

When transformations come from the bottom: exploring the contribution of the institutional work theory

Turki, Sondès

Département d'Organisation et ressources humaines – ESG - UQAM

Turki.sondes@uqam.ca

Résumé :

L'objectif de cette étude est d'examiner la contribution du travail institutionnel en tant que théorie institutionnelle centrée sur l'acteur à la littérature sur les entreprises multinationales (EMN). En particulier, le rôle des acteurs au niveau micro dans l'élaboration des pratiques et des politiques sur le lieu de travail est analysé. La modification des pratiques et des politiques sur le lieu de travail est un aspect courant des transformations organisationnelles.

Ce document conceptuel s'appuie sur une analyse documentaire de la théorie du travail institutionnel au sein des EMN. Il souligne l'importance de dépasser l'approche descendante de la transformation organisationnelle au sein des EMN. Les acteurs individuels jouent un rôle crucial dans la modification des pratiques et des politiques existantes ou dans la création de nouvelles pratiques et politiques.

L'article établit un lien théorique entre la théorie du travail institutionnel et la recherche sur la transformation des pratiques et des politiques sur le lieu de travail au sein des EMN.

Mots-clés : Théorie du travail institutionnel, pratiques et politiques sur le lieu de travail, acteurs micro, transformations, EMN.

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine the contribution of institutional work as an actor-centered institutional theory to the literature on multinational companies (MNCs), particularly in relation to the role of micro-level actors in shaping workplace practices and policies. The modification of workplace practices and policies is a common aspect of organizational transformations.

This conceptual paper is based on a literature review of the theory of institutional work within MNCs. It emphasizes the significance of moving beyond the top-down approach to organizational transformation within MNCs. Individual actors play a crucial role in modifying existing practices and policies or creating new ones.

The paper set a theoretical connection between the institutional work theory and research on the transformation of workplace practices and policies within MNCs.

Keywords: Institutional work theory, workplace practices and policies, actors, transformations, MNCs.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace practices and policies in multinational companies (MNCs) have been the subject of numerous studies. Research has focused on subsidiary autonomy (Belizon, Gunnigle, & Morley, 2013; Ferner, Bélanger, Tregaskis et al., 2013) as well as on the centralization and decentralization of workplace practices and policies within MNCs (Ferner, Almond, Clark et al., 2004). The main focus has been on organizational and institutional factors that impact workplace practices and policies.

Workplace practices and policies can evolve and change over time, often as part of the transformation process that may occur in and around MNCs. They are important means for organizations to achieve their strategies and ensure sustainability (Ferner et al., 2004). In the context of multinational companies, work practices and policies have a significant impact on organizational performance (Fey & Brojkman, 2017) and, therefore, on organizational sustainability. Additionally, organizational transformations within MNCs are often complex, involving multiple stakeholders and following non-linear processes. These processes are far removed from classic 'top-down' approaches (Ghosh, Hughes, Hodgkinson, & Hughes, 2022). The study of work practices and policies in the context of multinational companies is still attracting several researchers. This is due to the specific features of these companies, which involve multiple actors and face numerous cultural and legal barriers when transferring practices and policies. Multinational companies are often described as 'terrains of contestation' (Geppert & Dörrenbächer, 2011). Hence, it is increasingly recognized that the way how workplace practices and policies are set in MNCs is “the outcome of a micropolitical process - within structural constraints - involving conflicting or at least variant interests, and differential power resources, rather than a static characteristic of corporate structure” (Ferner, 1994, p.82). This is aligned with the idea that MNCs are micro-political entities (Dörrenbächer & Geppert, 2011) where actors have different power resources and interests.

Nevertheless, the role of individual actors is still not clear when it comes to how they modify the existing workplace practices and policies or create new ones. This paper introduces the institutional work theory in relation to workplace practices and policies in and around MNCs and goes beyond the structural institutionalism and power theories. It aims to introduce the institutional work theory as a relevant theory for studying transformations in MNCs.

This theoretical paper is structured in three sections. The first presents in details the institutional work theory. The second explores some applications of this theory within the MNCs literature. Finally, the third section highlights the way how this theory could be used in the management of transformations in and around MNCs from an individual actor perspective.

1. THE ESSENCE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL WORK THEORY

Over the past three decades, most of the organizational studies have focused on the role of institutions in shaping organizational life (Lawrence et al., 2013, p. 1024). This expansion of neo-institutional studies made it possible to study institutions at different levels. More specifically, some research has gone beyond the study of macro-elements of the environment and looked at the micro level by studying the role of actors in institutional theory (Eisenstadt, 1980; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Seo & Creed, 2002).

This interest in the roles of actors comes from the context in which they operate, a fast changing context characterized by institutional logics that are sometimes in competition (Pache & Santos, 2013; Reay & Hinings, 2009). These competing institutional logics may be the source of some institutional contradictions (Friedland & Alford, 1991) that do exist in the emerging fields more likely than in mature fields (Fligstein, 1997). These institutional contradictions provide "a space" for actors for the creation of new institutions (e.g., institutional entrepreneurs (Seo & Creed, 2002). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) go beyond this institutional contradiction

and show that the existence of multiple logics within "nested fields" (or institutional plurality) « provide actors the resources to engage in activities of contestation and reconceptualization » (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 248), activities that they called "institutional work".

Therefore, the concept or the theory of institutional work was first introduced by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006). By their study, these authors reviewed empirical institutional research over 15 years and this in three journals. They tried to connect the “disparate studies of institutional work” (p.216). Indeed, these authors categorize the new institutionalist approaches which focus on the actor in three research areas based on the actor’s role: the role of actor in creating new institutions (institutional entrepreneurship), the role of actor in the transformation of the existing institutions and the role of actor in maintaining the existing institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215) .

By putting together these studies, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006, p. 215) have defined institutional work as “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions”.

This definition highlights three important elements in the framework of institutional work theory: agency, intentionality and effort. First, the agency is justified by the existence of multiple institutions within the same field. This multitude of institutional logics gives actors a space for action and justifies his role in this institutional process. The institutional work aims to link the actors, the agency and the institutions and to emphasize the importance of the agency in the institutional process (Lawrence et al., 2009). Then, according to the theory of institutional work, institutions are "constituted in the more and less conscious action of individual and collective actors" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 219). This underlines the intentionality of the actors' activities in this institutional work. Intentionality is very important for the understanding of institutional work given that "without intentionality, actions may have profound institutional effects but still not be institutional work" (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 13).

Although this intentionality is reflected in visible actions in the context of the creation and disruption of institutions, it is represented by less visible or invisible actions in the context of the maintenance of institutions, reflected thus by the actors' "mundane actions" (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 1). Finally, the theory of institutional work focuses on the effort of the actor regardless of the outcome: success or failure in setting up an institution (Lawrence et al., 2011). This dimension which is the effort made by actors is very important since it helps to understand how and why actors undertake certain actions leading to institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2011; Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 17). Therefore, it leads to the treatment of institutions as social constructions and not as a natural result or "taken for granted" (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 15). The focus is thus on "the act of production, rather than the product itself" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 248). It remains to emphasize that this effort varies in terms of degree and type and therefore leads to different forms of actions considered as institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 15). Intentionality and effort, two central notions in the study of institutional work, are less explained than the agency and could be better explored (e.g. different forms of intentionality and different types of effort). They represent the means by which the agency is exercised.

The definition of Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) asserts the existence of two types of actors who are able to do institutional work: organizations and individuals. On the one hand, organizations have been widely studied as contributors to institutional work (Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache & Santos, 2010). Indeed, the responses to the different institutional complexities are largely structural (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013, p. 1283).

On the other hand, there are more and more studies that focus on individuals as key actors in institutional work. Through their different interests, individuals have some influence over institutions while being influenced by institutions (Lawrence et al., 2011, p. 53). These individual actors are represented mainly by professionals, organizational leaders (individuals at

the top of organizations) and to a lesser extent by individuals without professional expertise or high status within the organization (Lawrence et al., 2013, pp. 1025-1026). In the life cycle of institutions, individuals operating within the organization are neither purely rational actors nor passive actors.

Indeed, « the reproduction and continuation of institutions cannot be taken for granted, even the most highly institutionalized technologies, structures, practices and rules require the active involvement of individuals and organizations in order to maintain them over time » (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 217).

Although these actors, organizations and individuals, are not superheroes as the institutional entrepreneurship approach asserts (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011), they must generally have some strategic resources or other forms of power (eg: skills according to Fligstein (1997)). These resources allow them to shape the process of changing institutions according to their interests (Greenwood et al., 2002).

This actor's agency was first emphasized by the embedded agency paradox (Seo & Creed, 2002) which highlighted the circular relationship between institutions and actors. Institutional work provides a broader view of the agency concept in the context of institutional change (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 2). Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013, p. 1281) argue that it is « the latest incarnation of the embedded agency debate ». Indeed, the agency is supposed to be distributed among the different individual or organizational actors: each actor impact in one way or another the institutions. More specifically, at the individual level, institutional work is concerned with « how individual actors contribute to institutional change, how those contributions combine, how actors respond to others' efforts, and how the accumulation of those contributions leads to a path of institutional change or stability » (Lawrence et al., 2011, pp. 55-56). Thus, it is possible to detect the agency through an "institutional portfolio" or an "institutional biography"

(Suddaby & Viale, 2011) reflecting the impact of institutions on the lives of individuals and on the institutional work that they are able to do.

In conclusion, the theory of institutional work is based on agency and interest of actors and thus, puts the actors (organizations and individuals) in the heart of the institutionalization process.

2. APPLICATIONS OF THE INSTITUTIONAL-WORK THEORY WITHIN THE MNCs LITERATURE

It is widely accepted that many organizations embody multiple logics (Kraatz & Block, 2008) and when these logics are in conflict, institutional complexity comes out (Thornton et al., 2015). This institutional complexity is strongly present in MNCs operating in different territories with different regulatory regimes.

Indeed, within the MNCs, «contradictory prescriptions from different legitimating audiences systematically collide in everyday operations, and institutional complexity must be managed continuously. » (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013, p. 1283). This management of institutional complexity reflects an active and reflexive work that actors are able to perform in order to exploit the contradictions of multiple institutions and mobilize institutional logics to serve their interests (Tempel & Walgenbach, 2012).

Studies on institutional work within the MNCs literature can be divided into three categories according to the level of the institutions that are the subject of institutional work: intra-organizational level institutions, inter-organizational level institutions and field level institutions.

First, institutions at the intra-organizational level were studied either by mobilizing individuals or organizations as key players in this institutional work.

On the one hand, studies that have taken the individual as an actor focus on the roles of individuals and especially those occupying the higher hierarchical positions within the MNCs in the construction, maintenance and modification of their institutional environment. Thus, institutional work is presented as a means by which these actors express their authority and exercise power to influence institutions (Rojas, 2010).

Subsidiary managers represent a category of actors whose institutional work has been studied theoretically (Tempel & Walgenbach, 2012). Indeed, these actors play an agency role as they need to balance different institutional environments (home and host countries environments) (Edwards & Molz, 2014; Tempel & Walgenbach, 2012).

In particular, as part of the knowledge transfer process, subsidiaries managers are able to pursue four types of institutional work: the defense of local knowledge, the resistance of knowledge coming from the head office, the complete adoption of knowledge coming from the head office or the adaptation of knowledge coming from the head office to the local context (Tempel & Walgenbach, 2012).

Although these individual actors have some autonomy, their institutional work remains strongly embedded in the structures (rules and resources) of the institutional environment in which they operate (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011; Tempel & Walgenbach, 2012).

On the other hand, the organization was also supposed to be an active player in the process of institutional work. The issue of knowledge transfer, for example, has been treated as institutional work done by the multinational enterprise (Carney et al., 2016). Through the study of a multinational company operating in an emerging economy (the case of Ciputra Group), Carney et al. (2016) dissect this institutional work into several subsequent organizational stages. These knowledge transfer steps are as follows: the penetration of the network of the host

country, the establishment of relational contracting with the host country stakeholders (such as the government, the parties the most important policies), and the implementation of an innovative business model (Carney et al., 2016).

In addition to the issue of knowledge transfer, institutional responses to environmental change have been studied as institutional work done by MNCs (Chang & Huang, 2016). Taking the case of two Japanese MNCs, Sony and Toshiba, and analyzing their media reports, Chang and Huang (2016) conclude that these two MNCs each have an institutional logic different from the other: Sony represents a "corporate logic" (Maximizing employee profits) while Toshiba represents a "customer logic". However, despite this difference, facing the same technological change, the two MNCs have adopted the same institutional work (the same actions) in the form of copyright protection and product performance to achieve the same result which is "being dominant design". This institutional work was aligned with the institutional logic of Sony but not with that of Toshiba, which resulted in the success of new products from Sony and the failure of those of Toshiba.

Secondly, institutions at the inter-organizational level cover inter alia the international framework agreements (international framework agreements) which represent formal institutions. Thus, the institutional work that can be done at the inter-organizational level is reflected in a negotiation work taking place in very diverse contexts and institutional logics that are both complementary and in competition (Helfen & Sydow, 2013, p. 1077). Taking the case of three framework agreements negotiated between different MNCs (headquarters, subsidiaries, suppliers) and overall the Global Union Federation (GUF), Helfen and Sydow (2013) are questioning the manner in which the process of negotiating such agreements is done and this by mobilizing the concept of institutional work. This negotiating work involves the implementation by the actors of the negotiation practices using behavioral theories and strategic

negotiation to finally lead to international framework agreements (Helfen & Sydow, 2013). To this end, the institutional work « takes the political and interactive dimension of institutions seriously » (Helfen & Sydow, 2013, p. 1075) since these framework agreements result from the activities of "struggle and bargaining".

Finally, in the studies on MNCs and on fields-level institutions, it is rather the professionals and stakeholders involved in a profession that use the institutional work to influence institutions. By reviewing prior research on institutional change and professions, Suddaby and Viale (2011, p. 423) notice "four essential dynamics through which professionals reconfigure institutions and organizational fields": by using "their expertise and legitimacy to challenge the incumbent order and to define a new, open and uncontested space"; by using "their inherent social capital and skill to populate the field with new actors and new identities"; by introducing "nascent new rules and standards that recreate the boundaries of the field" and by managing "the use and reproduction of social capital within a field thereby conferring a new status hierarchy or social order within the field".

The studies by Smets et al. (2012) and Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013) illustrate the use of institutional work done by professionals as a response to the different contextual constraints in which they operate and lead to institutional change on field-level. In their studies, these authors take the case of the banking lawyers (English and German Banking lawyers) working in a global corporate law firm, a company representing an Anglo-German merger. Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013) show that banking lawyers are subject to contextual constraints such as national laws, the local professional rules and international financial market expectations from which emanate institutional logics that can be contradictory.

The institutional work of lawyers is thus reflected through their daily practices (actions and interactions) allowing them to cope with the institutional complexity in which they operate

(Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Similarly, their studies show that "field-level institutional change may emerge from the mundane activities of practitioners" (Smets et al., 2012, p. 877) since "it is in microlevel practices that field-level logics are enacted" (Smets et al., 2012, p. 898).

The review of these different studies highlights, firstly, the importance of the role of the actors (both organizational and individual) and their efforts in this institutional work process (Hampel et al., 2017) and hence, norms transformation . Secondly, these studies point out that the institutional work, carried out within the MNCs and at different levels, does not take place in a vacuum; institutional logics (Chang & Huang, 2016) or institutional structures (Tempel & Walgenbach, 2012) remain decisive factors in this institutional work.

3. INDIVIDUAL ROLE IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE MNC

Based on the foundation of institutional work that individuals and groups have the potential as in shaping environments in general, and institutions in specific (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 2), the institutional work theory can be mobilized to understand the role of individuals in the process of changing “global standards” in multinational enterprises.

Indeed, the institutional work goes beyond the presentation of the actors as purely rational or purely subject to structural constraints and this by emphasizing the existence of an interaction between the actor and the context in which he operates (Lawrence et al., 2011; Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 5). More specifically, the concept of institutional work treats institutions as “products of human action and reaction, motivated by both idiosyncratic personal interests and agendas for institutional change or preservation.” (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 6). Thus, institutional work differs from other institutional approaches in this respect, and this is “by placing the spotlight

on the role of actors and their efforts to interact with and influence institutions.” (Hampel et al., 2017, p. 559).

Therefore, institutional work seems to be an interesting approach to understanding the role of individuals in the implementation of “global standards”. As presented above, the work of Tempel and Walgenbach (2012) on subsidiaries managers and their roles in transferring HR management practices is an excellent example of mobilizing institutional work. This work can be extended by analyzing not only the actors at the level of subsidiaries but also all the actors at the level of the MNC.

Although this theory has several advantages for understanding the role of individuals, it has some weaknesses. First, it limits the role to three possibilities (creation, modification or maintenance) and remains less clear on the skills as well as the interests and identities that an individual must have to play this or that role (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011, p. 63).

Similarly, institutional work emphasizes the link between action and institution in one direction: actions of actors towards institutions (Battilana & D’unno, 2009, p. 38; Lawrence et al., 2009, pp. 7-8). This is an important criticism for at least two reasons: First, the actors are rooted in a social framework composed of multiple institutional logics (Greenwood et al., 2011) and “when institutional work (actions) does not align with institutional logics (rules), the institutionalization process might not always connect to or generate positive outcomes.” (Chang & Huang, 2016, p. 37). Second, institutional contexts have an important role in shaping the work and strategies of actors and they “determine what sorts of actors would perform what kinds of institutional work.” (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011, p. 65).

Therefore, the macro-micro relationship is very important and needs to be carefully analyzed in the context of institutional work. “We need a richer understanding of how

individuals locate themselves in social relations and interpret their context.” (Powell & Colyvas, 2008, pp. 276-277). This can only be done methodologically by analyzing the discourses of these individual actors (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Indeed, most empirical studies demonstrate the contribution of rich, detailed case studies to a better understanding of the actions of actors, especially individuals, in their attempt to create, maintain and disrupt institutions (Lawrence et al., 2009). Individual interviews may thus help to better identify individual actors’ role in the reshaping of workplace practices and relations policies within MNCs.

CONCLUSION

In an increasingly changing world of work, micro-level actors within MNCs are increasingly playing a dual role: a passive role of receiving environmental changes and an active role of contributing to these changes. In these two scenarios, micro-level actors within MNCs should rethink their workplace practices and policies accordingly.

The institutional work theory sheds light on the individual actor, an integral part of these companies, in this process of shaping practices and policies. Despite its great potential for understanding the role of individual actors in the process of changing workplace practices and policies, this theory remains unknown and unused in the context of international management studies. In fact, social institutional theory has been used extensively during the last three decades to study subject like norms transfer between MNC entities and subsidiary autonomy while institutional work theory (which is a new institutional theory) has remained marginal to studies in international management (Kostova et al., 2009).

This article is intended as a contribution to the reflection on the renewal of the broad field of organizational transformation by presenting the relevance of the theory of institutional work as a new theory responding to the changes impacting organizational work practices and policies.

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