Theoretical Contributions to a Sociology of (E)valuation

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We all experience that ratings, rankings and evaluations increasingly permeate our everyday life. In the academic context, we have become used to peer-review and, of course, everybody has heard about the Shanghai ranking. Since the financial crisis, we have also become familiar with the power of rating agencies that evaluate entire countries with an impressive influence on the stock market. In our daily live, everybody consults yelp to find the best restaurant or trip advisor for the best hotel, rates the customer service of some company or presses the »like« button on facebook to demonstrate his or her opinion.

Hence, we can find an increasing tendency to evaluate, compare and judge whatever happens in our environment and to consult ratings and rankings of various kinds in many contexts that are at the core of our everyday life. John Meyer and Brian Rowan have once come up with the idea of a »logic of confidence« that was said to substitute evaluations (Meyer, Rowan 1977). This mindset is apparently changing into a »confidence in evaluation«: Since the »audit society« that Michael Power described in 1999 (Power 1999) we have moved toward an even more encompassing »evaluation society« (see also Dahler-Larsen 2012).

Yet, what do these evaluations do? Evaluations intend to account for the accomplishment of performances, to define the worth of material and immaterial objects and to test existing procedures. They help to reduce complexity, to compensate for uncertainty and thus to facilitate

A brief review of the evaluation and valuation literature

Taking a closer look on these practices reveals that valuation and evaluation processes have recently got into the focus of academic attention as a prevalent social phenomenon. In particular, in the sociology of science and in science and technology studies but also in economic sociology researchers have contributed a multitude of observations that, on the one hand, shed

light on the social consequences of this ongoing development. On the other hand, latest research has also addressed the roots of this ongoing process. Classification and categorization (Bowker, Star 1999), standardization and commensuration (Timmermans, Epstein 2010; Espeland, Stevens 1998; Espeland, Sauder 2007) as well as quantification (Porter 1995; Espeland, Stevens 2008; Heintz 2010) have been recognized as salient social processes that constitute this currently ongoing evaluation trend. These processes are analyzed as influencing our perception of the social world through the creation of unifying classificatory systems and standards and their translation into numbers.

Yet, the theoretical roots of ideas about classification can already be traced back to Emile Durkheim who investigated religious practices as the classification of the world and its inhabitants into meaningful categories, namely the sacred or profane (Durkheim 2007 [1912]). Since then, the practice to divide the material but also the social world into categories that attribute value to things, ideas and practices has become analyzed as a pivotal feature of making sense of the world.

The consequences of such classificatory systems that define what is sacred or profane, right or wrong, good or bad or even what is normal or deviant behavior lie also at the heart of the research of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. Their research (despite all differences) shares the perception of *classification* as a dominant power that shapes collective evaluation processes which decide upon the life chances of individuals and their repertoires of action. Starting from this research perspective, Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (Bowker, Star 1999) have addressed the construction of such categories that convey an inherent valorization of a particular perspective on reality. They have emphasized that these classificatory systems can never be all encompassing. They have therefore put their focus on objects, ideas and practices that are excluded from social perception because they do not fit into existing categories.

Closely related to questions of classification and categorization are processes of *standardization* that are already inherent to the work of the aforementioned authors. Bowker and Star address this relationship by demonstrating that classificatory systems can become standardized when they persist over space and time. Timmermans and Epstein regard standards and the process of standardization as »*omnipresent conduits of a modernizing and globalizing world*« (Timmermans, Epstein 2010: 71). They play an important role in social regulation and coordination. Besides the top-down implementation of standards they furthermore emphasize that standardization can also derive bottom-up. This happens when a multitude of different actors starts reproducing the same routines because they regard them as relevant and legitimate.

Espeland, Sauder and Stevens address standardization from a different angle (Espeland, Stevens 1998; Espeland, Sauder 2007). They draw attention to the problem that classifying the world within a standardized set of categories leads to the levelling of differences, namely to *commensuration*. Measuring different social phenomena by applying the same categories and a common metric system makes them comparable or in their terms: commensurable. However, this comes at a price. Differences between measured objects disappear because they are put into the same category and are evaluated within the same parameters although it might be exactly these differences that could explain differences in the outcome.

Such parameters are furthermore often based on numbers. These numbers result from *quantification* (Porter 1995; Espeland, Stevens 2008; Heintz 2010). Quantification translates complex

social phenomena – even phenomena that seem at first hand hard to quantify such as, for instance, research quality – into numbers. Such numbers are perceived of as objective. Quantification therefore serves as »*a distinct style of communication*« (Porter 1992: 643) that generates trust and certainty because it attributes objectivity to evaluation outcomes. Decision-making on the basis of such »objectivated« numbers thus becomes regarded as legitimate because numbers seem to speak for themselves.

Research in the area of the sociology of science and science and technology studies thus addresses evaluations as social processes that are based on socially constructed classificatory systems that apply unifying standards and thereby reduce complex social phenomena into numbers. Economic sociologists, in addition, have shed light on the social construction of the (monetary) value of goods. They deconstruct the belief in objectively given worth by refering to Simmel who wrote about the relational value of money in his »Philosophie des Geldes« (Simmel 2008 [1900]). Zelizer points to his ideas when she analyzes the development of life insurances in 19th century USA (Zelizer 1978). She demonstrates the paradox behind the attempt to put a monetary price on the invaluable life of human beings.

Economic sociologists also refer to Durkheim in the context of valuation because of his idea of imaginative value systems that are expressed in religious practices. Here, Durkheim's religious sociology is understood more broadly as a sociology of valuation. Beckert argues in this regard that the value of economic goods emerges equally to religious totems from »*symbolic connections made between goods and socially rooted values*« (Beckert 2011: 107). The value of goods thus depends on its social context and is therefore deeply socially embedded. This understanding of value furthermore implies that the value of objects can change if the social context changes.

Consequentially, economic sociologists stress that »*valuation cannot be reduced to pricing*« (Stark 2011: 317). Instead, they emphasize that the value of any kind of good is based on the collectively shared attribution of value in the social process of valuation. Asking for »what's valuable?«, Stark introduces Dewey's Theory of Valuation (1939) into economic sociology (Stark 2011). Dewey differentiates between *pricing*, *prizing*, and *appraisal* as three types of valuation. He therefore does not regard value as a quality in itself. Instead, he highlights valuation as a practice whereby the value of goods, people, and practices is constructed. According to Dewey's differentiation, *pricing* relates to the attribution of value in terms of money. In this regard, Zelizer (Zelizer 2008) and Fourcade (Fourcade 2011) have shown that pricing not only happens in reference to economic market goods. Price tags are also put on immaterial goods such as human life or nature.

By *prizing* Dewey refers to a personal gesture of valuing something or somebody highly. Prizing thus entails a process of highly individual valuation that is based on emotions. In contrast to this individual emotional valuation, Dewey defines *appraisal* as an act of comparison whereby objects are evaluated and assigned value to in relation to others. Stark points here to ratings and rankings that result from contests and competitions. However, Stark also draws attention to the fact that the evaluation criteria of ratings and rankings can become the outcome of valuation themselves. He finds that »*the selection criteria guiding the judges are not given at the outset but emerge during the jury's deliberations*« (Stark 2011: 323). Stark thus argues that not only the value of goods or practices and also not just the categories of evaluation processes need to be

observed and analyzed but also their enactment through judges, juries and agencies that evaluate and attribute value. He claims that besides evaluation categories and the value of goods and practices as the preconditions and results of (e)valuation processes, the focus also needs to be put on the performances that construct value and enact evaluations.

Value and Institutions

This brief review of current trends in the sociology of science, science and technology studies and economic sociology (with apparent links to organizational sociology) shows that the observation and analysis of particular evaluation and valuation phenomena have become a prominent topic. Against the backdrop of these different empirical areas where research on valuation and evaluation processes takes place, Lamont defines valuation as a process of »*giving worth or value*« (Lamont 2012: 205) to something. Evaluation in turn is the process of »*assessing how an entity attains a certain type of worth*« (ibid.). She thereby highlights that both processes are not only located in specific areas of social life but are constitutive for social reality as such.

Understanding (e)valuation as constitutive for social reality brings us back to Durkheim. With Durkheim we find that valuation as attributing (positive but also negative) value to objects and practices according to a particular account about the metaphysically justified order of the world leads to the emergence of specific categories such as sacred, right and good and thus legitimate or, on the contrary, as rather the opposite. Valuation can thus be understood as a basic metaphysically grounded social process that leads to the classification of the world into normative categories that charge practices and objects each with a specific value.

This normative classificatory system provides the ground for everyday decision-making. Decisions are made by evaluating a phenomenon through drawing on value-charged categories as a guideline for judgments and the legitimation of actions. This evaluation reinforces particular categories because decisions are justified and legitimated in reference to their ascribed value. Evaluations are therefore the enactment of normative categories. And this enactment institutionalizes the classificatory systems.

There already exists a vast amount of literature on institutionalization processes that seeks to explain the social construction of reality. Questions of valuation and evaluation, however, have only played a minor role so far although already the so-called »old institutionalism« (Selznick 1996) in organization studies dealt with value-charged norms. Selznick and others argued that beyond technical requirements the internalization of norms is essential for the institutionalization of organizational practices. Norms need to be built into organizational structure in order to allow for its institutionalization. The emergence of such norms that constrain the formation of organizational structure, however, is not addressed.

While the old institutionalism emphasized integration of norms as central to institutionalization, the new (sociological) institutionalism gave it a cognitive turn. Norms became regarded as institutions themselves. They were understood as cognitive facts and were thus released from a functionalist understanding. Instead, phenomenological ideas from the new sociology of knowledge became an important point of reference.

In the new sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann introduce institutionalization as the core process of the social construction of reality. They thereby conceptualize institutionalization as necessarily accompanied by a process of legitimation. Berger and Luckmann understand legitimation as »*a process of ›explaining‹ and justifying*« (Berger, Luckmann 1967: 111). Legitimation, on the one hand, *explains* institutions by ascribing cognitive validity to the objectivated meaning of typified practices. On the other hand, it *justifies* the institutional order by attributing value to it. Berger and Luckmann therefore make a distinction between explanation and justification, the cognitive and the normative, and thus between meaning and value. However, they stress that the cognitive *explanation* precedes the normative *justification*. From their perspective, the knowledge about the meaning of a situation and its context is the precondition for understanding its normative implications.

The emphasis on cognitive explanations inspired the new institutionalism. Scholars from this school of thought emphasize that a cognitive cultural framework gives meaning to organizational practices. It is therefore not anymore the »*affectively ›hot‹ imaginery of identification and internalization of normative values*« of the old institutionalism (DiMaggio, Powell 1991b: 15) but rather an implicit taken-for-grantedness of already legitimated cognitive categories that the new institutionalism builds on.

However, since then, the new institutionalism has been criticized, in particular, for neglecting institutional emergence and change. One of the first attempts to address these problems was made by Friedland and Alford in 1991 (Friedland, Alford 1991). In their attempt of »*bringing society back in*«, they conceptualize five different institutional logics: capitalist market, bureaucratic state, democracy, nuclear family, and Christian religion. These institutional logics do not only provide individuals with the capacity to act meaningful and to interpret the social world according to a corresponding symbolic system. They also express conflicting alternative meanings that can interfere with each other and produce conflict. This is where Friedland and Alford locate individual autonomy and agency. It derives from »*contradictory relationships*« (ibid.: 255) between institutional logics. And these contradictions can bring about change (ibid.: 254-255).

Yet, they do not explicitly address any kind of value attached to these institutional logics. They rather stick to the cognitive interpretation of institutions that are conceived of as »*material practices and symbolic systems through which they [i.e. humans] categorize […] activitiy and infuse it with meaning*« (ibid.: 248). Conflict is thus understood as a conflict about meaning and not about value.

The focus on value was brought up again by Boltanski and Thévenot who published their book »On justification« about the same time (Boltanski, Thévenot 2006 [1991]). To some extent, they follow a similar approach like Friedland and Alford. They also distinguish different symbolic systems (the world of inspiration, the domestic world, the world of renown, the civic world, the market world and the industrial world) that guide social action. However, Boltanski and Thévenot ground these symbolic worlds not in different cognitive meaning systems but instead in different mutually incompatible modes of normative justification that can be arranged into orders of worth. They thus postulate a normative foundation of social action, put justification ahead of explanation and are thereby »bringing the *political* back in«.
Crisis and conflict are also central to their approach. They focus on the chance for reflexivity in these »*critical moments*«. The subjective perception of uncertainty allows individuals to reflect

upon an ongoing situation and the herein applied value system. Critical moments enable individuals to step outside of given institutional arrangements and to actively engage in a new interpretation of a situation.

Only recently, Friedland (Friedland 2013, 2014; Friedland, Mohr, Roose, Gardinali 2014) has also started to address more directly the relationship between the cognitive and the normative aspects of symbolic systems. He not just referred to new trends in the institutional logic literature but also to the aforementioned French pragmatism by Boltanski and Thévenot. He claims that in order to address questions of conflict and power one has to »bring *value* back in«. Regarding the prevailing new institutionalist literature, Friedland claims that value has been forgotten since the cognitive turn from the old to the new institutionalism. However, he neither advocates for a return to the Parsonian functionalist understanding of value-charged norms nor does he propose a rationalist account of objectively definable interests or power. Instead, Friedland agrees with Boltanski and Thévenot about »*the centrality of value, the materiality of evaluation, (...) [and] the primacy of the situation*« (Friedland 2014: 11).

1. First of all, he finds that value plays a central role in the construction of the social world. As with Durkheim, he argues that metaphysically objectivated value-charged classifications provide the ground for meaningful action. The attribution of value thus constitutes the fundament for the understanding of the social world based on which practices and objects then appear meaningful.

2. Second, he claims that »*valuation depends on on-going evaluation*« (ibid: 6). By claiming this, Friedland emphasizes that value always has to be enacted in evaluations. Evaluations are an ongoing process that constitutes the core of any social situation because evaluations tell the individual what is good or bad, legitimate or illegitimate and therefore how to act. Practices of evaluation thus manifest the attribution of value in the social world (ibid: 11).

3. Third, Friedland finds that each interaction depends on an »*agreement on the situational appropriateness of conventions of evaluation*« (ibid: 9). He defines »conventions of evaluation« as the intersubjectively shared general principles of worth or – in his own terms – *institutional logics* that constitute the framework for evaluating a situation. The focus on the situation thereby highlights that there is no fixed pre-existing evaluation order. Instead, the appropriateness of a particular institutional logic always emerges from situational negotiations. The continuous need for a mutual agreement on the adequate evaluation of a situation and arising conflicts about the appropriateness of particular institutional logics thus become crucial for change.

The contribution of (e)valuation to explaining social change

Summarizing these ideas about valuation and evaluation allows us to see that it is obviously not only the collectively shared attribution of meaning to practices and objects but furthermore their collectively attributed value that constitutes the common ground for understanding the social world and thus for decision-making. Yet, what can we derive from these insights for explaining socially constructed reality?

First of all, if we think of institutions as the cultural framework that guides our perception of the social world (Thomas, Meyer, Ramirez, Boli 1987), the focus on value allows us to see that the concept of institutions needs a further dimension. Institutions are not simply practices with a particular meaning attached to them. Institutions need to be operationalized as meaningful practices that are charged with a particular value. This becomes particularly obvious in moments of uncertainty that take place not only due to unclear or conflicting meanings, but also due to conflicting attributions of value. It therefore seems important to differentiate between and yet to integrate both meaning and value, the cognitive and the normative, rationalization and legitimation, explanation and justification within a conceptualization of socially constructed reality.

Following this idea might help us to find answers to prevalent questions such as social change. Change can thus be understood not only as a change in meaning but also as a change in value. We might thereby come closer to addressing questions that point to the core of everyday decision-making processes: How do we decide upon which evaluation framework to apply? What happens if we find that multiple evaluation frameworks are applicable at the same time? And finally, what happens when nothing fits at all?

We should therefore not only focus on discovering predefined or even new worlds of justification or institutional logics that are enacted within a particular context. In addition, we should search for ambiguous situations of uncertainty where a plurality of different such normative frameworks collides. Because it is in these situations that we might be able to witness institutional emergence and change.

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