The problem of the cultural determination of cognition in institutional theory*

Omar Lizardo
University of Notre Dame
olizardo@nd.edu

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1   Introduction

Institutional theory is the primary line of social science scholarship in which cultural sociology intersects with the study of organizations (Dobbin, 1994). Because of this, it is also a subfield that has wrestled with some very important (and still unresolved) issues in the sociological study of culture, including the connection between objectified cultural patterns and cognition (Zucker, 1983), the relationship between interests and agency (DiMaggio, 1988) and the relative (dis)connection of action from prescriptions in concrete social settings (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In many ways, it can be argued that institutional theory deals with the most important issue in cultural sociology, since the mechanisms of institutionalization are the ones that account for the persistence and "patterning" of culture in the first place (Zucker, 1977, 1988). This means that metatheoretical issues in the study of institutions and institutionalization are of relevance for scholars who study culture more broadly.

In this short communication, I would like to explore one key ambiguity that plagues certain *cultural* definitions contemporary definitions of "institutionalization." This ambiguity cuts to the heart of a certain (mis)conception of the relationship of cultural to cognition that was first noted by the anthropologist Maurice Bloch (1977; 1986), as implausible. This is the idea that a given set of collective cultural patterns (a "cultural" or "symbolic" system) can come to so suffuse the individual's cognitive process that it prevents her from thinking outside its own parameters. Bloch (1986) referred to as the "anthropological" theory of cognition. His main argument was that this view of the relationship between culture and cognition was self-defeating, and that any theory that postulated such a relationship between the person and the symbolic order was bound to be unable to explain social and cultural change (Bloch, 1977), or even its very own conditions of possibility.

I argue that when institutional theorists define "institutionalization" in a way that harks back to the notion that cultural patterns constrain cognition in the way described by the traditional anthropological argument, they run into similar problems. My recommendation is that this notion of "cultural-cognitive" institutionalization should be abandoned, because it is empirically unsustainable and substantively vacuous. I close by noting that there exists a weaker version of cultural-cognitive institutionalization that does the analytical job that institutional theorists require (and that is distinct from regulation and normativity), without resulting in the predictable aporias of the strong cultural-cognitive model.

2   Defining Institutions and Institutionalization

What are institutions? According to Scott (2008, 48), institutions are "...comprised of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life." This

definition of institutions—however vague—is not necessarily incompatible with all manners of specifying the relationship between rules, norms and cultural patterns and individual (or group) cognition. However, we can begin to detect some important conceptual tensions when the notion of cultural-cognitive institutionalization is more explicit spelled out. What does it mean for something to be "institutionalized" in a cognitive-cultural way? Relatedly, what model of "culture" does the notion of cognitive institutionalization presuppose?

From the cognitive-cultural viewpoint,

> . . . [c]ultures are conceived of as unitary systems, internally consistent across groups and situations. . . For cultural cognitive theorists, compliance occurs in many circumstances *because other types of behavior are inconceivable*; routines are followed because they are taken from granted as 'the way we do these things"' (Scott, 2008, 58).

The "many circumstances" qualifier notwithstanding it seems like Scott (correctly I think) isolates what marks cognitive-cultural institutionalization as different from the notion of regulative institutionalization popular in institutional economics[1] or the notion of "normative" institutionalization characteristic of the "old" institutionalism in sociology[2]. As Scott is clear to note, something is institutionalized in a cognitive-cultural way if actors are literally unable to think of (hence the cognitive part) a different way of doing things. This "constraint on individual cognition" (Bloch, 1977) is then thought of to emanate from large scale cultural patterns that are taken for granted (and therefore not "perceived" as being really there, like fish are unable to take notice of the water in which they swim).

3   Problems with the cultural-cognitive definition

A simple moment of reflection should reveal that this "cognitive" criterion (inconceivability) for something being institutionalized is simply too strong. In fact it is so strong that it is unlikely that anything could really be shown to be institutionalized in that way. Furthermore, it is clear that in some circumstances, a researcher cannot claim that something is institutionalized in this way without committing herself to the "liar's paradox." What circumstances are these?

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[1]Something is regulatively institutionalized if there are explicit, reliable and robust sanctioning mechanisms that are regularly activated once a deviation from the expected pattern in detected as well as routinely active monitoring mechanisms that can detect this violation.

[2]Something is normatively institutionalized if a specific state of affairs, cultural ideal or pattern of behavior is seen as desirable for its own sake by a set of powerful actors who are then committed to uphold the pattern in their everyday action and to instill and "socialize" new actors in the system so that they are also committed to seeing that pattern as the most desirable way of doing things

For an observer to say that something is institutionalized in this way, he or she must be a clear outsider to the social system in question. That is, a sociologist cannot say "X (e.g. the state) is cognitively institutionalized in modern Western societies" (Meyer et al., 1997) if the researcher is part of modern Western society. The reason for this is that if we follow Scott's definition, when a cognitive-culturalist says "X is institutionalized in Western society" what she is saying is that "for members of Western societies it is literally inconceivable to think of a different way of doing things." But the researcher can only make this statement if he or she has already isolated the relevant behavioral pattern, and has already "de-naturalized it" (for instance, by showing it to be "socially constructed"). This means that the researcher has in the very process of thinking as something being institutionalized come to the conclusion that "things could have been otherwise" and therefore is performatively showing that "somebody" in this case the social-scientist observer herself can conceive of a different way of doing things.

Thus, whatever it is, if it can be thought of as being "socially constructed" it is *ipso facto* not institutionalized in the way that cognitive culturalists say it is. In essence, if we hold on to the inconceivability criterion (and remove the possibility of a social-scientific observer who has a god's-eye point of view on the social system in question) then if something were to be institutionalized it would be impossible to ascertain whether it is in fact institutionalized in the cognitive-cultural way. Now notice that this problem is not an issue if the social scientist is making the claim for societies that she is not a part of (thus, Durkheim could have made a cognitive-cultural institutionalization claim about totemism among Australian aborigines), but his (Durkheim, 1969) claim about the institutionalization of "individualism" as a sort of secular religion in contemporary Western societies suffers from the above issue. Notice also, that this self-reference problem is only a problem for the cognitive-cultural definition; it is not a problem for the normative or regulative definition because neither makes the strong inconceivability claim about the actor's cognitive and imaginative capacities (and Parsons (1967) interpreted Durkheim's claim about individualism as implying a normative definition of institutionalization not a cognitive-cultural one).

That is, from both a regulative and normative institutional point of view, something can be institutionalized in the manner that they describe it and at the same it could be perfectly possible (and in fact it routinely is!) for the relevant social actors to be capable of thinking that things could be otherwise. For a regulative-institutionalist, it is possible think that things could be otherwise, but if you act on those thoughts you would be punished. For a normative institutionalist you are perfectly capable of thinking of alternative arrangements but they are to be rejected because none of the possible candidates are as inherently desirable as the one that is currently institutionalized. In essence, neither of these two approaches put as strong constraints on individual cognition as the cultural-cognitive approach does.

Beyond the logical difficulties, there are strictly empirical intuitions that militate

against the strong "inconceivable" definition of institutionalization. That is, a clear way to find out empirically whether something is institutionalized in a cognitive-cultural way would be to ask the relevant actors whether they can think of alternative arrangements other than the one that is currently held to be institutionalized. The cognitive-cultural institutionalist predicts that actors simply cannot perform this task under conditions of institutionalization. If actors instead can think of alternative arrangements but reject as undesirable, then that something is not institutionalized in a cognitive-cultural way, but "only" in a normative way. If they can think of alternative arrangements but report that they would not be able to endorse them because they would get punished by the relevant authorities (or endorse current ones because they get rewarded), then that something is clearly institutionalized in regulative way.

A quick review of the usual things that cognitive-culturalists say are institutionalized in the way that they say they are suggests that most of these things are "really" institutionalized in a normative and regulative way. From capitalism, to the state, to democracy, to women's rights, civil rights for racial minorities, etc. It is clear that if you give two seconds to a reasonably literate person, they can come up with alternative ways of arranging the relevant social realm in question (i.e. polity, family, economy, etc.). It is clear for instance, that capitalism is not institutionalized because people cannot conceive of a different way of doing things, but it is institutionalized on normative and regulative grounds. The same goes for current arrangements regarding civil rights, multiculturalism and women's rights, etc. We can think of alternative (and morally obnoxious) ways of arranging society according to hierarchical racial and sexual classifications, but we reject them as undesirable.

In essence, the inconceivability criterion of cultural-cognitive institutionalization is incoherent. It is simply too strong to ever be able to be empirically confirmed and it suffers from logical self-referential problems better known to our sociology of knowledge friends. More damaging, any claim that something is institutionalized in a cognitive-cultural way (that is actors are simply not able to think otherwise) is actually better thought of as being institutionalized in a normative or regulative way: actors are perfectly capable of thinking otherwise but find the present arrangement (a) inherently desirable or (b) backed by authorities endowed with coercive power.

4   Coda: A (tentative) Solution

So do we end up in a place where the "cognitive" part of institutions (the defining feature of the "new institutionalism" according to DiMaggio and Powell (1991)) disappears for lack of logical coherence and empirical confirmation? Surprisingly, I think not. In fact, I believe that there is a way to save a place for the cognitive component of institutions that sidesteps the above issues. This requires abandon-

ing the overly strong "inconceivability" criterion postulated by cultural-cognitive institutionalists. My inspiration is a passage from Weber's (1993, 166-183) famous essay on "Asceticism, Mysticism and Salvation Religion" where he discusses the hypothetical attitude of an ideal-type mystic when confronted with the lifestyle of an ideal-type ascetic and vice versa. The ascetic and the mystic represent for Weber, to distinct ways in which the "world-rejecting" cultural pattern could be institutionalized: the ascetic rejects the world as fallen but attempts to modify it, while the mystic rejects the empirical world as arbitrary and retreats to contemplation. For Weber (1993, 171), from the point of view of the ascetic, the mystical option is not "inconceivable" but simply appears as *senseless* or meaningless. The same goes for the decision on the part of the ascetic to remain engaged in the world from the point of view of the mystic.

Notice that this is not a "normative" judgment (although Weber also suggests that mysticism is ethically *undesirable* from the point of view of the ascetic and vice versa), it is not only that a given pattern of world-rejection appears "undesirable" but that in addition to this property they literally are not understood as meaningful (or applicable). In fact from this point of view it is possible to bring back the "primacy of cognition over values" that DiMaggio and Powell argued for: alternative forms of world-rejection are undesirable *because* they are meaningless. This stance appears to me to be more advantageous because the meaninglessness criterion is much weaker than the inconceivability one: a person could be perfectly capable of conceiving of an alternative arrangement and reject it because it "does not make much sense" to them (this is also actually more faithful to Berger and Luckmann). Furthermore, this judgment of meaningfulness is analytically and empirically separable from judgments of normative desirability and judgments of regulative propriety, which can make the claim of something being institutionalized in a cognitive-cultural way amenable to empirical application.

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