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Jost Sieweke*

IMITATION AND PROCESSES OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION – INSIGHTS FROM BOURDIEU’S THEORY OF PRACTICE**

ABSTRACT

New institutional theory highlights the importance of language in processes of institutionalization, but Bourdieu argues that institutions are also transmitted by mimesis, i.e., the unconscious imitation of other actors’ actions. The aim of this paper is to develop a framework that explains institutionalization through imitation. I show that through imitation, actors unconsciously incorporate a field’s practices and build field-related cognitive schemata that enable them to better adapt to a field’s specificities. The paper contributes to new institutionalism by developing a new perspective on the process of institutionalization.

JEL Classification: M10, M15.

Keywords: Bourdieu; Cognition; Habitus; Institutionalization; New Institutional Theory.

1 INTRODUCTION

New institutional researchers have focused mostly on the institutional theory’s macro-level. However, there is a growing interest in micro-level research (see, e.g., Battilana and Dorado (2010); Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott (2002); Reay, Golden-Biddle, and Germann (2006); Zilber (2002)); that is, at the level of the individual actor. Researchers argue that analyzing micro-level processes is important in explaining macro-level phenomena (see, e.g., Dacin, Munir, and Tracey (2010)), because micro- and macro-phenomena are mutually constitutive (Giddens (1979)).

Although this growing interest in micro-level processes has unlocked the micro-level “black box” of new institutional theory, there are still several open questions about micro-level processes (Powell and Colyvas (2008)). One such example is the process of institutionalization,

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which is the transmission of institutions from actor to actor (Tolbert (1988); Zucker (1977)). Institutionalization is a key concept in new institutional theory; it explains the diffusion of institutions within organizational fields and/or organizations (Tolbert (1988); Zucker (1977)), and institutional maintenance and/or change (Zilber (2002)).

However, despite the importance of institutionalization to the new institutional theory, there are few approaches that explain the process. Zucker (1977) provides the first empirical evidence that processes of institutionalization take place within organizations. Barley and Tolbert (1997) combine new institutional theory and structuration theory to develop a framework of institutionalization that linked actions and institutions, thereby developing a behavioral perspective on institutionalization. Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004) combine new institutional theory with discourse theory to emphasize the importance of linguistic processes for institutionalization (see also Berger and Luckmann (1967); Green and Li (2011)).

Although these perspectives contributed significantly to a detailed understanding of institutionalization, I argue that Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice provides an additional perspective that might extend frameworks of institutionalization. He emphasizes that transmission processes do not necessarily involve language; they can also take place through mimicry, i.e., individual's unconscious imitation of other actors' actions. Research in the fields of social psychology (see, e.g., Chartrand and Bargh (1999); Dalton, Chartrand, and Finkel (2010)), cultural anthropology (see, e.g., Tomasello (2001); Tomasello, Kruger, and Ratner (1993)) and neuroscience (see, e.g., Gallese (2009); Iacoboni (2005)) provides evidence for Bourdieu's claim that mimicking is important for the learning of culture. Nevertheless, although DiMaggio and Powell (1983) highlight the occurrence of mimetic processes at the organizational field level, institutional theory researchers have paid little attention to this approach on the micro-level.

Therefore, I argue that Bourdieu's (1990) perspective on institutionalization might add new insights to current approaches. Thus, in this paper I develop a framework that explains processes of institutionalization based on Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice. Although his concept of mimesis has already been discussed in psychology and sociology (Lizardo (2007, 2009)), I know of no current attempts to introduce it into micro-level institutional theory. Since the approach has the potential to shed new light on processes of institutionalization, I argue that new institutional theory might significantly benefit from Bourdieu's (1990) perspective. However, some researchers doubt whether a transfer of institutions from practice to practice without the involvement of linguistic processes is possible (e.g., Turner (1994)), since Bourdieu (1990) does not offer a cognitive explanation. Therefore, I use findings from other fields of research, such as cultural anthropology, cognitive science and neuroscience to extend Bourdieu's (1990) approach on the transmission processes. These findings from other fields provide a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the processes in actors' minds during institutionalization.

The paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, the paper contributes to new institutional theory by presenting a new approach towards micro-level processes of institutionalization. While the linguistic perspective has received considerable attention

(see, e.g., Phillips et al. (2004); Phillips and Malhotra (2008)), I argue that institutionalization might also take place on an unconscious level through unconscious imitation. Second, the paper is one of the first that follows calls in the literature (see, e.g., DiMaggio and Powell (1991)) to combine new institutional theory with Bourdieu's (1990) habitus concept. Although some scholars argue that Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus might "...contribute to a broadening and deepening of the institutional tradition" (DiMaggio and Powell (1991, 26)), there are few approaches that combine both (for an exception, see Vaughan (2002)). I show that Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus and new institutional theory can be fruitfully combined, and that habitus provides new insights for institutional theory, particularly on the individual level. Third, the paper contributes to calls to connect management and organizational research – in this case, institutional theory – with findings from the cognitive sciences (see, e.g., Becker and Cropanzano (2010); Becker, Cropanzano, and Sanfey (2011); Senior, Lee, and Butler (2011)). I show that findings from the cognitive sciences have much to add to new institutional theory, particularly at the micro-level.

2 INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

2.1 THE CONCEPT OF INSTITUTION

Although one of new institutional theory's main contributions to management and organization research is its focus on the cultural-cognitive dimension of institutions (Scott (2008)), researchers have so far focused mainly on the regulative and normative pillars (Phillips and Malhotra (2008)). However, some researchers argue that basic assumptions about institutions differ between the regulative and the normative pillars on the one side, and the cultural-cognitive pillar on the other side (Hirsch (1997)). While the regulative and the normative pillars assure stability by sanctioning deviating behavior, such sanctions are not required for the cultural-cognitive pillar. Zucker (1977) even argues that sanctions might deinstitutionalize an institution that is based on the cultural-cognitive pillar, since that institution appears to be less objective and impersonal, which are important characteristics of cognitive institutions. Actors are almost unable to think of any alternatives, since cognitive institutions appear to reflect how things are and how they have to be done (Berger and Luckmann (1967)). Some institutionalists even go so far as to assert that "other types of behavior are inconceivable" (Scott (2008, 58)). However, Scott's claim might be too strong, since actors may know different ways of acting that seem to make no sense (Lizardo (2010)). Hence, it might be more appropriate to argue that cognitive institutions constrain an actor's range of actions, since they appear to be the only feasible way of doing something.

Although cognitive institutions are one of the central concepts in new institutional theory, there is still contention on what exactly they are (see, e.g., Greenwood et al. (2008); Zilber (2002)). I challenge approaches that define such institutions as taken-for-granted behaviors or practices (e.g., Giddens (1979); Greenwood et al. (2008)). Behaviors and practices are observable results of institutions rather than institutions per se, since the same behaviors or practices can be "associated with different meanings, hence reflecting and maintaining

different institutions” (Zilber (2002, 250)). I argue that institutions are instead taken-for-granted beliefs about how things have to be done in social contexts. This concept of institutions resembles Meyer and Rowan’s (1977, 341) concept of institutions as “...facts which must be taken into account by actors”, and to Berger and Luckmann (1967, 54), who argue that an institution is “...a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors.” These definitions focus on the cognitive level by defining institutions as being socially constructed and as having no existence outside the human mind. Although institutions are still regarded as “socially constructed templates for action” (Barley and Tolbert (1997, 94)), they are not conflated with observable behaviors or social practices. Institutions influence actors’ behaviors by appearing to be objective facts.

2.2 THE PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The process of institutionalization is a central concept in institutional theory. Institutionalization is often described as the “...social process by which individuals come to accept a shared definition of social reality” (Scott (1987, 496)), or as “... the process by which individual actors transmit what is socially defined as real” (Zucker (1977, 728)). Essential to the process of institutionalization is that actors develop a shared definition of reality, which means that they come to accept institutions as having an existence of their own and as being part of a social reality (Berger and Luckmann (1967)).

Some researchers argue that through the process of institutionalization, institutions diffuse within societies, organizational fields, or organizations (Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004); Zucker (1977)). Several studies have so far analyzed institutionalization (for a review, see Zilber (2008)). For instance, they have investigated the institutionalization of management concepts (Kennedy and Fiss (2009); Süß (2009); Walgenbach and Beck (2005)) and organizational structures and practices (Etzion and Ferraro (2010); Fiss and Zajac (2004); Tolbert and Zucker (1983)). However, it is criticized that new institutional theory “...has tended to focus on the effects rather than the process of institutionalization” (Phillips et al. (2004, 635)). Furthermore, there is a tendency among new institutionalists to focus on institutionalization at the macro-level.

However, process of institutionalization also take place at the micro-level (Zilber (2002, 2008)). Berger and Luckmann (1967), for instance, identified three stages in the micro-level process of institutionalization: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. In the first stage, individuals perceive institutions as being external. Although institutions’ existence depends on being continuously reproduced by actors, individuals perceive them as existing independently of any particular individual (externalization). In the second stage, institutions attain the status of an objective social reality, which means that they are no longer questioned, since they appear to be natural and not socially constructed (objectivation). Finally, in stage three, individuals internalize the social world into their consciousness so that it becomes taken-for-granted (internalization) (Berger and Luckmann (1967)).

Berger and Luckmann (1967) identify two mechanisms in the transmission of institutions: First, institutions are transmitted when actors observe and interpret other actors’ actions

and understand the actions' meanings. Second, institutions are transmitted through language, since language enables actors to share their experiences with other members of their linguistic community (Berger and Luckmann (1967)). Although Berger and Luckmann (1967, 68) mention both mechanisms, they clarify that language is "the most important means by which the objectivated and objectified sedimentations are transmitted [...]"

Phillips et al. (2004) also focus on the linguistic perspective by developing a discursive model of institutionalization that captures how discourses produce institutions. In the first step, they argue that actions produce texts, particularly those actions that require sensemaking, since they are either novel or surprising, and those that affect an organization's legitimacy. In the second step, agents adopt and incorporate some texts, which then become embedded in their discourse. Finally, discourses produce institutions. This means that the agents produce established ways of acting in specific social situations. As Phillips et al. (2004) further argue, institutions are connected with actions, since institutions constrain and enable actions. This means that institutions also influence future texts and discourses emanating from actions.

Finally, Barley and Tolbert (1997) present a behavioral approach to institutionalization. They combine thoughts from new institutional theory and Giddens's (1979) structuration theory to develop a sequential model of institutionalization. In the first moment of institutionalization, institutional principles are encoded in scripts, which actors can use in certain social settings. By this means, actors internalize appropriate behavior in social settings. In the second moment, the encoded scripts that encode institutional principles in social situations are enacted. Barley and Tolbert (1997) argue that enacting a script does not necessarily entail a conscious choice by the agent; they are often not aware of any alternative behavior. Therefore, the authors reasoned that agents "...simply behave according to their perception of the way things are" (Barley and Tolbert (1997, 102)). In the third moment of institutionalization, the scripts are revised or replicated in concrete social action. If a script is constantly replicated without major revisions, it is in the fourth moment of institutionalization, externalization and objectification. This implies that patterns are disassociated from particular actors and historical circumstances and are regarded as having their own existence, which is decoupled from any human being.

These approaches provide explanations for processes of institutionalization and depict means by which institutions are transmitted (e.g., linguistic processes, see Berger and Luckmann (1967); Phillips et al. (2004)). However, the approaches can be extended in two ways: first, by depicting how institutions are transmitted through non-linguistic processes, I might develop a more comprehensive model of institutionalization; second, by analyzing the cognitive processes underlying institutionalization, I might enlighten the cognitive "black box" of institutionalization (Zucker (1991)). In the next sections, I open this "black box" and develop a framework for non-linguistic processes of institutionalization based on Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice.

3 BOURDIEU'S THEORY OF PRACTICE

3.1 THE CONCEPTS OF HABITUS

Although Bourdieu stresses that the three concepts of habitus, field, and capital are interdependent and should not be used separately (Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992)), I argue that it is useful to focus on habitus, since my study is mainly concerned with micro-level processes of institutionalization. However, because of the connections between habitus, field, and capital, it is impossible to isolate just one of the concepts. Therefore, in this study I address the latter two, albeit indirectly.

The habitus is a powerful tool for micro-level studies. Bourdieu (1990, 53) describes it as "... systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures". This definition of habitus delineates its cognitive dimensions. Lizardo (2004) argues that the habitus was significantly influenced by Piaget's psychological developmental theory (Piaget (1971)). Like Piaget, Bourdieu (1990) emphasizes the centrality of cognitive schemata, i.e., "knowledge structures that represent objects or events and provide default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships, and entailments under conditions of incomplete information" (DiMaggio (1997, 269)). Actors incorporate knowledge about the social world through their experiences in the world (Bourdieu (2000)). Therefore, the habitus is a structured structure, which means that it is structured by the socially constructed external environment (Bourdieu (1986)). The socially constructed knowledge is stored in the form of cognitive schemata in the actor's habitus.

Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes three different kinds of schemata: perception, appreciation, and action. First, the schemata of perception influence actors' perceptions in that information that matches schemata is more likely to be perceived than is information that is contrary to existing schemata (see, e.g., Correll et al. (2002); Macrae and Bodenhausen (2000)). Since actors' schemata of perception are the product of a socially constructed environment, actors tend to perceive the environment as natural and objective. Second, the schemata of appreciation enable actors to evaluate practices such as sports, music, or books that the actors like or dislike. Third, the schemata of action direct actors' behaviors. These schemata enable actors to behave in appropriate ways in familiar social contexts without the need for consciously thinking about their actions. However, if actors have to act within unknown social contexts, for instance, in social fields that they have newly entered, then it is likely that the actions directed by the habitus are inappropriate.

Because actors' actions are generated by the very same cognitive schemata that are structured by the external environment, they tend to reproduce the external environment through their actions (Bourdieu (1990)); therefore, scholars frequently criticized that the habitus determines actors' actions (e.g., King (2000)). Nevertheless, it is more reasonable to argue that actors' habitus directs and organizes social practices without any determinism (Brubaker (1993)). Thus, the habitus "produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation" (Bourdieu (1977, 78)).

3.2 THE PROCESS OF MIMESIS

Although Bourdieu acknowledges the roles of language and discourse in processes of institutionalization, he argues (1977, 87) that the most essential parts of the habitus are “transmitted in practice, [...] without attaining the level of discourse”. Transmission in practice means that cognitive schemata can be directly transferred from one actor to another (Bourdieu (1990)). This process is called “mimesis”, which is defined as the imitation of other actors’ actions (Bourdieu (1977)). However, imitation is not a conscious process, but one that takes place on a level below consciousness; the imitating actor is not aware that he or she is mimicking (Bourdieu (1977)).

Bourdieu’s concept of mimesis resembles Mauss’s process of prestigious imitation (Mauss (1973)). Mauss (1973) observes differences in the techniques of the body; for instance, differences in the way members of different societies run or march. He explains these differences by prestigious imitation, which he defines as meaning that humans tend to imitate actions “...which have succeeded and which he [the actor] has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him” (Mauss (1973, 73)).

Despite some similarities between Mauss’s prestigious imitation and Bourdieu’s mimesis, there are also significant differences. First, although Bourdieu emphasizes that mimesis is an unconscious process, Mauss does not clarify whether prestigious imitation takes place on a conscious or unconscious level, although doing so would make a significant difference. I argue that when there is conscious imitation, the actor is aware that she imitates actions and that she is able to discursively express if, what, and why she imitates actions. But when there is unconscious imitation, the actor is neither aware that he imitates nor is the actor able to answer questions about the imitation. Second, there are also differences in the extent of imitation. Mauss (1973) argues that actors observe the actions of others and imitate them, but Bourdieu goes so far as to say that people do not just mimic actions, they even incorporate those cognitive schemata that generate the actions (Bourdieu (1977); Lizardo (2009)). Consequently, mimesis is not only the imitation of actions, but also the acquisition of the principles that underlie the actions (Bourdieu (1990)).

4 THE PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

In this section, I develop my argument regarding the transmission of institutions through the processes of mimesis. I argue that such processes take place whenever actors enter a new social field. As new institutional researchers (e.g., Friedland and Alford (1991); Thornton and Ocasio (1999)) argued, fields differ regarding their specific logic, which defines how things have to be done within the field. Following Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, I argue that actors in a field build schemata that direct their perceptions and allow them to generate actions according to that field’s logic. However, if actors enter a field in which they have little knowledge about the institutions, they have no cognitive schemata to direct their practices. Therefore, they are not able to unconsciously follow the field’s

institutions. However, Bourdieu argues that besides a primary habitus, which is structured by earlier experiences, actors might also acquire a specific habitus that is built later in life (Bourdieu (2000)). This indicates that actors might still incorporate a field's institutions when entering a new field. My argument is that mimesis plays a critical role in the transmission of institutions from more experienced actors in a field to newcomers. *Figure 1* presents my framework. I argue that mimesis has to be distinguished from a behavioral and a cognitive perspective. This distinction is necessary to separate two different effects of mimesis: mimesis has a behavioral perspective, in that humans mimic other actors' actions, which is directly observable for participants; and mimesis also influences human cognition, in that schemata of perception and action are built, which direct actors' future practices.

Figure 1: Framework for the Process of Institutionalization

4.1 BEHAVIORAL PERSPECTIVE

The starting point in my framework is the connection between practices and institutions. Practices and institutions cannot be equated (Lounsbury (2008)), even though they are connected. Practices, which Reckwitz (2002, 249) defines as “routinized type of behavior”, depend on fields’ institutions; institutions influence which practices are regarded as appropriate within a field (see, e.g., Zilber (2002)). For instance, in a study of the NASA, Vaughan (1996, 65) finds that work groups develop “collectively constructed realities”, which she defines as shared beliefs about the “normalization of deviance” and “acceptable risks”. Work group members believe in these institutions and accept them as “objective reality” (Berger and Luckmann (1967)) within the organization. Moreover, members also direct their practices on these institutions. For instance, in the forefront of the Challenger catastrophe in 1986, work group members were aware of risks and deviations. However, the group perceived the deviations as being within the institutionalized tolerance range, which is one reason why NASA decided to launch the space shuttle (Vaughan (1996)).

Because practices depend on the institutionalized beliefs within a field, it is likely that if actors enter fields for the first time they do not know how to behave. Hence, they may feel that they are in the wrong place or that they are not able to act in the field. Bourdieu (1977) calls this the “hysteresis effect”, which indicates that actors’ cognitive schemata are not adapted to the field, either because actors have entered a new field or because an existing field has significantly changed. Studies on socialization in organizations provide evidence for the claim; they find that organizational newcomers adjust more quickly if their values match those of the firms, and that recruits whose values are similar to their organization’s remain longer with that organization (Chatman (1991); Tolbert (1988)). Other studies argue that “...newcomers [in organizations] need situation or culture-specific interpretation schemes in order to make sense of happenings in the setting and to respond with meaningful and appropriate actions” (Louis (1980, 233)).

Bourdieu (1977, 1990) argues that to act appropriately in unknown fields, actors will mimic other actors’ practices. They unconsciously imitate practices they observe from more experienced actors. In fact, studies from social psychology show that actors are mimicking other actors’ gestures, postures, behavior, speech, and facial expressions (see, e.g., Bourgeois and Hess (2008); Dalton et al. (2010); Lakin, Chartrand, and Arkin (2008)). For instance, Chartrand and Bargh (1999) find what they call a “chameleon effect” among human adults, which means that actors imitate actions of interaction partners. However, actors do not imitate every actor (van Baaren et al. (2009)); Lakin and colleagues (2008) show that actors are more likely to mimic if they feel excluded from a group. In such a case, actors are particularly likely to mimic in-group members compared to out-group members. Thereby, actors reduce the risk of social exclusion, since imitated actors tend to feel more sympathy towards mimicking actors (Chartrand and Bargh (1999)). Moreover, studies also indicate that actors tend to imitate actors who are similar to themselves, for instance, in ethnicity or gender (Molnar-Szakacs et al. (2007)). Finally, research finds that even very young children around the age of 12 months imitate other people’s actions and learn cultural behaviors through imitation (Tomasello et al. (1993)).

Similar findings are reflected in the field of management studies. For instance, Ibarra (1999) shows that managers who have recently been promoted orient themselves on the practices of more experienced colleagues; they observe how experienced managers interact with clients to convey some underlying principles. Through such observations, the newly promoted managers acquire tacit knowledge about their new role, which they subsequently apply in action (Ibarra (1999)). Similarly, Michel and Wortham (2009) show the importance of imitation processes in organizations. In their study of two big investment banks, these authors find that newcomers learn working styles by observing and imitating senior bankers. These studies provide further evidence for human imitative abilities (Michel and Wortham (2009)).

4.2 COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

Besides the behavioral perspective, mimesis has also a cognitive perspective that focuses on processes in the human mind during imitation. This perspective is significantly influenced by Bourdieu's (1990) claim that mimesis not only involves mimicking other actors' practices, but also the transfer of cognitive schemata from actor to actor.

To analyze the processes in the human mind during imitation that are crucial for processes of institutionalization, I first assume that when actors imitate a practice, they unconsciously encode it and understand its underlying meaning; i.e., the institution from which the practice is derived (Barley and Tolbert (1997); Bourdieu (1990); Zilber (2002)). For instance, I argue that the female volunteers in the Israeli rape center who were analyzed by Zilber (2002) not only mimic practices, but also unconsciously understand that these practices are derived from the logic of feminism that has been institutionalized in the center. This assumption is supported by research in social psychology that indicates that imitation does not mean that actors make a carbon copy of an action, but that imitation is related to understanding actors' intentions for an action (Reynolds Losin, Dapretto, and Iacoboni (2009)). For example, researchers find that actors are able to put themselves in other actors' positions and to unconsciously understand other actors' emotions and goals related to an action (e.g., Iacoboni (2009); Lieberman (2007)). Furthermore, actors are also able to understand other actors' intentions for an action; i.e., they unconsciously understand why actors are doing something the way they do (see, e.g., Behne et al. (2008); Iacoboni et al. (2005); Tomasello et al. (2005)).

Understanding the meaning of an action is a fundamental prerequisite for the non-linguistic transmission of institutions. As early new institutionalists argued, institutions represent not necessarily the most efficient way of doing something, but rather the socially accepted, expected, and/or taken-for-granted way (e.g., Meyer and Rowan (1977)). If actors only understand actions' goals, they would not then necessarily imitate the socially expected way of reaching a goal. Instead, they would use a range of different means to achieve a goal without considering which means are appropriate within a certain field (Jackall (1988)).

However, research indicates that institutions are connected to means, not goals. For instance, Battilana and Dorado (2010) show that if hybrid organizations, i.e., organizations that combine conflicting institutional logics, direct their hiring and socializing policies on goals and not on the means to achieve those goals, then conflicts arise among employees on the best ways to achieve those goals. However, if these organizations hire employees that have been previously socialized in one of two conflicting logics and socialize them to develop a commitment to the means of achieving the organization's goals, then there are fewer conflicts among the staff.

Battilana and Dorado's (2010) claim for focusing on means rather than goals is supported by other new institutionalists (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell (1991); Scott (2008); Thornton and Ocasio (1999)), who argue that the most important aspect for the reproduction of institutions is not that actors understand which goals are pursued, but that they under-

stand that a goal has to be achieved by using certain means. The authors rationale is supported by culture learning theory (e.g., Tomasello (2001); Tomasello et al. (1993)), which argues that culture is closely related to learning arbitrary cultural conventions (Tomasello and Moll (2010)). Thus, theorists assert that culture learning is "...not just learning things from other persons but is learning things through them – in the sense that he or she [a child] must know something of the adult's perspective on a situation to learn the active use of this same intentional act" (Tomasello (2001, 141)).

While research provided evidence that humans are able to unconsciously understand emotions, goals and intentions, the mechanisms that enable them to encode actions' underlying meanings and other actors' intentions are unclear. Bourdieu (1990) provides no explanation for cognitive processes related to mimesis, which has given rise to criticism and skepticism regarding the concept (Turner (2007)). My approach follows Lizardo (2007, 2009), arguing that the so-called mirror neurons in the human brain might explain these processes (see, e.g., Di Pellegrino et al. (1992); Rizzolatti and Craighero (2004)). These neurons fire when actors execute actions and when they observe the execution of actions performed by other actors (Iacoboni (2005)). Because these neurons simulate the behavior of others, thus mirroring the neural activity in other actors' brains, they are called "mirror neurons".

Mirror neurons were first identified in area F5 of the monkey premotor cortex; but because of the difficulties of studying single neurons in the human brain, there has been little research that provides direct evidence for a human mirror neuron system (see Keyzers and Gazzola (2010)). However, there is a great deal of data that provide indirect evidence for a human mirror neuron system (for a review, see Rizzolatti and Craighero (2004)). Since mirror neurons simulate neural activities in other actors' brains, some researchers argue that they are involved in imitation processes (see, e.g., Iacoboni (2005); Iacoboni and Dapretto (2006); Rizzolatti and Craighero (2004)). Moreover, researchers also argue that mirror neuron systems enable actors to understand others' actions and intentions (see, e.g., Gallese and Goldman (1998); Ocampo and Kritikos (2011); van Overwalle and Baetens (2009)). The rationale is that through their firing during action observation, mirror neurons enable actors to simulate other actors' mental states (Becker and Cropanzano (2010); Becker et al. (2011)). Thus, actors are able to understand other actors' intentions, enabling them to imitate the actions. Hence, I argue that the human mirror neuron system is a plausible mechanism at the neural level. It explains Bourdieu's concept of mimesis, as well as the empirical findings on the understanding of others' actions and intentions.

The final step in my framework is the building of cognitive schemata. Knowledge about institutions within a social field is stored in an actor's long-term memory in the form of cognitive schemata (Bekinschtein, Cardozo, and Manes (2008); Hardt, Einarsson, and Nader (2010)). Cognitive schemata simplify human cognition by enabling actors to retrieve knowledge rapidly and automatically (DiMaggio (1997); Rumelhart (1984)). Bourdieu (1977) argues that schemata are transmitted from actor to actor through mimesis, but I believe that the word "transmission" does not correctly express the process. Cognitive schemata are not transmitted from actor to actor. Actors learn about institutions by mimicking other actors, and by developing ideas about their mental states

(Reynolds Losin et al. (2009)). The unconscious understanding about institutions within a social field is stored as knowledge in actors' memories. After some time, they build cognitive schemata (Tse et al. (2007)). This process represents an important step in actor socialization (Harris (1994)), since schemata allow them to retrieve knowledge rapidly and automatically, so that they are able to follow the institutions in a social field without the need for any conscious thinking (Bourdieu (1990); Harris (1994)).

5 IMPLICATIONS FOR NEW INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

This study has several implications for new institutional theory: First, the proposed framework highlights the importance of imitation in micro-level processes of institutionalization. Although imitation has been found to be important to macro processes of institutionalization (DiMaggio and Powell (1983)), it has so far not been identified as contributing to similar processes on the theory's micro-level. I argue that imitation might complement previous work on institutionalization, particularly linguistic approaches. I argue that it is unlikely that researchers can identify processes of institutionalization that are either based on imitative or linguistic processes; instead, I assume that both processes might be simultaneously involved in institutionalization. For instance, even if actors unconsciously mimic other actors' actions, they will also talk to actors about these actions and about their reasons for acting in a certain way. Moreover, as I note earlier in this paper, they are also likely to read texts through which institutional meanings are transmitted. Hence, I maintain that it is likely that linguistic and imitative processes might reinforce each other in processes of institutionalization. My recommendation for future research is to conduct studies – for instance, ethnographic fieldwork – that capture both linguistic and imitative processes. By doing so, such studies could identify how both interrelate in micro-level processes of institutionalization. A good example, at least for the imitative perspective, is Wacquant's (2004) ethnographic study in a Chicago boxing gym, in which he used mimesis to depict the incorporation of the boxing gym's institutions in his habitus. Similar ethnographic studies in the context of organizations might show the interrelatedness between the imitative and the linguistic perspectives on institutionalization.

Second, the paper adds to discussions about connecting new institutional theory with Bourdieu's theory of practice. While there are some approaches to connect new institutionalism with Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital (see, e.g., Battilana (2006); Lounsbury and Ventresca (2003); Oakes, Townley, and Cooper (1998); Wright (2009)), there are few that introduce the concept of habitus in institutional research. I argue that combining Bourdieu's habitus concept with new institutional theory might foster the theory's development, particularly at the micro-level, because of the unique insights Bourdieu's theory might add to institutional processes. For instance, Bourdieu (2000) stressed the importance of the human body in micro-level processes, such as the internalization of the socially constructed world and the persistence of institutions. Although the body is not the focus of this study, I contend that my framework at least provides evidence that the body might matter to institutional theory. Mimesis implies that actors observe other actors' bodily practices. These bodily practices are derived from a field's institutions, which indicates that a field's institutions also materialize in actors' bodily practices. However, this

bodily perspective has so far received almost no attention by institutional scholars (for an exception, see Weik (2012)), although it might provide new insights into questions such as how actors reproduce institutions.

Furthermore, I argue that the *habitus* might serve as a cognitive micro-foundation for new institutional theory. So far, new institutional theory has difficulty explaining cognitive institutional processes at the micro-level, such as how cognitive institutions or institutional logics become institutionalized in actors' minds (Powell and Colyvas (2008)). Some institutionalists argue that cognitive schemata might serve as a micro-level theory to explain such processes (see, e.g., DiMaggio (1997); Thornton (2004); Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012)); Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, with its view of cognitive schemata directing actors' perceptions and generating their actions, might be a reasonable approach to overcome the current lack of a cognitive micro-foundation for new institutional theory. Moreover, as noted earlier, several sociologists (see, e.g., Lizardo (2004, 2009); Vaisey (2009)) stress that the cognitive concept of Bourdieu's *habitus* is supported by recent findings in cognitive science. For instance, researchers who study "embodied cognition" (see, e.g., Shapiro (2011)) support Bourdieu's (1977, 2000) argument for the influence of the human body on cognitive processes. Since Bourdieu's *habitus* concept and institutional theory share several basic assumptions (DiMaggio and Powell (1991)), I argue that Bourdieu's *habitus* concept might provide a cognitive micro-foundation for institutional theory.

Third, my study shows that research in fields such as cognitive science, neuroscience, social psychology, and cultural anthropology might provide new insights to new institutional theory. So far, there are few studies connecting new institutional theory with theories and/or findings from related fields of research (for an exception, see George et al. (2006); Johnson, Smith, and Codling (2000); Kennedy and Fiss (2009)). However, my study indicates that the theory might benefit considerably from connecting with these disciplines, since they offer new perspectives on important institutional processes, for example, on institutional persistence, creation, or change. Researchers on institutional work (e.g., Lawrence and Suddaby (2006)) emphasize that actors might consciously reflect institutions and purposefully try to maintain or change them, or even engage in creating new institutions. Such studies might benefit from adapting to research in psychology that analyzes the automatic behavior of human beings, and that might answer questions such as under which circumstances human beings are able to challenge their objectively perceived social reality; that is, under which conditions humans change from System 1 thinking (unconscious, automatic, and rapid) to System 2 thinking (conscious, controlled, and slow)? (for a review, see Evans (2008))

In addition to heeding these promising approaches to further develop institutional theory, I believe it is important to remember that linking cognitive science and institutional theory also carries some problems. First, research in the fields of cognitive and social psychology and cognitive science believes in a world that can be objectively measured by methods adapted from the natural sciences (Jost and Kruglanski (2002); Lee (1991)). Moreover, on the epistemological level, these approaches are based on the assumption of a cognitive individualism and universalism (Jost and Kruglanski (2002)). Institutional research challenges these suppositions; instead, it is based on an interpretative, social construc-

tivist approach and denies cognitive individualism and universalism (DiMaggio (1997); Phillips and Malhotra (2008)). However, there are recent turns in psychology (see, e.g., Gergen (1985); Jost and Kruglanski (2002); Molden and Dweck (2006)), neuroscience (see, e.g., Reynolds Losin, Dapretto, and Iacoboni (2010); Whitehead (2010)) and cognitive science (see, e.g., Gutchess and Inneck (2009); Varnum et al. (2010)) that take into account how society and culture influence human cognition and the human mind. Therefore, I argue that the gap between institutional theory and these disciplines is not as large as one might think and that transferring findings from these disciplines to institutional theory might further strengthen the theory's micro-foundation.

6 CONCLUSION

In this article, I outline a framework of institutionalization. I propose that institutions are learned by actors through the unconscious imitation of other actors' actions, thereby complementing current approaches in new institutional theory that emphasize the importance of linguistic processes (Phillips et al. (2004)). My rationale is based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977). I connect Bourdieu's perspective with evidence from other fields of research, such as cognitive anthropology, social psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience. By doing so, I provide a cognitive explanation for the proposed processes. I argue that researchers have to distinguish between a behavioral and a cognitive perspective to capture both the observable and unobservable parts of institutionalization.

The framework developed in this paper might start a discussion about the role of imitation in processes of institutionalization. Because of the complexity of processes of institutionalization, I argue that new institutional theory requires more exchanges with related disciplines that might open the cognitive black box of institutionalization.

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