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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF
ORGANIZATIONS VOLUME 58

**AGENTS, ACTORS,
ACTORHOOD:
INSTITUTIONAL
PERSPECTIVES ON THE
NATURE OF AGENCY,
ACTION, AND AUTHORITY**

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PART I

OVERVIEW

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CHAPTER 1

THE PROLIFERATION AND PROFUSION OF ACTORS IN INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

Hokyu Hwang, Jeannette A. Colyvas and Gili S. Drori

ABSTRACT

The social sciences and institutional theory have seen the proliferation of the term actor and the profusion of its meanings. Despite the importance and ubiquity of actor in institutional theory, the term is largely taken-for-granted, which has stunted the development of institutional theories of actors. The authors aspire to spur theorization of actor in institutional theory in the hope of carving out institutional theories of actor in the collective research agenda. The authors first contextualize their interest in actor in institutional theory and discuss the intellectual context within which the authors put this agenda forward. The authors briefly sketch out the main themes that would provide fruitful areas of inquiry in this new agenda and bring together a variety of strands in institutional theory with a clear focus on the relationship between institutions and actors. The authors conclude by discussing the contributions included in the volume.

Keywords: Actor; institution; institutional theory; social construction; theorization; rationalization

1. INTRODUCTION

The social sciences in the last several decades have seen a spectacular increase in the use of the term actor. From sociology and anthropology to political science

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and management, scholars have deployed the term to denote and describe an increasing array of entities from individuals and organizations to national states as well as transnational and supranational organizations. Although scholars have become increasingly comfortable with the term, this phenomenon, surprisingly, has received scant scholarly attention (Hwang & Colyvas, 2013). There has been little discussion about why and how this has happened, and to what consequence. More generally, the observation that actor is a social scientific concept and constitutes a meaningful social phenomenon on its own has escaped these disciplines within which the term's use has proliferated. Institutional theory is no exception to this overall trend.

Institutional theory has become one of the dominant paradigms in the studies of not just organizations, but also other institutional spheres in human societies (economy, politics, education, etc.) across several social science disciplines. While it, too, has seen – if not contributed to – the proliferation of actor in the pages of social science journals, scholars working within this tradition have not paid much attention to or problematized this pervasive phenomenon. Rather, some have even argued that the term has been so taken-for-granted that “it does not need a definition” (Suddaby, Elsbach, Greenwood, Meyer, & Zilber, 2010, p. 1238). This situation is particularly perplexing given the central importance of the relationship between institutions and actors in institutional theory, whose main contribution has been to reject the unreflective and uncritical acceptance of “rational” actor models in the social sciences and to show the institutional embeddedness and construction of actors (Meyer, 2010).

We hope to address this lacuna in institutional theory and in the social sciences by shedding light on the construct, which, while evoked with an increasing rate of frequency, remains under-studied and under-theorized due to its taken-for-grantedness. This volume takes initial steps toward building theories of actors as an area of inquiry on the collective research agenda in institutional theory, which would examine the emergence, construction, and transformation of actors and their roles in institutional processes. In doing so, we have assembled several studies that address the emergence, construction, and transformation of actors and the work they do in institutional stability and change in a variety of empirical contexts: from the creation of new industries like Islamic banking and organic agriculture in Turkey and scientific winemaking in Australia to the rise of evidence-based medicine in the United States and to the changing actorhood of sherpas in the Everest to the recent rise of “avatars” in cryptocurrency, to mention a few.

Our research agenda starts with the initial concerns that motivated the neo-institutional research tradition and pays close attention to more recent developments in understanding the plethora of roles actors play in institutional stability and change. The intellectual focus in the last few decades shifted from concerns about the construction of actors to the work of actors in institutional processes. The swinging pendulum has rendered actor as a concept more or less taken-for-granted (Suddaby et al., 2010), which has meant that the emergence, constitution, and construction of actors took a back seat in the institutional research agenda, stunting the development of institutional theories of actors. Agentic accounts of

institutional processes, when they are not informed by or couched in the institutional construction of actor, however, run the risk of diminishing what distinguishes institutional theory from other competing paradigms in organization and management theory, namely legitimated actorhood (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011). Moreover, as the performance of actors inhabiting concrete social worlds has become the focus of much institutional theory, it is imperative that we pay attention to how institutional influences construct actors and condition the parameters of their performance in social processes. As actors take part in institutional processes, they do so as agents of their own or others' interests and/or for greater collective causes by enacting or deviating from their legitimated actorhood as broadly defined in institutionalized roles and identities (Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1994; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Thus, theories of actors would bring the early and more recent strands in understanding actors in their institutional contexts into closer alignment.

In this paper, we first contextualize our interest in actor in institutional theory and discuss the intellectual context within which we put this agenda forward. We briefly sketch out the main themes that would provide fruitful areas of inquiry in this new agenda and bring together a variety of strands in institutional theory with a clear focus on the relationship between institutions and actors. We end with some introductory remarks about each contribution to this volume.

2. THE PROLIFERATION OF ACTOR AND THE PROFUSION OF ITS MEANINGS

Fig. 1 reports the proportion of articles that contain the word actor(s) in top journals in four social science disciplines (the *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Anthropologist*, *American Political Science Review*, and *Academy of Management Review*). Although the journals and disciplines vary in the exact timing of the rapid increase in the use of the term and the proportion of the articles deploying the term, the overall trend is clear: for a long period in the twentieth century, few articles contain the term, but the takeoff began in the early 1970s and all journals saw a rapid growth into the 1980s and through the 2000s.

Fig. 1 represents a real scholarly phenomenon, and yet defies an easy interpretation as several factors might be in play. Setting aside what scholars mean by the term actor, one interpretation could be that the proliferation of actor in social science journals reflects changes in the real world over the last several decades. Social scientific accounts of the contemporary globalizing world, indeed, argue that globalization has fundamentally reshaped the social landscape of contemporary societies. Literally, globalization means the opening up and expansion of new space for organization and organizing beyond the national horizon (Bromley & Meyer, 2016; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2006; Meyer & Bromley, 2013) shifting the gravitational balance between the state and non-state actors. At the same time, globalization has also involved both the scientization and rationalization of global and other environments as well as the legitimation of the human person and their rights and capacity to

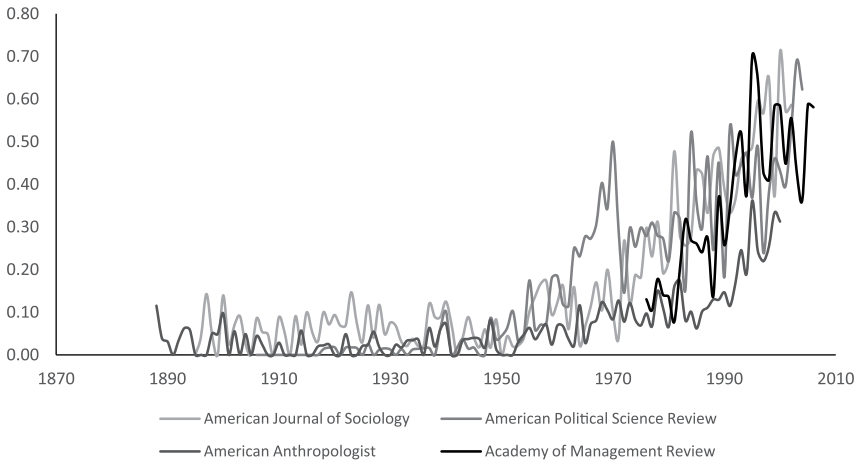


Fig. 1. The Rise of Actors in the Social Sciences.

organize and mobilize. The rapid advancement of natural and social sciences has rendered the world more knowable, and, therefore, safe and ripe for human intervention. The empowerment of the human person, at the same time, has pushed the locus of action and organization out of the state to the rest of the polity and to civil society and markets. At the turn of the millennia, [Slaughter \(2002, pp. 12–13\)](#) identified the central phenomenon in the preceding decades in which globalization accelerated: “the proliferation of actors in the international system above, below, beside and within the state.”

The rapidly expanding transnational realm has seen the emergence and expansion of international and supranational organizations including non-governmental organizations in a variety of spheres from science to humanitarian aid to the environment and to sports, to name a few ([Boli & Thomas, 1999](#); [Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006](#)). The proliferation of actors under globalization, however, has not been limited to the transnational space and has occurred across all levels of society, involving the changing status of the state as the primary actor and the rise of the rest ([Drori et al., 2006](#); [Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2009](#)). Although no longer the central actor that it once was and much tamed and diminished from the heyday of the nation-state system, the state continues to be a relevant, if not vital, actor ([Evans, 1997](#); [Mann, 1993](#)). Sharing the stage, at the same time, are other actors. Within bureaucracy, state power and authority have devolved to lower level governments (to provincial to local governments) and state agencies and administrative units have become much more autonomous and empowered organizations, particularly under new public management ([Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000](#)). Outside state bureaucracy, the formal organization has penetrated into hitherto informal domains and rationalized and transformed informal groups into organized actors at a phenomenal pace in a broad array of social, economic, and political spheres ([Drori et al., 2006, 2009](#); [Meyer & Bromley,](#)

2013). Multinationals extend their ubiquitous presence to every corner of the world in search of profits and productivity and have expanded the global market. Nonprofits and voluntary associations from local neighborhoods to global (and virtual) communities enact good citizenship and (re)produce civil society (Sampson, McAdam, MacIndoe, & Weffer-Elizondo, 2005). In this worldwide organizational revolution, the human person is celebrated and apotheosized as the primary actor driving much of organization and organizing (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).

Actor as a concept has come to denote an array of entities across levels of society in part due to the changes in the empirical world. The term has also acquired varied meanings and found both theoretical and methodological uses. For instance, exchange theory, according to Molm (2001, pp. 260–261), is a general theory that applies to both micro- and macro-levels. Actor denoting entities from micro to macro levels allows the theory to be flexible:

Participants in exchange are called actors. Actors can be either individual persons or corporate groups, and either specific entities (a particular friend) or interchangeable occupants of structural positions (the president of IBM). This flexibility allows exchange theorists to move from micro-level analyses to interpersonal exchanges to macro-level analyses of relations among organizations.

The minimal membership requirement for belonging in this broad category is participating or being able to participate in exchange, but members are as varied as a friend or the president of IBM or corporate groups.

In their seminal work on social network analysis, similarly, Wasserman and Faust (1994, p. 17) illustrate the term's use in the methodological literature:

Social network analysis is concerned with understanding the linkages among social entities and the implications of these linkages. The social entities are referred to as actors. Actors are discrete individual, corporate, or collective social units. Examples of actors are people in a group, department within a corporation, public service agencies in a city, or nation-states in the world system. Our use of the term "actor" does not imply that these entities necessarily have volition or the ability to "act."

In exchange theory and social network analysis, actor is no more than a blank placeholder for any social units or entities that (can) engage in social exchange and/or are found in "networks," regardless of the level of society at which they reside or whether, as Wasserman and Faust carefully note, they have intention or the ability to act.

While the above examples hint at the flexibility afforded by the term's broad applicability, other uses are quite specific – albeit implicit – about the term's connotation. For example, in some studies, actors are purposive and muscular entities endowed with clear agenda and coercive capacity. Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett (2008, pp. 10–12) argue that coercion is one of the core mechanisms of diffusion and assert that liberalization policies diffuse when "actors" with coercive power promote liberalization policies. Coercive power is exercised by "a range of actors: governments, international organizations, and even non-governmental actors", but is differentially distributed among social entities in a social system. The capacity to exercise power is a defining feature of real actors; thus, national

states without such capacity are non-actors. Indeed, “weaker parties simply expect that they will receive some benefits by making the policy change favored by the more powerful actor.” This example illustrates that actor as a concept distinguishes social entities based on differences in some core features such as power, status, resources, skills, technology, etc. Therefore, even within the same identity or role category, actor works to distinguish members based on certain theoretically important features.

Fig. 1, therefore, represents a complex phenomenon in which the diversity of social entities denoted with the term actor has accompanied the profusion of the term’s varied, connoted meanings and roles. The term’s taken-for-grantedness hides the term’s protean quality, which allows scholars to talk about the entities denoted and connoted as such without much elaboration or reflection. This situation is both a challenge and an opportunity, particularly for institutional theory, whose main *problematique* has been the relationship between institutions and actors – that is, how institutions give rise to and constitute actors, who, in turn, participate, in their specific manifestations, in the reproduction of and changes in institutional conditions.

3. RELATING TO AND EXPLAINING THE REAL WORLD

The proliferation of actors, spanning levels of society and geographical horizons, involves complex processes: from redefinition and disaggregation of the state; devolution of state power, sovereignty, legitimacy, and authority to lower and higher level entities; and to the transformation of informal and/or corporate groups into newly empowered, organized entities with clearer purposes. These developments in the real world fundamentally alter the social, economic, and political landscape around the world, and are simultaneously reinforced by profound shifts in the institutional environment (e.g., Coleman, 1974, 1982, 1990; Pedersen & Dobbin, 1997; Perrow, 1991). The emergence of new (categories of) actors and the changing status of actors and relations among them often represent significant institutional change, such as the birth of a new industry or transformative episodes in an institutional field in which the role of challenger and incumbent changes hands (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). Moreover, the roles and functions actors are authorized to perform define their behavioral parameters and expectations (Meyer et al., 1994). Conformity to and deviation from such institutionalized roles and functions speaks to the extent of institutionalization and/or the capacity of actors to take meaningful action in disrupting or resisting institutional demands (Jepperson, 1991). The institutional construction of actors and their roles in institutional processes, in other words, are at the core of institutional theory’s paradigmatic agenda. In this sense, institutional theory is well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the changes in the real world.

Although the relationship between institutions and actors is a central theoretical issue, theorization of actor remains a relatively barren territory in institutional theory. One reason for this is that institutional theory entertains varying,

if not conflicting, perspectives on the relationship between institutions and actors. Early insights in institutional theory showed that the rationalization of environments in a variety of social domains facilitates the emergence and construction of individual and collective actors. The expansion of science has enormously broadened and deepened the collective understanding and knowledge of the natural and social world whose organization and workings are portrayed to follow discoverable and predictable natural laws, and, therefore, can be understood by persons (Drori & Meyer, 2006; Drori, Meyer, Ramirez, & Schofer, 2002; Pedersen & Dobbin, 1997).

At the societal/system level, with the rise and institutionalization of the nation-state system, especially in the post-war period of de-colonization, the state became a legitimate collective actor pursuing public goods – development and welfare (Hwang, 2006; Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997; Strang, 1990). The expansion of modern individualism and the rise of human rights have apotheosized the individual person as the main protagonist of the modern, global world and as the fundamental unit of action from which different forms of collective actors are constructed (Meyer, 2000; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004). In stark contrast to the image of entrepreneurs as strangers (e.g., Barth, 1963; Swedberg, 2000) in anthropological studies of traditional societies, for instance, entrepreneurship has become a celebrated virtue that can be taught and learned in modern societies. The formal organization in the cast of a human person ceases to be a metaphor, but a description of individual agency and actorhood (Cornelissen, 2013). Consequently, organizations of various sorts flourish as legitimate solutions to local and global problems, and in pursuit of private and public interests, as “the building blocks for organizations come to be littered around the societal landscape; it takes only a little entrepreneurial energy to assemble them into a structure” (Bromley & Meyer, 2016; Drori et al., 2006; Meyer & Bromley 2013; Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 345). The formal organization, some have argued, has come to dominate and even absorb society (Davis, 2009; Perrow, 1991). In short, this perspective views agency as a modern form of authority derived from cultural and cognitive understandings that bestow individual and collective actors with roles and behavioral scripts (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Enactment becomes the causal link between institutions and actors (Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Powell & Rerup, 2017).

Reacting to this early, more phenomenological line of thought, subsequent developments have accentuated actor-driven institutional change, focusing on how actors creatively engage in recombination and transposition of existing materials to generate novel practices, meanings, and structures, and even change institutions themselves. The focus on the role of actors in institutional change, however, reverses the causal structure of institutional theory, as actors become the main driver of change. The most representative case of this movement is the popularity of institutional entrepreneurship and institutional work (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; DiMaggio, 1988, 1991; Hampel, Lawrence, & Tracey, 2017; Hardy & Maguire, 2008; Hwang & Powell, 2005; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). In these agentic approaches to institutional persistence and change, “New institutions arise when organized actors

with sufficient resources (institutional entrepreneurs) see in them an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly” (DiMaggio, 1988, p. 14). Oliver (1991, pp. 145–146) similarly emphasized strategic dimensions in organizational responses to institutional pressures and brought in “interest-seeking, active organizational behavior” to overcome institutional theory’s “lack of attention to the role of organizational self-interests and active agency.” Inhabited institutionalism has reminded us that institutions are “populated with people” and provided the impetus for articulating institutionalism’s “people problem,” helping introduce actor to the center stage of institutional analyses (Hallett, 2010; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) and Lawrence et al. (2009), building on DiMaggio and Oliver, charted a similar direction by coining an umbrella concept, institutional work, to highlight “the important influence of actors on institutions – purposefully creating, maintaining and disrupting them” (p. 246). These streams represent “a growing awareness of institutions as products of human action and reaction, motivated by both idiosyncratic personal interests and agendas for institutional change or preservation” (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 6; see also Hallett, 2010).

Inspired by the broad agentic turn in institutional theory, scholars have accumulated a vast array of studies of institutional maintenance and change (see Hampel et al., 2017 for a comprehensive review). These studies collectively document how different types of actors and their strategies and activities help maintain and transform a myriad of institutions throughout society. This growing literature complements the earlier studies that analyze the proliferation of actors in the contemporary social world and studies what actors do in their concrete habitats and how they reproduce and change the institutions in which they are embedded. The institutional work agenda has done much to elaborate on this “actors-as-an-independent-variable” agenda, envisioning and highlighting more diverse, active, and prominent roles for actors in institutional processes. In doing so, institutional scholars have uncovered the many faces of actors and their activities in a diversity of contexts.

Dacin, Munir, and Tracey (2010) in their insightful study of the Cambridge high table dining, showed how the repeated enactment of institutionalized roles in highly ritualized events contributes to the reproduction of the class system and inequality in the British society. If Dacin et al. showed the importance of actors’ enactment of routines in institutional maintenance, Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, and Smith-Crowe (2014, p. 285) pointed to the role played by “institutional guardians” or “shamers,” who “have cognitive, emotional, and/or moral commitments to existing prescriptions and patterns of social relations” and “police the boundaries of acceptable behavior” by engaging episodic and strategic uses of shaming. Moreover, scholars have used the “paradox of embedded agency” as the main theoretical framework to contextualize the agentic capacity of actors within institutional constraints (Seo & Creed, 2002). While acknowledging the institutional embeddedness of actors, this framework zooms in on the characteristics of actors and institutions that enable a (set of) actor(s) to engage in activities for institutional change or disruption. The capabilities, resources, and other features of actors identified as essential in the performance of institutional work