



People, Actors, and the Humanizing of Institutional Theory

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ABSTRACT In much contemporary institutional scholarship, the term ‘actor’ is used as a shorthand for any entity imbued with agency. Talking about actors in institutions thus serves the necessity of allocating agency before returning to the analysis of institutional structures and processes. We find this approach to actorhood limiting, conceptually and normatively. Grounded in the perspective of pragmatist phenomenology, we assert the need for distinguishing between persons and actors, and the value of integrating the person into institutional analysis. We conceive of persons as humans with a reflective capacity and sense of self, who engage with multiple institutions through the performance of institutional roles. People may acquire actorhood by temporarily aligning their self with what is expected from a particular actor-role in an institutional order. Conversely, institutions enter people’s lifeworld as they are personified in people’s social performances. We outline this perspective and examine conceptual and normative implications that arise from the integration of human experience in institutional analysis.

Keywords: actor, inhabited institutions, institutional theory, person, phenomenology, self

INTRODUCTION

Institutional scholars have used the notion of the actor to carry the conceptual burden of addressing agency in contemporary institutional analysis – as an(y) entity that is endowed with agency. Consequently, scholars have identified organizations, persons and other collective constructions, such as nation-states, as actors, and have taken the notion of actorhood to mean that those entities are recognized and have standing within an institutional order of interlocking actor-roles¹ (Lok, 2018; Meyer, 2010). This conception of actorhood is elegant in its simplicity and scope. It allows for an extension of the actor concept to non-human objects as actants (Curchod et al., in press; Latour, 1990). It is unproblematic, as long as institutional analysis is primarily concerned with

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intra-institutional phenomena, such as practice diffusion or norm enforcement, where the constitution of actors within institutions can reasonably be taken as a starting point. Identifying actors is then simply an acknowledgement that the animating force behind institutional phenomena operates through the actions of entities that are themselves constituted by the institution, a micro-foundation for institutions that is fully integrated with macro-institutional structures.

We argue that this approach cannot be sustained considering recent directions in institutional theory. Instead, institutional theory must engage more genuinely with the concepts of actor, person (or 'people', plural) and personhood. An 'actor' is an entity that is located in a network of other actors within an institutional order (Meyer, 2010). It is constituted by the institution and is afforded actorhood (standing as a recognized entity) by its position within the institution and in relation to the domain governed by the institution. Hence, actors can be people in specific roles (e.g., manager), but also organized collectives, legal fictions, and material objects and technological artefacts (Latour, 1990; Meyer, 2010). In contrast, 'person' (singular, 'people' in plural), refers to a human being that is endowed with a sense of self and capacity for self-reflection² that is not produced by any single institutional order. This conceptualization of the person draws on several strands of social theory, most centrally on work grounded in phenomenology (Patriotta, in press; Schütz, 1967[1932]) and pragmatism (James, 1922). Personhood, the possession of a sense of self arising from the capacity for self-reflection, affords people a source of evaluative and projective agency that is located in part outside particular institutions. Moreover, personhood, in its modern sense, is associated with certain natural rights and endowments regardless of the norms and roles of particular institutions (Taylor, 1989). This notion of personhood, therefore, gives people moral standing and extra-institutional claims to recognition³ that can be leveraged to evaluate, critique and contest institutions (Taylor, 1989).

The conceptual case for a turn to people in institutional analysis rests on three assertions. First, people routinely partake in diverse institutions that pertain to different domains of their life. For example, the same person on the same day may act as a parent and spouse in their domestic life, an employee as part of a formal-rational organization, and as a participant of religious practices in a congregation of faith. Peoples' meta-institutional experiences from traversing domains gives rise to the self, a capacity for critical reflection and integration across domains that mediates role-specific experiences. Second, a focus on actors, defined by their agency within an institution, leaves unanswered the question of the integration of complex societies with multiple institutional sub-systems. While institutional analysis recognizes the differentiation of a society's institutional systems, the concept of the institutional actor as constituted within an institution is not equipped to account for social solidarity and coordination across institutional domains. Finally, not all human experience is equally institutionalized, and few institutions are complete enough to cover all behavioural possibilities. This leaves room for idiosyncratic conduct and local or temporary interaction orders. This non-institutional part of everyday life is a source of deviance in relation to institutional spheres of life, and the concept of the person incorporates these experiences. Unless the idea of the 'institution' is overextended to subsume all social activity, boundaries to institutional influence exist.

The ontological distinction between a person who is not constituted by any given institutional order and the actor roles that the person may inhabit within institutional orders offers substantial analytic advantages. As we elaborate below, we see people as not only inhabiting institutions as actors with the capacity for critical reflection. People also personify institutions and thus make experientially accessible institutions' fundamental ideals, or ethos, to others. In the next section, we elaborate the view of person and actor as distinct concepts, and how the two interrelate in a theoretically enriching way. We then discuss implications of more centrally integrating people into institutional analysis.

THE PERSON AND THE ACTOR

People have neither been a central part of neo-institutional theorizing, nor have they been accorded special qualities as actors compared to symbolic entities, such as organizations and legal entities, or material entities, such as physical and technological objects. Recent work on how people experience institutions makes it necessary to revisit the relationship between people and actors in institutional analysis. The insights that people inhabit institutions (Hallett and Ventresca, 2006), face multiple institutional prescriptions (Kraatz and Block, 2017; Thornton et al., 2012), and alternatively maintain or disrupt them (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), all pose the question how people come to identify with a particular institution, and why they support or disrupt it (Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Gill and Burrow, 2018; Gutierrez et al., 2010). Recent work has also broadened the view of people as institutional actors, by pointing to the centrality of their emotional experiences (Lok et al., 2017), values (Kraatz and Block, 2017), interactions (Fine and Hallett, 2014) and social practices (Smets et al., 2017), none of which have been central to traditional notions of actors in institutional theory (Hwang et al., 2019). Conversely, scholars have emphasized that artefacts, such as buildings (Colombero and Boxenbaum, 2019), factories (Lanzara and Patriotta, 2007) or algorithms (Curchod et al., in press), can exercise agency and might hence be seen as actors. This further underscores the need to distinguish people and actors, and this is what we set out to do here.

An understanding of the relationship between personhood and actorhood in institutional analysis requires closer attention to the grounding of institutions in human experience. As (Schütz, 1967[1932]) argues, the social reality of institutions as natural and taken for granted is grounded in their immediate experience in people's *lifeworld*. For Schütz, the lifeworld (*Umwelt*) is the realm of the everyday, the decidedly social experience of interacting with others that are co-present. This immediate experience of lived reality contrasts with the more distant social reality of anonymous contemporaries (*Mitwelt*), predecessors (*Vorwelt*) and successors (*Folgewelt*). Importantly, while people may well organize their representations of their lifeworld into different spheres, the intimate and familiar everyday creates a fundamentally integrated flow of experience that makes institutionalized distinctions less salient than in more distant symbolic realities. Re-centring institutional analysis in people and their lifeworld, rather than in institutional spheres and fields, brings to the fore the interrelation of institutions in human experience and corresponding questions how different institutional orders of roles and norms are experienced and coordinated in everyday life. The concept of the person is central to these questions.

The centrepiece of personhood is a social self which develops over time and refers to the way a person represents her experience in the world to herself (James, 1890; Mead, 1913). The concept of the self refers the capacity of a person to be aware and self-reflective (Mead, 1913, 1934). As Mead suggests, the social self is neither the simple sum of role experiences nor idiosyncratic and detached from institutional templates. People are not simply ‘individuals’ implying atomized autonomy, separateness and essentialism (Willmott, 2011), whose biographies and aspirations can be bracketed off in favour of generic socio-cognitive processing patterns. According to Mead, the self emerges from past and present experiences in various institutionally defined roles that leave significant imprints on people. But creating a sense of self also involves creative and aspirational dimensions that go beyond direct experience (see also Joas, 1996[1992]). As people go through life, constructing and maintaining desired social selves is an important preoccupation (James, 1890; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). A person’s self-concept is thus ‘bigger’ than the ability to think and feel like a particular institutional actor in a given institutional order. It exists in and across the different institutional orders the person inhabits, so that people do not simply disengage from one sense of self when they leave one institutional order and engage with another. Instead, they form and maintain their self as they do so, raising important conceptual questions about their performance as institutional actors.

We argue that the concept of an ‘actor’ in institutional theory itself is inherently anthropomorphic, whereby the person is the implicit metaphor for other ‘actors,’ (Ashforth et al., 2020) without critical reflection on the quality of personhood implied in the metaphor. We suggest that it is important to treat actorhood as an accomplishment, rather than as a shorthand for an entity that acts on institutions. As we have argued elsewhere (Voronov and Weber, 2016, 2017), actorhood is then a provisional and tenuous accomplishment, requiring a fusion of the person’s subjective experience and self with the demands and expectations of an ascribed institutional role – learning to think and feel like the ‘actor’ they are supposed to be. This is a holistic process, involving cognition, emotions and bodily experiences and may require editing or suppressing certain valued parts of one’s self (Obodaru, 2017; Petriglieri et al., 2017), such as when a person is unable to practice a valued profession after a layoff.

Toward A Revised Model of Institutional Actorhood

The model of institutional actorhood that follows from centring institutional analysis on people and their lifeworlds consists of three components. First is an acknowledgment of the social self as the locale where personhood and institutional actorhood meet. Second is a phenomenological understanding of the human experience of navigating institutional orders in the everyday. And third is the practices through which the fusion between the person’s self and the institutional order, however temporary, is accomplished. We sketch out each component in turn.

The self links actorhood to personhood. The transformation of the person into an institutional actor involves the social self. Competent actorhood in a particular institutional order is not just behavioural rule-following. It involves the person learning to feel, think and

reflect on oneself as an object within an institutional order (Voronov and Weber, 2016). This transformation makes the person experience the institutional order as a social reality and develop a stake. For instance, the reason that an academic might get disappointed by poor teaching evaluations is because she or he has developed a self that includes being a competent teacher. Academics might differ in their reactions to the disappointing news. Some might feel that they need to enhance their teaching performance, while others decide that teaching evaluations are not the best measures of efficacy. Each reaction is made possible only to the extent that the person has come to see the teaching role as a way through which their self is realized. This integration into the self creates the capacity to reflect on personal competence and the worth of the practices.

Ethos and the subjective experience of institutions. The primary connection that people have with an institutional order is via its ethos, or the fundamental 'ideals that lend moral authority to the institutional order' (Voronov and Weber, 2016, p. 460). The ethos of an institutional order is internalized in the person's ideal self that guides their self-evaluations of the kind of person they want to be. The term 'ethos' acknowledges a person's desire to invest themselves in a sacred, fantasmic, and idealized system of values that attract and channel emotional energy and provide moral justifications (Voronov and Weber, 2016, 2017). Ethos makes an institutional order subjectively experienced as real and fulfilling in the everyday; without accepting an institution's ethos, everyday interactions would be experienced as empty and alienating. For example, 'care and respect for patients' (de Rond and Lok, 2016, p. 1979) is a fundamental value, and part of the ethos of the medical profession. It is a precondition for all competent behavior as a medical professional, regardless of the specific role identity within the institutional order. As the above suggests, the connection between the person and an institutional order is holistic, mediated via emotions and aesthetics (Creed et al., 2019). It is this connection that explains people's 'passionate identification' (Friedland, 2013, p. 593) with institutions.

From actorhood to the self. The transformation of a person into an institutional actor is complicated by the fact that a person's self is not developed purely within any particular institutional order. Nor is it limited to a particular institutionally ascribed actor role that a person might need to occupy. In fact, people vary in the extent to which the various institutional spheres that they traverse are integrated into their sense of self (Fraher and Gabriel, 2014; Kellogg, 2011). For instance, institutions that structure the work sphere might be most central to the sense of self of one person, and those that structure the family sphere might be more central to the self of another. These spheres cannot be easily compartmentalized and can influence each other (Hochschild and Machung, 2012; Ramarajan and Reid, 2013). People find themselves carving a trans-institutional sense of self through role taking in a particular institutional order, or by leaving out or deleting parts of the self that are incompatible with that valued institutional order.

All of the above suggests that the alignment between a person and a particular institutional order cannot be assumed and should instead be treated as an empirical question. In other words, the use of the term 'actor' as a shorthand for any kind of an entity that is capable of agency is problematic because it starts with the presumed accomplishment of actorhood. Yet, becoming an 'actor' while maintaining a self is a complex and tenuous

process that cannot be taken for granted. Hence, institutional actors may not as readily available as assumed in existing models that start with the accomplishment and analyse the impact of actors' efforts.

From Inhabiting to Personifying Institutions

People not only inhabit institutions and draw on available roles for building their own selves. People are also important for the process we dub *personification*, which refers to the public effect of the fusion of self and actor role that makes institutions phenomenologically real to others. This is not simply a duality of institutions, or a micro-foundational mechanism of institutional processes. Rather, it is a contingent condition for institutional vitality, whereby institutions require plausible living proofs, lest they become abstract and divorced from lived experience.

In making this argument, we follow Schütz (1932), who showed that the reality of institutions is foremost a social reality, experienced through observation and direct interaction with other people. Institutional arrangements are valued by people not only because people are used to them and reproduce them out of habit. Rather, as we have suggested, people become invested in fundamental institutional ideals – or ethos – to make their everyday interactions as institutional actors meaningful and natural. Ethos is, however, never objective or perfectly translated into concrete institutional arrangements, and moreover, such arrangements are not as experientially accessible as people's social lifeworlds. Key to experiential access to institutions is thus the presence of people who credibly personify ethos. For instance, in the context of institutional arrangements in the field of healthcare, Pratt and colleagues' (Pratt et al., 2006) study of professional socialization among medical residents identifies high-status doctors who personified professional ideals. The personification of the ethos of healthcare (care and respect for patients) made the institution of medicine phenomenologically real for the residents via senior doctors embodying the ethos through their overt behaviours. One highly admired doctor, for instance, was described by an intern as follows:

[Dr.] Kline is very in tune with treating the patient as a person and not just as a commodity or a case and that's really important when you realize that these patients are [not] just any sort of disease process but they are a person as a whole. Again, that also goes into the fact that being a primary care physician, you're treating them as just the whole person and not just certain organs or diseases separately (p. 251).

The notion of personification does not assume an inherent connection between persons or things and an institutional order. Rather, institutional ethos is projected onto a person who is then taken by themselves and others as a more or less credible materialization of the ethos, as the vignette above illustrates. The credibility is assessed not via a cognitive process of deliberation but via an aesthetic and emotionally laden process of resonance (Creed et al., 2019; Giorgi, 2017; Meyer et al., 2017). The result of resonance is that some people are taken as natural and 'authentic' materializations of ethos, while others are not (Fotaki, 2013).

Audiences also play a role in personification. They are the arbiters of whether a person delivers a social performance that is experienced as natural and authentic (Alexander, 2004), and the person relies on the audiences' reactions to behave in a competent manner (Creed et al., 2014). Yet, people are often typecast in the audience members' minds as either more or less credible personifications of an institution's ethos. Thus, for instance, female surgical residents might struggle to personify the 'iron man' masculine ethos of surgical residency (Kellogg, 2011). Another reason that personification is contingent and prone to breakdowns is the multiplicity of institutional expectations that permeate any given life sphere (Greenwood et al., 2011). Institutional logics compete for centrality at the level of the self of the people working in the organizations exposed to them, with compartmentalization or hybridization being challenging. Thus, in Besharov's (2014) study of a natural food supermarket, most people figured out a way to attach themselves fairly comfortably to a preferred logic and corresponding roles, and relied on more adaptive leaders to help facilitate integration. Yet, Toubiana and Zietsma (2017) show that such processes may fail. They found that people struggled to acknowledge the presence of a logic not central to their sense of self, and no intermediaries personified the bridging of different logics. Without convincing personifications, institutional integration and hybridization failed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

We have outlined a perspective that more fully integrates *persons* into institutional research. We argue that other perspectives on micro-foundations are limiting, conceptually and normatively, because they do not make the distinction between *people* and *actors*. There is never a perfect fusion between a person and an actor role, but only social performances of variable competence and experienced reality. The perspective advanced in this article offers several avenues for advancing institutional research. Rather than offering an extensive list, we offer three illustrations of implications for theory, methods and normative grounds.

Constraint and Choice in Actorhood

The broadest implication of our theorizing is to re-conceptualize the inhabited institutional perspective in organizational research. The key focus of this perspective has been on understanding how people inhabit institutions with an emphasis on lived experience and social interaction (Hallett, 2010; Hallett and Meanwell, 2016; Hallett and Ventresca, 2006). Our view is clearly in alignment with these symbolic interactionist premises. Yet, extant research has not sufficiently acknowledged the durable non-contemporary effects that institutions may have in shaping a person's sense of self, beyond a focal institutional order of the present. One open question in the context of institutional actorhood is about how institutional orders recruit prospective 'inhabitants' and how much commitment to the institution the inhabitants develop. People are compelled to inhabit some institutions and get to choose others. Because the fusion between personhood and actorhood has been treated as a given in prior institutional research, scholars have not explored the distinction between the types of institutional actor that a person is *required* to be versus

the types s/he *chooses* to be. ‘Mandatory’ institutions, such as early socialization in schools or market exchange may not elicit deep commitment and durable centrality to the self, but does the less voluntary nature and perhaps lower stake make their maintenance more difficult, or in fact easier? On the contrary, hobbies can become ‘greedy institutions’ (Puddephatt, 2008) and impact a person’s sense of self in seemingly disproportionate ways. A parallel question is how people *disengage* from having to be a particular kind of actor. Research on forgone selves has started to examine how people deal with losing the opportunities to enact their valued identities (Obodaru, 2012, 2017).

In fact, even ‘unwanted’ institutional orders, such as prisons, can still have durable impact on a person’s sense of self – persisting even after a person has left the institutional order (Rogers et al., 2017; Toubiana, in press). On the contrary, a focus on processes of the self also points to the role of future-oriented processes of imagination and projective agency in people’s engagement with institutions (Mische, 2009). Internalization of institutional ethos may give rise to fantasies and imaginary future selves that influence how people inhabit institutions beyond present conditions. Studies with a phenomenological grounding in people’s lifeworld and self-concept thus promise to produce as novel explanations of institutionalization, de-institutionalization, and institutional change (e.g., Patriotta and Lanzara, 2006).

Actorhood and Social Solidarity

At the macro level, the person-actor nexus holds promise for revisiting the questions of social solidarity and the integration of complex societies with multiple institutional and sub-systems – questions rarely examined by organizational scholars (Weber and Waeger, 2017). The feeling of social solidarity in a society at large is a complex accomplishment, as is vividly illustrated by the rise of populist movements in many countries that lay bare the latent divisions, discontent and institutional breakdowns. Social solidarity is accomplished through elaborate interactions of multitude of actors, and breakdowns of the actor-specific sense of self on large scale can make people feel alienated from their communities and their countries (Hochschild, 2016) and precipitate tremendous instability of a variety of institutions. As we alluded to above, it is worth exploring the extent to which breakdowns of social solidarity result from a shortage of credible personifiers of institutional arrangements. Social solidarity then is a somewhat opaque grand challenge that institutional scholars could illuminate in important ways, and with think that the person-centred view, advocated in this article, is particularly suited to this task.

Methodological Implications: People’s Lifeworlds versus Fields of Actors

Empirical studies of institutions most commonly start with the definition of an institutional field, and are based on data related to that institution collected from the actors within that field. While this approach offers a deep contextual understanding of that institutional sphere, it systematically brackets questions of the interdependence of the dynamics of several institutions. For example, the mobilization of people for institutional change may have as much to do with their engagement and experience in other actor roles and a changing sense of self (Hochschild, 2016), as it has with dissatisfaction with

the conditions of the focal institution. The assumption of institutional spheres and fields also hampers the study of processes at the margins of institutions, such as in interstitial spaces where the influence of institutions may manifest itself quite differently (e.g., Furnari, 2014), and the messy world of negotiating institutions in everyday interaction (Weber and Glynn, 2006). A person-centric starting point to institutional analysis would instead begin with the phenomenological study of people's entire lifeworlds, at the individual or collective level. The separation of institutional domains and fields can then be treated as an empirical question, potentially identifying strategies of spatial and temporal separation and switching, as well as shifts or blurrings of institutional boundaries. At the macro level, such a research strategy also may lead to a better understanding of how complex inter-institutional systems operate.

Normative Implications: The Humanity of Institutions

A people-centred institutionalism also offers a (humanist) normative foundation for institutional analysis, by affording people natural rights of recognition and basic human dignity. It is then possible to evaluate the ethical quality of institutional arrangements against this standard and critique particular institutions. The actor concept in existing institutional analysis, by contrast, is focused on the contribution of actors to a given institution and does not contain an ability to critique the institution. For example, it is possible to critique the institution of slavery on grounds of standards of human personhood that transcend the specific institution and the actor-roles of the slave and slave-owner. The personhood of people are 'citizen' rights at the level of society, not 'actor' rights within the institution. It is not possible to critique slavery based on an institutional analysis that analytically derives actorhood from within the institution. A critique would have to be external to the apparatus of institutional analysis. Our proposed perspective thus means acknowledging that institutional processes are not simply about the mechanics of change and order, but that considerations of moral worth are an inescapable part of the institutional analysis. Greater attention to people's lived experience promises to be a foundation of a version of institutional analysis that is concerned not only with an understanding with how institutions work, but that see institutional analysis reflectively as a moral and emancipatory scholarly project (Hudson et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article is neither to discourage the use of the term 'actor' in institutional theory (Hwang and Colyvas, in press) nor to allow this term to obscure the people that are the lifeblood of institutions (Lok et al., 2017). Rather, by embracing the ontological distinction between people and actors, we enhance the analytical utility of both concepts. Yet, it is the primacy of people that enables us to understand how actorhood is accomplished in specific institutions and to recognize its provisional and tenuous nature. At the same time, we retain and further underscore the mutual necessity of people and institutions. People rely on institutions to fashion their sense of self, and institutions require people to make them phenomenologically real and permanent.

NOTES

- [1] An institutional order is a shared meaning system that typifies actor-roles – ‘categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships’ (Barley and Tolbert, 1997, p. 96). Orders locate actors in constellations of typified identities, expectations, and frames that guide behaviour within a sphere – ranging from the family, and community, to work and government (Weber and Glynn, 2006).
- [2] This conception privileges natural human beings over other entities as uniquely endowed with the capacity for self-reflection. It emphasizes the combination of biological integrity with capacities for subjectivity and self-reflection that are absent in other types of institutional actor.
- [3] We use the term recognition in the sense of used by Honneth (1992) and Taylor (1992), who derive from the ability of people to see themselves as an Other (a sense of self) a normative imperative to afford intrinsic worth to every person regardless of their institutional status.

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