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Organizational Culture and Institutional Theory: A Conversation at the Border

Kathryn Aten¹, Jennifer Howard-Grenville², and Marc J. Ventresca³

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Why don't organizational scholars who study "culture" also study "institutions" and vice versa? Kathryn Aten, a PhD student at the time, pondered this question as she hurried from an Academy of Management (AOM) symposium in which Mary Jo Hatch had asked attendees, "Where are the institutional theorists in the room? Raise your hands" (Nobody did). Kathryn had selected the symposium in hopes of gaining a better understanding of how culture and institutional theory might inform meaning creation in the context of emerging organizations and fields. She ran to the next symposium on her schedule, selected also in hopes of gaining a better understanding of meaning creation, and found no culture theorists. Unable to understand why two fields that seemed to address similar questions were so separate, Kathryn asked colleagues if they would be willing to help organize a symposium exploring culture and institutional theories. This symposium began with the seemingly simple questions of a PhD student: What are cultures and institutions and are they distinct? Do organizational culture and institutional theories provide unique perspectives? If so, can they be used together? What would we gain and how would we do it? The essays in this dialogue are the result.

Outside of the management field, studies that emphasize organizations as systems of meaning and highlight the cultural-cognitive construction of organizations and practices are included under the broad umbrella of cultural studies of organizations. However, within management, such work forms two distinct streams of research, that on organizational culture and that on institutions. A group of scholars began to explore where these research streams meet at a symposium at the 2009 AOM meetings. This dialogue continues the conversation, adds some additional voices, and seeks to bring together scholars active in each stream to reflect on this somewhat puzzling historical division of intellectual labor. The aim of the dialogue is to develop and inspire "border conversation" between those working in these two streams of organizational scholarship, to explore how key arguments and assumptions from each stream might add value to the other, and to propose questions and approaches that will seed a more nuanced development of cultural constructs within and across these literatures.

Recent years have witnessed burgeoning interest among management scholars in the role of symbols and systems of meaning in shaping action within and between organizations. Although these issues treated diversely have long been on the scholarly "table," there is renewed interest in how

social actors put culture to use in organizational settings (Fine, 1996; Hallett, 2003; Hatch, 1993; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Swidler, 2001) and in the role of discursive and symbolic processes in interorganizational arenas (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Zilber, 2008). Special journal issues dedicated to the "cultural construction of organizational life" (Organization Science, 2011) and "organizations and their institutional environments" (*Academy of Management Journal*, 2011) attest to the growing interest and vibrant scholarship within these fields.

(How) Do Cultural and Institutional Approaches Differ?

Organizational studies comprise a rich mix of research approaches and traditions, a source of debate, and, for some, despair or polemic (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2006; Pfeffer, 1993; Scott, 2007; Van Maanen, 1995). This diversity provides a first and possibly the simplest explanation for the largely separate development of the institutional and organizational culture literatures. Although descriptively accurate in terms of context and careers, this explanation offers scant satisfaction and even less guidance to scholars exploring opportunities at the borders of separate literatures.

Different points of origin. Another possible explanation for the oddly separate development of the two literatures stems from their origins in different intellectual traditions. Much early work on organizational culture drew heavily (but selectively, as Hatch, 2004 argues) from models and approaches in anthropology. Other scholars drew on symbolic interactionism and saw culture as negotiated order (Fine, 1996) conveyed and sustained through social interaction (Van Maanen, 1978). Many scholars took the view that organizations *are* cultures (Smircich, 1983) and sought to explain how rituals, symbols, shared beliefs, assumptions, or narratives carried and conveyed culture (Kunda, 1992; Martin, 1992; Schein, 1992; Turner, 1967). Despite considerable variation in the role attributed to various cultural carriers

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(see Martin, 2002; Weeks, 2004), most early studies reinforced a view of culture as contributing to the “deep structure” (Swidler, 2001, p. 163) and stability of organizations, shaping “the myriad behaviors and practices recognized as a distinct way of life” (Gregory, 1983, p. 364). These works also emphasized managerial cultures, over time including a broader set of work cultures (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Jackall, 1988; Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998; Morrill, 1995).

In contrast, the modern tradition of institutional theories in organizational analysis grew from sociological theories of action and constraint but focused researchers directly on richly textured systems of meaning operating within and between organizations. This approach explicitly countered the then-dominant closed systems models in organizational analysis that gave primacy to technology, task complexity, and interdependence as the drivers of organizational structure and strategy. Early institutionalists working in the Columbia School of Merton and their students (e.g., Clark, 1970; Gouldner, 1954; Selznick, 1949) brought renewed attention to politics and conflict (Haveman, Broschak, & Cohen, 2009; Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003). The “new institutionalism” broadened that stance to directly focus on meaning, interpretation, and culture, albeit using a more “macro” conception (Suchman & Edelman, 1996; Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987; Meyer, 2006) and, some would say, at the cost of a concern with politics, a criticism also directed at much organizational culture theory, although prominent counterexamples exist (e.g., Hallett, 2003; Rosen, 1985; Roy, 1960).

Diverging research methods and strategies. Research methods and strategies influence the kinds of knowledge we make. This offers a second potential source of the silence between the two literatures. Our understanding of organizational culture and institutions advanced through scholars’ use of methods directed at understanding and explaining routine, stability, and sometimes change at different levels of analysis. Studies of organizational culture typically looked within single organizations (for a notable exception see Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983) to examine “webs of meaning,” constituted through symbols and interactions that varied across organizational units and functions. This convention reinforced an ethnographic tradition, giving social actors an important role and implying a need for researchers to gain close access to their worlds. Early work on culture used ethnographic methods, including participant observation, written field notes, and individual accounts collected through informal interviews with organizational members.¹

Early institutional studies had much methodological continuity with these approaches: rich and careful ethnographies, copious fieldwork, and a concern with ambiguity resolution. Such studies were typically case studies, focused on phenomena found between and across organizations—directing attention to interorganizational relationships

and, after the mid-1980s, to organizational fields and “institutionalized cultural-cognitive models and practices” (Morrill, 2008, p. 28). Gouldner (1954) and Selznick (1949) arguably built from close observations of the dynamics of work and managerial activity, but these nuances gave way to archival studies that focused increasingly on “external” linkages and interactions (DiMaggio, 1991).² The focus on careful observations of interaction faded from the mainstream of institutional theory, and the core works that shaped that literature from the early 1980s through the late 1990s combined a variant of Columbia sociology’s survey and statistical methods with large *N* sample strategies in the spirit of organizational ecology, yielding a never fully accepted “cultural structuralism” (Ventresca & Mohr, 2002). With this methodological preference came an analytical focus on structures and practices, to an empirical neglect of meaning.

Different mechanisms to explain stability. Finally, each literature drew early empirical attention to the stabilizing influences of culture or institutions. Each tended to locate stability in different mechanisms (interaction, face work, institutionalized templates, and classifications) that occurred at different levels of analysis. Moreover, each literature has been subsequently critiqued for overemphasizing the stabilizing aspects of its focal mechanisms.

In studies of organizational culture, culture was frequently taken to be a source of normative social control (Kunda, 1992), which operated within an organization or group through the stabilizing influence of shared norms, assumptions, symbols, and meanings (Schein, 1992). Even when culture was portrayed as fragmented (Meyerson & Martin, 1987) or unevenly shared because of the existence of multiple subcultures (Martin, 2002; Van Maanen & Barley, 1985), accounts often presented such differentiation as an achieved “truce” rather than a source of ongoing negotiation of meaning.³

The early institutional literature has been critiqued for similarly portraying institutions as overly stabilizing and persistent. This stems in part from the canonical works in institutional theory that appropriate “politics” and “the cultural” from neighboring research traditions and disciplines in overly synthetic and abstract ways. For example, “isomorphism” in the original usage was substantively about adaptation and the contextual embeddedness of forms.

DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) now-classic statement is an argument about mechanisms of change embedded in complex networks, resources, and meaning structures. But much of the subsequent work on isomorphism lost this emphasis on organizational field structuration (in empirical terms) as a prerequisite for isomorphism. As a result, many accounts of isomorphism underspecified the relevant social structures of authority and meaning that “drive” isomorphism (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Lounsbury et al., 2003), and isomorphism became a stand-alone concept that came to mean [inevitable] “convergence.”

Emerging Similarities Between Cultural and Institutional Approaches

Despite potential commonalities, the divergent intellectual origins, problems, and lineages led to developments within each literature that continue to be addressed largely separately. We, therefore, see opportunity for productive interchange and foreshadow some key themes here, leaving a more complete discussion to dialogue contributors.

Bringing people back in. Recent studies reinforce moves to conceptualize systems of meaning as dynamically produced and reproduced, an accomplishment of social actors rather than a set of contextual conditions. Accordingly, each literature has recently explored important process questions (Langley, 1999), including the following: How do certain meanings come to have significance and become privileged within a given organization, field, or group of social actors? How do individual and collective actions influence these meanings and their significance? How do such efforts contribute to either the stabilization or destabilization of meaning? How do stable meanings support change?

In the organizational culture literature, recent efforts reconnect with contemporary work in anthropological and cultural studies, with emphasis on cultural dynamism and change (Hatch, 1993, 2004, 2010). The sociological focus on culture as a “toolkit” or repertoire of actions (Kaufman, 2004; Swidler, 1986) portrays culture as a resource deployed by actors designing action within organizations, rather than a constraint on action (Hallett, 2003, 2010; Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle, Irwin, & Mao, 2010; Weber, 2005). Similarly, a major development in the institutional literature is the significant attention to the role of actors and the refocus on institutional “work” in changing and/or maintaining institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004). The attention to “inhabited institutions” reinforces these potential linkages, focusing on people- and activity-rich accounts in which the ongoing work of interpretation, sense-making, and struggles over identity and meaning are vivid (Hallett, Shulman, & Fine, in press; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Kaplan & Tripsas, 2008; Scully & Creed, 1997; Zilber, 2007). These initiatives offer points for conversation with research on organizational culture because they mirror that literature’s renewed attention to agency and dynamics.

Cross-level analyses. A second area for potential synergy between these fields lies in paying greater attention to processes that engage multiple levels of analysis. As mentioned, individual actors have taken a more prominent role in each literature in recent years. Much could be gained by explicitly studying how actors draw from meanings outside the organization and craft actions within organizations or vice versa. Such work would highlight the embeddedness of actors in multiple systems of meaning. Empirical study in this area can find common ground with the traditional focus of cultural

analysis on meaning and practices within organizations, and with institutional studies of meaning and practices across organizations.

Ongoing Challenges and Points of Intersection: Highlights From the Symposium

With these developments come distinct questions and challenges for the two fields, and their intersection, as suggested by panelists at the AOM session. Although each author will address these in depth in their dialogue sections, we highlight a few central questions here. First, both fields remain deeply concerned with developing a better understanding of how meaning is made, shared, stabilized (or not), and with what consequences. It appears that, despite the interest shown by scholars in each tradition in meaning, much remains unexplained. All panelists saw promise in studying how meanings “move” between organizational cultures and institutions (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1996; Weber, Heinze, & DeSoucey, 2008; Zilber, 2006).

A second question concerns how we capture and explain complex multilevel processes. Although the separation of levels was problematic for some panelists, others were very concerned about how to account for these multiple levels and their interaction, especially in a world where some corporate cultures have gained global significance. How meaning is made, how it gains significance, and how that significance is transferred—through material and symbolic forms—across and within levels remains a central concern for many.

In the essays that follow, each of our four main contributors—Mary Jo Hatch, Tammar Zilber, Bob Hinings, and Majken Schultz—brings her or his insight to these questions and more. We attempted to capture the element of dialogue in textual form by having each contributor read each initial essay and then work in one of two pairs to create a coauthored reflection on their individual contributions, with one in each pair coming from the cultural and the other from the institutional perspective. Coauthored reflections follow their authors’ paired essays. First, Mary Jo Hatch writes from the perspective of her work on the dynamics of organizational culture, followed by Tammar Zilber who writes as an institutional theorist concerned with meaning. Together they explore common and divergent concerns in these literatures and offer ideas for, and examples of, crossing the border between them. Next Bob Hinings explores how recent work on institutional logics can inform understanding of organizational culture and vice versa. Following this, Majken Schultz considers four ways in which culture and institutions influence one another. Together Bob Hinings and Majken Schultz then outline ways forward through greater attention to multiplicity of meanings, and call for scholars to take a process perspective and explicitly attend to how

globalization reshapes the interactions between culture and institutions. Cal Morrill then enters the dialogue with comments on the set of essays, as a scholar long concerned with the cultural, institutions, and conflict, albeit one who did not participate in the AOM session. Finally, Kathryn Aten and Jennifer Howard-Grenville reflect on where researchers could usefully focus attention. They speak both to scholars new to the field(s), and to those who have long recognized opportunities to develop the common and complementary ground between studies of culture and of institutions. We provide this as a direct invitation to further productive conversations at the borders of cultures and institutions.

Notes

1. The primacy of fieldwork was joined by new streams of work that engaged organizational culture in new ways, in some cases, operationalizing culture as a variable that could be measured through survey techniques and then used to assess other variables such as commitment (Hofstede, 2001; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996). This body of work remains on the edges of the organizational culture literature.
2. Meyer and Rowan's (1978) work on the rich interactional orders and face work in the management of schools underscores this transition. Their chapter develops the Goffman-inspired "logics of faith" that support Weick's theories of loose coupling. Although not strictly speaking an ethnography, the presentation of argument and speculations relies directly on vivid observations of the workplace and the administrative cultures of schools.
3. The work of Hughes, Becker, and, especially, Strauss and his students did not find a place in this conversation (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Hughes, 1962; Strauss, 1978), neither among the organizational culture community nor the institutionalists. This puzzle is an especially perplexing one. This points to a community of researchers never fully "in" the organizational culture world who were the boundary spanners, many more closely identified with sociology as a discipline (e.g., Morrill, Jackall, Fine, and Becker in various incarnations). Contemporary directions suggest that selective borrowing and appreciation of this work is important, for example, the burgeoning literature on "institutional" or the work by Golden-Biddle and Locke (2007) on the way meaning is constructed in the writings of organizational ethnographers.

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