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Institutional work in environmental governance

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In this Special Issue, we interrogate and evaluate the concept of institutional work in the domain of environmental governance, by bringing together diverse papers spanning a range of substantive and theoretical approaches. The papers apply the concept of institutional work across fields of regional development, water governance, climate change adaptation, and urban planning, and disciplines of planning, sociology, political science, geography, and anthropology. As a whole, the Special Issue contributes to a growing body of literature exploring the role of agency in processes of institutional change. This has implications for environmental governance scholarship, which emphasises the role of institutions across all scales from local to global and to understanding transformations in governance systems within which institutional change plays a central role.

Keywords: institutional work; institutions; agency; ideas; discourse; ideas; discourse

1. Introduction

Environmental governance systems are failing to adequately address many critical issues, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and water resource unsustainability, among others. Finding ways to improve environmental governance, across local to global scales, requires central attention on institutions, and in particular on *how institutions change*. For example, how can institutions be adapted within changing circumstances and in the light of evolving sustainability objectives? Institutions refer to the "clusters of rights, rules and decision-making procedures that give rise to social practices, assign roles to the participants in these practices, and guide interactions among occupants of these roles" (Young 2008, xxii). Institutions are a central aspect of governance systems, and interact with other aspects, such as belief systems, culture, and a sense of community (Young 2008, 15; North 2005). Yet understanding how institutions change is not easy: indeed, this issue is a key theoretical challenge, both within the domain of environmental governance (Beunen and Patterson 2016), as well as within broader disciplines of planning, political science, sociology, and policy studies (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009; Mahoney and Thelen 2010, 2015; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Van Assche, Beunen, and Duineveld 2014; Kashwan, MacLean, and

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García-López 2018). This Special Issue explores a novel approach for analysing processes of institutional change and stability: analysing institutional work.

Institutional work is defined as "the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009, 1). This involves a wide range of possible actions and behaviours "to cope with, keep up with, shore up, tear down, tinker with, transform, or create anew the institutional structures within which they live, work, and play, and which give them their roles, relationships, resources, and routines". (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2011, 53). It is an actor-centred approach motivated in part by an interest in understanding institutional change, inspired by a view of institutions as shaped by continuous interactions between actors and structures. It offers an intriguing, and promising, analytical perspective for studying dynamics underpinning processes of institutional change in environmental governance. However, it also requires careful rethinking in this context (Beunen and Patterson 2016). In particular, we argue that a broader view of institutional work should be taken compared to its original specification, to include not only action but also its *effects*. With this modification, the concept of institutional work can significantly enrich institutional analysis in environmental governance.

In this Special Issue, we interrogate and evaluate the concept of institutional work in the domain of environmental governance, by bringing together diverse papers spanning a range of substantive and theoretical approaches. The papers apply the concept of institutional work across fields of regional development, water governance, climate change adaptation, and urban planning, and disciplines of planning, sociology, political science, geography, and anthropology. As a whole, the Special Issue contributes to a growing body of literature exploring the role of agency in processes of institutional change. This has implications for environmental governance scholarship which emphasises the role of institutions across all scales from local to global (Biermann *et al*. 2010; Young 2008), and to understanding transformations in governance systems within which institutional change plays a central role (Biermann *et al*. 2012; Galaz *et al*. 2012; Van Assche, Beunen, and Duineveld 2014; Loorbach, Frantzeskaki, and Avelino 2017; Moore *et al*. 2014; O'Brien 2012; Patterson *et al*. 2017).

In this Editorial, we first introduce the concept of institutional work and the motivation for this Special Issue (Section 1), then highlight overall insights from the body of contributions (Section 2) and briefly introduce each of the individual papers (Section 3), and finally, identify key analytical and normative implications and future prospects from this work.

2. Insights from the special issue

Three overall insights arise from this Special Issue:

1. Institutional work provides a more comprehensive perspective for studying diverse forms of agency in environmental governance than is typically adopted.
2. Institutional work provides a conceptual link between materialist and discursive approaches, which typically sit somewhat awkwardly alongside each other.

3. Institutional work provides novel insights into micro-dynamics of institutionalisation and institutional durability, which are key challenges in understanding change and stability.

Each of these key contributions is discussed in turn.

2.1. A broader view of agency

Firstly, institutional work provides a comprehensive perspective for studying diverse forms of agency. On the one hand, it emphasises intentional strategies that actors may use in seeking to achieve certain ends (e.g. Van Assche, Gruezmacher, and Deacon 2018; Pittman 2019). On the other hand, it also provides a lens by which to consider *unintentional* actions which have significant effects for institutional stability and change (e.g. Bisschops and Beunen 2018). This second aspect is vastly under-studied, yet likely to be a major 'invisible' force shaping effects such as institutional maintenance (e.g. 'keeping things stable'), drift (e.g. declining relevance of certain institutions within changing contexts), and disruption (e.g. unintended consequences triggered by action in another area).

For example, Hodgson (2006, 7) highlights the role of habit as playing a "foundational role … in sustaining rule-following behavior", which is vital to consider in combination with explanations focusing on intentional behaviour. From a political perspective, Capoccia (2016) argues that scholars need to pay as much attention to the activities of incumbents who intentionally act to resist change, as reformers or entrepreneurs seeking to promote change. For example, this includes activities such as agenda setting and control, influencing the formation of coalitions seeking to disrupt institutions, and control of the timing of decision-making (Capoccia 2016). In other words, "Reactionaries should populate our narratives of the politics of institutional change as much as reformers" (Capoccia 2016, 1118).

Thus, institutional work provides a more comprehensive perspective for studying agency than is typically adopted in institutional analysis. It encourages consideration of diverse actions by considering a broad range of effects of action within an institutional setting across categories of 'creation', 'disruption', and 'maintenance'. Typically, analysts studying agency focus on intentional actions that can explain the occurrence of a certain institutional change, often through variables such as leadership, entrepreneurship, and change agents. Institutional work broadens the analytical scope to consider how different types of actions interact, and possibly pull in different directions simultaneously or in reaction to one another. Hence, it opens the door to analysing political contestations *between* agents within a certain setting (e.g. for, against, or agnostic to change), rather than focusing only on promoters of change alone. Furthermore, it calls into question heroic assumptions about strategies used by entrepreneurs/change agents, because an institutional work lens implies that counter-actions are inevitable. Processes of institutional change are likely to be characterised by ongoing jostling, action and reaction, and interplay between intentional and unintentional behaviours.

2.2. The role of ideas and meaning

Second, one of the surprising insights emerging from this special issue is the potential for institutional work to provide a conceptual link between materialist approaches (e.g.

focussing on actors motivated by the distributional consequences of institutions), and discursive approaches (e.g. focusing on ideas, meaning, and narratives) in institutional analysis (Bontje *et al*. 2018; Riedy, Kent, and Thompson 2018). March and Olsen (1984, 735) long ago highlighted the importance of examining how "political life is organised around the development of meaning through symbols, rituals, and ceremonies". Recent institutional scholarship demonstrates a growing interest with discursive and ideational aspects of institutions (Larsson 2015; Jones, Shanahan, and McBeth 2014; Schmidt 2008; Gillard 2016). Scholars explore how institutions are shaped by discursive or ideational factors, and may come to embed certain discursive patterns over time (e.g. aggregation and payoff rules, logics of appropriateness), or how institutional structures influence discursive dynamics and processes of social learning (Heikkila and Gerlak 2018). For example, institutions for environmental decision-making that shift from public to private property rights-based approaches over time, or come to reflect financial-oriented logics, such as payments for ecosystem services, may arguably reflect the sedimentation of discourses prevalent within increasingly neoliberal societies. So far, institutional scholarship exploring discursive or ideational aspects has sat somewhat awkwardly alongside more traditional lines of thinking focused on material aspects.

Institutional work opens up new ways of understanding institutions as discursive constructs that are created and changed by people. It thus provides a lens for combining materialist aspects, such as incentives, motivation, and power, with discursive processes by which meaning is constructed, shared, modified, and stabilised (Riedy, Kent, and Thompson 2018). Furthermore, it also allows consideration of non-traditional insights about how people interpret and enliven institutions, such as the role of emotion (Vasile 2019). Broadly, it resonates with emerging insights from constructivist institutionalism which argues that the behaviour of actors depends not only on their material interests but also on their own *perceptions* of their material interests, which are shaped by ideas, meanings, and beliefs (Hay 2006, following Blyth 2002).

Thus, institutional work enables insights into how discourses become institutionalised (e.g. Hajer 1995), as well as actions by which institutions become an object of ongoing discursive struggles. Institutional work therefore offers insights into the role of actors mediating dialectical processes through which discourses and institutions influence each other. This may be combined with other specific techniques such as narratives, performances, and meaning work (Bontje *et al*. 2018; Riedy, Kent, and Thompson 2018).

2.3. Micro-dynamics of institutionalisation and durability

Third, institutional work provides novel insights on the micro-dynamics of institutional change and stability: (1) processes producing *institutionalisation* and (2) processes producing *durability*. These processes may, at first glance, seem to be entirely different; the first being about change and the second being about stability. However, an institutional work lens reveals that both are likely to arise from underlying activities by actors who create, maintain, or disrupt institutional orders (Bisschops and Beunen 2018; Bergsma *et al.* 2017).

Institutionalisation refers to processes by which institutional innovations or reforms that are introduced become embedded within an existing institutional order. This is

likely to require much work to integrate new rules and procedures into existing institutional structures. Indeed, the difficulties of institutionalising new innovations/reforms are alluded to whenever notions such as path dependency (Pierson 2000), lock-ins (Seto *et al*. 2016), inertia (Harries and Penning-Rowsell 2011; Taylor 2016), or even policy implementation failure (e.g. Pressman and Wildavsky 1984) are invoked. The concept of institutional work offers new insights into micro-dynamics by which actors intentionally or unintentionally support institutionalisation (or not). For example, actors are crucial in translating new rules into workable forms, setting up new administrative procedures, and advocating uptake among colleagues ('creation' work). They are also crucial in transitioning away from existing procedures and explaining to others why existing approaches are no longer appropriate ('disruption' work). Yet simultaneously, other embedded actors may work against change by continuing to carry out existing procedures either intentionally or through habit, or even defending existing procedures ('maintenance' work). Whether new innovations/reforms succeed in being integrated into the existing institutional order is likely to depend a great deal on the outcome of these actions and struggles.

Durability refers to processes by which institutional order is broadly maintained towards a certain set of objectives over time in the face of external contextual shifts and shocks (following Cashore and Howlett 2007). This is subtly different from stability arising from path-dependence or inertia, because it emphasises that actions are needed for institutional maintenance. It is especially important for understanding how institutions that serve normatively desirable functions (e.g. environmental regulation, public participation, long-term climate policy) or help to bolster certain qualities of democratic governance (e.g. accountability, transparency, impartiality) may be sustained over time. Simply introducing an innovation or reform is no guarantee of long-term durability. For example, a recent global study of biodiversity conservation observes that many governments around the world are using various tactics to undermine their own established conservation laws and policies (Chapron *et al*. 2017). Institutional work provides new insights and opportunities for understanding processes of durability, or its lack, by directing attention to the variety of actors working to different ends, such as maintaining or undermining a certain institutional setup.

Thus, institutional work provides a novel window into how emergent patterns of institutional change and stability are produced on a micro-foundation of agency-related dynamics, including strategic behaviour, political contestation and jockeying, and the interpretations and narratives through which the meaning and relevance of institutions are created and changed. Importantly, it implies that not only changing institutions, but also maintaining them, requires active and ongoing effort. Moreover, institutional work also offers a lens for examining the cumulative effects of agency-related behaviour, which may result in patterns of institutional order that were not specifically intended by any single actor and thus cannot be easily reduced to being a consequence of strategic action alone. This is particularly useful for studying what are often increasingly complex, pluralistic, and fragmented environmental governance systems. Yet, from a broader future-oriented perspective, institutional work also provides a novel lens for addressing the challenge of 'governing for resilience' in a complex and changing world (Beunen, Patterson, and Van Assche 2017).

3. Papers in the special issue

The special issue begins with a paper by Raoul Beunen and James Patterson entitled "Analysing institutional change in environmental governance: exploring the concept of 'institutional work'", which critically reflects on the notion of institutional work and its potential for contributing to understanding institutional change in environmental governance. It elaborates on the intellectual background of the concept, beginning with its use in the domain of organisational studies, but then extends into some of the particularities of the domain of environmental governance. This leads to recommendations about how institutional work should be reconceptualised to encompass both purposive and non-purposive actions, and the effects of these actions.

Lotte Bontje, Sharlene Gomes, Zilin Wang and Jill Slinger, in their paper "A narrative perspective on institutional work in environmental governance – insights from a beach nourishment case study in Sweden" study the different narratives through which actors link discourses with institutions. These narratives reflect ideas about social-environmental issues, the relevance and impact of existing institutions, and the need for alternative ones. It shows how these different narratives function as institutional work.

Kristof Van Assche, Monica Gruezmacher and Leith Deacon, in their paper "Mapping institutional work as a method for local strategy; learning from boom/bust dynamics in the Canadian west" explore the theoretical and the practical relevance of institutional work for analysing complex landscape dynamics. They show that institutional work can be a useful analytical tool for researchers and practitioners alike, to inform strategising for institutional change.

Saskia Bisschops and Raoul Beunen, in their paper "A new role for citizens' initiatives: the difficulties in co-creating institutional change in urban planning" apply institutional work to analyse how different forms of institutional work interact and how these interactions are shaped by various contingencies. They show that both purposive and non-purposive actions matter, and that attempts to change institutions might lead to a series of actions through which institutions are in fact maintained, rather than changed.

Emmy Bergsma, Mendel Giezen, Bart Schalkwijk and Chris Büscher, in their paper "Adapting to new realities: an analysis of institutional work in three cases of Dutch infrastructure planning" explore different institutional environments in which Dutch infrastructure planning organisations try to shape institutional change. Their paper points to the nested nature of institutions and shows how a focus on institutional work can increase the reflective capacity of both researchers and organisations.

Tanya Heikkila and Andrea Gerlak, in their paper "Working on learning: how the institutional rules of environmental governance matter" build on the idea of reflective capacity by exploring how rules structuring an environmental governance arena can enable or constrain institutional work. They analyse how formal and informal rules shape learning processes, and point to forms of institutional work that can help to foster learning.

Monica Vasile, in her paper "The enlivenment of institutions: emotional work and the emergence of contemporary land commons in the Carpathian Mountains" places emphasis on the role of emotion in institutional work. This shows how institutional changes emerge from the complex relations between actions and actors, in which institutional work is often non-purposive. It also brings attention to the histories of specific places and to the interplay between institutions and encompassing flows of narratives.

Chris Riedy, Jennifer Kent and Nivek Thompson, in their paper "Meaning work: reworking institutional meanings for environmental governance" further explore the importance of meaning making processes. They draw on two case studies, one about local democratic innovation employed by Noosa Council in Queensland, Australia and another about the international campaign to divest from fossil fuels, to analyse the narratives that actors create and mobilise in order to promote institutional changes. They show that institutional work may, in practice, centre on 'meaning work'.

Finally, Jeremy Pittman, in his paper "The struggle for local autonomy in biodiversity conservation governance" explores the multi-level context of institutional work, focussing on actions through which local actors aim to create and maintain local autonomy. Analysing biodiversity conservation in the Canadian prairies, it shows how local actors struggle to find a balance between higher level rules and local practices. This brings attention to the multiple sets of (formal and informal) institutions that matter in a particular context, and that institutional work may involve actors within a single arena or across different levels.

4. Conclusions and future prospects

We conclude this Editorial by identifying implications and future prospects for the study of institutional work in environmental governance. Firstly, we consider analytical implications regarding its explanatory power and positioning, and second, we consider normative implications for intentional efforts towards institutional change in environmental governance. Finally, we briefly outline future prospects in environmental governance and institutional scholarship more broadly.

4.1. Analytical implications: explanatory power and positioning

A key question from an analytical perspective concerns the specific explanatory value of the concept of institutional work. We see that its potential lies in explaining how diverse behaviours, both individually and interactively, influence institutional structures (e.g. Beunen and Patterson 2016; Bergsma *et al*. 2017; Van Assche, Gruezmacher, and Deacon 2018). We do not argue that the concept necessarily has direct analytic value for explaining meso or macro patterns of institutional change and stability, although it does contribute novel insights, not least through emphasising the micro-dynamics underpinning broader patterns of institutional change (Bisschops and Beunen 2018; Vasile 2019). The primary added value is in complementing existing explanatory frameworks, such as discursive approaches (see e.g. Bontje *et al*. 2018; Riedy, Kent, and Thompson 2018). Thus, we urge caution in studying institutional work as an end in itself, but see potential for it to enrich accounts of institutional change and stability set within broader theoretical approaches.

A particular opportunity for future theoretical development is to combine institutional work with previous ideas about long-term patterns of cause and effect in understanding institutional change (Van Assche, Beunen, and Duineveld 2014). This could, for instance, draw on Pierson's (2003, 2004) typology articulating different temporal problem structures as a result of different configurations of long- and short-term causes and effects. This typology has strong relevance to environmental governance, which often involves problems with both long-term causes (e.g. socioeconomic changes, unsustainable resource consumption) and long-term effects (e.g. biodiversity decline,

land use change, climate change). Here, institutional work can contribute new insights about the nature of long-term causes of change *within* institutional and political arenas. For example, understanding cumulative drivers of institutional change, such as the undermining of rights, rules, or procedures over time, or the promotion of new narratives and meanings accorded to existing institutions.

4.2. Normative implications: improving environmental governance

From a normative perspective, institutional work provides new insights regarding: (1) how institutional innovations and reforms may be realised, and (2) how existing desirable arrangements may be retained, strengthened, or adapted over time.

On the first point, institutional work demonstrates that successfully realising institutional change is not just about introducing and promoting new innovations or reforms. It also crucially involves relating the proposed changes to existing structures, and the ideas of others (something particularly explored in Bisschops and Beunen 2018; Van Assche, Gruezmacher, and Deacon 2018; and Pittman 2019). In this regard, a focus on institutional work can provide creative and sometimes indirect ideas about actions that could be taken to promote an agenda (e.g. undermining existing institutions, cultivating new meanings), and to anticipate counter-actions that may be taken by other actors (see e.g. Heikkila and Gerlak 2018 on the relationship between learning and institutional work). On the second point, institutional work demonstrates that maintaining successful institutional arrangements also takes ongoing effort, as backsliding or reversal can happen all too easily, such as through long-term decay, loss of political support or interest, or even outright attack by endogenous actors or higher-level political elites (Beunen and Patterson 2016). In this regard, the concept of institutional work can provide creative ideas for how to bolster existing arrangements (e.g. strengthening reinforcing dynamics, reframing the meaning of existing activities), and to anticipate counter-actions.

More broadly, institutional work implies the need for continuous proactive and reactive adaptation by actors seeking to promote and defend rights, rules, and procedures serving the public good. It should be expected as a matter of course that these will be subject to constant tension, not only at the legislative and policy-making phase, but also over time, where both endogenous actors (e.g. public administrators, political representatives) and exogenous actors (e.g. businesses, individuals) may constantly seek to exert influence in different directions. On the other hand, when such arrangements become taken-for-granted, they may lose relevance, or become susceptible to challenge at a certain moment in time. Whilst illuminating, this also raises challenging questions about the long-term durability of rights, rules, and procedures serving the public good – questions that are especially salient within contemporary political experiences across the world, where long held assumptions about institutional durability and wins of past social struggles are being increasingly threatened.

4.3. Final remarks

As demonstrated in this Editorial and the Special Issue overall, the concept of institutional work offers both theoretical and empirical novelty. Scholars approach the domain of environmental governance from a broad range of disciplinary and substantive angles, yet the topic of institutions and institutional change cuts across nearly all

in one way or another. Institutional scholarship itself is diverse, encompassing multiple traditions (e.g. rational choice, historical, sociological, and constructivist institutionalisms) (Hall and Taylor 1996; Rhodes, Binder, and Rockman 2006), each with differing emphasis on the nature and causes of change in institutions. And yet institutional work appears to speak across these lines of thinking, offering ideas to scholars studying both 'rule-taking' (e.g. response to incentives and its cumulative effects) and 'rule-making' (e.g. political behaviour to contest and redefine the prevailing order). In essence, it provides an agency-centred approach to work 'outwards' in examining agency-structure dynamics, as a counterview to more traditional institutionalist approaches that begin with broad institutional or social structures and work 'inwards' to examine the role of agents within a given system. Consequently, institutional work provides novel insights across existing lines of institutionalist analysis, and is valuable within multidisciplinary and problem domains of environmental governance particularly within a dynamic and changing world.

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