

Nano-Papers: Institution - Organization - Society¹

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Let's talk about time! Temporal talk as a coordination mechanism in institutional work

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Abstract:

Agency is a focal and contested issue in studies on institutional change. One aspect that is not understood very well yet is how multiple dispersed actors achieve distributed agency when engaged in institutional work. Conceptualizing agency in its temporal orientation, we propose that effective distributed agency depends in a large part on how multiple actors talk about, align, and link their interpretations of past, present and future. Institutional theory needs to account for actors' time orientations in distributed agency and institutional work to gain a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms of coordination.

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Institutional work and distributed agency

The role of actors in institutional change has been a longstanding area of interest and debate in new institutional theory. The “pendulum” has been swinging between a higher or lower influence attributed to actors, while authors develop and apply a range of nuanced meanings of agency (e.g., Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 213). Deliberate institutional change seems a problematic idea due to the “paradox of embedded agency”, i.e. the question of how actors can change an institution if their actions, intentions, and rationality are conditioned by the very institutions they wish to change (Holm, 1995).

In contrast, DiMaggio upholds agency and talks about institutional entrepreneurship that is enabled by powerful actor’s “sufficient resources” (1988, p. 14). Later studies find several other enabling field-level conditions and highlight the role of particular social skills (for an overview see Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). More recently, the “institutional work” that DiMaggio (1988, pp. 13–15) talked about already has been used as a broader concept that can also describe the unobtrusive, piecemeal, and sometimes barely visible contribution of marginalized and dispersed actors to larger processes of institutional change. Like institutional entrepreneurship, institutional work is not to be understood as a mechanism that fully explains institutional change by itself, but as an analytical device to study the more “mundane” practices and “day-to-day adjustments, adaptations and compromises” through which actors intentionally affect institutions (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009, p. 1). The idea of institutional work locates agency much less in individual “heroic” actors. Instead, it is distributed and carried out by multiple actors. The conceptual development from entrepreneurship to work appears to be a move towards greater plausibility of change, yet brings about the question of how “a wide range of actors” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 217) can exercise “distributed agency” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011).

Distributed agency is different from collective agency. Following Meyer and Jepperson (2000) actorhood and agency are culturally constructed. With this in mind, distributed agency presumes multiple actors but, unlike collective agency, does not require one collective actor with “the cultural construction of the capacity and authority to act for itself” (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000, p. 105). Studies on social movements (e.g. the “microbrewery movement”) have shown, for example, how the formation of a movement identity among dispersed actors can create collective

agency (Rao & Giorgi, 2006). Distributed agency, in contrast, is attributed to the interplay of several culturally constructed actors who, collectively, do not become a single “authorized agent” (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000, p. 101). For illustration, *many people* voting for the same candidate constitute distributed agency, while *the people* rule as a collective actor in democracy.

Distributed agency allows for various forms of coordination in institutional work. Few studies on institutional change claiming a distributed agency lens actually dive into the mechanisms of how this distributedness and agency go together. A recent example for this is the study by Delacour and Leca (2016) in which they describe the rise of Impressionism as a story of highly controversial and unlikely institutional change. As an explanatory mechanism they find “distributed strategies developed by loosely coordinated coalition members” (2016, p. 2). In their analysis, however, they remain mostly silent about how the loose coordination is performed. This shortcoming leads to the conceptual puzzle for this paper: How can the individual contributions by multiple actors be coordinated in order to create, disrupt or maintain institutions?

This question allows us to grasp coordination as something intentional and reflexive, but also as something that can happen rather unintentionally and serendipitously. As a tentative answer we propose that effective distributed agency depends in a large part on how multiple actors talk about and align their interpretations of past, future and present.

Temporal work: Talking about time

In their seminal paper Emirbayer and Mische (1998) introduce a multidimensional concept that understands agency as a “chordal triad” of an actor’s orientation towards past, present, and future, in which “all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones” (1998, p. 972). Against the backdrop of this concept, agency can be defined as “a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)” (Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009, p. 47).

This definition however remains at the level of individual agency. Recently Kaplan and Orlikowski (2012) link the three temporal modes of agency to accounts of distributed agency within teams. Studying sources for strategic

change in organizations, the authors develop a model of how actors resolve differences and align their interpretations of the past, present and future. Through this alignment, the authors argue, “concrete strategic choice and action” – hence agency – was enabled (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2012, p. 965). They describe the practice of deliberation and alignment as “temporal work”, a concept we think can advance our understanding of distributed agency in institutional work as well.

In studies of institutional work, time as a social dimension has mostly played an implicit role. Only recently scholars have begun explicitly to describe deliberate modifications in the perception of time, e.g. “constructing urgency” or “enacting momentum”, as a form of institutional work (Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016, p. 1011). So far, we are not aware of any studies of institutional work that foreground an interpretative understanding of time (as used by Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2012) in which actors are able to reimagine the future, rethink the past, and reconsider present concerns by talking to other actors. Most speech acts are inevitably linked to past, present and future, as their content can only be understood in regards to these temporal modes. Our idea of temporal work as institutional work, however, is more specific and aims at speech acts through which actors attempt to align their interpretations of past, present and future and create connections between these temporal modes.

Talking about the past

Regarding the *past*, Emirbayer and Mische speak of the “iterational dimension of agency”, and of actors’ capacity “to recall, to select, and to appropriately apply the more or less tacit and taken-for-granted schemas of action that they have developed through past interactions” (1998, p. 975). As a form of “temporal work” in strategy making, Kaplan and Orlikowski (2012, p. 977) describe the capacity of actors to rethink the past when projecting into the future. In a similar vein, Schultz and Hernes (2012) show how differences in the use of memory affect the articulation of claims for future identity. This orientation towards the past, Kaplan and Orlikowski argue, is closely linked to the widely discussed concept of sensemaking that emphasized the retrospective construction of meaning by actors (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

In their case study of a large communication equipment manufacturer, Kaplan and Orlikowski show how employees with a greater ability to reinterpret the historical trajectories of the firm “pushed” others towards “out of the box [...] thinking” and thereby enabled a consensus on one of

these new and more radical out-of-the-box strategic ideas (2012, p. 977). What the interviewee described as “pushing” is the joint reinterpretation of the past that the authors describe as temporal work.

We believe that actors who intend to affect institutions require a great degree of reflexivity in order to develop an awareness of the institution they are constrained by in the first place. Individual actors might therefore gain agency by reflecting on the rules and regulations they remember having perceived in the past. If multiple actors engage in institutional work to affect a certain institution, distributed agency seems therefore more likely to manifest itself when their interpretations of which rules and regulations they perceived in the past are aligned. We argue that this alignment can be achieved when multiple actors talk about how they remember past events, deliberate on diverging memories and possibly revise their interpretations of the past.

This form of temporal work can eventually help them to develop similar projections of the future. Divergent interpretations of the past may trigger such temporal work and give rise to alignment efforts towards the future.

Talking about the future

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) also describe an actor’s orientation towards the future as one element of agency. Actors’ “projective capacity”, they argue, encompasses “the imaginative generation [...] of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future.” (1998, p. 971). These “received structures” directly link the future-orientation to the past-orientation described above. In a similar vein Kaplan and Orlikowski, in their study on temporal work in strategy making, find that this “ability to project alternative futures depended on the way actors connected these futures to their understandings of the past and the present” (2012, p. 975). As one of their examples the authors describe recurring team meetings between a business manager, a network engineer and a director in the engineering group that were “composed of interchanges” (2012, p. 975) in which these actors brainstormed collectively on how the future convergence of two technological trajectories in the firm might look like. By talking to each other they were able to envision futures that were more radical than simple extrapolations of past trajectories.

When engaged in institutional work that intends to disrupt or create institutions, actors also need projective capacity

to imagine alternative institutional arrangements. However, this is not to be understood bluntly as the utility maximizing behavior of a *homo economicus*, but as a form of interested imagination necessary to motivate action in the first place and which is likely to result in institutional arrangements quite different from the initial projection. Even for institutional work that intends to maintain institutions actors need a projective capacity to imagine an alternative and less desirable future, as they otherwise would not be able to motivate the intentional reproduction of the status quo. If multiple actors develop projections of alternative futures that inform their institutional work, the success of their actions seems more likely if these projections are not too far apart, though not necessarily identical, but at least compatible. We therefore argue that when multiple actors engage in deliberation of their imagined futures, it is more likely that they achieve distributed agency together. On the other hand, they might also disagree about desirable future states, which will lead to further struggles and deliberations that also contribute to a form of distributed, if not harmonious, agency.

Talking about the present

Emirbayer and Mische describe an actor's orientation towards the present as the practical-evaluative dimension of agency. This dimension entails "the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations" (1998, p. 971). In their account on how employees work with temporal interpretations in strategy making, Kaplan and Orlikowski (2012, p. 977 ff.) find that the ability to generate more radical strategies for the future "depended also on the degree to which actors deliberated the problems and priorities they felt the organization should be addressing in the present" (understood not as the fleeting moment, but as what is perceived as current concerns). They interpret radical deviation from the strategic path as a sign of greater agency. The authors come to the ambiguous conclusion that "the more the participants reconsidered present concerns, the greater the tensions that arose", yet also that through such interactions and tensions "new connections among the past, present, and future were built" (2012, p. 978).

In one of their examples members of a certain project intensely discussed the problem that the planned short-term investments in a certain technology are conflicting with the expected long-term decline of this particular market segment. By talking about these conflicts employees were able to consent on what needs to be done, a decision that

eventually led to the complete shutdown of the project. This shows that, when engaged in institutional work, actors need to make decisions on current affairs all the time. When making these decisions they need the capacity to ground these decisions in their interpretations of the past and projections of the future. Due to what Emirbayer and Mische describe as the "dilemmas [and] ambiguities of presently evolving situations" (1998, p. 971) these ad hoc evaluations can hardly be described as a direct function of the interpretations of past and future. They are hard to make and hence rather unforeseeable to other actors in the field. When trying to affect institutions however, it seems that success is more likely when ad hoc decisions of multiple actors are complementary rather than contradictory. We therefore argue that when multiple actors engaged in institutional work talk openly about how to evaluate presently evolving situations before deciding upon them, they are more likely to achieve distributed agency.

Concluding remarks

The framework we propose can be used to further explore why some institutional projects achieve greater distributed agency than others. Recently this question has also been addressed in studies of field configuring events as mechanisms of coordination in institutional fields (Lampel & Meyer, 2008). Although some of these studies explicitly mention the social construction of time during these events, e.g. as a "sense of urgency" (Schüssler, Ruling, & Wittneben, 2014, p. 141), they say little about the antecedents of this productive coordination. Temporal talk can be used as a lens to study how this coordination is achieved by multiple actors in a field. The ability to engage in temporal talk is thereby not equivalent to the ability to convince others of one's own interpretation of time, but the ability to create alignment between one's own interpretation of past, future and present with that of others (also possible by changing one's own interpretation).

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