Putting Communication Front and Center in Institutional Theory and Analysis

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL TOPIC FORUM

Putting Communication Front and Center in Institutional Theory and Analysis*

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ABSTRACT

In this article we introduce AMR's Special Topic Forum on Communication, Cognition and Institutions. We conceptualize the roots of cognitive, linguistic and communicative theories of institutions, and outline the promise and potential of a stronger communication focus for institutional theory. In particular, we outline a theoretical approach that puts communication at the heart of theories of institutions, institutional maintenance, and change, and we label this approach "communicative institutionalism." We then provide a brief introduction to the set of articles contained in this forum and describe the innovative theorizing of these articles in the direction of communicative theories of institutions. Finally, we sketch a research agenda and further steps and possibilities for theory and research integrating communication and institutions.

Institutions are all around us. Besides the brute material "facts" or physical bodies inhabiting the world of organizations, most of social reality is defined by established rules and conventions that govern collective thoughts, intentions and behaviors (e.g., Berger & Luckman, 1966; Diehl & MacFarland, 2010; Searle, 1995). Since the 1970s, this recognition of the pervasive role of institutions within and across organizations has led to a vast and still growing stream of research in management and organization theory. It is arguably an eclectic stream that consists of studies wedded to various theoretical traditions and camps – or "institutionalisms" – ranging from work on institutional myths to logics and institutional work. At the same time, these studies are part of a broader neo-institutional turn that, in its entirety, holds a central position within the field of management and organization theory today (Davis, 2010; Scott, 2008).

Whilst neo-institutionalism may be a broad church encompassing various theoretical traditions, these traditions tend to have a shared focus on individual and collective cognition as an explanation of the macro-level features of institutions (DiMaggio, 1997). This cognitive focus has largely distinguished the new institutionalism from the "old" institutionalism (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997; Selznick, 1996), and has since the 1970s led to a considerable body of work exploring shared thought structures, or cognitive representations (labeled as frames, categories, templates, schemas, mental models, logics, myths, or scripts), that constitute the legitimate ways of acting socially in particular organizational settings (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006).

Much of this body of work has been based on the assumption that identifying such individual and collective representations gets at the heart of institutional reality where "… the psychology of mental structures provides a micro-foundation to the sociology of institutions" (DiMaggio, 1997: 271). This guiding assumption has been criticized in recent years (e.g.,

Jepperson & Meyer, 2011) for being too atomistic in focus and for relying upon a form of methodological individualism that considers institutions as aggregations of individuals acting in recognizably similar ways under similar circumstances, assigning similar kinds of cognitive meanings and motives to those actions. This "scaling up" through aggregation from individuals to macro-level social structures is arguably a viable heuristic that is commonplace within neo-institutional theory and research (Thornton et al., 2012). Besides its methodological value, however, this stance can also be seen as reducing social reality to individual and collective cognitive categories and cognitive dispositions, as "micro-foundations" that are assumed to explain the endurance as well as change of institutions. The overly cognitive focus associated with this stance arguably brings with it some theoretical blind spots (Suddaby, 2011) and comes at the expense of fuller and more holistic accounts of the socially constructed nature of institutions (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Jepperson & Meyer, 2011).

In this STF, we aim to provide a forum for such alternative accounts that put social interaction and communication at the center of institutional theory and analysis and in doing so address the strictures of predominantly cognitive theories and models. By communication, we mean social interaction that builds on speech, gestures, texts, discourses and other means; thus, we adopt a broad view on communication that encompasses a range of disciplines, theories and methodological approaches. The main motive behind this aim is that greater attention to dynamics of communication has the potential to enhance the richness and explanatory power of our theories and models of institutions. However, this potential can, as we believe the papers collected here demonstrate, only be realized through a theoretical and methodological shift in our focus and analysis. Specifically, we suggest here an approach where speech and other forms of symbolic interactions are not just seen as expressions or reflections of inner thoughts or collective intentions, but as potentially formative of

institutional reality– a point that is generally recognized in other fields (e.g. Heritage, 2004; Searle, 1995) although this base insight has not yet been further developed and disseminated within neo-institutional theory at large.

What this STF sets out to do is to bring together two larger strains of research—cognition and communication—to enrich and advance our understanding of institutions and of institutional change in and around organizations. Our goal was to assemble a set of papers bringing in concepts and insights from various theories of social cognition, linguistics, discourse, rhetoric, and media and communication studies. In our call for papers issued in the autumn of 2012, we invited manuscripts that would specifically leverage theoretical ideas and insights related to communication from other areas of the social sciences, and would connect these ideas in coherent ways with our understanding of the cognitive basis of institutions. We illustrated this invitation with topics and research questions we saw as particularly relevant, including the suggestion of rethinking and remodeling categorization and legitimization processes from a communication perspective, and exploring the role of broadcast and social media in not only transmitting or carrying, but also shaping institutional logics and frames. We also in particular encouraged submissions that would introduce new constructs or concepts related to communication into institutional theory, such as voice, dialogue, and speech acts, thus going beyond traditions such as rhetoric and discourse that already have some traction within institutional research.

Our enthusiasm for this topic met with a similar enthusiasm from researchers in the field, with sixty papers being submitted that in one way or another examined the role of communication or communication related concepts such as audiences, genres, and discourse. In reading through these papers, we noticed the excitement and potential that is offered by inserting a stronger emphasis on communication into institutional theory and analysis. At the

same time, we observed that many of the submissions tended to focus on more conventional perspectives in institutional theory rather than introducing new communication-related constructs and models, and potentially alternative theoretical grounds, to advance our understanding of institutions. Another striking observation was the difference between papers in their assumptions regarding speech and communication; quite a number of papers focused on how aspects of speech and communication *reflect* particular cognitive outcomes or representations – in a sense, provide a window into the cognitive processes of institutional maintenance or change – whereas other papers focused on how speech and communication are *formative*, or constitutive, of a particular institution, and thus bring about cognitive outcomes.

The papers that were selected for inclusion in the special issue reflect these emphases, and thus also the range of work that is currently being carried out in this area of institutional research. In order to place these papers in context, we first describe the overall promise and potential implications of bringing a stronger communication focus into institutional theory and analysis. We then introduce the articles and their central contributions, and we conclude the paper by sketching a research agenda and suggest a number of directions for further theory development and research.

COMMUNICATION, COGNITION, AND INSTITUTIONS: AN OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Communication as a Conduit

Traditional accounts of institutionalization and institutional change have back-grounded communication, or treated it as a black box (Suddaby, 2011). The direct consequence of this neglect has been that when communication is recognized, it is largely assumed to operate as a conduit or channel through which cognitive content (such as information or semantic

meaning) is disseminated and spread across an institutional setting or field (Beckert, 2010; Thornton et al., 2012). In such a conduit model of communication, cognitive content and pragmatic intentions of actors are easily transferred to other actors in the same setting or field, with the effectiveness of such transfer being primarily mediated by the cognitive capacity to process information and by the social ties of the actors involved.

An obvious limitation of models built on this "conduit metaphor" (Reddy, 1979) is their underlying epistemology which considers communication— or indeed any acts of symbolic meaning construction—as an uncomplicated process of sending and receiving messages, where any semantic or pragmatic outcomes are already largely prefigured and predetermined by actors initiating the communication. This assumption in fact underplays degrees of agency that both sending and receiving actors may have in processes of communication and meaning construction (Schober & Brennan, 2003) and it further treats language and cognition as isomorphic. When language is thus understood as merely a means to encode, transfer, and decode cognitive contents between communicating actors, it is also assumed to offer a direct window into individual and collective cognition as it exists in an institutional setting or field at a particular point in time. Schneiberg and Clemens (2006: 211) suggest that the common measurement strategy among neo-institutional researchers has indeed been "to use actors' discursive output as topics for analysis, that is, as documentation of cognitive frames, principles, or institutional logics". They critique this strategy, and the conduit metaphor on which it rests, by emphasizing that actors may be working from different cognitive principles and schemes than what they communicate in public and may also not "'mean what they say' in the sense that discursive output does not flow directly from cognition" (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006, p. 211).

Performative Approaches to Language and Institutions

The limitations of the conduit image are to some extent offset by performative approaches to communication that since the early 2000s have been introduced into neo-institutional theory. These approaches, sometimes brought together under the label of rhetorical institutionalism (Green & Li, 2011), include theory and research on framing (Fiss & Zajac, 2006), tropes (Etzion & Ferraro, 2010), discourse (Phillips et al., 2004) and rhetoric (Green, 2004) within institutional settings and fields. A key assumption of these approaches is that any collective cognition or joint understanding that forms the basis for institutions is not simply pre-existing and accessed or shared by individuals but is in effect constantly *produced,* or *reproduced,* in the use and exchange of language, as a central part of communication (e.g., Phillips et al., 2004; Green, 2004). More specifically, performative approaches assume that any cognitive contents and inferences for institutionally prescribed actions are produced and realized through and in the use of language within interactions (e.g., Green et al., 2009; Phillips et al., 2004). Language (but conceivably also other symbolic expressions such as gestures and bodily signals) has a performative role in that its use pragmatically affects actors in their thoughts and behaviors, which also means that language in its use bears the brunt of initiating broader cognitive change at the level of an institutional field. Studies of the role of rhetoric and discourse in the context of institutions for example focus on the structure and characteristics of the language being used (such as certain keywords, idioms or rhetorical arguments) by actors, as ways of (re)producing institutions, and explore how linguistic choices or alterations to a linguistic repertoire may in turn initiate processes of institutional change (e.g., Green & Li, 2011; Jones et al., 2012; Maguire et al., 1994).

The advantage of these performative approaches is that, compared to a strict conduit model, they consider language not as a neutral, external window into cognition, but as performative and thus as to a greater or lesser extent formative of the cognitive basis of institutions, as well

as of any changes to such institutions. As such, these traditions accord a much more central role to all forms of discourse, including rhetoric, framing, messages, vocabularies and narratives within neo-institutional theory and analysis. Some of these approaches such as the work drawing from framing and new rhetoric grants a degree of agency to individual actors and tends to have a situated focus on the way in which the use of certain words or phrases, as alternative framings, may trigger or initiate broader cognitive change within an institutional setting or field (e.g., Green et al., 2009; Rhee & Fiss, 2014). Other approaches such as Foucauldian or critical discourse analysis however consider the formative role and effect of language as strong and almost all-encompassing, assuming that broader discourses or rhetorical vocabularies "bear down" on individual actors, have a hold over them (in a Foucauldian sense even "work through them") and in doing so reproduce and thus maintain institutions (e.g., Phillips et al., 2004).

These various performative traditions thus differ in their epistemological assumptions, but they nonetheless share the broader assumption that language use, akin to a physical force (Talmy, 2000), may produce or engender cognitive reactions. The pragmatic force of language then is its capacity to effectuate cognitive change, with the choice of certain words (such as slogans, metaphors, and idioms) and grammatical or stylistic features having a direct impact on individuals and groups within an institutional setting or field. Not surprisingly, therefore, performative approaches often tend to start analyses with a focus on certain actors, as "speakers," in key discursive positions and analyze the characteristics of their language use, given that their language has a direct impact, to a greater or lesser extent, on other actors, as "listeners". The basic point here is that these performative approaches tend to be asymmetrical in that they effectively start with the pragmatic aspect of speakers' intentions but largely neglects listeners as active agents, who are instead cast as a speaker-in-waiting whose basic role is to respond (or not) to a speaker's rhetoric or discourse (Bavelas, Coates,

& Johnson, 2000). This also implies that the intentions and acts of a speaker are usually privileged over those of the listener or recipient, as opposed to seeing their communication *as a joint activity*.

Sweetser (1990) explains this asymmetrical emphasis by suggesting that performative approaches such as speech act theory, rhetoric, and discourse theory still hark back to a basic conduit or transfer model of communication (see also Searle, 1969). That is, a speech act, rhetorical argument, or discursive utterance is assumed to 'transfer' discursive objects from a speaker to a listener, in order to create its force (see, for example, Quinn & Dutton, 2005). As Sweetser (1990: 20) says: "Speech acts are metaphorically treated as exchange or transfer of objects from one interlocutor to the other; the objects are linguistic forms, which are containers for meaning. This object-exchange metaphor for speech exchange has been analyzed under the name of the 'conduit metaphor' (Reddy, 1979)".

That performative approaches maintain the premise of a basic conduit model as an image of communication is perhaps not that surprising. Indeed, the main focus of performative approaches is on language as a "force" (Sweetser, 1990; Traugott, 1991; Traugott & Dasher, 2005) directly shaping cognitive outcomes in "other" actors across an institutional setting or field, rather than a broader focus on episodes or events of communication, including characteristics of the communicating actors, the media used to carry messages, and the way in which actors adapt and respond to each other as part of their interaction (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Steinberg, 1998). This notion of language as a "force" may align well with the notion of institutional settings and fields harboring forces that condition and constrain actors in their thoughts and behaviors (e.g., Powell & DiMaggio, 1983). Yet, it at the same time presupposes a rather linear form of causality (cf., Clark, 1996) around the "net-effects" realized by a competition between rhetorical vocabularies or discourses in a field (Fiss &

Delbridge, 2013) as opposed to theorizing more complex forms of causality associated with institutional maintenance and change.

Communication as Constitutive of Institutions

These points bring us to a third approach to communication and cognition in the context of institutions. We label this approach "communicative institutionalism" as it draws on an image of communication as a joint activity, within which both speakers and addressees co-produce, moment-by-moment, an understanding of their social relationship and joint understanding (cf., Tuomela, 2002). In this view, then, communication is seen as "the ongoing, dynamic, interactive process of manipulating symbols toward the creation, maintenance, destruction, and/or transformation of meanings, which are axial—not peripheral—to organizational existence and organizing phenomena" (Ashcraft et al., 2009: 22). Put differently, communication is a process through which collective forms such as institutions are constructed in and through interaction, instead of being merely a conduit for enacting discourses (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Echoing Dewey's (1916/1944) famous statement, the premise here is that collective forms such as "society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication" (p. 4, quoted by Cooren et al., 2011; 1150; italics in the original).

In this sense, communication, in the form of continuous interactions at multiple levels and with multiple potential outcomes, is seen to constitute institutions. This view does not negate the performative character of language, which is in fact crucial for exploring the constitutive nature of communication (Cooren et al., 2011). Nor does it argue that institutions are not manifested in communication (Lammers, 2011; Lammers & Barbour, 2006). Instead, it emphasizes that "any performance is as much the product of the agent that/who is deemed performing it as the product of the people who attend and interpret / respond to such performance—analysts included… [and thus] any performance will never be reducible to the

way it was intended or meant by its producer"(Cooren et al. 2011: 1152). In other words, the joint cognitive understandings and meanings that emerge (in ongoing fashion) from communication are unlikely to be isomorphic with the original intentions of the multiple participants engaged in it. Ambiguity, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity across actors are to be expected (Seo & Creed, 2002), which in turn suggests a more complex set of interactions and ensuing institutional outcomes than is often provided by more linear accounts around hegemonic discourses, effective rhetoric, and institutional entrepreneurs.

Institutions, as common cognitive understandings, are importantly also an emergent effect, or outcome, of ongoing processes of communication between diverse actors. Rather than casting institutions as entities at a different level of analysis and divorced from acts and practices of discourse and communication, we advocate for a perspective that accounts for the communicative constitution, maintenance, and transformation of institutions. This latter point may be the most radical for neo-institutional scholars, as it seems to go against the common tendency to oppose structure and action and macro and micro levels of analysis. Yet, the key suggestion is not to do away with those dualisms, but to recognize the fundamental importance of communication, which requires theory and analysis that are, as Fairhurst and Putnam (2004: 6) put it, "grounded in action" and thus “inhabited” (Hallett, 2010) in the first place. Institutions, in other words, are performed and negotiated on the *terra firma* of local, situated interactions (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010; Bechky, 2011; Lawrence et al., 2011). The resulting emergent outcomes – in terms of maintaining or changing an institution – may be confined to a specific set of interacting actors, but may also spread and be more widely shared across a group of actors and organizations in an institutional field (Durand & Jourdan, 2012; Kennedy & Fiss, 2014; Loewenstein et al., 2012). Importantly, such spread and diffusion is itself contingent on communication.

This interactive model of communication has not yet been fully explored in the context of institutions. There are some early papers that are starting to study and analyze institutions from this perspective (e.g. Ansari et al., 2013; Loewenstein et al., 2012). For instance, McPherson and Sauder (2013) examine institutional logics in the context of negotiations in drug courts. These authors conceptualize logics as organizing principles, figures of speech, and arguments that are employed in interactions “on the ground” that allow various actors to coordinate and manage their work and to reach consensus in an institutionally complex environment. In shifting from a conduit to an interactive model of communication, they in turn argue that

> "in order to fully comprehend institutional maintenance and change, organizational scholars must pay careful attention to the ways in which institutions are negotiated, interpreted and enacted by individuals *as they interact*. Thus it is through dynamic local processes that institutional logics are attached to organizational activity in symbolic and substantive ways as actors *constitute and shape* their meaning and relevance" (McPherson & Sauder, 2013: 168; emphasis added).

This interactive model puts communication at the center of institutional theory and analysis. It accords a constitutive role to communication, as it is primarily in and through communication that institutions exist and are performed and given shape. The metaphor of constitution suggests that in and through interaction, actors themselves construct a common base of understanding regulating their thoughts and behaviors. Such understanding may be contingent on prior interactions and may make use of available communal conventions, but may also be affected by the dynamics of the interaction itself (McPherson & Sauder, 2013). This view of a communicative institutionalism holds we believe great promise. In Table 1, we summarize the core tenets of this perspective alongside the other two main institutional approaches and their conceptualization of communication.

Insert Table 1 about here

PAPERS IN THE SPECIAL TOPIC FORUM

Against the background of our discussion of communication and cognition, we now turn to the five papers contained in this Special Topic Forum. In our view, each of these papers has important implications for advancing a communicative perspective on institutions, and pushes our thinking about institutions forward in important ways. Table 2 below presents a brief summary of each paper, describing its primary purpose, level of analysis, theoretical base and implications for research. Three of these papers focus on the role of discourse and communication in the maintenance and change of institutions at large, whereas two papers focus more specifically on institutional processes such as the legitimization or abandonment of practices. In some of these papers, existing theory on discourse and rhetoric is extended and elaborated into novel theoretical arguments and explanations. In other papers, new ideas and theories are brought in from adjacent fields (such as psycholinguistics and communication theory) that suggest promising new lines of theorizing and research. All five papers, however, bring novel theoretical perspectives to bear upon familiar problems and questions within institutional theory and present testable models and propositions that can be directly extended into empirical research.

Insert Table 2 about here

The first study sets the overall agenda for the special topic forum by explicitly searching for processes of communication that constitute the basis of macro-institutional logics. Ocasio,

Loewenstein and Nigam (2015) begin their paper by noting that whilst communication in particular contexts has typically been considered as instantiating or reproducing institutional logics, the reverse argument, that communication constitutes logics, holds great potential for advancing our understanding of the durability and change of logics. Yet, as they argue, with a few exceptions (e.g., Sauder & McPherson, 2013), this causal link has only been theorized in a limited way. Rooting their arguments in a realist epistemology, their propositions connect communication processes with the structuring effects and causal powers of institutional logics and practices. More precisely, they formalize and elaborate theory on how specific processes of communication— coordinating, sensegiving, translating and theorizing— demarcate cognitive categories of understanding, help individuals form collective bonds or relationships around those categories, and link these categories to specific practices and experiences. In this way, these processes constitute the very basis of how cognitive categories become culturally shared and conventional in a particular institutional setting. Ocasio, Loewenstein and Nigam (2015) assume in turn that the communicative constitution of such categories is central to the establishment of common vocabularies of practice (with words and idioms systematically referencing those categories) as well as broader institutional logics, or value sets and behaviors that are seen to govern practices in a particular setting. These theoretical ideas and arguments offer a number of direct opportunities for further research. Not only can the propositions that they offer on each of the communication processes be directly tested, but further research may also model the different forms of communication together to explore the tipping points that constitute transitions in institutional categories, vocabularies and logics.

Bitektine and Haack also present a multi-level model detailing the behavioral and cognitive factors affecting legitimacy judgments at both a micro-individual and macro-societal level of analysis. They draw on research in behavioral decision making and public opinion research to

tease out the cognitive conditions and pressures associated with legitimacy judgments at both levels. These authors argue that commonly accepted, and thus institutionalized, legitimacy judgments are characterized by applying norms that are generally seen to be valid, whereas individual level judgments involve assessments of what norms are appropriate in a particular context of action. Institutional maintenance and change involve accordingly processes and feedback loops between these cognitive dispositions (of believing norms are generally valid and/or appropriate in a particular context) associated with legitimacy judgments; with institutional change being instigated through a questioning by actors of the general validity of previous norms in a particular setting or through the import of an alternative set of ideas and norms that based on their validity in other societal domains can equally be said to be appropriate. Their model also details a number of important "social actors" such as the news media and regulators that mediate and magnify the processes of maintenance or change linking the individual and macro levels of analysis. Future research may explore, in a field setting as well as potentially in a laboratory setting, the cognitive conditions and pressures associated with legitimacy judgments. This model could be further extended with research that specifically focuses on a meso-level of analysis, involving interactions between individual actors, groups and organizations, that arguably play a crucial role in either maintaining the status quo or in changing legitimacy judgments by diffusing alternative sets of values and norms.

Harmon, Green and Goodnight take on a similar quest in their paper by focusing on how the rhetoric that is used within a field reflects processes of institutional maintenance and change. They also try to characterize conditions reflecting maintenance and change, but where Bitektine and Haack primarily focus on cognitive dispositions in legitimacy judgments they focus instead on the homogeneity and structure of the rhetoric, or argument, that is being used to legitimize or delegitimize a set of practices. Drawing on Toulmin's (1958) classic

work on rhetoric and argumentation, they argue that actors can use rhetoric in two structurally different ways; they can, first of all, use the rhetoric that is common to a field (labeled *intra-field rhetoric*) and whilst doing so largely reiterate and accept the common grounds and backing for the claims that are being made about a certain practice. Second, actors across a particular institutional setting or field may however also use forms of rhetoric that are more diffuse and furthermore in their backing and grounds refer to other social settings and professional domains (labeled *inter-field rhetoric*). The onset of inter-field rhetoric in a particular setting, they argue, is reflective of processes of change, as prevailing norms are starting to shift. As such, Harmon et al. see intra-field and inter-field rhetoric as important markers of shifts in the pendulum between maintenance and change. This presents a cogent argument that warrants further empirical research to tease out its reach and boundary conditions. For example, it may well be that in institutionally complex environments (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2011) different forms of rhetoric and norms may persist, rather than marking the onset of a wholesome change to a new institutional order. Future empirical research may therefore explore and tease out the details around the basic propositions presented in the paper. We also believe in line with our earlier discussion that there is promise in focusing not on only rhetoric as reflective of institutional maintenance and change (effectively, considering them as markers or "windows into" maintenance or change), but also on how specific rhetorical acts (such as, for example, naturalizing analogies (Douglas, 1986)) in contexts of communication may either validate and justify already existing norms or instigate and trigger processes of institutional change. This would cast rhetoric, as part of communication, as formative rather than just reflective of processes of institutional maintenance and change.

Next, Roulet and Clemente draw on a well-established theory in mass communication and public opinion research to develop a model of how practices in an institutional field may

become deinstitutionalized. The 'spiral of silence' theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) suggests that through social pressures and a fear of being in the minority, individual opinions gradually coalesce into homogenous public opinion. This is akin to a spiraling process, in the sense that it increasingly boosts and amplifies the voice of those who are, or have become, the majority whilst suppressing the voice of those in the minority. Roulet and Clemente argue that similar processes are at play around the legitimization and de-legitimization of practices in institutional fields. Besides this broad parallel, they also extend and fine-tune their argumentation to this setting, recognizing the differences that exist between opinion formation in society versus process of legitimacy judgments in specific institutional fields. These differences aside, the use of a grounded and well established theory from mass communication is an inspired choice as it offers a set of predictions and concepts that by extension can be usefully modeled in an institutional setting. Empirical research may set out to test these predictions and to put more detail to the schematic model that Clemente and Roulet provide. Such further research may also, we suggest, try and model the spiral of silence dynamic in institutionally complex environments, where in effect alternative opinions may be seen to compete for attention and actors actively strive to mobilize others to become a dominant, if not the majority, opinion in a field.

In the fifth and final paper in the set, Gray, Purdy and Ansari develop a framing perspective on the formation and change of collective meanings and interpretations in an institutional field. Explicitly positioning themselves against macro sociological “top-down” perspectives on institutions, they set out to develop a process theory of how institutions “bottom-up” emerge in interactions where actors frame alternative meanings and over time may gradually converge on common frames that become institutionalized. Their process theory presents specific details on the micro processes at the level of these interactions that sustain and energize the adoption of a certain frame over others, and may thus lay the basis for broader

institutional change. A further contribution of their process theory is that it combines a focus on the content of interactions, in the form of framing, with an account of how interactions themselves may take on a certain structure as an interaction order through repetition and regularity, affecting the spread and diffusion of frames across an institutional field. In this way they explicitly scale up from a micro to macro level, and in a manner that clearly foregrounds the role of interactions, and thus communication. Their paper is probably the broadest in reach in that it maneuvers all the way from acts of framing in specific contexts of interaction to macro field level conditions and outcomes. Future research may draw on this process theory and add more detail to the high-level processes and mechanisms that they develop in the paper. As Gray, Purdy and Ansari (2015) suggest, their framing perspective is not only well placed to scale up from a micro to macro level of analysis, but is also supple enough to be combined with alternative theoretical lenses, such as identity and materiality, that may affect how and why meanings are constructed, spread and become institutionalized over time.

Taken together, these five papers deepen our understanding of the role of discourse and communication in institutional maintenance and change. Four of the papers present multi-level models that explain both the durability of institutions as well the roots for change. As such, the papers in this forum offer both generic as well as specific implications for empirical research moving forward, as well as some new insights and ideas on how our theorizing on institutions can advance. The articles in this forum may thus serve as signposts to further research, suggesting ways in which discourse and communication can be more fully incorporated both conceptually and empirically into institutional research.

This said, the studies collected here also indicate the need for further reflection. A general observation is that some of their arguments are still to a large extent rooted in the performative rather than a truly interactive approach to communication. This brings an

emphasis on the structure of language either reflecting institutional conditions of stability or change, as in the papers by Bitektine and Haack (2015) and Harmon, Green and Goodnight (2015), or as a pragmatic force, energizing and channeling institutional dynamics, as highlighted by Ocasio, Loewenstein and Nigam (2015). Because of this emphasis, there is perhaps less of a focus on the role of actors, and their agency, in actively and creatively using language in communicative interactions, with the focus instead placed on the structure and functions of language and their effect on individual and collective cognition. This in part because these papers are anchored in theoretical bases that are primarily cognitive and linguistic in orientation, rather than communicative (see Table 2). That is, the paper by Roulet and Clemente (2015) is the only paper that directly draws on communication theory, extending a model from mass communication theory, whilst Ocasio, Loewenstein and Nigam (2015) and Gray, Purdy and Ansari (2015) base their theorizing in part on concepts and ideas from interactional linguistics and communication theory. This general observation, in our view, signals the real possibilities that exist for further theorizing that is geared more explicitly towards conceptualizing the interactive and processual dynamics that link the micro to macro level of analysis in institutional theory (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). Such theorizing would add considerably to our understanding of when linguistic and cognitive categories are not only reflective of institutions, but of how these are being used in interactions (Hallett, 2010), and constitute the very basis of institutional maintenance or change.

DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A COMMUNICATION-CENTERED RESEARCH AGENDA FOR INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

In the remainder of our introduction to this Special Topic Forum, we want to sketch a research agenda for the communicative institutionalism we have proposed here, outlining the opportunities and benefits of a communication-based perspective on institutions, institutional maintenance, and change. The suggestions that we offer are admittedly only selective, and we

recognize that there may be many other options and pathways for further research. Yet, the overview that we present here does, we hope, provide some useful pointers to further research. We structure our suggestions by genre and mode of communication into three broad areas: (1) framing, (2) rhetoric and discourse, and (3) categorization. For each of these areas, we highlight how a centering on communication opens up opportunities to advance and progress institutional theory and analysis.

Framing

The notion of framing has already gained considerable currency as a communication-centered approach to understanding meaning construction in and around organizations (Ansari et al., 2013; Gray et al., 2015). As Cornelissen & Werner (2014) note in a recent review, the use of framing as a construct ranges from micro-level conceptualizations and effects (e.g. Benner & Tripsas, 2012; Weber & Mayer, 2011) to meso-level notions of strategic frames and framing (e.g. Nadkarni & Narayanan, 2007; Fiss & Zajac, 2006) and macro-level ideas such as field and institutional frames as well as their contestation (Lounsbury, Ventresca & Hirsch, 2003; Beckert, 2010; Meyer & Höllerer, 2010). In our view, much of the attractiveness of frames as a construct for management scholars lies in their ability to connect the macro-structural aspects of collective meaning structures with the micro-interactional level where much of the negotiation of meaning takes place. It is this dual nature of frames that places them squarely at the center of a communicative approach to understanding institutions and their creation and change as well as their consequences. In particular, there exist intriguing opportunities at the micro level to understand the interactive production and reproduction of institutions and their logics through framing in context where frames for instance mediate between individual convictions and others' expectations (Cornelissen, 2012). Such work would also allow bridging to the inhabited institutionalism promoted by Hallet (2010) and others.

At the meso-level, the study of strategic and collective action framing in particular would benefit from more attention to the co-construction of meaning in the communicative process. For instance, recent studies have shifted attention from merely examining the choice of frame to understanding related and much more audience-centered aspects of the framing process such as the identity of the frame-articulator as constructed by the audience or the context in which frames are offered (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Rhee & Fiss, 2014), including the dynamics of the institutional context. Yet, while this work has shifted the focus towards the ways in which strategic meaning making is either enhanced or limited by the co-construction of meaning, the notion of frame resonance (e.g. Babb, 1996) would offer a particularly attractive field to develop a truly interactive understanding of how meaning is co-constructed. While prior research has conceptualized frame resonance primarily in terms of an audience's receptiveness to certain framing strategies, the view advanced here would shift the focus further towards examining for instance how frame resonance operates through an interactive process by which the frames of organizational actors and their audiences may over time converge, synchronize, or diverge (cf. Corman et al., 2002).

Finally, research at the macro level has already to a considerable extent embraced the collective construction of field or institutional frames. Especially the notion of frame contests points our attention to for instance the ways in which coalitions of actors promote or challenge certain conceptions or understandings of social reality (e.g., Maguire et al., 2004; Meyer & Höllerer, 2010). While social movements theorists have proposed several concepts such of frame bridging and alignment to examine this process, this analysis of framing struggles has yet to more deeply engage with the communication literature. For instance, the notion of co-orientation (Broom, 1977) would appear to provide a helpful perspective to understand the way that frame resonance and alignment may be achieved.

Rhetoric and Discourse

Rhetoric already has significant traction as part of institutional analysis, highlighting how communication is central to institutional diffusion and change (Green, 2004; Green & Li, 2009). In particular, the so called New Rhetoric (Cheney et al., 2004; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1959) has been used by scholars to explore processes such as the diffusion of practices (Green, 2004, 2009) and their legitimation (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), as exemplified by the paper by Harmon, Green and Goodnight (2015) in this STF. Another related stream of institutional research has drawn on discursive theories and methods to study institutions (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004; Hardy & Phillips, 2004). From this perspective, institutions are constituted by discourses, and such an analysis has been used to better understand institutionalization, de-institutionalization and re-institutionalization processes (Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2010) as well as specific topics such as legitimation (Vaara & Tienari, 2008). In the spirit of fostering a stronger communication focus, there may be value in further embedding discursive and rhetorical analyses within communicative contexts. This would combine the strengths of such analyses with the motives and agency of interactants, and with aspects of their communication, including the media used to communicate (Vaara & Monin, 2010; Vaara & Tienari, 2011). Doing so may enrich theory and analysis, and would potentially bring more fine-grained detail to our understanding of institutional reproduction and change as a dynamic process in which discourses and rhetoric are used, created and transformed by interactants rather than simply transmitted or channeled through them.

One potential application of studying discourse and rhetoric in connection with institutions is analysis of the communicative construction of institutional logics. In recent studies, institutional "logics" have been conceptualized either as higher order structuring dimensions (such as authority, identity, and governance) ruling organizations and their behaviors (e.g. Thornton, 2002; Thornton et al. 2012) or as arguments and associated meanings (e.g. Green,

2004, 2009; McPherson and Sauder, 2013). However, these two conceptualizations are not necessarily antagonistic but can be reconciled and may in fact complement each other, as shown by Ocasio et al. (2015) in the current issue. A promising avenue concerns the study of multi-level phenomena like institutional maintenance and transformation where at macro levels of analysis logics can be seen as structuring dimensions whereas at micro-level of analysis logics may be more like discursive or argumentative flows.

From a communicative perspective, further research may employ discourse and rhetoric to study how institutional logics are used and mobilized in concrete actions (McPherson & Sauder, 2013). In this view, actors make sense of institutional logics via discourses, and use these discourses in their interactions. As such, institutional logics as proceeding from super-ordinate institutional order may be conceptualized as discourses or discursive aspects of institutional order. From the communicative perspective on institutions, it would be important to emphasize that these discourses may be used in a various manners and situations, which paves the way for resolving or exacerbating ambiguity and contradiction between logics, for giving birth to replacement, transference, or hybridity across logics, the analysis of which may in fact help to understand the institutional complexity in a novel way.

Rhetoric may be furthermore linked with this kind of analysis, and it offers specific advantages for targeted analysis of institutional logics. From a rhetorical perspective, institutional logics can be as arguments, as sets of linked propositions that in a particular social context may exert persuasive force on actors. Across institutional fields and settings, the use and force of such propositions may vary (Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1979). Thus, when scholars study changes in field logics, they can draw on rhetoric and argumentation theory to determine precisely how arguments (i.e., claims, grounds, warrants, and backings) and their underlying logic have changed. An added advantage of casting institutional logics as arguments is that it draws attention to the previously built up communication environment

in which logics, as arguments, are uttered (Aakhus, 2007), and against the backdrop of alternative, forgotten or suppressed arguments (Jackson, 2013; Green, Li & Nohria, 2009).

Moreover, discursive and rhetorical analysis may be extended to study aspects of institutions that are not captured by the notion of "logic." For example, ideology and power are key aspects of the institutional order, which from a micro perspective can be better understood through an analysis of discourse-in-action. Emotion is arguably another aspect of institutions that warrants further attention, and rhetorical theories also provide conceptual and methodological tools for such analysis.

Categorization

Work on categories and categorization processes presents another area of neo-institutional research that stands to benefit from a stronger focus on communication. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in work on categorization and categories at the level of industries, markets, and firms (Durand and Paolella, 2013; Vergne & Wry, 2014). Much of this work has been inspired by Zuckerman's (1999) work on the categorical imperative and by the increasing focus of organizational ecology research on questions of categorical purity (Hannan et al., 2007). Whilst this has been a burgeoning line of research, work on categories is also turning to communicative questions around the very process of categorization and the flexible and changing ways in which categories can be constructed, reconfigured, or even combined by organizational actors in particular industry and market contexts (Kennedy et al., 2010; Glynn & Navis, 2013; Vergne & Wry, 2014). This turn complements research on the priming and effects of categories— as culturally grounded cognitive schemas— on the expectations and behaviors of audiences, with a focus on the micro-processes of communication through which such categories are defined and demarcated and thus emerge in the first place (cf. Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

To address these questions, recent work has started to define a theoretical vocabulary that is better able to describe and explain both the construction, or emergence, and effects of categories (Durand & Paolella, 2013; Kennedy et al., 2010; Kennedy & Fiss, 2013; Vergne & Wry, 2014). Some authors have for this purpose revisited cognitive psychological research on for example priming and prototype effects (Durand & Paollela, 2013). As categorization processes may rely on goal-based motivations (Barsalou, 1991), i.e., categories reflect actors' own purposes rather than pre-existing prototypes, this may fundamentally affect how for example producers and consumers negotiate the legitimacy of categories. For example, whereas in some market contexts, producers are able to convince buyers and consumers of their capabilities and performance through belonging to well-identifiable prototypical categories, in other instances, buyers and consumers construct of their own volition what they consider to be appropriate categories rather independently of any producer's communication. In both legitimate and contested industries, this may lead to important consequences, such as a higher likelihood of asset divestments to avoid assimilation with what are seen to be negatively valued firms in the eyes of consumers (Durand & Vergne, 2014). Here, research could further investigate the interactions between producers and audiences, with cognitive categorizations being an outcome of the motives of the various parties as well as of the communication that has taken place (Kennedy, 2008). In particular, empirical cases of norm infringement, contestation, or organizational misconduct would lend themselves well to such research that might then focus on studying shifts in legitimacy as a result of interactions between producers and audiences, and any relevant intermediaries (e.g., the media, rating and accreditation agencies).

One other source of inspiration for categorization research is the work in cognitive linguistics on categories (Lakoff, 1987; Barsalou, 1991) which, from its founding, has been closely allied to the work by Rosch and others in cognitive psychology but also brings a distinct

focus on how speech and language are not only reflective of but also integral to categorization processes. Lakoff (1987) in his landmark book on categorization highlights in particular two forms of speech, which he casts as fundamental to categorization: metaphor and metonymy. Both are often considered as figurative modes of speech, or tropes, yet linguists and communication scholars have long recognized the fundamental role of both forms of speech in language and categorization in general (a point taken on by for example Barley (1983) and Weber et al. (2008) in relation to institutional research).

Broadly speaking, metaphor involves an analogical comparison in language and thought where a term or concept (called the target) is likened to another (called the source), with the source stemming from a category of knowledge and language use that was not previously associated with the target (e.g., Cornelissen, 2005). Kennedy and Fiss (2013) suggest that such analogical comparisons are central to the formation of new categories (see also Navis & Glynn, 2010). As they write: "New categories become common knowledge when a private or one-off insight applies a familiar meaning, often by analogy or translation, to a novel, unfamiliar occasion or for unusual purposes, and the situation and meaning then become widely accepted" (Kennedy & Fiss: 1145-1146). Metaphorical language and thought in fact tend to assume a lateral, or *horizontal*, process that draws analogies across socially familiar registers of language and categories of knowledge. In comparison, metonymies rely on an exchange between parts within the same domain of language use and knowledge. They involve a *vertical* or contiguous mapping or exchange between parts and elements of a register of language and associated category of thought. Such a mapping or exchange typically involves a part-whole or whole-part substitution in speech and thought. A key feature of such substitutions is that metonymy often leads to a *compression* in which the whole category is reduced to a single feature or entity (Manning, 1979), which accounts for prototype effects in categorization when a specific detail or set of details is "used (often for

some limited and immediate purpose) to comprehend the category as a whole" (Lakoff, 1987: 79).

Lakoff (1987) stresses that both figures of speech, in combination, are central to the establishment and institutionalization of new categories. In this vein, category emergence can in future research be tracked by focusing on how in the discourse of actors an initially rich set of figurative metaphorical expressions that is used in a tentative way (i.e., marked by interruptions, frequent switches between expressions, or impromptu elaborations and extensions) over time settles and contracts into a discrete set of idioms and metonymic labels that are used in a standard way as shorthand expressions to designate the established category. Following Lakoff (1987), it may well be that the interactions and shifts between the two figures of speech within and across episodes of communication may turn out to be not only reflective but also formative of the institutionalization of new categories.

CONCLUSION

Institutional theory has become one of the most important theoretical perspectives in management and organizational research. In particular, the recent trend to focus more on the social and cognitive micro-foundations of institutions presents an important deepening of this perspective. Yet, we believe that institutional theory would benefit from a further shift towards the communicative dimension. While it is fair to say that communication in its various forms has already been a key part of institutional analysis, our intention with this Special Topic Forum has been to place it in the front and center of such analysis and to encourage the further development of a distinct strand of communicative institutionalism.

Our suggestion is rooted in a more general belief that it is important to value and advance various types of communicative approaches – be they rooted in linguistics, discourse or rhetorical analysis, or communication theory. In this editorial, we have aimed to underscore

the contributions of the various kinds of studies that focus on the performative effects of language on institutions but called for further research that attends to the interactive aspects of the communicative construction of institutions. The papers in this Special Topic Forum already demonstrate the promise of such research, but there are of course many more research avenues and opportunities, and we hope that further work might follow these examples and progress this agenda even further.

Table 1: Perspectives on Communication within Neo-Institutional Theory and Analysis

Theoretical Approach	***Classic neo-institutional theory*;** including most work on institutional adoption, change, and logics	***Rhetorical institutionalism*;** including discourse, rhetoric, frame and speech act theory	***Communicative institutionalism*;** emerging area of research at the intersection of communication and cognition
Basic Perspective on Communication	Conduit model of communication: communication as the channeling or transmission of cognitive contents and intentions between actors	Performative model of communication: predominant focus on language as a force that (physically) prompts cognitive reactions in actors	Interactive model of communication: communication as a process of interaction within which actors exchange views and build up mutual understanding
Link of Communication to Cognition	Communication as a neutral transmission of cognitive contents; communication has causally a negligible role in explaining (cognitive) institutional maintenance and change	Communication as an asymmetrical process of senders with their language influencing and cognitively priming recipients; language (as part of communication) has a direct impact on (cognitive) institutional maintenance and change	Communication involves moment-by-moment dialogue and interaction between actors, who coordinate the dialogue and any joint understanding that they build up; communication (including but not limited to language) has a constitutive role in (cognitive) institutional maintenance and change

Table 2: Contents and Characteristics of the Papers in the Special Topic Forum

Study	Primary purpose	Level of analysis	Theoretical base	Research Implications for institutional theory
Ocasio, Loewenstein and Nigam; How streams of communication reproduce and change institutional logics: The role of categories	To explain how through specific communication processes – coordinating, sensegiving, translating and theorizing - categorical distinctions and durable principles are produced and reproduced that form the basis of institutional logics	Micro- to macro-level of analysis	Psycholinguistics (e.g., Clark, 1996; Levinson, 2000) and research on communication as constitutive of organizations (CCO) (e.g., Taylor & Van Every, 2000)	Use the basic propositions to model how changes in communication processes (coordinating, sensegiving, translating and theorizing) instigate changes in institutional logics. Extend the propositions into a process model that examines the tipping points that govern transitions in institutional logics
Bitektine and Haack; The macro and the micro of legitimacy: Towards a multilevel theory of the legitimacy process	To develop a model that describes and explains institutional stability and change at multiple levels of analysis by explaining the communicative and cognitive mechanisms linking individual judgments and	Micro- to macro-level of analysis	Behavioral decision making (e.g., Tost, 2011) and public opinion research (e.g., Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004)	Use the basic propositions to model micro-to-macro level changes in judgments related to the validity and propriety of behaviors in an institutional setting. Extend the model to explore inter-mediate group processes and mechanisms (at the meso level) that mediate the micro-to-macro level stability and change

	macro-level agreements			in institutions
Harmon, Green and Goodnight; A theory of rhetorical legitimation: the communicative and cognitive structure of institutional maintenance and change	To describe and explain institutional maintenance and change based on the degree to which rhetoric (and specifically the rhetorical backing for the legitimacy of a practice) within a field is stable and settled or dynamic and evolving	Macro-level of analysis	Rhetoric and pragmatics: Toulmin's argumentation theory (Toulmin, 1958)	Use the basic propositions to identify and describe the rhetoric used within a field and associated with institutional maintenance or change. Extend the model into more detailed rhetorical analysis of when and how alternative arguments, with different backings, challenge and change the default rhetoric within a field
Roulet and Clemente; Public opinion as a source of deinstitutionalization: A 'spiral of silence' approach	To develop a communication-informed account of how initial acts of opposition towards a practice in a field may evolve into a majority view, leading in turn to the delegitimization of the practice	Micro- to macro-level of analysis	Mass communication theory: Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence theory	Use the model of a spiral of silence at the field level to research the deinstitutionalization of a practice. Extend the model towards institutionally complex environments to test, and potentially extend, the basic predictions

Gray, Purdy and Ansari; From interactions to institutions: Micro-processes of framing and mechanisms for the structuring of institutional fields	To develop a process theory of how interactively established frames in dyads and groups may spread and diffuse across an institutional field and may in turn come to structure interactions and meanings within that field	Micro- to macro-level of analysis	Theory on interactional framing (e.g., Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1974) and structuration theory (e.g., Giddens, 1984)	Use the description of the different framing processes to trace the entire process and spectrum of institutional change from micro interactions to macro conventions. Extend the model to consider the role of identity, discourse, and materiality alongside framing in processes of institutional change

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