al., 2011: 352). What is missing from this debate is the pre-reflective agency expressed by protention, the relevance of which can be illustrated through McPherson and Sauder's (2013) empirical study of multiple logics in drug courts. The authors found that “institutional background does not at all determine the type of argument [actors] . . . will make nor which logic they will use to make it” (2013: 180), and they interpreted this finding as evidence that actors are able to reflectively pick the logic they need to use according to the aim they are pursuing. However, McPherson and Sauder were confronted with the seeming puzzle that despite being reflective, actors still “consistently favor their home logics” (2013: 180) and that “although all drug court actors know the language of the available institutional logics, some are more fluent in this language than others” (2013: 185). The authors attempted to reconcile this seeming tension by invoking the constraints faced by actors, especially those provided by the positions they occupy within the drug court. The idea is that, compared with peripheral positions, central positions enable actors to rely on more information

and become more familiar with other logics. The authors go on to conclude that positions “enable and constrain the free use of logics” (2013: 185).

However, the tendency to favor “home logics” even in the presence of reflexivity is a paradox only if one accepts the juxtaposition of enabling and constraining, which makes it difficult to account for actors’ propensity toward some courses of action. The view of action I have developed here suggests that there is no contradiction between reflexivity and propensity; indeed, they both operate at all moments. The former is associated with the enabling and has to do with the availability of information and awareness of possibilities. The latter is the result of the orienting: by allowing actors to develop fluency in some logics, positions make actors more likely to use those logics than others. Hence, actors do have some autonomy, in the sense that their positions within the drug court afford the possibility to use any of the available logics. However, they are still influenced by their habitus, which makes them more fluent in some logics than others and *orients them toward using those logics, even if they are aware of alternatives*.

These considerations suggest that positions do more than merely enable and constrain the use of logics—they also orient it. The microfoundations proposed here thus make it possible to reconcile the assumption that actors are committed to the logic of the groups they belong to (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Lounsbury, 2007) with the observation that actors may well be aware of and use other available logics (McPherson & Sauder, 2013). Moreover, the foregoing discussion suggests that these microfoundations account not only for action within a given logic, as illustrated in the examples of Peter and the jazz musician, but also for action between logics.

The foregoing argument has important implications for further developing research on institutional change resulting from situated improvisations (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Smets et al., 2012; see also Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen, & Van de Ven, 2009; Jarzabkowski, Smets, Bednarek, Burke, & Spee, 2013; Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015). For example, Smets and Jarzabkowski’s (2013) study of global law firms shows that institutional change can result from the situated improvisations of actors whose intention is not to change institutions but, rather, to “get the job done” in their day-to-day work. Two aspects are particularly relevant.

The first concerns the agency underlying situated improvisations. Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013) interpret the intention to get the job done in terms of project. Specifically, while they hint at the presence of a habitual dimension that is not devoid of agency (2013: 1281), they treat it as agentic in the sense of project—that is, in the sense of the constant monitoring of practices that are reflectively selected (2013: 1296) or dismissed (2013: 1298). The new microfoundations suggest that agency also has a pre-reflective component, which orients actors toward practices compatible with their habitus, even if they are aware of alternatives. These microfoundations could therefore provide theoretical underpinnings for further empirical work that disentangles reflexivity and orientation in situated improvisations. Such work will probably find that even if actors are aware of viable alternatives, they might see practices compatible with their habitus as self-evidently “right,” or they might find it difficult to switch to different practices even if they wanted to.

The second aspect concerns situatedness. Smets and Jarzabkowski’s (2013: 1304) study shows that situatedness shapes the “exigencies of the situation,” thus favoring some responses over others. This view of situatedness corresponds to the mechanism of embeddedness based on project, whereby current positions shape means and ends. However, if we only look at the current situation, it is difficult to explain why German and English lawyers in the same firm faced a similar situation and shared the same exigency to get the job done, but addressed it differently, by building on the practices they had trained in (2013: 1292–1293). The new microfoundations suggest that it is important to also consider the other mechanism of embeddedness, deriving from the history of positioning as expressed in the habitus. This would suggest that German and English lawyers shared the embeddedness in the current position (they faced the same exigencies) but differed in their embeddedness over time—that is, in their habitus (the practices they had trained in)—and this shaped their improvisations along different trajectories.

In summary, the above examples suggest that to understand institutional change, we cannot simply look at reflective agency, whether it is aimed at changing logics or at day-to-day objectives; we need to consider how action as a whole results from the reflective and pre-reflective engagement with current positions and habitus.

Finally, the approach developed in this article has implications beyond institutional theory. In fact, the view of structure as constraining and enabling action has informed several strands of organization theory, such as technology (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Leonardi, 2011; Orlikowski, 1992, 2000), practice theory (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Nicolini, 2013), and organizational routines (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). A view of structure as orienting, as well as constraining and enabling, could provide valuable insights in those areas as well.

For example, there is wide consensus that technology constrains in precluding some uses and enables in making other uses possible (e.g., DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Leonardi, 2011; Orlikowski, 1992, 2000). However, little has been said about whether different users might be inclined to settle on different uses among those that technology enables. For instance, the physical form of a copper-plated coin makes some uses impossible (e.g., to absorb liquids) but makes possible a great variety of other uses, some of which may well not have been imagined by its designers and manufacturers (e.g., to give a copper look to a tabletop). However, this observation alone says little about why some users may be more inclined to imagine and use a certain object in some ways over others. The view of action I have developed in this article can be helpful here, in showing how users' habitus might orient them toward some uses over others. For example, a history of positioning as a DIY enthusiast could make salient that copper-plated coins are an affordable way to give a fashionable copper look to a table.

Another example is Feldman and Pentland's (2003) study of endogenous change in organizational routines. The authors argue that agency is necessary to move from the "ostensive," institutionalized aspect of routines to the "performative" aspect—that is, how routines are actually performed in specific moments by specific actors. They go on to conceptualize such agency in terms of "reflexive self-monitoring" (2003: 106)—in other words, in terms of project. The microfoundations proposed here would suggest that part of the narrowing down of possibilities to actual actions occurs through pre-reflective agency—that is, by protention. Hence, not all variations in routines result from reflexive self-monitoring; some may stem from the pre-reflective mobilization of schemes to address ever-changing situations. By adopting the microfoundations proposed here, it is possible to disentangle the reflective and pre-reflective components of the agency underlying

endogenous changes in routines and to provide theoretical underpinnings for studying how the pre-reflective component orients endogenous change in some directions rather than others. For instance, take Feldman and Pentland's example of how a university's hiring routine might be adapted to unexpected circumstances by using videoconference calls instead of in-person interviews. Emphasis on reflexive self-monitoring suggests that videoconference was a reflective choice, resulting from the explicit evaluation of available possibilities (such as conducting the interview over the phone, or even doing without an interview altogether) and their relative merits in addressing the requirements of the new circumstances. The approach of this article would suggest studying if, within the range of feasible solutions, adaptation of routines was oriented toward some solutions over others—for example, because videoconferencing was already being used for communication across the university's campuses so that it appeared as a self-evident solution without an explicit means-ends evaluation of alternatives.

The microfoundations I have proposed could be further developed in several ways. The foregoing discussion has suggested empirical routes to study how project and protention work together, orienting actors toward some actions even if they are aware of alternatives. Further research could also attempt to develop a finer-grained typology of the mechanisms through which project and protention depend on social positions and habitus. Such research might usefully draw on cognate disciplines. A starting point could be found in the cognitive approach to person-situation interaction in social psychology (e.g., Mischel, 1973; Mischel & Shoda, 1995), which has roots in phenomenology and pragmatism, as do many of the authors cited here (see Kihlstrom, 2013). Moreover, studies of intuition in cognitive psychology (Chase & Simon, 1973; Kahneman & Klein, 2009; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982) and management (Dane & Pratt, 2007; Simon, 1987), although less explicitly focused on the social origin of schemes, may nonetheless provide important insights on their pre-reflective transposition.

CONCLUSION

After a long period of oscillating between competing views on the primacy of structure and that of agency, institutional theory is converging

toward a more balanced view. However, pre-reflective agency and the orienting effect of structure are still largely untheorized, and this may be hindering the quest for the micro-foundations of institutional theory.

In this article I have taken some steps toward addressing these issues by proposing a way to theorize pre-reflective agency and showing that reflective and pre-reflective agency are continuously and concurrently in play. Building on this, the article suggests a dual mechanism of embeddedness, based on an actor's current positions and history of positioning, as well as a view of structure as constraining, enabling, and actively orienting action. This view makes it possible to reconcile the means-ends framework, which informs the old institutionalism and recent approaches that emphasize agency, with the practical consciousness introduced by the new institutionalism, at the same time as making explicit the agentic dimension of the latter. This reconciliation provides a route to addressing a long-standing problem in organizational and social theory more widely: explaining how human action is influenced by, yet to some extent autonomous from, the institutions or structure within which it takes place.

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