Standing Working Group 7 “Institutions and Knowledge”

EGOS Sub-theme CFP Montreal 2013

An Institutional Family Reunion?

Bridging Ontologies, Levels and Methods

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Institutions operate across social levels. Taken for granted beliefs and recipes for action (e.g. institutional logics) at the societal level materialize – through processes of diffusion and translation – in field-level and organizational-level structures, practices and world-views, as well as in individual cognitions and behaviors. Individual and collective actors' actions (e.g. institutional entrepreneurship, institutional work), in return, reflect back on organizations, fields and society at large in an on-going reciprocal process. Institutions, then, essentially link different levels; this ability to effectively bridge macro and micro levels, agency and structure, the individual and the social, is indeed the origin of their resilience and the foundation of their power.
Nonetheless, studies on institutions and knowledge generally focus either on the micro (organizational or individual levels) or the macro (societal or field levels). While the very rationale of institutional arguments lies in the interrelations between social levels, in most studies one level is relegated to the background, assumed but not explored. Micro and macro level studies usually differ in terms of their underlying paradigmatic stand as well. Most micro level studies reflect a constructivist paradigm, with relativist ontology and perspectivist depiction of knowledge, and use qualitative methods. Many macro level studies share a constructivist paradigm, but field-level analyses tend to take on a more structuralist flavor as a result of scholarly preferences for a wider historical gaze and use of quantitative methods to analyze the dynamics of more macro spatio-temporal objects of inquiry. While not embracing realism or objectivism, most macro scholars are also uneasy with strong relativist and subjectivist positions. Instead, a sort of critical realism or ontological skepticism pervades this work. Part of the problem is that instead of using methods as instruments to analyze specific research questions, we often view institutional processes and dynamics through the prisms of the methods we apply and ask the questions these methods allow us to ask.

We find this divide to be unfortunate and seek to foster a conversation that eschews this segregation of micro and macro. Montreal with its overall “bridging metaphor” as conference theme seems to be ideal to address these ontological, epistemological and methodological challenges in the study of institutions and knowledge. We aim at rethinking the micro-macro divide in institutional research, and hope the discussion will allow us to generate possible ways to re-connect varieties of institutional scholarship.

Some of the questions we hope to address in this stream are: How can we explore and explain micro-institutional processes while also connecting them back to the macro level? How can we explore and explain macro-level processes without loosing sight of their micro-level foundations and effects? How do studies of institutional work relate to those on institutional logics? What are the epistemological and methodological premises and consequences of such re-connections? Is it possible to do field-level ethnographies? Can we even explore institutionalization along time on the micro-level?

We invite papers that offer ways to bridge the divides within institutional theory, whether with a theoretical, conceptual, methodological and/or empirical focus. While these may include critical reviews of the literature, highlighting divides and charting new theoretical and methodological roads for paradigmatic integration, we are mainly looking for empirical works that exemplify such integration -- empirical works that draw upon multiple methods and engage cross-level processes, thus highlighting the bridging that we seek.