

# COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

## **Expanding the Theoretical Landscape of Organizational Socialization Research: Institutionalism and Beyond**

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### **Abstract**

Our essay challenges an understanding of organizational socialization as a process whereby newcomers adapt to objectified organizational entities. To this end, we explore potential theoretical contributions of organizational institutionalism and related discourses on institutional logics, organizational hybridity, and organizational imprints. All of these perspectives support a concept of organizations as ‘moving targets’ in their relationship to dynamic environments. Accordingly, individuals such as newcomers can be positioned as active agents who engage in complex sense-making processes. However, institutionalism also has its shortcomings, as a deeper analysis of a seminal paper on organizational socialization in hybrid organizations reveals. We observe an ongoing commitment to an evolutionary adaptation paradigm, a paternalistic managerial attitude, and the denial of hegemonial market logics in organizations. In conclusion, we propose additional perspectives beyond institutionalism, which can further expand the theoretical landscape of organizational socialization research through independent and critical studies.

### **Keywords**

Identity, institutional logics, organizational hybridity, organizational imprints, organizational socialization

## 1 Introduction

“Each theoretical perspective has places it cannot see, territory it cannot map.” (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 241).

Exploring unknown territories requires not only an adventurous spirit, but also a good understanding of the core area of an existing theory, its limitations, and a reasonable assessment of both promising and problematic future paths. The goal of this paper is to outline such a theoretical journey in the field of organizational socialization. Its core area has been determined by key contributions including those by van Maanen and Schein (1979) and Jablin (1987). They conceptualized organizational socialization as a prescriptive n-step learning process newcomers need to follow in order to successfully align with organizational expectations.

The theoretical “places” that such stage models cannot see is paradoxically the endpoint of the socialization process. The organization ‘into’ which the newcomer is socialized remains an atheoretical construct. It appears as a pre-existing unified rational entity that requires neither further explanation nor legitimation, despite the fact that it is granted the right to determine the entire ‘absorption’ process. This paper aims to transform the organization into a theoretical territory that can be mapped. Our ambition is to go beyond linear stage-models and to de-objectify their inscribed finality by conceptualizing the goals of socialization as “moving targets” (Haack & Schoeneborn, 2015, p. 307). Organizations are exposed to dynamic contexts which contribute to multiple and contradicting identity claims. Not least the newcomers themselves may turn into actors who are not just adapting but – theoretically – challenging and changing organizational cultures and identities, and thus are able to act as socialization agents in their own right.

Our description of the limitations of traditional organizational socialization research is not new (Guhin, Calarco, & Miller-Idriss, 2021). However, there are different ways to respond to those limitations, and the available theoretical options have not been systematically explored. For example, and in particular during the 1990s, researchers looked at newcomers as “information seekers who take an active role in adjusting to their new environment” (Morrison, 1993, p. 173). Empirical studies have identified a number of creative communication strategies (Morrison, 2002), but the characterization of individual agency as “pro-active adaptability” (Fugate et al., 2004, p. 14) has stayed with the linearity and the finality of the process, so that the need to align with a pre-existing reality is not called into question.

It stands to reason that theories in the tradition of post-structuralism, as well as constructivist and constitutive approaches, are more promising when attempting to make sense of organizations as de-objectified “moving targets”. Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory is one such example: Scott and Myers (2010) conceptualized socialization as a recursive process between the newcomer as a capable, reflexive agent and organizational structure. This enabled the authors to capture the micro-meso dynamics that constitute and reconstitute organizational realities. The links to the macro-level of society, however, have been neglected. In our contribution we focus on another prominent school of thought in organization studies which may be able to fill that gap: organizational institutionalism and related discourses on institutional logics, organizational hybridity, and organizational imprints. Due to their phenomenological roots, these approaches are also committed to finding answers that result from fundamental dualities such as agency vs. structure and subjectivity vs. objectivity. Accordingly, institutionalism offers an additional perspective that may help to go beyond an understanding of organization as an unquestioned static and rational structure. Institutionalism analyzes organizations as dynamic phenomena that need to be explained with reference to societal influences that are conceptualized as institutions.

Thus, our overarching research question is: *What is the theoretical potential and what are the pitfalls of organizational institutionalism, once the ‘goal’ of the organizational socialization process manifests itself as a “moving target”?* Our theoretical reflection on the value of institutionalism for organizational socialization research follows two tracks, before we finally propose theoretical pathways beyond institutionalism. Metaphorically speaking, we first take a bird’s eye view of institutionalism, which enables us to describe general claims and theoretical propositions. However, a theory can only prove its value in its specific and detailed engagement with empirical data. This necessitates that, in a second step, we follow the bird’s “nose dive”, too. We will take an in-depth look at Battilana and Dorado (2010) - a single paper which was selected because it has significantly influenced the relevant discourses and is one of the few contributions that has applied institutionalist thinking to organizational socialization. Inevitably, our choice is highly selective, but a critical in-depth analysis of a seminal paper may help to uncover theoretical inconsistencies, contradictions, and ideologically driven presumptions that the bird’s eye view alone cannot see.

## 2 The Bird’s Eye View: Institutionalism and its Value for Organizational Socialization Research

Traditional organizational socialization approaches and ‘old’ institutionalism share a perspective on formal organizations as disciplining agents. They build on the ideal of stable, rational, and internally consistent bureaucracies that determine processes such as the socialization of newcomers (Selznick, 1996). One particular merit of new

institutionalism (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) is that it challenged such theoretical perspectives. “Bringing society back in” (Friedland & Alford, 1991) was the ambition that pushed organizations from an independent into a dependent variable. Meyer and Rowan (1977/1991) argued that organizations do not follow generic principles of effectivity but rather construct accepted societal myths of rationality in order to legitimate themselves vis-à-vis their environment. This, in turn, would explain why organizations look so similar. DiMaggio and Powell (1983/1991) observed isomorphism, meaning the tendency to copy each other, as a key conservative feature of organizations, simply because these organizations would be exposed to similar expectations from their societal environment.

The concept of organizational isomorphism shows that contextualizing organizational structures alone does not contribute to an understanding of “moving targets”, as long as the environment is perceived as a monophonic force that always expects an affirmative stance towards the very same myths. It has been criticized that neither organizational change nor innovation can be explained by the concept of isomorphism. New institutionalism, however, has developed further into what today is preferably labelled “organizational institutionalism” (Greenwood et al., 2017; Ocasio & Gai, 2020). The ‘institutional logics’ perspective became one of its most important schools of thought (Lounsbury et al., 2021). It builds on Friedland and Alford’s (1991, p. 243) assumption that “society is constituted through multiple institutional logics”. Not isomorphism, but a diversity of organizations is explained by a diversity of societal contexts such as the market, the political sphere, and civil society (Hoffmann, 2011; Jay, 2013). All of these institutions provide “taken-for-granted social prescriptions that guide actors’ behavior” (Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1419). Aligning with such prescriptions is a problem for so-called hybrid organizations in particular because they are concurrently exposed to contradicting institutional logics (Pache & Thornton, 2021). A prime example are social enterprises which need to manage the tension between mission orientation and profit orientation. The dominance of the latter may result in a commercialization of e.g., higher education or civil society organizations (Suykens, De Rynck, & Verschuere, 2020; Thornton, 2004; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2015).

Organizational imprinting is another research field that has helped to extend the perspective of new institutionalism (Marcquis & Tilcsik, 2013). It also assumes that organizational structures and practices can best be explained by the need to adapt to societal expectations. Concurrently, however, research on imprints contributes to a more dynamic understanding of institutional contexts by temporalizing “the stamp of the environment” (Marcquis & Tilcsik, 2013, p. 220). It is argued that organizations are more adaptive during distinct sensitive periods which are often, but do not necessarily need to be, the founding period. The institutional context may change over time, but the organization remains committed to the same imprint. This does not result in a kind of generic isomorphism, because organizations are imprinted by different sensitive periods and, therefore, are also different from each other. Moreover, ‘old’ imprints remain flexible: processes of “exaptation” allow their creative reutilization in order to meet ‘new’ institutional expectations (Marcquis & Huang, 2010).

Overall, recent theoretical developments promoted by research on institutional logics, hybridity, and imprints account for the dynamics and diversity of organizations as moving targets. In addition, there have been increased efforts to counter the critique that the micro-level of analysis has been neglected. Bévort and Suddaby (2016, p. 33) summarized this criticism by stating that

“the construct of institutional logics, like much of neo-institutional theory, offers little space for individual agency in processes of institutional maintenance, creation or change. [...] Individuals are granted little freedom within institutional theory to choose freely amongst logics or to deviate from their omniscient prescriptions.”

Organizational institutionalism is keen to cover this theoretical blind spot (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009; Lok, 2020; Powell & Rerup, 2017). For example, the concept of individual imprints has been introduced, inspiring research on the impact of organizational founders and entrepreneurs (De Cock, Andries, & Clarysse, 2021; Hannan, Burton, & Baron, 1996), and research on hybrid organizations strengthened individual agency in institutionalism by utilizing identity approaches (Lok, 2010). All of these efforts have helped to “bring individuals back into the conceptualization and empirical investigation of institutions.” (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016, p. 19). The passive organizational member subordinated to one consistent and totalizing institutional logic has been replaced by ‘struggling’ individuals exposed to conflicting institutional logics and imprints. For some, such exposure may result in confusion, for others it can induce creative sense-making processes. Practices of enacting, accommodating, prioritizing, denying, segmenting, reconciling, contesting, or resisting institutional logics have been conceptualized as individual “institutional work” (Bargues & Valiorgue, 2019; Brown, 2021; Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013) resulting in hybrid identities (Currie & Logan, 2020). Thus, a tension-centered understanding of identity work as institutional work has laid the foundation for the acknowledgement of individual agency in organizational processes.

The trust in individual agency has also advanced rather prescriptive research that provides guidelines on how to manage institutional tensions within an organization. For example:

- Compartmentalizing allows differing prioritizations of logics among different functional units such as departments (Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

- Segmenting is a spatial or temporal separation, which allows for different prioritization of logics at different locations or points in time (Gümüşay et al., 2020; Smets et al., 2015).
- Decoupling is a (public) commitment to formal structures and policies reflecting societal expectations, while internal practices follow contradicting logics (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977/1991).
- “Inverted positioning” (Hoffmann & Kristensen, 2017) or a “Trojan Horse” strategy (Pache & Santos, 2013) is an extreme form of a decoupled public image. This could take the form of the greenwashing of controversial industries, but also, vice versa, the brownwashing of a green company in order to align with the logic of the market.
- Compromising is the acceptance of tensions between logics and the attempt to find a balance between them. It acknowledges that none of the logics can be realized to their full extent (Oliver, 1991).
- Integration is not the acceptance, but rather the denial of logic incommensurability. For instance, Besharov (2014) concludes from a case study that diverging logics can be mutually reinforcing.
- Deference to the competing logic is a communication strategy that develops cooperative relationships which are built on politeness and mutual respect (Jourdan, Durand, & Thornton, 2017).
- Creating and professionalizing boundary-spanning roles in organizations help to increase multiperspectivity and organizational reflexivity overall (Hoffmann, Röttger, & Jarren, 2007).

Socialization research could benefit from academic discourses on institutional logics, hybrid organizations, and organizational imprints. Colliding, blended, decoupled, dominant, or marginalized logics manifest themselves as competing identity claims, which turn organizations into “moving targets”. The empirical question would then be how newcomers are either confused or can utilize the aforementioned strategies when they enter organizations and define their own roles.

To date, there has not been much research that has explicitly applied institutionalist approaches to organizational socialization. Bagues and Valiorgue (2019) analyzed how newcomers maintain and create roles through institutional work. Dacin, Munir, and Tracey (2010) highlight the importance of rituals for socialization processes and institutional maintenance. Raemy (2020) conceptualizes journalists’ socialization as a learning and adaptation process towards an institutionally determined ideology. In the following, our focus will be on Battilana and Dorado (2010). Thus, we will leave the bird’s eye view behind and, continuing with the metaphor, accompany the nose dive. As a key contribution to the academic discourse on organizational hybridity, Battilana and Dorado’s take on socialization and their empirical analysis not only exemplifies the opportunities, but also the pitfalls that arise when using institutionalism to expand the theoretical landscape of organizational socialization research.

### **3 The Bird’s Nose Dive: From Theory to Ideology**

According to a meta-analysis by Pache and Thornton (2021), Battilana and Dorado’s (2010) comparative case study on two microfinance organizations is by far the most cited article in the field of organizational hybridity and institutionalism. It set the tone for subsequent research and is also one of the very few contributions that analyzes organizational socialization specifically from an institutionalist perspective. Our examination will focus on the perils of institutionalism when applied to organizational socialization.

The microfinance organizations investigated by Battilana and Dorado (2010) were exposed to two competing logics: a mission-driven “development logic” and a profit-oriented “banking logic”. The authors argue in favor of a balancing approach; one of the investigated organizations would have been successful in balancing institutional logics, while the other failed to reconcile them.

What comes as a surprise, however, is that the authors only apply economic success criteria representing the “banking logic” in order to measure the success of a strategy assumed to balance both logics. For example, they celebrate a “carefully designed and continuously improved bonus system” (Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1430) implemented by the ‘successful’ organization. This turns out to be an excessive individual incentive scheme applied to Human Resources. Loan officers “could double their pay via performance; they could receive up to 105 percent of their base salary as additional compensation for excellence in job performance.” (Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1430).

In other words, while Battilana and Dorado (2010) claim to showcase a balanced approach to conflicting institutional logics, they are in fact revealing the hegemony of a highly competitive market logic imposed on the HR management of an ostensibly hybrid organization. This affects the way they approach organizational socialization. The authors distinguish between

“a ‘mix-and-match’ approach and a ‘tabula rasa’ approach: The mix-and-match approach prioritizes individual capabilities and therefore leads to hiring people who are carriers of the logics the organization is attempting to combine; the tabula rasa approach emphasizes socializability above all, thereby prioritizing individuals not steeped in either of the logics being combined.”  
(Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1432).

The latter is recommended for hybrid organizations. In other words, ‘empty’ mindsets are likely to be better suited to hybrid organizations than strong personalities: “You need to hire people you can manage” (Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1428) says a manager of the ‘successful’ organization quoted in the article. Thus, the authors revitalize the paternalistic belief in “socialization policies, which teach and reinforce desired behaviors and values in hires” (Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1420).

Battilana and Dorado’s (2010) approach needs to be criticized solely for their naïve assumption that “tabula rasa” newcomers actually exist. In fact, the examples from the ‘successful’ organization they themselves provide corrupt their approach. The organization’s leadership decided “to hire recent university graduates with the basic technical background required for loan evaluation (e.g., auditing, accounting, and business).” (Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1430). Instead of taking these examples as representations of the “banking logic”, the authors describe them as neutral expressions of “operational excellence” (Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1430) – a means of reaching a higher end which would then be oriented towards the “development logic”.

Perhaps it is due to the intervention of the journal’s reviewers that, towards the end, the article itself takes another turn that pulls the rug out under their entire idea of combining “a tabula rasa hiring approach with a means-focused socialization approach” (Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1435). The authors admit the need for “continued vigilance to assure that, as foreseen by Weber (1922/1978), in the long run, operational excellence does not become an end in itself, thereby possibly superseding the original hybrid goal of the organization.” (Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1435). It was not only Max Weber, but also the system theory of Niklas Luhmann (1968) - and not least New Institutionalism itself - that revealed the vulnerability of Battilana and Dorado’s (2010) means-end figure. Friedland and Alford (1991, p. 251) state: “The new institutionalist work has demonstrated the normative organization of means, such as (...) manager forms of government among municipalities. Through these means (...) organizations obtain legitimacy, but no necessary efficiency.” Thus, Friedland and Alford (1991) would probably disagree with Battilana and Dorado when they claim that “operational excellence” and the recruitment of business technocrats is a neutral means that does not affect the salience of a “banking logic” within hybrid organizations.

There has not been any substantial critical engagement with Battilana and Dorado (2010), even though (or perhaps because) their contribution has significantly shaped the emerging discourse on hybrid organizations. Our critique is twofold: (1) The authors highlight the need to balance competing logics while in fact celebrating the hegemony of business thinking. In consequence, (2) they also promote a paternalistic approach to organizational socialization: It would be best if newcomers were naïve and innocent - a cognitive “tabula rasa” so that they can be formed according to the needs of management.

We conclude that institutionalist research on organizational hybridity helps to expand the theoretical landscape of organizational socialization theories. However, an in-depth look at a key contribution such as that by Battilana and Dorado (2010) exemplifies theoretical contradictions that indicate an ongoing susceptibility to managerial ideologies. In the next section, we will first argue that this is not only a problem of the way the theory has been empirically applied; it is also due to an ongoing macro-bias that throws the entire theory back to the evolutionary proposition that adaptability is ultimately the best trait individuals such as newcomers can have. Accordingly, we will conclude by proposing theoretical perspectives that go beyond organizational institutionalism.

## **4 Soaring to New Heights Beyond Institutionalism**

Accounting for the diversity of institutional logics, conceptualizing institutional work as identity work, and acknowledging the relevance of individual imprints have been milestones in theory building based on organizational institutionalism. These can also support efforts in organizational socialization research to go beyond an understanding of onboarding as an alignment with pre-determined organizational structures.

However, the way Battilana and Dorado (2010) devalue individual agency is just one example showing that organizational institutionalism still suffers from a macro-bias (Suddaby, 2015). When explaining traits of newcomers’ imprints, it is primarily societal expectations that serve as an independent variable. Individuals are reduced to ‘carriers’ of conditions determined by the institutional context at the time of entry (Tilcsik, 2014). Moreover, it is once more the organizational imprint affecting the individual imprint rather than vice versa (Lee & Battilana, 2020). Individual imprints continue to be described as being rather weak in comparison with the organizational imprint. Similar to the founding period of the organization, it is in particular the early career period that is conceptualized as a sensitive period

of weakness for individuals: “Both organizations and individuals are assumed to constitute more of a blank slate during such periods and to be especially receptive to external influences as they attempt to achieve fit with their environments to manage the uncertainties of newness.” (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013, p. 199).

That such uncertainties may result in an unquestioned acceptance of the employer’s imprint is seen not as a problem, but as a great opportunity for employer organizations. The aforementioned “*tabula rasa*” approach promoted by Battilana and Dorado (2010) can easily be read as an invitation for employers to exploit the “blank slate” status of newcomers in order to bring them in line with hegemonic organizational expectations. Thus, with the exception of a few extraordinary entrepreneurs, institutional logics and imprinting approaches still refrain from constituting true agency on the employee level. In consequence, ‘ordinary’ newcomers who show commitment to institutional logics which are in conflict with the dominant organizational imprint are not appreciated as potential creative game changers. Quite the contrary: they pose a problem for the organization and need to be ‘domesticated’. Dokko et al. (2009, p. 54) argue that they “bring rigidities that act as a baggage, weighing down responsiveness or ability to reflect in the new situation”. Reframing reflexivity as an affirmative willingness to sacrifice one’s own personal history sounds almost like a parody of Giddens’ understanding of reflexive agency. It exemplifies in all clarity, how theory building on institutional logics, hybrid organizations, and organizational imprints can lose their critical impetus and support the dark side of organizational socialization: supporting managerial desires to employ “blank slates” without any “baggage”.

Thus, despite its significant value for organizational socialization research, we also need to recognize the pitfalls of theories in the context of organizational institutionalism, institutional logics, hybridity, and imprinting. In the following, we propose additional theoretical angles which could help to avoid those pitfalls and strengthen critical perspectives on organizational socialization.

#### **4.1 From an infrequent hybridity to persistent paradoxes**

Paradox theorists assume that organizations can be characterized by means of persistent social practices “that contradict one another, even though these practices are equally perceived to be legitimate and relevant to the success of an organization” (Hoffmann, 2018, p. 669). Enriching the hybridity discourse with assumptions from paradox theory (Gümüşay et al., 2019; Jay, 2013) can help to expand the theoretical landscape of organizational socialization research in two ways:

- Hybridity is no longer perceived as a deviation from ‘normal’ organizing committed to one dominant institutional logic alone. Instead, every organization is to some degree hybrid because every organization is exposed to persistent paradoxes.
- The elements of such paradoxes are irreconcilable; organizations might be able to balance them, but they cannot integrate them (Hoffmann, 2018; see also Quinn & Cameron, 1988). Paradox theory that follows such a “permanent dialectics approach” (Smith & Cunha, 2021, p. 93) would reject Battilana and Dorado’s (2010) promotion of harmonious means-end or win-win-figures that are used to reconcile e.g., profit orientation and social mission within a social enterprise.

Understanding organizations as arenas where incommensurate everyday practices collide enables us to analyze them as sites of persistent tensions and ongoing power battles. Resulting hegemonies are contingent (Mouffe, 2013), so from the employee’s perspective, the organization once again becomes a moving target. Instead of aligning with the organization as a unified entity, newcomers have to position themselves and enter the ‘battlefield’ as proactive agents. Thus, paradox theory may also support a critical power perspective on organizations that has partly been lost in the mainstream discourse on institutional logics, imprints, and hybridity (Berti & Simpson, 2021).

#### **4.2 From liminality as transition to liminality as an enduring experience**

The belief in the persistence of organizational paradoxes can also inspire organizational research on liminal experiences which are described as “being betwixt and between states, roles, and/or identities” (Ibarra & Obodary, 2020, p. 471). Traditional organizational socialization research has already used liminality as a stage in the transition process starting with the organizational entry (Van Maanen, 1984). Furthermore, recent research has highlighted how liminality can induce creative processes on the individual level and innovation on the organizational level (Ibarra & Obodary, 2020). However, liminality is still primarily understood as a clash between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’, and the ‘old’ will ultimately be left behind. Connecting paradox theory with a revised understanding of liminality would make it possible to go beyond socialization as a transitional process of the ‘new’ replacing the ‘old’ and encourage the empirical investigation of persistent liminal spaces where the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ co-exist.

#### **4.3 From formal organizations to partial organizations**

The theoretical landscape on organizational socialization could further be expanded by looking at ‘incomplete’ partial organizations. Examples discussed by Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl (2016) are standards, meta-organizations, markets,

networks, and families. For example, networks understood as cross-sector collaborations are inherently hybrid (Quélin, Kivleniece, & Lazzarini, 2017), and blur the line between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of organizations. Asking when and where future employees actually enter the organization is no longer a triviality but becomes a crucial research question for organizational socialization research. Is it when they sign the contract? Is it when they complete an internship during their studies? Is it when they write their master’s thesis in collaboration with a company? Research on hybrid partial organizations including, e.g., employers and socialization agents such as higher education institutions could de-objectify organizational boundaries and reconstruct them as contingent and dynamic results of negotiation processes. That is important not least from a critical perspective (Gibson & Pappa, 2000). The constitution of partial meta-organizations could be analyzed as a power-based osmosis strategy aiming to impose one distinct institutional logic on another hitherto independent formal organization. Macro-phenomena such as the commercialization of higher education (Hall, 2018) and micro-phenomena such as an anticipatory socialization that brings students in line with the market logic can then be described on the meso-level of (partial) organizations.

#### ***4.4 From mirroring the institution to the organization as a decided order***

Neglecting agency is a common critique directed at new institutionalism, and the inclusion of identity approaches has tried to fill that gap. However, we have argued that institutionalism continues to suffer from a macro-bias. The focus remains on reified institutional forces as explanatory variables. In addition to the risk of reducing individuals to ‘carriers’ of logics and imprints, there is also a chance that the organization may disappear as a theoretical category in its own right. If organizations are nothing more than “orders representing wider social institutions” (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl 2016, p. 94) and all their energy goes into adapting to that institutional environment, then the distinction between organization and environment becomes theoretically meaningless.

As an alternative, Ahrne and Brunsson (2011, p. 84) proposed a unique theoretical conceptualization of organization as a “decided order”. Drawing on Niklas Luhmann’s (2000) radical constructivism, they argue that organizations constitute themselves as a self-referential sequence of decisions. Each organizational decision is a contingent selection between alternatives and every decision builds on previous decisions by the same organization. Instead of subordinating organization to institution, they propose a different relationship: “to restrict the term ‘institution’ to those social orders that are based on taken for granted beliefs and norms and to relegate all forms of decided orders to the term ‘organization’” (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016, p. 99). Understanding organizations not as institutional mirrors but as decided orders can help organizational socialization research to focus on what ultimately matters: What is decided by whom ‘in the name of the organization’? Who is employed, who is not employed? Who is promoted, who is not promoted? Who is fired, who is not fired?

#### ***4.5 From reified practices to communicative contingencies***

From a communication perspective, Gümüşay et al. (2020) coined the term “elastic hybridity” as a conflict-reducing organizational response to individual members who insist on differing logics of institutions. Key communicative features of elastic hybridity are polyphony and polysemy. Polyphony is a diversity of employee voices articulating contradicting claims on organizational identity (Andersen, 2003; Hoffmann, 2020; Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017). Polysemy are multiple understandings of one and the same communicative form (Wikberg, 2020). It is a strategic ambiguity which enables the co-constitution of conflicting meanings (Eisenberg, 1984). Thus, organizational identity is created by the use of the same terms, but these are allowed to be understood in different ways. For example, professionalism has traditionally been developed as an alternative concept to the logic of the market. However, medical managers then equated professionalism with managerialism in order to justify a commercialization of healthcare (McGivern et al., 2015). Gümüşay et al. (2020) argue that polysemy as strategic vagueness is “making spaces” for a diversity of conflicting interpretations. That, in turn, enables polyphony: multiple voices “take spaces”.

“Elastic hybridity” can also be conceptualized as an organizational socialization strategy, which enables the acknowledgment of multiple voices during recruitment processes. However, critical research would also need to investigate when and under what conditions hybridity is not elastic enough or when the opposite happens: it becomes overstretched. In any case, the theoretical concept of elastic hybridity leaves room for individual agency of the newcomer as a positive organizational force. It is not wiped away by establishing a “tabula rasa” that can then be shaped according to the expectations of a managerial elite.

## **5 Discussion and Conclusion**

Organizational institutionalism has developed into one of the most prominent theoretical schools of thought that help to go beyond a static understanding of organizations as objectified ‘containers’. Organizations not only explain and determine the behavior of e.g., newcomers, they also need to be explained. They become “moving targets” and getting

along with such dynamics would require an active agency on the side of the newcomer, who is no longer socialized 'into' a stiff entity.

New institutionalism argues that organizations legitimate themselves by aligning with (not necessarily rational) expectations in their institutional environment. By extending that paradigm, it has in particular been the institutional logics perspective and empirical research on hybrid organizations that explained organizational dynamics by highlighting their exposure to often contradictory institutional expectations. In addition, the imprinting approach uncovered temporal dynamics and the potential influence of individual imprints. It was not least the fruitful connections between organizational institutionalism and identity approaches that strengthened the agency of individuals such as newcomers vis-à-vis the organization.

However, institutionalists' ongoing paradigmatic belief in a deep organizational desire to align with expectations in the environment is a double-edged sword in theoretical terms. Even though research has increasingly accounted for organizational dynamics, sympathies for an evolutionary equilibrium thinking continue to shine through. Traces of social Darwinism resurface as a 'survival of the fittest' ideology – be it a newcomer effectively adapting to their employer organization, or an organization effectively adapting to its environment. Such an orientation towards 'quasi-functional' contingency theory comes as a surprise (Haack & Schoeneborn, 2015) since new institutionalism began as a critical constructionist theory aiming to uncover myths of organizational rationality. However, as our critical re-reading of Battilana and Dorado's (2010) seminal article on hybrid organizational socialization has shown, the institutional logics literature can easily lose sight of its critical phenomenological roots and reproduce functionalist and managerial ideologies such as paternalistic concepts of organizational socialization that reduce newcomers to little more than "blank slates" desperately seeking the guidance of managers.

Thus, we conclude that organizational institutionalism continues to have a kind of stranger anxiety towards individual agency. With a few exceptions (e.g., Bargues & Valiorgue 2019), this applies in particular to empirical studies, so that references to identity theories easily blow over as an academic lip service. It is a reservation that also extends to agency on the meso-level. The organization remains "nested" (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 242); it is subordinated to, and must align with, much stronger external institutional forces. These forces have to bear the entire burden of an explanatory variable; institutionalism continues "to treat institutions as reified constructs or black boxes and (...) focused on the movement of the effects of institutions on organizations, rather than the institutions themselves." (Suddaby, 2010, p. 17; see also Lounsbury et al., 2021). Thus, the problem of reification is not solved, but merely delegated from the organization to the institution. Institutionalism accepts the organization as a moving target, but it is an organization that is hardly able to control its own moves. It is moved by reified institutional forces beyond its existence. Thus, we conclude that the theoretical contribution of institutionalism to organizational socialization research remains limited as long as the institution is exploited as a convenient 'deus ex machina'.

Avoiding such pitfalls and re-establishing critical perspectives demand both reflections on methodological constraints and the exploration of new theoretical pathways. Methodological problems arise from a strong reliance on the cause-effect scheme in quantitative analyses (Furnari et al., 2021) and a quantified understanding of richness in qualitative case studies (Pache & Thornton, 2021; Reay & Jones, 2016). For example, for their qualitative paper Gümüşay et al. (2020) present a database comprising 18,450 pages! We cannot blame the authors; they received a best paper award. Their academic impression management is an entirely reasonable response to top journals' increased expectation to 'verify' the salience of institutional logics with a mammoth amount of qualitative interview and observation data. However, is such an excessive investment in fieldwork worthwhile when such data needs to be condensed into tables spanning just one or two pages? Is there not a strange contrast to the "uninhibited" theoretical claims of institutionalism (Alvesson, Hallett, & Spicer, 2019), where vast quantities of data are reduced into rather clear-cut representations of institutional logics?

Moreover, we also need to ask how a privileged and extensive field access that builds on strong personal and/or professional connections to the organization under inquiry affects the analysis. The mixing of researcher and consultant roles and granting the client e.g., the "right to review my writing prior to publication" (Jay, 2013, p. 143) can easily result in a loss of critical distance and an affirmative retelling of practitioners' 'success stories'. Academic discourses that shield rather than challenge such developments can become a problem: "If the institutional constraints on behavior are not specified, the social sciences risk becoming ideologies of the institutions they study." (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 260) Thus, we follow Alvesson et al.'s (2019, p. 124) proposal "to turn institutionalism on itself" and reveal how researchers are forced to "follow (institutionalized) routes and templates" of a hegemonic discourse. We conclude that it is the responsibility of the leading peer-reviewed journals in particular to pay more attention to creative research designs and critical in-depth analyses instead of rewarding extensive collaborations with the organizations under investigation.

Nevertheless, the institutional logics perspective, organizational hybridity, and imprinting approaches have made tremendous progress over the years with the inclusion of identity theories in particular providing a boost for theory building. While appreciating its value for organizational socialization research, we should not rely on the bird's eye view alone, which is easily dazzled by an all-inclusive picture-perfect theory painted by elite scholars in the field. We

took the effort to follow the nose dive of the bird, too, and looked into one seminal contribution. What we found is a disturbing move from theory to ideology in organizational socialization: the omnipotent manager filling the mindset of helpless “blank slates” in order to make them fit with the organization and its hegemonic commercial logic. We conclude that future theory building on organizational socialization needs to go beyond traditional evolutionary and managerial equilibrium concepts that continue to be promoted under the banner of organizational institutionalism. Accordingly, future empirical research needs to go beyond the highly standardized ‘case study’ designs that have led to unhealthy dependencies on ‘friendly’ collaborations with so-called ‘real world’ organizations. Not least such pressures on empirical fieldwork explain why institutionalism neglects questions of power and has cut ties to its critical theoretical roots. In other words, the institutionalist discourse has lost its own imprint. Thus, we would agree with Alvesson and Spicer’s (2019) verdict of institutionalism as a theory in its midlife-crisis. “Kill your Idols” by returning to the roots is therefore our paradoxical advice for a young and hopefully wild new generation of scholars. We outlined some potential pathways: Accounting for (1) the persistence of paradoxes, (2) liminality as an enduring experience, (3) partial organizations that de-objectify the boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, (4) the positioning of organizational agency as a decided order, and (5) the communicative constitution of organizational contingencies could provide inspiration when expanding the theoretical landscape of critical and independent organizational socialization research.

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