

Signifying Institutions

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In “How Institutions Communicate,” John Lammers argues that students of organizational communication and organizational theorists of an institutional stripe should join forces to explore the *terra incognita* of organizing: The territory between structure and action otherwise known as the missing micro–macro link. Lammers implies that these two groups of researchers would make for a compatible expeditionary force because both are social constructionists who have been working for too long on opposite sides of the wilderness. Institutionalists would bring to the expedition concepts of social structure that scholars of communication purportedly lack. Students of communication would contribute an understanding of coordinated human action and interaction that institutionalists have recently been struggling to reinvent (Barley, 2008; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Powell & Colyvas, 2008).

The compass that Lammers offers for the expedition is the “institutional message,” which he defines as “a collation of thoughts that takes on a life independent of senders and recipients.” The formulation certainly bears a family resemblance to the various “taken-for-granted” that populate institutionalists’ papers. Moreover, the notion of a collation suggests that the ideas that make up the discourse surrounding an institution need not cohere, either logically or as a narrative. Rather, they are more like a collage, which calls to mind Everett C. Hughes’ definition of institutions as “clusters of conventions” woven together to form what he and other Chicago School sociologists continually referred to as a “social fabric” (Hughes, 1971, p. 52).

Lammers proposes that we conceptualize institutional messages as mediators that tie the institutional logics that organizational theorists write about to

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the practices that students of communication more commonly study. Based on a comparative analysis of how scholars have previously used “institutional message,” Lammers adduces four attributes that cut across the various usages regardless of the level of analysis at which they were originally employed. He submits that institutional messages vary with respect to their reach, their encumbrance, their endurance, and the intentionality of their sender. Messages become more institutional the longer they endure, the greater their reach, the more they encumber, and the more intentionally they are sent.

Lammers’ claim that institutional messages mediate has a Giddensian ring. In one of the most ambitious theoretical attempts to bridge the abyss between the micro- and the macrosocial, Giddens (1984) proposes an analogous topology. He envisioned three entwined axes of structuration. One pole of each axis existed at the structural or institutional level of analysis; the other was grounded in the ongoing flow of everyday action and interaction. Between the two poles of each axis lay what Giddens called a *modality*: A type of resource on which actors draw as they go about doing their lives collectively. One of Giddens’ axes tied systems of signification (institution) to communication (interaction) through interpretive schemes (modality). Another linked systems of domination (institution) through facilities or resources (modality) to power (interaction). The third tied legitimation (institution) to sanctions (interaction) by way of norms (modality). According to Giddens, if analysts wish to untangle how institutions constrain action and, conversely, how actions create, sustain, and alter institutions, they must attend to the interplay up and down as well as across the three axes. Lammers’ essay orients our attention to the axis of signification (i.e., an institutional logic) and communication (i.e., a practice) and posits the institutional message as a modality.

Historically, institutionalists have mostly concerned themselves with issues of legitimation, perhaps secondarily with signification, and least commonly with power. I believe that Lammers is correct in arguing that recent theorizing about institutional logics and categorization signals a growing interest among institutionalists in the role that signification plays in creating, maintaining, and altering institutions. I also concur that analyses of how institutional logics constitute and are constituted by everyday actions have been relatively rare and are sorely needed (but see Barley 1986; Orlikowski 1992, 2000; Yates & Orlikowski, 1993), although the emerging literature on institutional work may begin to address this void (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). My concern is with whether institutional messages, as formulated by Lammers, will take us where we need to go. I want to suggest several modifications that might provide better declination for using institutional

messages as a compass for venturing into the wilderness between the micro- and macrosocial.

First, I would recommend shifting the emphasis from messages to messaging. If one adopts Giddens' notion of the duality of structure, the idea that structures both constitute and are constituted by action, then Lammers' essay addresses half of the dynamic. He proceeds from the premise that institutions have already formed and that from them emanate messages that shape action and practices. But if institutional messages are a modality (or a moderator), then people should deploy them wittingly and unwittingly as they try to achieve their objectives in the here and now. In other words, institutional messages should not only constrain, they should also enable action and, in the process of enabling, become a mechanism for creating, maintaining, and changing institutions. I suspect that fashioning and articulating messages are integral to how people craft institutions. As Hardy puts it in her comment, institutions do not simply communicate; communication institutionalizes.

Because Hardy and Suddaby have expounded so well on the role communication plays in forming, preserving, and shifting institutions, I will simply refer you to their essays for elaboration. I want to add, however, an important and related methodological point. If one wants to study institutions in action, to examine how they constrain, or how they are constituted by human action (including speech), longitudinal data and a historical bent are required. Institutions happen through time, which Lammers certainly appreciates because he takes endurance to be a property of institutional messages. Although typologies of the sort Lammers offers can be useful for sharpening our thinking, studying the communicative aspects of institutionalization demands moving beyond static to dynamic analyses of how people craft and respond to messages over a *longue durée*. My suspicion is that from a more dynamic perspective, the attributes of messages are likely to matter less than the nature of their crafting, saying, hearing, and responding. This is not to say, however, that messages' attributes are likely to be inconsequential.

My second modification, therefore, concerns the notion of a message's endurance. Lammers claims that endurance depends on the frequency at which the message is sent and its lack of equivocality. Frequency is certainly relevant to endurance. Unless the ideas associated with an institution are said and heard over and over again, it is difficult to understand how they could become embedded in everyday life to the point where they become taken-for-granted. I am less convinced that being unequivocal contributes to the endurance of an institutionalized message or ideology. In fact, I would expect precisely the reverse: That equivocal messages are more useful for institutions.

Institutional rhetorics and the rhetorics of social movements are built around statements of value that often pivot around abstract nouns such as honor, freedom, equality, fairness, equity, merit, safety, efficiency, property, and so on. Abstract nouns and equivocal messages have a distinct advantage: People who hear them can act as if they concur with the message (or more accurately the value it expresses) although holding different understandings of what has been said. Love is, as they say, a many splendored thing and so are honor, equity, and freedom. Put differently, I would expect institutional messages to work like boundary objects (Bechky, 2003a, 2003b; Starr & Griesemer, 1989); they bring together disparate social words by allowing people to proceed as if they were all talking about the same thing. The possibility of a multiplicity of readings creates the flexibility necessary to redefine a variety of situations within a frame.

Because Lammers repeatedly associates unequivocalty with law (pp. 25, 26) I wonder if the notion of encumbrance has not somehow bled into the idea that institutional messages lack equivocality. Although there can be no doubt that people subject to a law must comply with it (i.e., the law encumbers), what compliance means is open to interpretation and negotiation. Laws are notoriously ambiguous, precisely because they are constructed with words. In fact, it is the equivocality and ambiguity of law that affords lawyers a living. Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita's (2001) study of how managers fashioned a broader concept of diversity in the workplace in the context of complying with Equal Employment Opportunity law provides an instructive case. In fact, Edelman (1992, 1999) has written extensively about how the inherent ambiguity of law offers organizations considerable leeway in negotiating what actions constitute compliance.

The third modification I would suggest concerns the concept of intentionality. Do senders of strong institutional messages have to seek to affect practices explicitly or, for that matter, do they even need to send institutional messages knowingly? Undoubtedly, spokespersons for institutions sometimes intentionally craft messages to garner support for their institutions. Similarly, one would expect members of social movements whose agenda is to establish or undermine an institution to formulate messages strategically. But are all strong institutional messages intentionally sent? Berger and Luckman (1967) and ethnomethodologists such as Garfinkel (1967) and Heritage (1993) would argue otherwise. Some messages that communicate deeply entrenched institutions, such as gender, are continually communicated unwittingly. This was why Garfinkel (1967) found the transsexual, Agnes, to be instructive. Agnes was so adept at communicating the signs and symbols of femininity that she passed as a woman totally undetected in most

circumstances. Although Agnes employed her messages knowingly, intentionally, and with incredible care, Garfinkel's point was that most of the rest of us send and receive the same messages in a taken-for-granted manner as we go about doing gender in daily life. Consequently, I wonder if intentionality is crucial for institutional messages, especially those messages that support the well-ensconced institutions that underwrite the grammar of everyday life in a society.

Intentionality also seems to pose a problem for the consistency of Lammers' conceptualization of institutional messages. Central to his argument is the useful idea that institutional messages become disembodied from both sender and receiver. But if so, then how are we to reconcile intentionality with disembodiment? In the case of a liturgy, a ritual induction into an organization, the recitation of an oath, or a rhetorical statement such as the invocations of freedom and sacrifice often heard on July 4, coupling intention with disembodiment might be possible. On such occasions priests and other officials intend to do something (save a soul, confer membership, or establish the tone of an occasion) without claiming authorship for their words and, in some cases, even meaning what they say. I am fairly certain that most Boy Scouts are probably thinking about something else when they open their meetings with the Scout Oath. Who knows what priests, not to mention members of the congregation, think about when they drone through a liturgy? But intentionality of a conscious sort seems irrelevant for communicating key institutional messages.

As noted above, the irrelevance of intentions is integral to the notion of agency in the tradition of ethnomethodology. Ethnomethods are how people do social life without being aware of what they are doing. One can not lack an awareness of what one thinks one is doing and at the same time be intentional. (One can, of course, intend one thing, but get another.) Intentionality also seems unnecessary for the routine use of an institutional rhetoric, for example, the free market rhetoric that has come to suffuse the policy statements of conservative politicians since the 1980s (Smith, 2000). Rather than treat intentionality as a defining attribute of an institutional message, I would counsel treating it as a variable or condition. This would allow analysts to ask under what circumstances are institutional messages intentionally and unintentionally deployed. My guess is that the more institutionalized a discourse or rhetoric becomes, the less intentional becomes usage.

None of these concerns, however, should detract from importance of Lammers' key point: Institutional theorists have paid insufficient attention to signification. Institutional messages, however defined, are tightly tied to ideologies which, without doubt, are composed and carried by the kinds of

statements that comprise them. As Bendix (1956) showed us more than 50 years ago, ideologies are crucial for understanding how institutions are sustained and modified over the course of history.

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Bio

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