



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Lok, J. & Willmott, H. (2019). Embedded Agency in Institutional Theory: Problem or Paradox. *Academy of Management Review*, 44(2), pp. 470-473. doi: 10.5465/amr.2017.0571

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/20208/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2017.0571>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

publications@city.ac.uk



Review

Embedded Agency in Institutional Theory: Problem or Paradox?

Journal:	<i>Academy of Management Review</i>
Manuscript ID	AMR-2017-0571-Dialogue.R2
Manuscript Type:	Dialogue
Theoretical Perspectives:	Institutional theory, Philosophy of science and/or sociology of knowledge, Sensemaking and Cognition
Topic Areas:	Social Construction < Organization and Management theory, Social construction of organizational phenomena < Managerial and Organizational Cognition, Managerial and organization cognition (General) < Managerial and Organizational Cognition
Abstract:	In "Beyond Constraining and Enabling: Toward New Microfoundations in Institutional Theory" Professor Cardinale (2018) seeks to expose and correct "shortcomings" (p.133) in institutional theory's conceptualization of structure, agency and their relationship. To this end, he theorizes the "different mechanism[s] through which actors are embedded in structure" (p.134). We agree that institutional theory's microfoundations merit theoretical attention and development. However, we question the premise that the issue of agency in institutional theory is adequately, or even plausibly, formulated as one of "embeddedness". We also challenge the relevance of Professor Cardinale's engagement of Husserl to help solve what we argue to be a phantom problem central to his theory.

1
2
3 **EMBEDDED AGENCY IN INSTITUTIONAL THEORY:**
4 **PROBLEM OR PARADOX?**
5
6
7

8 **JACO LOK**

9 Macquarie University
10 Macquarie Graduate School of Management
11 99 Talavera Road, Macquarie Park
12 NSW 2113, Australia
13 jaco.lok@mgsu.edu.au
14
15

16
17 **HUGH WILLMOTT**

18 City, University of London
19 Hugh.willmott.1@city.ac.uk
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27

28 **Key words:** Institutional theory, agency, social theory, phenomenology, Husserl
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 In “*Beyond Constraining and Enabling: Toward New Microfoundations in*
4 *Institutional Theory*” Professor Cardinale (2018) seeks to expose and correct
5 “shortcomings” (p.133) in institutional theory’s conceptualization of structure, agency
6 and their relationship. To this end, he theorizes the “different mechanism[s] through
7 which actors are embedded in structure” (p.134). We agree that institutional theory’s
8 microfoundations merit theoretical attention and development. However, we question
9 the premise that the issue of agency in institutional theory is adequately, or even
10 plausibly, formulated as one of “embeddedness”. We also challenge the relevance of
11 Professor Cardinale’s engagement of Husserl to help solve what we argue to be a
12 phantom problem central to his theory.
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23

24 **Embedded Agency as a Phantom Problem**

25
26 When Seo and Creed (2002) introduced the term “paradox of embedded agency” in
27 institutional theory they stressed that it only entailed an “apparent” contradiction; one
28 that, to their satisfaction at least, had already been addressed by Barley and Tolbert
29 (1997) who, drawing on Giddens (1984), conceived of the “*mutually constitutive*
30 relationship between institutionalized scripts and [their] local reenactment” (Seo &
31 Creed, 2002: 224, italics added). So, how did this “apparent” contradiction come to be
32 treated as a central problem in institutional theory, as claimed by Cardinale (2018),
33 rather than as a paradox?
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43

44 We believe the answer lies in the naturalization¹ of the metaphor of
45 “embeddedness” in institutional theory, and the associated theorization of the relation
46 between structure and agency as semi-independent forces that influence each other.
47
48 “Embedded” means “set firmly into a mass or material” (Merriam-Webster, 2017): it
49 implies that “agency” is “set firmly into” a surrounding “mass” called “structure”.
50
51
52
53

54
55 ¹ Following Berger and Luckmann (1966), by “naturalization” we mean the unreflexive rendering of a
56 particular understanding of the world as normal, self-evident, and commonsensical. This meaning is derived
57 from Husserl’s (1910) “natürliche Weltbegriff” and Scheler’s (1960) “relativnatürliche Weltanschauung”.
58
59
60

1
2
3 Giddens (1984) has likened this type of conceptualization to the walls of a room from
4 which an individual cannot escape (signifying “embeddedness”), but inside of which
5 s/he can move around at whim (signifying “agency”).
6
7

8
9 Cardinale (2018) refers to “embedded(ness)” more than 40 times in his paper, and,
10 as a result, nearly literally reproduces Giddens’ metaphorical room when he posits
11 that structure “provides (...) a *space* of open possibilities (...) enjoy[ed]” by actors
12 (p.133-145; italics added). It is this particular conceptual framing that produces his
13 central problem: Is action really “fully autonomous” (p.148) in the space of
14 possibilities that is “created” (p.142) by structure? And, if not, what are the
15 “mechanisms” (p.133) through which action is still “influenced” (p.133) by structure
16 within this space? What was originally presented by Holm (1995) and Seo and Creed
17 (2002) as a paradox is, in this way, transformed into a seemingly tractable problem
18 that admits a solution. Crucially, however, it is only when conceiving of the relation
19 between structure and agency in terms of embeddedness – taken literally rather than
20 paradoxically - that a search for mechanisms through which agency and structure
21 exert their mutual influence is necessitated.
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36

37 Holm (1995), who never actually used the term “embedded agency”, as well as
38 Seo and Creed (2002), were, arguably, aware that this apparent necessity is dispelled
39 when the relation between structure and agency is understood as mutually
40 constitutive; or, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 20) more incisively put it, as
41 “ontologically complicit”. This alternative understanding is advanced in strands of
42 social theory that explicitly challenge Professor Cardinale’s thinking of agency and
43 structure as existing on “distinct levels” (p.146) that influence each other. Practice
44 theorists like Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984) – to whom Cardinale (2018)
45 liberally refers - conceive of agency as enabled and constrained “through” structure,
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 not “by” it; and, relatedly, structure is theorized as “both medium and outcome”
4
5 (Giddens, 1984: 25) of agentic practice.
6

7 This practice-theoretic perspective is widely cited by institutional theorists but
8
9 often selectively translated into a more familiar, affirming form – a general issue of
10
11 imported ideas being “lost in translation”, to which we will return in the second part
12
13 of this comment. Practice theory’s reconceptualization of the relation between
14
15 structure and agency in terms of ontological complicity casts radical doubt on the
16
17 coherence of “embeddedness” as a way of characterizing it. This, in turn, raises
18
19 critical questions about the intelligibility of a research program that aspires to identify
20
21 “mechanisms” of “embeddedness”. Whereas the reasoning of Holm (1995) and Seo
22
23 and Creed (2002) is broadly congruent with a practice-theoretic perspective,
24
25 Cardinale (2018) subscribes to a literal use of the embeddedness metaphor, which
26
27 results in a Quixotic quest to solve a phantom problem of his own creation (see
28
29 Planck, 1946). His search for mechanisms to connect structure and agency affirms
30
31 and normalizes, rather than debunks and dispels, the theoretical difficulty that arises
32
33 when agency and structure are conceptualized as oppositional, and/or existing on
34
35 distinct levels. Unfortunately, Cardinale’s (2018) remedy for the “problem” of
36
37 embedded agency in institutional theory reproduces its fault lines.
38
39
40

41 Our difference with Cardinale (2018) could be reduced to a mere disagreement
42
43 about whether to conceptualize action as enabled, constrained, or guided “by”, or
44
45 “through”, structure, which may then be dismissed as a petty squabble over semantics.
46
47 However, we believe that much more is at stake: failure to reflect critically on the
48
49 effects of the widespread, naturalized use of the embeddedness metaphor in
50
51 institutional theory impedes future theory development. In its absence, the
52
53 appreciation of embedded agency as a paradox, rather than a problem, goes missing.
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 This, in turn, leads to increasingly technical and abstract attempts to identify
4 mechanisms that are conjectured to connect structure and agency, as exemplified by
5
6
7 Cardinale's (2018) appropriation of the Husserlian concept of protention. Such
8
9 attempts inevitably result in the perpetuation of the very problem they seek to
10
11 overcome, because they leave its source intact: the conceptualization of the structure-
12
13 agency relation as semi-independent, counterposed forces, sustained by a literal
14
15 reading of the embeddedness metaphor. More importantly, the preoccupation with
16
17 phantom problems that this never-ending cycle fosters diverts valuable research
18
19 attention away from other important research problems that have more direct
20
21 relevance for the analysis of organizational life. This includes, for example, the
22
23 research questions that animated the seminal contributions of Holm (1995) and Seo
24
25 and Creed (2002): when and how can people engage in change-oriented behavior?
26
27
28 Ironically, the phantom problem of embedded agency that is commonly misattributed
29
30 to these authors risks displacing important and relevant questions such as these.

31 32 33 **Using an Exotic Metaphor to Solve a Phantom Problem**

34
35 We now turn to a second, broader issue that arises from Professor Cardinale's
36
37 introduction of the Husserlian concept of "protention" as a resource for identifying
38
39 mechanisms central to his theory. Namely, how are scholars to handle the importation
40
41 of foreign intellectual traditions into management and organization theory?

42
43
44 Cardinale (2018) commends protention "as a useful means of capturing the idea of
45
46 proximity towards valuing some course of action rather than others" (p. 134) such that
47
48 agency is guided or oriented to incline in a direction that "appears as inevitable"
49
50 (p.147). This pre-reflective facet of agency, he contends, "has often gone unnoticed,
51
52 and its implications are largely ignored" (p. 133). The first thing to note about this
53
54 appeal to the concept of protention is its tenuous connection to Husserl's coinage of
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 the term, which relates to time consciousness, and specifically to the temporal horizon
4 against which the present is perceived (Husserl, 1999). It is very difficult to connect
5 or reconcile this meaning with Cardinale's (2018) use of protention in relation to
6 actors' pre-reflective dispositions towards preferring particular courses of action. This
7 difficulty is compounded by the absence of any considered discussion or justification
8 of the concept's importation and subsequent translation in Cardinale's (2018) theory.
9 Based on his brief acknowledgment that he uses the concept "more broadly" (p.136),
10 we speculate that protention is deployed as a loose metaphor for a phenomenon that,
11 at best, lacks a direct connection to, or basis in, Husserl's phenomenology.
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21

22 As Oswick, Fleming and Hanlon (2011) point out, the importation and translation
23 of foreign concepts and forms of theorizing can sometimes be productive for theory
24 development. However, such borrowing or blending also frequently involves a
25 process of domestication or colonization in which nuance and challenge is sacrificed.
26 With regard to institutional theory, for example, this can have the (possibly
27 unintended) deleterious effect of stifling or disarming challenges to its dominance in
28 organization theory, with damaging consequences for theoretical pluralism (Willmott,
29 2015; Lok, 2017). Before contemplating or commending the importation of exotic
30 traditions like Husserl's phenomenology, it is therefore appropriate to assess whether
31 equivalent or greater inspiration or insights may be gained from theoretical traditions
32 that are already influential in institutional theory.
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45

46 Through his many references to Giddens and Bourdieu, Cardinale (2018) takes the
47 practice-theoretic tradition as his starting point for developing "new
48 microfoundations", yet he neglects to consider that this tradition incorporates an
49 attentiveness to how, in his formulation, "structure actively orients actors toward
50 some possibilities rather than others" (p.144). The process is illustrated at some length
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 in Giddens' commentary on Willis' *Learning to Labour* (Giddens, 1984: 289-307).
4
5 More generally, the practice-theoretic tradition is also richly appreciative of pre-
6
7 reflective agency, including the influence of unconscious conditions of action. As
8
9 Giddens (1984: 6) writes: "Unconscious motivation is a significant feature of human
10
11 conduct" which includes "forms of cognition and impulsion which are either wholly
12
13 repressed from consciousness or appear in consciousness only in distorted form".
14
15 Informed by such understandings, a number of institutional theorists have begun to
16
17 study the psychodynamics of human agency (e.g. Voronov & Vince, 2012; Lok,
18
19 Creed, DeJordy & Voronov, 2017). We therefore consider Cardinale's (2018) resort
20
21 to Husserl in his search for a pre-reflective dimension of agency largely redundant.
22
23

24 With regard to the relevance of Husserl's phenomenology for the advancement of
25
26 institutional theory more generally, there are testing questions to answer about the
27
28 commensurability of these two perspectives. Even though Husserl's position within
29
30 the realism-idealism spectrum has been subject to debate (e.g. Ameriks, 1977), his
31
32 phenomenological method was specifically designed to break out of the
33
34 representationalist onto-epistemic boundaries in which institutional theory, and with it
35
36 most social science, are confined. At the core of Husserl's mature work is a deep
37
38 skepticism about the adequacy of what he calls the "natural attitude" as a basis for
39
40 positive (social) science. As Giddens (1977: 10) puts it, footnoting Husserl's *The*
41
42 *Crisis of the European Sciences*, "Positive thought supposedly provides a medium for
43
44 the principled corrigibility of the world of lay beliefs or the 'natural attitude', but
45
46 actually accepts implicitly some fundamental elements of the natural attitude which
47
48 remain concealed and therefore unexplicated." Like most social science, institutional
49
50 theory assumes and reproduces this natural attitude through, for example, the
51
52 deployment of naturalized meanings ascribed to concepts like "embeddedness",
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 “agency” and “structure”. Husserl’s invitation is to suspend and replace causal
4
5 theorizing that is based in such naturalized concepts through what he called “radical
6
7 self-understanding”:
8

9
10 *[T]heoretical achievement (...) can only be and remain meaningful in a true*
11 *and original sense if the scientist has developed in himself the ability to inquire*
12 *back into the original meaning of all his meaning-structures and methods, i.e.,*
13 *into the historical meaning of their primal establishment, and especially into the*
14 *meaning of all the inherited meanings taken over unnoticed in this primal*
15 *establishment, as well as those taken over later on. (Husserl, 1970: 56)*
16
17

18 To be clear, we are not advocating a Husserlian approach, which we acknowledge
19
20 to be highly problematical, and not least for advancing any form of social analysis.
21
22 Where we consider Husserlian phenomenology to be of potential value is in its
23
24 intrinsic orientation to exposing and problematizing the “unnoticed”, as explicitly
25
26 formulated in the previous quote from Husserl (1970). This orientation enables a
27
28 critical exploration of the “historical meaning” of concepts as a way of unearthing
29
30 some of the “unnoticed” effects of their unreflexive appropriation and deployment in
31
32 institutional theory. This possibility is frustrated when exotic concepts, such as
33
34 “protention”, are engaged for purposes that are disassociated from their epistemic
35
36 tradition. In our reading, Cardinale (2018) misjudges how the phenomenological
37
38 tradition - established by Brentano and Husserl and then developed and applied by
39
40 Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Schutz, Ricoeur and many others – may potentially
41
42 contribute to the reconstruction of institutional theory’s microfoundations. For
43
44 example, it might be asked: What is *not* seen when we naturally and “realistically”
45
46 apprehend institutions in elemental terms of “structures”, “actors”, “embeddedness”,
47
48 and “protention”?
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

REFERENCES

- Ameriks, K. 1977. Husserl's Realism. **The Philosophical Review**, LXXXVI, 4: 498-519
- Barley, S. R. and Tolbert, P.S. 1997. Institutionalization and structuration: Studying the links between action and institution. **Organization Studies**, 18: 93-117.
- Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, T. 1966. **The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge**. London: Penguin Books.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. **Outline of a theory of practice**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L.J.D. 1992. **An invitation to reflexive sociology**. Chicago: University of Chicago press.
- Cardinale, I. 2018. Beyond constraining and enabling: Toward new microfoundations for institutional theory. **Academy of Management Review**, 43: 132-155.
- Giddens, A. 1977. **Studies in social and political theory**. New York: Basic Books.
- Giddens, A. 1979. **Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis**. London: Macmillan
- Giddens, A. 1984. **The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration**. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Holm, P. 1995. The dynamics of institutionalization: Transformation processes in Norwegian fisheries. **Administrative Science Quarterly**, 40: 398-422.
- Husserl, E. 1910. **Grundprobleme der Phänomologie**. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, E. 1970. **The crisis of the European sciences: An introduction to phenomenology**. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Husserl, E. 1999. **The essential Husserl: Basic writings in transcendental phenomenology**. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Embeddedness. 2017. In **Merriam-Webster.com**. Retrieved December 5, 2017, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/embeddedness>
- Lok, J. 2017. Why (and how) institutional theory *can* be critical: Addressing the challenge to institutional theory's critical turn. **Journal of Management Inquiry**, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492617732832>.
- Lok, J., Creed, W. E. D., DeJordy, R. and Voronov, M. 2017. Living institutions: Bringing emotions into organizational institutionalism. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T.B. Lawrence and R.E. Meyer (ed.) **The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism**. 2nd ed.: 591-620. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

1
2
3
4 Oswick, C., Fleming, P. and Hanlon, G. 2011. From borrowing to blending:
5 Rethinking the processes of organizational theory building. *Academy of Management*
6 *Review*, 36: 318-337.

7
8 Planck, M. 1946. Scheinprobleme der Wissenschaft. *Neue Physikalische Blätter*,
9 Heft 7: 161-168.

10
11 Scheler, M. 1960. *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft*. 2nd ed. München:
12 Francke Verlag.

13
14 Seo, M. G. and Creed, W. E. D. 2002. Institutional contradictions, praxis, and
15 institutional change: A dialectical perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 27:
16 222-247.

17
18 Voronov, M. and Vince, R. 2012. Integrating emotions into the analysis of
19 institutional work. *Academy of Management Review*, 37: 58-81.

20
21 Willmott, H. 2015. Why institutional theory cannot be critical. *Journal of*
22 *Management Inquiry*, 24: 105-111.