

Uninhibited Institutionalisms¹

Mats Alvesson

Tim Hallett

Andre Spicer

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Abstract

Institutional theory (IT) is a very influential set of approaches in organization studies. There is increasing critique that the set is becoming uninhibited: too broad, dispersed, and confusing. Efforts to rejuvenate the field(s) have led to all-embracing definitions and efforts to account for too much, which makes it difficult to identify what is distinct about the assembly of research. This article discusses critically the state of IT and suggests some reconceptualizations of institution and institutional theory and points at some alternative lines of development.

Introduction

Institutional theory stands on a precipice. It has reached terrific heights: hundreds of papers published in top journals representing multiple areas of research, scholarly monographs with leading university presses, special issues of prestigious academic journals, regular workshops and conferences, tenured faculty members at top universities, swathes of doctoral students and multiple handbooks. However, these heights are potentially dangerous, and there are wisps of criticism that threaten to gust. Some claim, "that the development of institutional theory has shifted from 'enlightening the masses' to 'preaching to the choir'" (van der Voet, 2014: 129). Others have complained that

¹ We thank Amelia Hawbaker for her comments on this essay.

'institution' has become a 'vapid umbrella term', which means everything and nothing (Haveman and David, 2008: 588; David and Bitekine, 2009). Alvesson and Spicer (2018) argue that institutional theory has passed its "best before" date, partly because of all-embracing definitions and efforts to account for too much, which makes it difficult to identify what is distinct about the assembly of research. Such criticisms are not restricted to scholars who work outside of the tradition. Self-described institutionalists have commented that the approach "is creaking under the weight of its own theoretical apparatus" (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca, 2011: 52); while others suggest that "we need to ask whether its power to explain organizational phenomena is withering in the light of its rather splintered proliferation" (Greenwood et al, 2008: 31).

We share these concerns, and our purpose in this essay is to pose a number of provocative questions about institutional theory and the practice of institutional research. We do so as scholars who come to institutional theory from different perspectives. The first two authors are sympathetic critics, who recognize the merits of old institutionalism and classic new institutionalism, but have become concerned with the expansive scope and potential dominance of contemporary institutional research. The third author identifies as an institutional theorist and is likewise concerned that the approach is trying to become all things to all people, a strategy that more often ends up angering nearly everyone. We share the belief that some basic problematization and rethinking can be useful for institutionalists and non-institutionalists alike.

We pose our provocations as questions because we recognize that there are multiple answers and arguments to be made. In doing so our goal is to stimulate the kind of dialogue, debate, and reflexivity that *Journal of Management Inquiry* is so successful in

promoting. We explore the implications of the more critical responses to the questions as a means to productively problematize aspects of institutional theory and research practice. It may be useful for institutional research to take a step back before venturing further forward. With this we hope to encourage more focused, interesting, and empirically sensitive work, and to promote the search for novel and alternative frameworks.

Institutional theory: theory or brand?

Q: Do the significant differences in the various definitions of “institution” indicate some problem with the notion of IT as a “theory?” Is IT a coherent “theory,” or is it more of a set of varied approaches using the same intellectual brand?

There are multiple plausible answers to these questions, and it could be that the proliferation of multiple definitions allows for vibrant creativity. Pluralism is often good. For the sake of argument, however, let us suggest that the answer to the first of these questions is “yes.” It is no secret that, throughout the literature, there are multiple, vague, inconsistent, and contradictory definitions of “institutions” –if scholars even bother to define the term at all (R.E. Meyer and Hollerer 2014, Purdy et al. 2017). Going back to “old,” and “new” institutionalism, Phillip Selznick and his colleagues meant something rather different than do John Meyer and his colleagues. Selznick’s cadre spoke not so much of “institutions” but rather “institutionalization,” whereby organizations underwent a process of value-infusion, often becoming “institutionalized” in a manner quite different from the original organizational purpose (Selznick 1943, 1948, 1957, Clark 1956, 1970, Messinger 1955, Zald and Denton 1963). Selznick’s distinctively organizational, historical approach is a contrast to Meyer’s field perspective, where macro “institutional myths” are

idealized cultural accounts that provide a “rational theory of how” organizations ought to operate, supplying legitimacy when organizations conform (Meyer and Rowan 1977: 342).

In one sense, these different definitions are not really problematic because “old” and “new” institutionalism are theories of different things, but in another sense the shared terminology of “institution” masks these differences and creates confusion. “Institution” as an organization that is infused with value and “institution” as responses to expectations to conform are different phenomena and involve different conceptualizations that beget different theories. Selznick’s is a theory of how organizations come to acquire a distinctive character (1949, 1957), whereas Meyer’s is a theory of isomorphism.

Things become more complicated and potentially problematic when we consider the range of definitions that exist under the now very broad heading of “new” or “neo” institutionalism. In their seminal volume that gave “new institutionalism” its name, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) spoke not of “institutional myths,” but rather institutional scripts and schemata. Although the “mythic” approach of Meyer and his colleagues and the “schemata” approach of DiMaggio and Powell are both deeply cultural, they gloss an important implication: loose coupling is explicit in Meyer and Rowan’s focus on institutional myths and ceremonial compliance (1977, 1978), but the concept of institutional schemata, where organizational actors are unable to think otherwise, actually implies a much tighter coupling to substantive practices. This kind of cognitively driven isomorphism should follow templates quite far into substantive activity, and not stop with surface structures. A well-known criticism of the DiMaggio and Powell view (circa 1991) is that it promotes an image of cultural “dopes” (Colomy 1998), but dopes that enact

institutional scripts unreflectively are not very savvy or good at creating ceremonial facades around loose coupling.

Despite the shared heading of “new institutionalism,” these different definitions may imply different theories of organizational conformity—a loosely coupled one and a tightly coupled one, with different implications for how organizations operate. Organizational ceremonies and organizational core structures with substantive effects are not the same things. Regardless, the many quantitative studies of organizational conformity that followed the seminal “new” institutional works relied on measures surface conformity, leaving the question of the actual coupling to substantive activity unexamined (Tolbert and Zucker 1983, Baron, Dobbin, and Jennings 1986, Baron, Jennings, and Dobbin 1988, Sutton et al. 1994, Chaves 1996). The dependence on large-N quantitative studies featuring surface measures of conformity created a robust set of empirical findings, but they also blurred our understanding of the internal operation of organizations (or what Stinchcombe 1997 called the “guts” of institutions), and glossed the implicit differences between institutions as cultural “myths” versus cultural “schemata.”

As new institutionalism has continued to proliferate, so have the definitions of “institution.” Quite often these definitions are only vaguely specified. This makes it difficult to identify the similarities and differences across the definitions, but again, with careful consideration they seem to imply different things. For example, in 1987 Meyer et al. began to gravitate away from “institutional myths” and towards “cultural rules,” but “rules” imply less space and a tighter coupling between institutions and organizations than does the loosely coupled imagery of “myth and ceremony.” In 1991 Friedland and Alford introduced the alternative terminology of “institutional logics” which has recently taken a

very expansive turn under Thornton et al. (2012), which we discuss later. In 1995 Scott expanded the definition of institutions to include “cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior” (p. 33). With this expansion “institutions” were still cultural phenomena, but not *just* cultural.²

Moving into the new millennium, Fligstein (2001, cited by Lawrence and Suddaby 2006: 216) refers to institutions as “rules and shared meanings... that define social relationships, help define who occupies what position in those relationships and guide interaction by giving actors cognitive frames.” This definition is more narrowly cultural than Scott’s, but it has more expansive implications—institutions are no longer just about organizational conformity but also social relationships, social position, and interaction. Lounsbury and Crumley (2007) expand in a materialist direction, defining institutions as “sets of material activities that are fundamentally interpreted and shaped by broader cultural frameworks such as categories, classifications, frames, and other kinds of ordered belief systems” (p. 996). Here institutions are both, at once, material and cultural, but this is quite different from Meyer and Rowan’s and DiMaggio and Powell’s vision where institutions (whether “myths” or “schemata”) were the independent variables that explain conformity in organizational forms. These definitions exhibit quite a bit of diversity, suggesting that the meaning of “institution” is not intuitive. And yet, at times, other scholars write as if the meaning of “institution” is obvious. For example, Green and Li (2011: 1663) discuss “how actors are both constrained and enabled by institutions.” So institutions constrain and enable, but so do many other things, and as a result it is no longer obvious as

² “Culture” is likewise a term that is seldom clarified by institutionalists and cultural sociologists alike.

to what “institutions” refers to, or how they are distinct from anything that is more broadly “social.”

These expansive and often vague definitions vary, and they have varying implications as to what is to be explained, and how. And yet, despite these differences, they are all described as or incorporated under “new” or “neo” institutional theory. As just one more example, in their influential edited volume, Greenwood et al (2008: 4-5) define institutions as “more-or-less taken for granted repetitive social behavior that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order.” This definition is made up of nine, tightly packed aspects. Institutions are defined as (1) taken for granted, (2) repetitive, (3) comprise social behavior, (4) based on normative systems, (5) and cognitive understanding, (6) give meaning (7) and focus on social exchange, (8) self-reproduction, and (9) creating social order. This is a lot, and the definition includes strong assumptions about how the social world hangs together. We are open to the possibility that this definition does capture what institutions “are,” and what they “do,” but questions remain as to just how and how much these nine aspects actually do hang together and under what circumstances, or alternatively, when or how processes such as “social exchange” and “self-reproduction” exist in their own right and exhibit some independence or autonomy from “institutions.” Putting such questions aside, however, our key point is that this definition is very different from the original notions about “institutional myths” and organizational isomorphism that launched the new institutional endeavor.

These are but a (admittedly convenient) sampling of the multiple definitions that exist. By highlighting them here we do not intend to criticize the individual authors.

Rather, we appreciate their efforts to, at least at a minimum, attempt to articulate what institutions “are,” even if the result is a collection of pseudo-definitions. Our central concern is that, for a theory that was developed to explain organizational homogeneity, there is abundant heterogeneity in the definitions of “institutions.”

Granted this heterogeneity, is IT a coherent “theory,” or more of a set of varied approaches using the same intellectual brand? We believe that, unless a scholar is prepared to specify which institutional theory s/he is working under, while carefully specifying its key elements, IT should be considered more of a “brand.” As a brand it helps to provide broad identification into a scholarly tradition and it offers some value as a grouping to those who adhere to it, but this is quite different from—and may obstruct—theoretical clarity and interpretive capacity.

As a body of work, institutionalism seems to have traded theoretical coherence for brand diversity. Further evidence of this exchange can be found in the many contemporary scholars who are exploring concerns such as “institutional entrepreneurship” (Garud, Hardy & Maguire, 2007) or “institutional work” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). These scholars are dealing with important questions (about change and agency) and using methods (typically qualitative) that are rather different than the concerns of classic new institutionalism (emphasizing stability, the level of the field, structural effects, and quantitative measures of surface conformity). The concerns of “institutional entrepreneurship” and “institutional work” are much closer to those of Selznick and his interest in leadership (1957). Indeed, Kraatz (2009, 2011) argues that IE and IW scholars—with their concern with purposive activity—are reinventing the Selznickian wheel, but without his important focus on the role of the organization and the unintended

consequences of purposive action. Nevertheless, contemporary IE and IW scholars wave that banner of neo institutionalism or “IT,” and not “old institutionalism.”

As a brand, institutionalism is wildly successful. The proportion of published articles in organization studies including “institution” in the title, the abstract, or the keywords has doubled over less than 20 years (Alvesson & Blom 2018). The diversity evident in the approach suggests that it is not a singular theory, but rather a confederation of loosely coupled theories. Old institutionalism is a coherent theory of organic organizational change. Classic new institutionalism is largely coherent theory of field-level isomorphism (despite the differences between Meyer and Rowan and DiMaggio and Powell mentioned above). Contemporary research on institutional work and institutional entrepreneurship have much in common with each other, and scholars working in these areas wave the “new institutional” or “neo I” banner, but this is strange in that these works seem to have more in common with the “old” institutionalism that flourished from the 1950s to the 1970s than they do with the “new” institutionalism that formed between the late 1970s and the new millennium.

The reader may find the word “brand” to be pejorative, but we need to acknowledge that, in today’s crowded field of mass research and mass publication, branding has become unavoidable. Branding provides necessary labels and affiliations and it aids in positioning and clear signaling (the importance of which should be well-known to institutional theorists). The “brand” problem in social science is hard to avoid and umbrella concepts with brand qualities are embraced (CMS, discourse, leadership, strategy as practice, etc.). That institutionalists are in brand company does not mean that the problem is not significant. Given IT’s popularity and enormous variation, the issue of branding stands at

odds with theoretical clarity and distinctiveness. As a minimal response to this problem we hope that we can at least work on trying to increase clarity about *which* “institutional theory” we are talking about and subscribing too. For clarity, for the benefit of young scholars, and for the benefit of outsiders looking in, it would be helpful if institutional theorists would avoid the glossy terms “IT” and even “Neo I” and speak specifically of “old institutionalism,” “classic NI,” and perhaps “millennial” or “post” institutionalism.”

An over-packaged use of “institution”?

Q: Does the over-packaged use of the term “institution” lead to slippery, and at times confused, contradictory, tautological reasoning? Does this over-packaging inhibit our thinking rather than expanding it?

Since institutional theory and research has become so vast, it is easy to select specific studies and successfully argue, in response to the first question above, “No, because here’s a case where the meaning of institution *is* concise, and it isn’t slippery or confusing.” We do not doubt that there are studies that avoid this problem. We also recognize that vague definitions can be useful and have a place in scholarship, especially in exploratory and/or creative studies that develop new ideas and concepts. Because institutional theory is now so broad, almost any critique can be dismissed through references to some examples that fall outside of the critique or provide a counter-point. The field encompasses so much research that it has become a moving target, difficult to criticize.

However, for the sake of argument and debate, let us propose that the answer to the first question above is “yes.” In some instances, we think this is certainly the case. The problem is not simply that there are so many definitions of institutions, but also that, in

some of the definitions, so much is packed into the term. For example, Thornton et al. (2012) define “institutional logics” as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activity, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences” (p 2). There is so much that is included in this definition—social construction and history, the symbolic and the material, individuals and organizations, meaning and action, time and space—that it is hard to conceive of what might be excluded, and how an “institutional logic” differs meaningfully from an “institution.” Moreover, these institutional logics seem to do quite a lot—and at the same time. There is not much space left for “institutional non-logics” or for “non-institutional” forces to accomplish anything. Nevertheless, in the next paragraph, Thornton et al. add to the terminology with the notion of “institutional orders,” including family, religion, the state, professions, and so on. These “institutional orders” seem to do the same things as “institutional logics,” but the “orders” also “shape how reasoning takes place and how rationality is perceived and experienced” (p. 2). However, as a part of ordinary, common parlance (instead of theoretical parlance) “logics” are thought to shape reasoning and entail various rationales, so with the addition of “institutional orders” it becomes unclear if this is also what logics do, or if logics do something else. All of these “institutional orders” influence individual and organizational behavior, but so do “institutional logics,” as indicated by the above definition. An inquiring reader is left wondering what, exactly, institutional logics, institutional orders, and institutions distinctly “do.”

This kind of over-packaging creates slippage and a number of problems. One problem, as noted in the previous paragraph, is that “institutions,” “logics,” and “order” seem to do the same things. With this, an “institutional order” becomes an “order order.” This kind of tautological grammar is not merely redundant, it also creates confusion as to what is the explanandum, and what is the explanans. A second and related problem with this kind of over-packaged definition involves tautological reasoning. For instance, the definition of “institutional logics” includes effects on individuals and organizations. As such, it becomes odd to say that institutions influence individuals and organizations since they are already part of the definition. Since so much is included inside of the definition of an institutional logic, there is little that is left beyond the logic for the logic to explain. That is, the logic cannot explain what it already is, because so much is endogenous to the definition. The result of this kind of tautology is an expansive “relabeling” but not “explaining” (Liska 1969: 444). By subsuming so much the concept explains less, not more. Although this may be an extreme interpretation and supporters of the institutional logics approach would surely argue otherwise (and we hope they do so), our point is that the over-packaging of the definition creates more confusion, not clarity.

A third problem with this kind of over-packaging is that it strips otherwise discrete concepts of their power. To repeat part of the definition, institutional logics “provide meaning to individuals and organizations in their daily activity, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences.” In this conceptualization time and space become subordinate to the logics that subsume them. However, beyond institutional theory, there are entire studies on the sociology of time and space (Mead 1932, Hall 1966). In these works “time” exists in its own right, as does “space,” and they likewise “provide

meaning to individuals and organizations,” and create the conditions of possibility of action. Yet in the institutional logics perspective time and space become, at best, mediating variables. In contrast, if we were to keep time and space outside of the definition of an institutional logic, time and space would then provide alternative theoretical explanations for organizational and individual activity, and allow for different ways of thinking. In contrast, the over-packaged definition of “institutional logics” elides this kind of theoretical pluralism in favor of a Meta theory. This Meta theory incorporates nearly everything, but only as residual categories.

Fourth, because so much is included in the definition, it is unclear as to how the elements relate to each other and help to explain each other. Take, for example, the “historical patterns” included in the definition of institutional logics. Few would deny that there are some effects of historical patterns on individuals and organizations, but there is doubt as to whether historical patterns are so tightly coupled with the other parts of institutional logics—assumptions, beliefs, the organizing of time and space, reproduction of lives, and so on. Indeed, classic NI would expect these things to be loosely coupled. If given a superficial glance, many things may appear to be governed by an “institutional logic,” but on closer empirical examination the many things included inside of the definition are far more muddled, and organizational life can exhibit multiple and inconsistent meanings, meaninglessness, incoherence, and turmoil (e.g. Hallett 2010; Jackall 1988). The response to this criticism may be that there are “multiple,” “plural” and/or “competing” institutional logics at play, but notice again how such a response subordinates discrete organizational processes to the overarching concept of “logics,” while too easily dismissing alternative theoretical frameworks and understandings.

Similar problems are evident in the concept of “institutional work,” an important part of which involves “organizing and establishing procedure” (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006: 223). According to Lawrence and Suddaby, institutional workers are “culturally competent actors with strong practical skills and sensibility who creatively navigate within their organizational fields” (2006: 219). They are characterized by “awareness, skill, and reflexivity” (note that this appears to be almost the opposite of the dopey view of people in classic NI, despite the shared “institutional theory” brand). Lawrence and Suddaby identify nine versions of work that creates institutions, six versions of work that maintains them, and three forms of work that disrupts institutions. This is a comprehensive list, but including so much undermines the core idea of “organizing and establishing procedure.” How does work that disrupts institutions also “organize and establish?” Perhaps acts of disruption should be seen as “institutional unwork” or “unworking” institutions, narrowing the concept of “institutional work” instead of expanding it, or directing scholars to the alternative, established literature on deinstitutionalization (Cherlin 2004).

The over-packaging of “institutional work” also creates tautology and confusion. For example, Lawrence and Suddaby argue: “The construction of identities as a form of institutional work is central to the creation of institutions” (2006: 223). This is an obfuscating redundancy that becomes more evident if institution/al is replaced with its definition: “The construction of identities as a form of (organizing and establishing procedure) is central to the creation of (organized, established procedures).” Continuing their argument about identity and institutional work, the authors use an example in which employees of a non-profit museum are encouraged to see themselves as working in a business. However, the meaning of an “institution” here does not work so well, because

revising an identity is not really the same thing as creating a new procedure. It is hard to equate an identity with a procedure and identity is also quite different from creating business-like rule structures that confer property rights or affect technical standards. Nevertheless, as long as the authors use the ambiguous signifier “institutional work” the text seems reasonable, as it allows vague associations. However, if the specific meaning is inserted into the language then the definition becomes problematic and leads to slippery reasoning.

When adopting the language of “institutional logics” and “institutional work,” everything becomes an “institution”: from the handshake to the corporation, from the judicial form to the Western conceptions of the individual, from the family firm to a procedure for accountability. By seeing institutions (logics) everywhere—spanning historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices which reproduce life experience and organized procedures—concepts or insights that could have fallen outside of the expansive lexicon are either co-opted or ignored. With this, it is possible that scholars who have bought into the expansive lexicon of institutions may find it difficult to conceive of their research in ways that are not inflected through institutional theory. As Suddaby (2010: 14) has warned, “just as the world becomes a nail to a boy with a hammer, so too do we lose the variety and complexity of the empirical world when we begin to view it through a common theoretical lens.” In this way, the over-packaging of institutional concepts inhibits thinking instead of expanding it. We have to wonder if the world of organizational studies is becoming populated with people and hammers nailing down organizational phenomena, sometimes in ways that make them unrecognizable.

Institutionalized theory: The path to scholarly legitimacy?

Q: Has institutional theory become too much of a ready-made (if ambiguous) template to guide what constitutes “good” research? Has it become too easy or tempting to follow established templates set out by the various strands of IT than to engage in the costly search for alternative theories to illuminate one’s data in a novel way?

The answer to these questions may very-well be “no.” As junior scholars will attest, there is very little about the research and publishing process that is “easy,” and as accountability metrics and quantitative measures of productivity expand in academia, the pressure to publish and the stakes involved have only been increasing. Moreover, because institutional theories are now so broad and ambiguous, it can be quite difficult to learn and make sense of the expanse of IT and its various “templates.” As theories go, IT is not an easy one to comprehend, and classic NI in particular is (or was at the time of its appearance and peak) non-intuitive, which is also why it is so interesting and compelling (Davis 1971). That so much is published with “institution” in the title may not indicate that it is easy, it may be seen as proof of the high quality of the work, the “truth” of the various institutional ideas, or may simply reflect the large number of people who find value in using and adding to institutional theory (whatever institutional theory may mean).

Nevertheless, let us suppose that the answer to these questions is “yes.” As the field has become established, we have indeed witnessed what Tolbert and Zucker (1996) called “the institutionalization of institutional theory.” A worry here is that contemporary academics are highly focused on getting published in the right journals and they may then follow (institutionalized) routes and templates that seem to optimize chances for success and recognition. Here we have the opportunity to turn institutionalism on itself, that is, to use institutional theory to analyse institutional research. Doing so provides yet another

example of the enduring value of institutional theory, but also the potential irrationality of institutional research in practice.

In classic new institutional thinking, one of the central characteristics of an institution is that it provides actors with a template to guide them as to what legitimate social action is (Meyer et al., 1987: 22). Following this, institutional theory may provide researchers with a framework that can be used to make their research appear as legitimate. That is, when engaging with institutional theory, a research project is effectively “enacting” a number of established templates that guide and constitute “good research.” With this, the scholar’s attention is directed to a growing menu of “institutional” phenomena—legitimacy, logics, mimesis, change, complexity, entrepreneurship, work, and more. So armed, the scholar can go into almost any empirical setting with these existing categories and look to fill them in. As a result, what might be considered esoteric topics by mainstream management and organization scholars—such as the market for contemporary Indian art (Kahari and Wadhwani, 2010), the norms in US gay bath houses (Hudson, 2008), anarchist activists in London (Perkmann and Spicer, 2014), and the rituals of formal dining in colleges at the University of Cambridge (Dacin et al., 2010)—are rendered legitimate. We are not arguing that these studies are not “good.” Indeed we recognize their value. Our point is that they are rather odd from the perspective of *management and organization studies*, and they would seem even more bizarre if not for their institutional clothing. The ceremonial label of “institution” and “institutional theory” can be a means to craft legitimacy around seemingly peripheral and possibly “illegitimate” management and organizational topics (Elsbach and Sutton 1992).

To be sure, there are many cases where the institutional label, the data, and the theory are a strong match, and are mutually reinforcing. However, if classic new institutional theory is correct in its depiction of how the world works, there are surely instances—even published ones—where the apparent fit between the data and the theory is “ceremonial.” With a twist on Meyer and Rowan, we must wonder if there are times where institutional theory is adopted and used not because it provides a special understanding of a phenomena or a set of empirical material, but because it confers legitimacy onto the research project. If so, this may actually promote a loose coupling between institutional theory and the empirical material that is presumably being used to understand. The existing body of research in classic new institutionalism would suggest that this would especially be the case for latecomers, who might adopt institutional theory to make their work (and indeed themselves) appear as legitimate. However, this kind of ceremonial practice would offer little in the way of significant, novel contributions to knowledge.

As Zucker has argued, “social knowledge once institutionalized exists as a fact, as part of objective reality, and can be transmitted directly on that basis” (1977: 726). This means that a body of theory that had previously been seen as rather radical (as classic new institutionalism was from the late 1970s to the late 1990s) becomes treated as an unproblematic part of how the world is. It is possible that concepts such as institutions, fields, myths, isomorphism, institutional work, and institutional entrepreneurs are increasingly treated as objective realities to be found out there in the field. When this happens, many of the assumptions, questions, and ambiguities associated with each of these concepts become taken-for-granted realities. As Willmott (2011: 69) points out, “in

institutional theory, ‘institution’ and especially ‘individual’ assume a reified, self-evident status, and, in this respect, proponents of institutional theory *are forgetful of their (our) own institutional work.*” This kind of research practice would be good for institutional theory and the institutional theorists who are ritually cited, but bad for social science.

Conclusion

In asking the questions presented in this essay, we hope to prompt useful debate about the state of institutional theory and research. To be provocative, we have provided answers in a critical, if ultimately sympathetic, form. We see some problems in the coherence, packaging, and practice of institutional theory and research. Institutional theory seems to have an important paradox at its heart: On the one hand, it offers a confusing array of mixed metaphors, ideas, and knowledge claims. On the other hand, institutional theory is often presented as an “it”—that is, an integrated and robust theory. We have articulated some ways in which these tensions could be problematic, and we recognize that other readers will find them less so. We encourage further reflection and a defence of institutional theory and practice or, alternatively, some basic rethinking and redevelopment, possibly along radical routes. The overall field of institutional research includes some very important contributions, including Selznick (1949, 1957), Meyer & Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Hwang and Powell (2009), and others who do manage to achieve clarity. However, in the overall field of research it is difficult to get a clear-sighted overview or sense of direction. Even when some scholars and publications successfully avoid tautologies, confusions, and other problems, their readers may be less fortunate in sorting through the broad and vague definitions and the multitude of texts that

use the key signifier of ‘institution’ in different ways. On the level of the field, messy assemblies of texts with broad, vague and inconsistent definitions make it difficult to comprehend the whole.

We realize that many of the types of concerns we have raised here pertain not only to institutional theory, but also to other theories and areas of research. That these provocative questions are not unique to a specific field does not diminish their importance when considering the on-going development and practice of institutional theory and research. With a liberal mind-set, some may conclude that the answers to the questions posed here indicate that the range of definitions in IT is *not* problematic, that it is a coherent theory – or a set of clearly demarcated and distinct theories, with enough similarities to motivate the use of a common signifier –and not a brand, that the term “institution” has *not* been over-packaged, and that it has *not* become too easy to conduct research based on existing IT templates. Even if this is the case, our more critical responses have identified what the problems could look like were they to come to fruition, and alert us as to what to watch for and be vigilant of, to prevent institutional theory from tumbling from its lofty peaks.

Should these problems exist, or should they come to exist, what is to be done? One possibility would be to call for a moratorium on the use of the term “institution.” This might compel scholars to clarify what they mean. If we mean cultural mythologies, what is lost if we call them that? Or, if we mean structural convergence and surface organizational conformity in response to environmental pressures, what is lost if we call it “isomorphism theory?” If we mean activities that create new styles of social organization, what is lost by saying that, specifically, instead of calling it “institutional entrepreneurship?” What would

be lost if we spoke not of “institutional work,” but rather specific types of work that create and organize procedures? We believe that doing so would create clarity, and would also help scholars to identify related literatures and areas of research instead of remaining comfortably within an expanding institutional bubble. Importantly, this does *not* entail a rejection of the various institutional theories. Scholars can and should continue to use the valuable ideas inherent in institutional theories. We advocate for the use and articulation of institutional theories without use of the obfuscating term “institution.” Good substantive content would not suffer from the discontinued use of a potentially problematic brand-label. Sound research should qualify without support of an institutional branding. This certainly worked for Selznick and his colleagues, as well as Meyer and his colleagues, long before “old” and “new” institutionalism were termed by DiMaggio and Powell in 1991.

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