

Running head: INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

An Institutional Theory of Organizational Communication

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Abstract

For many years, reviewers have argued that organizational communication research is overly concentrated on microphenomena to the neglect of macrophenomena, but macrophenomena have generally remained unspecified. An institutional theory of organizational communication is proposed to fill that gap. Drawing on institutional theory in organizational sociology and on concerns in organizational communication, we define institutions as constellations (i.e., relatively fixed arrangements) of formalized rational beliefs manifested in individuals' organizing behaviors. Key concepts for the analysis of institutions include membership, rational myths, isomorphism, and decision hierarchies. Based on our definition and armed with these concepts, the paper formally specifies propositions of an institutional theory of organizational communication. Applying the propositions to a published case of organizational identification demonstrates how an institutional perspective offers additional explanatory power, especially concerning professional roles.

An Institutional Theory of Organizational Communication

For many years reviews have criticized organizational communication research for concentrating on individuals and interaction—micro phenomena—while neglecting larger forms of social structure—macro phenomena (Daft & Steers, 1986; E. Jones, Watson, Gardner, & Gallois, 2004; Wert-Gray, Center, Brashers, & Meyers, 1991), but few theorists have specified what a macro perspective on organizational communication might entail. The list of macro phenomena is long and seemingly disparate; it includes aspects of organizations (such as organizational structure), as well as other organizations, laws, policies, regulations, traditions, customs, and cultures independent of focal organizations. A defining feature of macro phenomena is that they appear to be outside the direct control of organizational members, but nonetheless “attain a life of their own and often overshadow, constrain, and manipulate their members” (Poole & McPhee, 1983, p. 195).

Similar calls for increased attention to contextualized (E. Jones et al., 2004), multilevel (Flanagin, Park, & Seibold, 2004), and mesolevel (Ballard & Seibold, 2003) research echo a desire to understand and integrate macro and micro processes in organizational communication research. Conrad and Haynes (2001) deemed efforts to link individual action (micro) and organizational structure (macro) the preeminent task of organizational communication researchers. We argue in this paper that an institutional perspective can provide a way to incorporate macro phenomena into organizational communication research.

Communication scholars have already acknowledged such potential in an institutional approach. For example, Conrad (2000) noted that institutional theory has the potential “to bridge the action-structure dualism” (p. 102) in organizational communication research. Taylor, Flanagin, Cheney, and Seibold (2001) suggested that communication researchers should return to

the sociological roots of organizational analysis—transforming sociological concepts with insight from communication and enriching communication research in the process. They argued that, in the past, organizational communication research has ignored such macro issues, but that great potential exists in a return to “broader institutional concerns; issues that transcend the domains of distinct organizations and speak to broad social processes and problems” (p. 119).

Despite these calls for attention to the role of institutions in organizational communication, to date no systematic theory or definition of institutions has been articulated in the organizational communication literature. In our view, explicating the institutional character of organizing may assist the growing body of organizational communication research interested in institutional forces (Euske & Roberts, 1987; Kuhn, 2005; Lammers, 2003; Lammers, Barbour, & Duggan, 2003; Liu & Buzzanell, 2004; McPhee & Zaug, 2000). Therefore, we propose an institutional theory of organizational communication blending insights from institutional sociology that have yet to be specified for communication research. Specifically, we develop a formal theory of the role of institutions in organizational communication that views institutions as constellations of established practices guided by enduring, formalized, rational beliefs that transcend particular organizations and situations.

To consider the potential of an institutional theory of organizational communication, this essay is organized as follows. In the next section, we offer an explication of the concept of institution. We then develop a formal definition of institution for use in organizational communication research. Based on our understanding of the communicative nature of institutions, we identify formal propositions of an institutional theory of organizational communication. We then apply these propositions to a published case study of organizational

identification. In our concluding section, we identify the research implications of the theoretical shift we propose.

Explicating Institution

The term institution has multiple meanings in everyday language. It is frequently used synonymously with organization, in reference to a specific church, school, college, hospital, asylum, reformatory, mission, or corporation, especially to confer prestige or status on a particular organization. Institution has also been used to refer to supra organizational entities or governing bodies such as the economy, the state, or a religion. A given level of aggregation has been said to be the institutional level (e.g., contrasted with the individual, group, or organizational levels). The traditional professions, such as medicine, law, and clergy, are sometimes referred to as institutions. Institution has also been used to describe specific customs and practices (e.g., the institution of marriage) as well as rules and laws (e.g., the institution of criminal justice). As an adjective, the term refers to arrangements that are fixed, established, or enduring, as in institutionalized practices. When persons become institutionalized, such as inmates, patients, or soldiers, they are generally thought to be under some compulsory rule. As slippery as the term is, in these various usages, it suggests that certain persons, organizations, beliefs, ways of thinking, behaviors, or rules have an enduring and fixed character.

There is evidence that institutions are not characteristic of primitive or preliterate societies (W. R. Scott, 2001, p. 214). According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the English Language* (OED, Simpson & Weiner, 1989), the earliest use of the term institution was to suggest establishment. The Latin root refers to something set up or established, especially something designed, as a precept or general rule. Established, also from the Latin via French and Middle English, means to make firm or stable. The OED also refers to the Establishment as a group in a

society exercising power or influence over matters of policy or taste, and seen as resisting change. Thus popular usage of institution emphasizes the fixed or established qualities of some social arrangements.

That institutions are enduring and established is also reflected in the use of the concept in political science (Nardulli, 1991; Thelen & Steinmo, 1992), law (Hauriou, 1925), economics (Eggertsson, 1990; Furubotn & Richter, 1997), and sociology¹ (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; W. R. Scott, 2001; Selznick, 1949, 1957, 1996). Most accounts (for example, McPhee & Zaug, 2000) trace the roots of an institutional approach in organization studies to Weber (1968/1906-1924), who was concerned with identifying enduring types of social phenomena in civilizations throughout history. Weber formally defined an institution as “a compulsory organization or association (anstalt)” [literally, establishment] (p. 52), in contrast to the voluntary organization, which one might join or leave at will.

In contrast to Weber’s emphasis on membership, other writers have emphasized beliefs, norms, rules, or behaviors as the basis of institutions. Hauriou (1925), for example, saw shared highly valued ideas as underlying laws, which in turn became institutions. Commons (1950) similarly viewed institutions as “working rules” or “the duties imposed on individuals by the collective action of all together” (p. 27). More recently, Meyer and Rowan (1977) defined institutionalization as “the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rulelike status in social thought and action” (p. 341).

Whereas rules generally connote a guide for action, in institutional sociology, their established or fixed character is also emphasized. Giddens (1984), for example, saw institutions recursively implicated in human interaction yet nonetheless fixed. His (1979) definition of

institution was “those practices which have the greatest time-space extension” (p. 17).² He also referred to institutions as among “the more enduring features of social life” (p. 17). W. R. Scott (2001), whose work is perhaps most frequently linked with an institutional approach to the sociology of organizations, offered the following three-pillared definition: “Institutions are composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that together with associated activities and resources provide stability and meaning to social life” (p. 48). Thus, the term has come to connote fixed and enduring membership, beliefs, and actions.

The work of institutional sociologists, beginning in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, led to several efforts to specify the role of institutions in the life of organizations, suggesting that institutions are (a) formal, (b) rational, (c) hierarchical, and that they (d) shape and control the structure of and action within organizations. In an effort to specify the way that institutions are formally manifest in organizations, Meyer and Rowan (1977) showed how the formal—that is, explicitly documented—structure of organizations could be viewed as mythical and ceremonial, rather than as meeting functional requirements of production or performance. Selznick (1957) noted that organizational practices could become “infused with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (p. 17), and Meyer and Rowan extended this idea by showing how this infusion was primarily institutional: “Institutional rules function as myths, which organizations incorporate, gaining legitimacy, resources, stability, and enhanced survival prospects” (p. 340). More recently, Abbott (1988) based a theory of professions on formalized knowledge, and acknowledged that professionalism is “the main way that expertise has been institutionalized in industrial societies” (p.323).

Meyer and Rowan (1977) coined the term “rational myth” to describe the beliefs generated about the legitimacy of certain actions leading to desired outcomes of organized

processes. Rational in this sense refers to the idea that certain means lead to specific ends. Meyer and Rowan (1977) showed how established and enduring beliefs were typically associated with how ends should be reached, and that these beliefs had consequences for how work was accomplished, even if the beliefs could not be tested.

Suggesting that institutions are hierarchically structured, W. R. Scott, Meyer, & Associates (1994) identified categories of decisions that are unevenly distributed in institutionalized organizational environments: funding, programmatic, and instrumental decisions. Particularly in public sectors such as education and defense, but to an extent in the market sector as well, funding decisions are more centralized than programmatic decisions, and programmatic decisions are more centralized than instrumental decisions.

In an effort to show how institutions shape and control life in organizations, Meyer and Scott (1983) identified institutional sectors or fields of organized activity (such as education), in which beliefs and values dominated activity, in contrast to technical sectors (such as manufacturing), where market forces and technique dominated. Institutional isomorphism, a term first used by Meyer and Rowan (1977), based on the work of Hawley (1968) and others, was developed further by DiMaggio and Powell (1991). DiMaggio and Powell argued that as organizational leaders, managers, and employees adopt and follow institutional rules, their organizations become more similar to each other. DiMaggio and Powell identified two types of isomorphism, competitive and institutional, concentrating on three sub-types of the latter. *Coercive* isomorphism refers to the adoption of a particular organizational form or process because of a dependency of one organization on another. *Mimetic* isomorphism includes copying successful practices. *Normative* isomorphism comes about through the adoption of practices deemed appropriate by trade, industry, and professional associations.

The work on the isomorphic character and processes of institutional fields emphasizes the structure, power, and scale of institutions, and demonstrates that institutions are different from and independent of organizations. In a similar vein, Offe (1993) has argued that institutions are distinguished by the presence of a “third party” in organizational affairs:

Institutions depend for their viability and survival upon the knowledge and at least tacit consent of ‘third parties’ that are not directly involved in the particular interaction the institution regulates.... what those involved in an institutional interaction can and cannot expect from each other is itself expected by third parties or outside observers. (p. 7)

Thus for Offe, as well as the institutional sociologists cited above, institutions are seen as composed of rule-like beliefs, behaviors, or practices; they tend to be fixed, enduring, formal, and independent of organizations; and they act as real but unseen constraints on organizing.

Focused on the patterning of mundane social life, ethnomethodologists have also worked to explain institutions. Garfinkel’s (1967) concept of accounts refers to the narratives individuals create to explain and give meaning to their day-to-day behaviors and experiences. Garfinkel attempted get at the accountability of everyday activities—the underlying, regular, socially-understood reasons people offer for action. At a micro level, then, the accountability of action is a reflection of its institutionalization. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) traced the influence of ethnomethodology in three traditions of communication research: conversation analysis, rules theories, and studies of talk at work. Conversation analysis focuses on the “microscopic features of ordinary talk: how conversations open, the order in which speaking can occur, and in general how it displays skillful collaboration” (p. 40). Rules theories also attempted to uncover the cognitive rules underlying every day interaction. The body of work examining talk at work investigates the connections between organizational settings and patterns of talk to demonstrate

in part how talk serves as the “principal means through which actors conduct goal-oriented activities” (p. 40). Each of these research efforts has attempted to understand the enduring influence of socially constructed knowledge in the regularities of interaction.

Blending concerns for day-to-day life and large-scale social structure, Foucault’s (1972/1969, 1977/75, 1991) work also has implications for considering an institutional view of organizational communication. Although we might refer to the subjects of Foucault’s major writings as institutions (e.g., discipline and punishment, medical care, sexuality, and government), that is not the term he used to describe these phenomena. Instead, Foucault used two ideas to describe the contemporary manifestation of large-scale structures: governmentality and discursive formations. For Foucault, governmentality (also translated as and used interchangeably with “governmental rationality,” “rationality of government,” or “art of government,” see Gordon, 1991) is the kind of power that emerged as feudalism failed during the 15th through the 18th centuries in Europe. It concerns quite explicitly the notion of individuals’ involvement in their own control. For Foucault (1991) however, governmentality subsumes institutions, which he described as archaeological artifacts of governmentality:

By this word [governmentality] I mean...[T]he ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target populations... (p. 102)

He explicitly ties the notion of governmentality, and by definition, institutions, to power or control not only over a population, but also of the self by the self, of the household, and of the economy (p. 91). Hence, his work is consistent with the sociological writings about institutions as beliefs manifested in practice.

As for discursive formations, Foucault extends his archaeological metaphor to identify arrangements of distinguishable social objects, such as statements reflecting beliefs about marriage or punishment, into aggregates that become unquestioned over time. He argues that discursive formations are not necessarily unified, orderly, or congruent. The question naturally arises as to whether institutions might profitably be thought of as discursive formations. But Foucault (1972/1969) suggests otherwise:

There again, I had to...recognize that [the discursive formation of] clinical discourse was just as much a group of hypotheses about life and death, of ethical choices, of therapeutic decisions, of institutional regulations, of teaching models, as a group of descriptions; that the descriptions could not, in any case, be abstracted from the hypotheses, and that the descriptive statement was only one of the formulations present in medical discourse. (p. 33)

For Foucault, then, discursive formations include institutions.

Via the concepts of governmentality and discursive formations, Foucault adds an important element to our understanding of institutions. They function to control people. Through these concepts, Foucault directs our attention to the enormous power that institutions have in the contemporary era, and, consistent with an ethnomethodological view, toward their implication as subtle and mundane discursive phenomena. In sum, the sociological tradition has encouraged a view of institutions as consisting of established and enduring patterns of beliefs and practices that apply at both the micro level within organizations as well as at the macro level across organizations.

Use of the concept of institution in organizational communication research also reflects the established, enduring, and powerful character of institutions. For example, Eisenberg et al.

(1985) differentiated an institutional network tie as one that proceeds “without the involvement of specific organizational roles or personalities (e.g., routine data transfers between banks)” (p. 237) as opposed to representative or personal links, which require the active participation of two organizational members. This distinction suggests an agreed upon formal arrangement or rule.

Finet (2001) identified institutional rhetoric as “externally directed corporate expression[s] of relatively formal collective entities” (p. 274). In reference to Cheney’s (1991) analysis of the Catholic Church, Finet suggested that institutional rhetoric is that of a particular organization. She used the term to distinguish the quality of the rhetoric—“sociopolitically relevant organizational discourse” (p. 247)—and the quality of organizations—established organizations strategically managing their public faces. Finet argued that institutional rhetoric was “intended to influence the larger social normative climate” (p. 274), especially those other organizations that have regulatory powers such as unions, professional schools, trade associations, and churches. Her work thus recognizes a larger framework within which organizing occurs.

Other communication researchers have also seen institutions as beyond particular organizations. Taylor (1995) referred to the need to investigate the “institutional moorings of talk” (p. 29) in proposing a discourse-based ontology of organizing. He highlighted the relationship between institutional and organizational structures and the independent influences of institutions on organizational communication. Taylor’s discourse ontology of organizing represents a growing body of work that operates under the assumption that communication constitutes organizing (Deetz, 2001; Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996; Smith, 1993). Demonstrating the isomorphic pressure of institutions on organizing, Flanagan (2000) found that

normative external pressures rather than functional benefits predicted the organizational adoption of websites.

In that vein, McPhee and Zaug (2000) referred to institutions as features of the communicative constitution of organizations, noting that organizational members institutionally position themselves in relation to their organizations' external environments. Institutional positioning, in their view, is a type of communication flow that links an organization to its external environment. They refer to Deetz and Mumby (1990) in recognizing that organizations exist in the context of "values, laws, rules, ideology, and other institutions," going so far as to define organizations as "behaviors inside an institutionalized container, coordinated by prior plan or cognition" (§ 13). Thus, they also employ the concept of institution as something apart from an organization, but stop short of defining the institution communicatively.

Deetz (1992) used the term *institution* "to draw attention to the variety of ways particular thematizations [common practices and routines] are sedimented" (p.126). He favored the term because it "is elastic enough to cover buildings and technologies, particular social arrangements, as well as language and various discursive practices and in each case to remind us that they are socially created *and* [italics in original] material (p. 126). His concern with sedimented discourse is that it may be arbitrary and closed to democratic participation. He likened the institution to the social equivalent of a personal habit, indicating that its origin is less important than its continuation.

Following Deetz (1992), Jones (2005, November), in her study of the establishment of philanthropy in an organization, used the idea of institutionalization to argue that donative behavior was established in a way that hid its functions and purposes from participants. In a similar vein, Liu and Buzzanell (2004), in their study of maternity leave negotiations, defined

institutional practices as “the use of standard operating procedures” (p. 338). Kuhn (2005) employed the concept of institutionalization in his essay on the establishment of a multi-perspectival approach to organizational communication as a fixture in the field. He relied on Tolbert and Zucker’s (1996) sociological multi-stage model of institutionalization (innovation, habitualization, objectification, and sedimentation) to describe how the interpretive turn in organizational communication studies has become established. Although the purpose of Kuhn’s essay was not to define an institution, his aim, like other communication scholars who have used the term, was to describe something that had become permanent.

In sum, the sociological writing on institutions has in general emphasized their formal scope and power. Communication scholarship has emphasized the local and micro practices that use or create relatively fixed routines. Both lines of scholarship have emphasized the enduring and organizationally-independent character of institutions. Combining the insights of organizational sociology and the concerns of organizational communication researchers, we are ready to offer a definition of institutions that can integrate these elements. It is our aim to articulate a technical definition of institution that is useful to organizational communication researchers. Therefore, our definition may be consistent with some popular and scientific understandings of the term and inconsistent with others. For example, it is more important to us that we articulate a useful understanding of markets, professions, and governments than marriage, family, or greeting protocols, even though it may be argued that the latter are also institutional in some sense. Toward that end we suggest that institutions may be understood in terms of six interrelated aspects.

First and foremost, we view institutions as manifested in practice. They consist of observable routines that are consistent in many settings. It is in this sense that we can call

education and medicine institutions—they consists of observable behaviors that are at least roughly consistent across a variety of social settings. Second, institutions are also manifested in beliefs, in that they can be described as cognitive and emotional elements in the decisions and choices that individuals make. So, corresponding to practices in education and medicine are beliefs about what, for example, constitutes a good college education or good health care. Third, institutions involve individuals as actors and carriers of the aforementioned beliefs. In this sense we can refer to individuals as members of institutions and understand that institutions are thereby established associations among people. Fourth, institutions are characterized by low rates of change. Institutions endure. The elements of behaviors, ideas, and individuals involved in the arrangements we refer to as institutional exhibit a fixed and enduring quality, especially as relevant to local organizing. Fifth, institutions relevant to organizational communication are often formalized, that is, written and archived. Sixth, and finally, we assert that institutions relevant to organizational communication reflect a rational purpose. Institutions involve prescriptions for how to get things done. It is in this limited sense that institutions are composed of rules for conduct. It is also in this sense that we recognize the power of institutions. Institutions guide individuals via knowledge formally stored and followed.

Each of these six elements is intrinsic and essential for a communicative understanding of institutions. In summary, for analytical purposes, we view institutions as constellations of established practices guided by formalized, rational beliefs that transcend particular organizations and situations. The following section specifies formal propositions of an institutional theory of organizational communication.

Propositions of an Institutional Theory of Organizational Communication

The propositions below expand on the general argument that institutions contribute to our understanding of organizational communication. The propositions employ the fundamental components of institutions (behaviors, actors, and beliefs) as well as derived elements, including formal knowledge and established practices. In addition, the propositions link these elements to the previously discussed concepts of membership, rational myths, isomorphism, and hierarchy. They are clustered logically and arranged from the general to the specific, but as theoretical propositions, they are specified in conceptual, not operational, terms.

Proposition 1: Communication sustains institutions

At the most general level, we argue that institutions are communicatively constituted. As individuals identify with established beliefs and practices, it is day-to-day practices enacted, endorsed, routinized, and recorded that sustain institutions largely (though not solely) through organizing. The institutionalized practices of higher education—tenure, peer-reviewed publishing, large lectures, and conference presentations— are sustained in the communication practices of individuals at particular universities. At the heart of this proposition is the conviction that institutions are sustained over time in explicit rule-following practices. Researchers should expect to see institutions reproduced in communication.

However, institutions are by definition slow to change, and what change does occur emerges slowly from these practices, wherein the institutions may be adapted in novel ways or fade away. Boden (1994) for example, demonstrated how institutional rules became “laminated” into organizational structure through meeting-after-meeting reiterations of enacted rules in organizational communication (p. 91). This proposition is consistent with all of the foregoing

literature that links institutions and communication processes. In that sense it is not controversial, but it lays the foundation for the following, reciprocal, proposition.

Proposition 2: Communication aligns organizing with institutions.

Individuals who accept institutional rules (i.e., who become members of an institution) tend to reproduce those rules in their communication. That is, there is a bias towards reproduction. This proposition also has internal and external as well as tacit and explicit aspects. In one sense, individual members move their organizations toward conformity with institutions by their reference to institutions (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). In another sense, managers of organizations can situate organizations in conformity to institutions through boundary-spanning interorganizational communication (Finet, 2001). In both cases, statements of, references to, and endorsement of institutional rules carry force, because they are more widely recognized and because, by definition, apply across organizations. Researchers should expect institutional members to evaluate organizing using institutional knowledge.

That communication aligns organizations and institutions is exemplified in the ways institutions both constrain organizational change and serve organizational decision-making. For example, Christensen, Bohmer, and Kenagy (2000) argued that the institutions of medicine are the limiting factor confounding the implementation of innovation in health care. In other words, accepted and established ways of doing things limits change.

Institutions also guide decisions. In the well-documented case of Tylenol tainting (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001), Johnson and Johnson faced a decision about whether to recall its products based on the slim evidence of tainting in one store. The corporate mission statement reflected a formal rule of the institution of medicine: Do no harm (see, for example, the Hippocrates Oath reprinted in du Pre, 2005, p. 22). In line with that mission statement, internal

and external communication came into conformity with an institutional rule, and Johnson and Johnson gained legitimacy through its decision to recall its product.

Proposition 3: Institutions operate in organizing through formal communication

The prevailing manifestation of institutions relevant to organizational communication is formality. Institutions reside in beliefs that are reflected in behavior; the beliefs are nearly always explicitly stated in formally recorded knowledge, although communication practices may be only partial reflections of that knowledge. After all, institutions are only one source of influence for organizational communication. Knowledge becomes formalized—literally written—when there is a need to transport or distribute it across space and time and or apply it to larger audiences (Condit, 2004; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004). Disputes about institutional rules also can lead to their formalization (Abbott, 1988; Oliver, 1991). Researchers should expect that the more imbued organizations are with institutions, the more text is likely to be generated that endorses those institutions.

In addition to living in a plethora of formal knowledge, much communication in organizations concerns efforts to interpret and conform to externally generated institutional demands. A prime example is the U.S. federal government's Sarbanes-Oxley act of 2002, which sets accounting and governing standards for publicly trade firms (American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, 2005). Entire organizations and units of organizations work furiously to conform to these and other regulations. Nonetheless, it cannot be said that compliance with Sarbanes-Oxley, just to take one example, is strictly functional for any given organization. Instead, the daily efforts to comply and interpret become the stuff of myths: accounting standards are not necessarily functional, but they are rational primarily in the sense that Meyer and Rowan (1977) defined as mythical.

Proposition 4: The success of boundary-spanning communication depends on the presence of institutions

When an organization communicates with its environment (or perhaps more accurately when individuals do so on behalf of an organization), it must reference institutions.

“Macroactors,” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 160) organizational negotiators, public relations professionals, board interlockers, crisis communicators, and the writers of mission statements all enact institutional communication. That is, they are drawing on schemas that have influence across organizations. Researchers should expect references to institutions in interorganizational and external organizational communication, and that evaluations of the success of that communication will depend on those references.

For example, Clarke’s (1999) study of the production of emergency plans demonstrated how organizations call on what he labeled the shibboleths of catastrophe planning. Emergency plans—no matter how farfetched or counterproductive—need to draw on established practices for clear communication, tight coordination, and complete cooperation to be seen as successful. Clarke argued that indeed the lack of concrete criteria for evaluating emergency plans made the enactment of institutional guides all the more important for organizations. We see these shibboleths as institutional rules for the practice of emergency management. The efficacy of boundary-spanning communication is an effect of institutions on organizing; put differently, organizational boundary spanners are users and carriers of institutional rules. Moreover, it is often through external communication that organizational members come to reflect in their decisions the features of an institutional environment; the independent dry cleaner joins an association of laundries, the purchasing agent for one hospital collaborates with another, a small manufacturer imitates the procedures of another more successful competitor. Each of these

examples concerns communicative activity that relies on institutions to guide an organization and eventually to bring it into conformity with the institutional environment.

Proposition 5: Institutional hierarchy is manifested in organizing

Institutional power is not evenly distributed across organizational environments. Formal rules apply unevenly to institutional members, both within and across organizations. Some members are more or less bound by rules, and some organizations and organizational members have more or less power to challenge prevailing institutional rules. Recall that a decision hierarchy is a way of representing or differentiating between types of decisions and their relative concentrations within institutions. The institutional perspective recognizes the existence of striking power differentials across members (Mouzelis, 1989). Researchers should expect institutions to have different effects on organizing at different levels.

Wal-Mart, for example, has more power to defy existing institutional rules than the local hardware or grocery store. Also, some instances of institutional communication offer more flexibility in the application and appropriation of institutional rules. For example, the novel appropriation of institutional rules is more likely at higher levels of a decision hierarchy. Those institutions most relevant to formal organizations tend to reflect hierarchical stratification. The institutions of government and marketplace each exhibit centralization and concentration of decision-making authority.

We view the foregoing propositions (summarized in Table 1) as a foundation for an institutional theory of organizational communication. Rather than arguing that they constitute an exhaustive list, we would see them as sensitizing researchers to the institutional features of organizational communication. We turn now to an application of these propositions to a particular study of organizational communication.

Applying the Institutional Perspective to Organizational Communication Research

One way to illustrate the usefulness of the institutional approach, and especially its power to offer additional explanations of organizational communication, is to focus on a particular piece of representative research. Kuhn and Nelson (2002) offered an excellent example of research on organizational identification. Their paper joins a number of others that attend to the processes by which members of organizations adopt identities (Larson & Pepper, 2003; Miller, Allen, Casey, & Johnson, 2000; C. R. Scott, 1997; C. R. Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998). The research in this area has advanced recently because of a new found clarity in distinguishing identification from commitment and other variables (Miller et al., 2000), specifying processes, in part using elements of structuration theory (C. R. Scott et al., 1998), and recognizing the likelihood of multiple identity formations (C. R. Scott, 1997). We see an opportunity in this research to understand how institutional forces operate on identity formation.

Kuhn and Nelson (2002) focused on an urban planning department over a nine-month period after an emotional meeting about restructuring of the department (p. 16). The subjects included 24 members of the organization in four work roles, and the analysis focused on the relationships and discursive strategies of members of two roles in particular, project coordinators and technical assistants (p. 15). Using a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, as well as network analysis, they found answers to four research questions. First, people who held multiple identity structures tended to communicate with others more frequently (they held more central positions in the organization as a network). Second, members of the organization used competing discourses “to either bring about change in the system or reproduce existing structures” (p. 25). Third, work group membership was moderately associated with the use of different discursive resources (p. 25). Finally, they found that individuals’ primary identity

structures (division, organization, workgroup, or profession) shifted somewhat during the study period, with a consolidation among technical assistants of identification in their work group (p. 27). They concluded that discursive strategies reflect identity structures and network positions. Given the call for an institutional perspective on organizational identification (C. R. Scott et al., 1998, p. 300), the question arises as to how one might apply the approach in a case study such as this. Below, we consider such an application, following the propositions laid out in the previous section.

Communication sustains institutions. Urban planning as an activity and a profession (M. Scott, 1971, p. 541) is characterized by constellations of established practices guided by formalized, rational beliefs that transcend particular organizations and situations. We find it likely that the professionalization of planning and in particular the professional socialization of planners contributes a backdrop of professional identification that is suggested by Kuhn and Nelson's (2002) data, although not considered in their analysis. Moreover, an institutional point of view would specify how professionals come through training and socialization to adhere to certain sets of rules in their communicative positions, and we would note that this begins to happen prior to joining organizations.

Communication aligns organizations with institutions. Kuhn and Nelson (2002) observed communication among the members of the organization that referred to pressures to reform the department and its activities. These pressures and the actions of the department in a local setting quite likely constituted the enforcement of the broader institutions of which the planning department was a part. An institutional perspective would ask about the extent to which organizational rules and individual rule following align with established practices. In this case,

an institutional approach would predict very small changes in the organization (which indeed is apparently what occurred) because institutions themselves are so slow to change.

Institutions operate in organizing through formal communication. The planning department was the organizational repository of codes that represented the rules and knowledge of institutionalized planning. Indeed, the central roles in Kuhn and Nelson's (2002) case were focused on the application of formal knowledge (ordinances) to organizational practices. A number of the comments by respondents concerned formal knowledge and rule enforcement. For example, Kuhn and Nelson reported that the technical assistants and planning coordinators frequently conflicted on the subject of "ordinances," "stipulations," "professional judgments," and the problem that "sometimes you have to bend the rules" (pp. 23-24). The ordinances were themselves the subject of contention. An institutional perspective emphasizes the need to analyze the body of written rules—codes, regulations, policies, ordinances, case law, and contracts—that may drive organizational decision-making (see also Phillips et al., 2004).

The success of boundary-spanning communication depends on the presence of institutions. The clearly different identity structures and network positions displayed by administrators in contrast to others in the planning department is consistent with expectations of an institutional view. An institutional perspective would predict that the administrators' boundary-spanning role would reflect a more evenly balanced array of claimed identities. The same may hold for the planning coordinators, who were required to work with community members as well as specific clients to develop and represent planning efforts. The technical assistants, on the other hand, had much less of a boundary-spanning role to play. But the success of the administrators and planning coordinators depended upon adherence to established practices.

Institutional hierarchy is manifested in organizing. The interpretation and initial enforcement of rules generally were the responsibility of the technical assistants, who operated at the instrumental end of a hierarchy of decision rights. Their frustrations, and the emotional responses Kuhn and Nelson (2002) observed, reflected a low level of institutional power. The planning coordinators in contrast had something more like programmatic decision-making rights, working toward a plan that reflected the needs of a wider community. An institutional perspective asks what influence one's place in a decision hierarchy may have on organizational communication.

Strategies for Future Research

This institutional theory of organizational communication is our attempt to link the study of institutions and organizations. The following section offers four strategies for investigating an institutional theory of organizational communication. We do not see these strategies as methodological imperatives; rather we see them as a partial list of ways of uncovering institutional aspects of organizational communication. First, the institutions associated with particular organizations may be explicated. Second, the institutional perspective calls for a diachronic or historical approach. Third, an institutional approach may benefit from comparative research. Fourth and finally, the institutional approach calls attention to levels and units of analysis. We discuss each of these implications below.

The identification of institutionalized behavior may be difficult given the taken-for-granted nature of institutions. Researchers should consider what traditions, professions, associations, industries, sectors, or markets form the context of the organization under study. One way to identify these is to consider the requirements, benefits, and costs of membership in a

particular institution; who might likely be a member and why; and what instances of communication would be likely to involve institutions.

Second, communication researchers looking for institutions may attempt to understand organizational communication diachronically (see also Barley & Tolbert, 1997), that is, over time. Because institutions endure and change slowly by definition, research must specify the historical situation of specific organizational phenomena. Even longitudinal data may be supplemented with knowledge of the history behind a given institution, because even the best longitudinal data rarely capture the entire history of an institution.

Third, the institutional perspective suggests studying multiple organizations simultaneously. Such research can identify when the observed communication behaviors are evidence of a widespread tendency and when they are particular to a single organization. Comparative and diachronic research can address the problem of an institution operating as a hidden constant (Johns, 2001, p. 33). Likewise, the specification of countervailing institutional pressures may be teased out by studying multiple settings. For example, the use of archival data to select sites in multiple communities, cities, counties, states, regions, or countries allows for a greater likelihood that institutional factors may vary, especially if some argument can be made for the differential effects of an institution across space as well as time. Moreover, the study of multiple organizational sites and multiple institutions allows for the measure of how the organizational iterations of an institution may vary even when the institution itself does not.

Fourth, the institutional perspective highlights the need to consider organizations themselves as units of analysis. More significantly, the institutional perspective suggests a shift toward novel units of analysis, such as the use or invocation of traditions, or more formally, policies, regulations, laws, or contractual stipulations. Organizational communication researchers

might focus on formal communication in particular to understand how policies, laws, regulations, or contracts act in an organization. Cooren (2004) and Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy (2004) for example, have both argued already that organizational texts have agency in the context of organizational communication.

Likewise, an institutional perspective invites researchers to reconsider traditional conceptions of levels of analysis. Levels, traditionally thought of as embedded degrees of aggregation (e.g., individual, group, organization), might also be thought of as markets, policy arenas, and professional organizations—aggregates of another sort. Institutions, by acting across realms, also present particularly difficult challenges of data analysis. An institutional perspective may be assisted by the use of mesoanalytic and multileveled data analytic methods (House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995; Hox, 2002; Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Rousseau & House, 1994).

Conclusion

The institutional perspective raises and attempts to answer the following question for organizational communication: “If people are constantly re-enacting their social world every day, how come it so often turns out the same?” Our answer is that enduring, established practices based on formalized beliefs—in short, institutions—offer powerful guides, even constraints for organizing (Phillips et al., 2004). Drawing on institutional sociology we have attempted to identify ways that an institutional perspective can add productively to the study of organizational communication. In our conclusion we would emphasize three features of institutions—formal knowledge, rationality, and independence—as the key contributions of an institutional theory of organizational communication. Although we acknowledge that our definition restricts the usual

use of the term, we have also identified analytically critical features of institutions that may help develop better explanations of organizational communication.

The existence of formally written rules, laws, regulations, guidelines, and contracts is a defining feature of institutions in our view. Such texts are the material manifestation of accumulated knowledge about how to solve problems and conduct relationships in an increasingly complex world (Phillips et al., 2004). The *rules* aspect of formal knowledge is only one of the features of this formalism; by these codes, conduct is not only constrained but also guided and coordinated. That conduct is also *informally* guided and adjusted, or that social reality in an important sense is constructed via on-going interaction, does not lessen the relevance of formal knowledge and the routines it stipulates. We would suggest that often the taken-for-granted, unexamined, or tacit dimension of organized life is in fact supported by the existence of actual documents. In contemporary organizations, the formalized (i.e., contractual or regulated) relationships between members of *different* organizations may be as consequential for action as ongoing face-to-face relations among members within an organization.

Our assertion that institutions relevant to organizational communication reflect a means-ends orientation—that they are rational—is consistent with W. R. Scott's (2001) view, and distinguishes the idea of institutions as we define it from other cultural concepts. For example, traditions, conventions, or mores in the wider society, such as hand-shaking or door-holding, could be called institutions but these lack the tight link between behavior and goals of institutions in our view. Instead, for analytical purposes we prefer to reserve the use of the term to established practices that are formally understood. Whether these are always followed, or whether some routines are originated in situ, is in our view beside the point. Formally established practices are in fact the only way that most persons living in the United States receive medical

care, obtain a loan, enroll in a class, build a house, obtain telephone services or public utilities, or conduct a myriad of other activities of daily life. Should the analyst (or a participant) question which routine is followed, it is actual, not tacit, laws, regulations, and contracts that are available to guide him or her.

Institutions are independent of organizations. Our understanding of institution does not refer to any particular organization or aggregate of organizations. Institutions do not contain organizations. Rather, multiple institutions influence organizing in multiple settings. In this way, institutional theory addresses limitations inherent in systems-theory metaphors of organizing that may limit organizational communication researchers' ability to conceptualize the life-of-its-own quality of organizations. The relationship between organizations and institutions parallels the relationship between individuals and organizations: just as individuals rely on organizations to recursively structure their behavior, so organizations have a recursive relationship with institutions. But it makes little sense to speak of these as levels, because individuals' communicative behaviors constitute both organizations and institutions.

Finally, in our effort to argue for the recognition of institutions in organizational communication research, we acknowledge that the study of institutions is itself evolving. Recently, and consistent with our view, Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber (2006) have applied the concept of institutions to the structure of collective action as a "mode of engagement" characterized by "normative rules ... to be followed by all participants ... involving little control on the part of individuals" (p. 37). Similarly, Phillips, et al. (2004) identified the production of self-policing texts as a defining feature of institutions where violating institutional orders carries cognitive, social, and economic costs. Such efforts offer additional warrants for specifying how phenomena beyond the control of individual organizational members enable and constrain

organizational behavior. Institutions provide an essential source of explanations for organizational phenomena that should not go ignored by organizational communication researchers.

Much work remains, however. For example, what specific institutions operate to constrain or enable communication in particular organizations remains an empirical question that we have not addressed. That forms the project to which we turn next. We believe it can be safely argued that today institutions, not only organizations, deserve our attention. Some want institutions changed and others want new institutions established or old ones re-established. Our problem, of course, is not to determine whether institutions exist or even whether they are important. Instead, our problem is to understand how these phenomena affect, and how they are affected by, organizational communication. In this paper we have offered a framework for operationalizing institutions, specifying their features in order to bring them into sharper focus for more productive research.

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Footnotes

¹ Much has been written in organizational sociology about institutional theory (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; W. R. Scott, 2001; W. R. Scott et al., 1994; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996).

Importantly, more recent writings distinguish earlier versions of institutional theory as overly emphasizing rationality. In this paper we acknowledge that distinction but find it unnecessary to develop as a starting place for organizational communication.

² Although Giddens's work has been popular among communication scholars, they have generally not picked up on institutional aspects of Giddens's work, preferring to focus instead on the micro aspects of how rules and routines are produced and reproduced (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; McPhee, 1985; Poole & McPhee, 1983; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1995; C. R. Scott et al., 1998; Seibold, Heller, & Contractor, 1994).

Table 1

Propositions of an Institutional Theory of Organizational Communication

Proposition 1	Communication sustains institutions.
Proposition 2	Communication aligns organizations with institutions.
Proposition 3	Institutions operate in organizing through formal communication.
Proposition 4	The success of boundary-spanning communication depends on the presence of institutions.
Proposition 5	Institutional hierarchy is manifested in organizing.