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Introduction

Institutions and Interaction

Social institutions are the basis of much, if not most, of our social lives. Typically, people are educated in schools; they are treated for illness in hospitals; they socialize or undertake recreation in groups such as reading/sports/arts clubs; they work for companies or public organizations, or they set up their own companies; they watch films and television programmes, read newspapers and books and they listen to music, all of which are produced and distributed by institutions. The organizations that undertake this work – the schools, hospitals, gyms, news corporations, and so on – have social purposes and functions that act on people in very real ways. People do go to prison as a result of the decisions made in courts, children do get their life chances delineated by the decisions made about them in schools and by the awarding bodies of examinations, and the culture we produce and consume is strongly defined for us by the media organizations that produce, distribute and market them.

Since its inception, sociology and the social sciences have been very interested in the exploration of how institutions function (Powell and DiMaggio 2012). For many years, the structuralist and ‘macro-sociological’ tendencies of this work meant that much of it approached institutions in a way that either ignored or downplayed the simple fact that these institutions have their basis in human behaviour; they treated people as if they were a bi-product of institutions, and, as such, largely sidelined them from analysis. However, in recent years, institutional scholarship has shown an increasing concern with ‘bringing the actor back in’ to the study of institutions (Cornelissen et al. 2015; Schmidt 2010; Hirsch and Sekou 2009; Hallett and Ventresca 2006) – that is, in concentrating on people (commonly referred to as ‘social actors’ or simply ‘actors’) rather than on structures. To date, these discussions have occurred without a detailed consideration of how the ‘interactionist traditions’ in sociology (which we define below) have already contributed to the analysis of the relationship
between people and institutions. While the recognition that we need to focus on actors through a study of interaction and communication (Cornelissen et al. 2015) is very welcome, as Hallett and Ventresca (2006) have argued, it ignores the substantial existing body of work that does precisely that. In light of this, our interest in this text is in showing clearly the ways that sociological interactionist perspectives analyse institutional action. Our central argument is that in turning towards social actors, institutional scholarship should pay close attention to the ongoing traditions of enquiry that have as their focus an analysis of institutional action as behavioural/interactional phenomena.

Interactionist traditions are premised on a simple argument that has been repeatedly made by many sociologists, but which is often nonetheless overlooked: i.e. that all social phenomena, including institutions, are the result of people’s actions, and therefore it is these actions that should form the focus of empirical investigation. This principle is a defining idea in the sociologies that we will be examining here: namely, symbolic interactionism, conversation analysis and ethnomethodology. In this text we will use the generic terms ‘interactionism’ and ‘interactionist perspectives/studies’ to refer to these areas of work. Interactionist studies focus on people’s actions and interactions and they are often regarded as the opposite of sociological approaches that look at society as a set of structures and larger social systems, usually by studying patterns of behaviour across large populations. Our central aim here is to show what these interactionist perspectives bring to the study of institutions and, by extension, to show the limitations and risks of approaches that eschew the details of interaction.

This book is intended to stimulate a renewed understanding of the importance of the methodological frameworks of these interactionist sociologies for the study of institutions. The study of institutions is an increasingly interdisciplinary endeavour, and researchers who are new to these traditions will struggle to find a text that offers them a clear way into this body of work. Scholars working in the areas of symbolic interactionism, conversation analysis and ethnomethodology continue to produce research that is of great importance for our understanding of institutions, but these studies are often buried in obscure journals that are published for people who are already interested in interactionist research rather than for more general readers. In other words, the interactionist contributions are not prominent or easy to find for a non-expert reader. Even within sociology itself, interactionism has long been extremely marginalized, and is characterized by Dennis et al. as ‘one of contemporary academic sociology’s most understated achievements’ (Dennis et al. 2013: 2). In the case of symbolic interactionism, this is probably quite a dramatic overstatement as many of the main ideas of this perspective are widely accepted within sociology and beyond. Nonetheless, there is certainly truth in the idea that the analytic implications of this and the other ‘interactionist’ perspectives we are discussing here have not been sufficiently examined. A significant part of our aim here is
to help readers who are new to sociology or are new to studies of interaction to understand what these perspectives offer and how they fit with other intellectual traditions in institutional scholarship. In the bulk of this book (Chapter 4 onwards) we aim to do this not by long reviews of historical debate and classic work in the field, but by looking at contemporary debates and phenomena related to institutions, and to show the contributions that interactionism has made to their analysis.

‘Interactionist’ Approaches

Symbolic interactionism, conversation analysis and ethnomethodology have a number of things in common. Firstly, they have a conception of what ‘institution’ and ‘organization’ means that is contrary to the many approaches that study institutions. As we shall discuss shortly, interactionists do not make a firm distinction between the terms as representing different levels of analysis, but more commonly use them more or less interchangeably in much the same way that people do in their everyday lives. Secondly, these approaches are not interested in constructing abstract theoretical schemes to characterize institutional practice, which is one of the central preoccupations of much mainstream institutional scholarship. Instead, and thirdly, these are above all empirically focused disciplines that aim to explore the organizing principles of interaction as they are lived, experienced and applied by people in real-world contexts.

In spite of the similarities we highlight above, the three traditions we will explore here are also very different from one another, so much so that it is not common to discuss them together (for a recent exception see Dennis et al. (2013)). Talking about them as a ‘collection’ might be taken to imply that they have unified and compatible intellectual projects, but that is misleading. These approaches are radically different from one another, and those differences stem from their different theoretical antecedents, their conceptual orientation, and the models of human action that underpin them (Gallant and Kleinman 1983). We will discuss the particular features of each perspective in Chapters 2 and 3. To be absolutely clear, in using the term ‘interactionism’ as a collective noun for symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, we are not intending to suggest that these perspectives are the same – we simply wish to ‘bracket out’ a discussion of their differences in order to focus on what each of them (as different perspectives) can bring to the study of institutions through a focus on people and their actions. In the concluding chapter we will return to the matter of their differences and draw on the examples we have looked at throughout the book to analyse the distinctions between each approach.

These three perspectives have a long history, dating back to the early part of the twentieth century in the case of symbolic interactionism, and roughly the late fifties for ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. We are not going to review this history in any detail, nor are we going to discuss in depth the
wider methodological debates relating to the approaches as excellent books already exist that give such an introduction (see for instance Hughes and Sharrock (2007)). However, we will provide a general illustration of the theoretical interests of the perspectives as they relate to the study of institutions. This will, we hope, be sufficient for readers who are new to the perspectives to understand the basic features of their respective analytic stances.

It is, however, worth clarifying at this point something of the relationship between these perspectives: while influenced heavily by European intellectual traditions, all three originated as areas of study in the USA and, in different ways, out of frustration for the state of contemporary sociological work. Symbolic interactionism (from here on, SI) pre-dates the other two, and was very much concerned with understanding ethnographically the newly emerging social contexts of modernist America, particularly its burgeoning cities and their associated social problems. SI is an extremely disparate area of work. This has always been the case, but it is perhaps even more pronounced now, and contemporary SI is said to be so eclectic in its theoretical frame as to be hardly recognizable as a coherent discipline at all (Fine 1993). Historically, SI has been characterized by strong factions of very different approaches, the most obvious of which is between the work undertaken at the University of Chicago (and referred to as the ‘Chicago School’) associated with the work of Herbert Blumer, E.C. Hughes, Howard Becker and many others, and that of the ‘Iowa School’ (unsurprisingly, undertaken at the University of Iowa), which was more heavily influenced by Manford Kuhn and Carl Couch’s work, and developed a very different approach to the study of interaction involving experimental work and developing predictive models of interaction processes. For many contemporary researchers outside of sociology, the term symbolic interactionism has become associated with a very specific tradition of research undertaken by scholars in the University of Chicago (Atkinson and Housley 2003), and with Blumer’s (1969) account of SI.

The label ‘symbolic interactionism’ is credited as emerging from Blumer’s work (1969), and can be thought of as the study of how people use symbols to build meaning. As Denzin put it ‘interaction is seen as an emergent, negotiated, often times unpredictable concern. Interaction is symbolic simply because minded, self-reflexive behaviour demands the manipulation of symbols, words, meanings and diverse languages’ (Denzin 1974: 269). Even the work in Chicago was extremely varied (Becker 1999), and included forms of scholarship that did not fit easily with Blumer’s scheme. In this text we will concentrate our discussion on the Chicago tradition, particularly in relation to the work of E.C. Hughes, and his students and colleagues, as this work has the greatest relevance for institutional scholarship. We also include here discussion of the work of Erving Goffman, who is by no means a clear ‘symbolic interactionist’ in any sense, but who has enough conceptual relation to the approach to strongly warrant his discussion here.
Introduction

Ethnomethodology (EM) and conversation analysis (CA) are essentially ‘sister disciplines’ of one another, so much so that it is common to refer to them with the combined abbreviation of EMCA. They emerged later than SI, around the early fifties, and although they shared many interests with SI, they were also highly critical of some of its approaches. EM was developed principally by Harold Garfinkel (1967b), and was always a niche area of work, even in its heyday of the sixties and seventies. The focus of studies was on the ways that people make sense of their actions, and on the practical reasoning (or ‘methods’) that they use to accomplish social actions. CA was developed by Harvey Sacks and a small number of his colleagues in the late 1960s/70s: Sacks and Garfinkel worked closely together and EM and CA share many traits, with CA focusing its attention particularly on conversational practices and, later, on gesture, movement, gaze and other bodily actions, whereas EM involves a more general ethnographic approach to interaction.

While our principal area of concern in this book is with institutional scholarship in interaction, it is important to set the scene a little for how the study of interaction emerged as an area of interest in sociology, and to show how interactionist traditions relate to the wider sociological interest in institutional scholarship. In the remainder of this introduction we want to fill in this broader context. We will do this by, firstly, focusing on the work of three scholars – Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Alfred Schutz – each of whom occupies a prominent place in the sociological canon and have played a particularly important role in the turn to the study of interaction. There are other scholars that we could have focused on, but these three are particularly important in helping to demonstrate the centrality of interaction as an empirical and conceptual area of work, and to contextualize just a little the more focused study of the three approaches that we will embark on in this book.

The Sociological Study of Interaction

Georg Simmel

Simmel (1858–1918) was one of the first sociologists to take seriously the idea that social life and the daily activities of people interacting with each other might be important for sociology. Prior to Simmel, sociology was mostly concerned with the operations of society as a social system and not with the everyday actions of ordinary people. In very broad terms, thinkers such as Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx (who often are described as two of the ‘founding fathers’ of sociology) analysed society by focusing on institutions and on culture and their impact on people. Simmel’s approach represents almost a reversal of this view as it involved an interest in the people who make up institutions, rather than the impact of institutions on people. Simmel saw society as an accomplishment that emerges from people’s actions; ‘[S]ociety is merely the name for a
number of individuals, connected by interaction’ (Wolff 1950: 10). It attains its structure from repeated interaction that brings out ‘social forms’ such as attraction and repulsion, harmony and disharmony, liking and disliking, and many others (Simmel 1949; Wolff 1950).

In Simmel’s view, the task of sociologists is to explore the process he calls ‘sociation’ (Vergesellschaftung), i.e. ‘the particular patterns and forms in which men [sic] associate and interact with one another’ (Simmel 1910: 378). From sociation we are able to analytically abstract an understanding of ‘social forms’, which are the common structural features of sociation across different contexts. A social form, therefore, is a stable structure or social process that emerges through interaction. Some of the forms that he analysed include the Division of Labour, Competition, Conflict, Strangers, Superiority, Subordination and marriage (Wolff 1950). Through the ongoing processes of reciprocation (Wechselwirkung) (which is Simmel’s term for social interaction), forms become stabilized and come to constitute the broader culture that operates as the context of social action. When people participate in social forms, those forms come to structure the processes of social interaction themselves. In the example of marriage, the conventions of ‘the institution of marriage’ specify the cultural modes of celebration of the union, modes of co-habitation, gender roles, and so on. There may be no causal relation here as individuals can and do of course establish their own forms of being in a marriage. However, Simmel argues that there are also stable and consistent properties of the marriage unit of organization.

Simmel describes cultural forms as ‘constraining’ interactions. In his view there is a tension between this constraining feature and what he sees as an innate drive within individuals to challenge such structures. As such, there is a kind of dialogical process between, on the one hand, the operation of social ‘forms’ that emerge from social interaction and the broader culture that they are a part of, and on the other hand, the acting individuals and his/her inner world and spiritual life which aim to challenge and change these forms.

The introduction and analytic focus on ‘social forms’ allow Simmel to distance his approach from sociological research that treats social contents as heterogeneous and contingent. Simmel used the word ‘content’ to refer to the drives, motivations, interests and purposes of individuals. His argument is that interaction cannot be analysed by looking at individuals alone, and must be regarded as having a form that is of a sociological character – i.e. as taking stable social forms (Tenbruck 1959). The things that people do – such as getting married, buying things in shops, talking to medical professionals, chatting with friends and so on – have recognizable structures that are not solely related to the drives and desires of individuals, but are more properly understood as social in nature. The structure of marriage as a system of social organization has a character that is ‘objective’ and which to some extent constrains the individuals within it. However, we can’t properly understand the
idea of marriage as a social form without looking closely at the individuals who constitute it and the drives and motives that they operate with. The relationship between individuals and contexts of action became an important area of conceptual development in later symbolic interactionist and EMCA studies.

Simmel’s notion of forms involves creating ‘ideal types’ of social activity; the forms that he proposes as concepts to analyse interaction are idealized, and they exaggerate certain features of the context in order to draw attention to the regular form of certain modes of activity. To state that all marriages involve similar forms of celebration (i.e. of marriage ceremony) is, of course, an oversimplification. Within a given cultural contexts there are strong conventions about what a marriage ceremony might look like, but it is also the case that every ceremony is different too, with particular aspects of the context that make it unique and distinctive in small but significant ways. However, the idealization helps us to focus on the common sociological features of the encounters that constitute such events. Further, forms may be analytically transferable to other empirical areas, and may show structural similarities between different social contexts and different areas of social life. The sense of mutual dependence and reliance found in the marriage form, for example, can, Simmel suggests, be found in other forms of dyadic relationships, such as those between two political groups. In a coalition government, for instance, where two parties share power in a democratic system, the mutual reliance on each other as maintaining ‘the acting government’ creates mutual dependence and a requirement for collaboration in order to maintain the supra-institution that is (in part) emergent from their collaboration.

Simmel’s work provided an important step in taking interaction seriously, and in seeing what sociologists had previously seen as their subject matter (i.e. structural processes) as the result of interaction. It also showed the active role that individuals played in interpreting their social conditions, a theme that would become particularly prominent in interactionist work. Simmel’s ideas became very influential in the development of American sociology in the early twentieth century, particularly at the University of Chicago. Here, Albion Small who had studied in Germany and later Robert Park who had studied with Simmel in Berlin distributed the German sociologist’s analyses. Small published some of Simmel’s analyses in the American Journal of Sociology and Park became the teacher of later generations that include Everett Hughes and Edward Shils (Dingwall 2001; Prus 1995).

Simmel’s influence on interactionism is particularly visible in research conducted at the New Iowa School. Under the direction of Carl Couch a group of researchers investigated the formal properties of social relations, and ‘operationalized’ Simmel’s concept of ‘social forms’, which are explored often through laboratory experiments that involved the examination of filmed encounters (Couch 1987; Hintz and Couch 1975). This strand of interactionism has not been pursued or further developed in the last couple of decades.
since Couch’s premature death (Miller 2011). Instead, related concerns with
the structural properties of interaction can be seen in video-based studies of
interaction that have been derived from EM and CA. We will discuss this body
of research in Chapter 3, and it will also feature throughout the other chapters
of this book.

Max Weber

Another sociologist of substantial importance in the move to an interest in
interaction was Max Weber (1864–1920). Like Simmel, Weber saw social col-
lectives as resulting from individuals, and viewed any larger grouping as simply
something like a set of conventionalized actions that are produced by people.
As he put it:

When reference is made in a sociological context to a state, a nation, a cor-
poration, a family, or an army corps, or to similar collectives, what is meant
is … only a certain kind of development of possible social actions of indi-
vidual persons.

(Weber 1978: 14)

The term social action is critical to Weber’s ideas, describing the ways that
social phenomena emerge through actors’ processes of meaning-making, and
how people collectively act in relation to shared ideas about how some action
should be taken. Weber saw it as sociology’s job to explore the meanings of
social life for people in order that we can see how such collective action is made
possible.

Weber’s methodological approach of studying ‘ideal types’ involved the
proposition that sociologists can construct idealized forms to characterize
social phenomena such as religious movements, political systems, social classes,
or socio-economic structures. These idealized forms refer to the ways that peo-
ples in those positions or functions typically behave – they are typifications or
ideal types of action, rather than real supra-human entities or phenomena, and
they are always only the result of people’s actions.

The area of Weber’s work that has had a strong influence on the socio-
logical study of institutions is his study of bureaucracy. Weber’s ideal type of
bureaucratic institution involves an organization orientated to productivity
and efficiency and describes the relationship between authority and organized
systems of administration. Bureaucracies were a core part of his comparative
and historical study of the emergence of capitalism. For Weber, bureaucracy
comprised systems of rules of practice and roles of participation. People were
appointed to these roles on the basis of qualifications, rather than through
favour or personal traits; the individuals, in a sense, were superfluous as it was people’s roles and their position in fulfilling certain role-functions that were important. Bureaucracy is a rational form that was needed to be able to move away from systems that existed on the basis of arbitrary favour or charismatic leadership. However, Weber characterized bureaucracy as an iron cage in that, firstly, it alienated people from meaningful participation as they fulfilled roles for institutional purpose that were entirely abstracted from them as people: in bureaucracies, people lose their individuality and become replaceable functionaries. Further, Weber argued that bureaucracy would take on a momentum of its own, and come to operate as a sort of political force that defended itself. When people use the term ‘bureaucratic’ to negatively characterize some experience, they often mean that the process was unnecessarily complicated and inflexible, and which had to be completed ‘for the sake of it’ rather than for a real purpose. This is something of what Weber had in mind, where a system comes to function ‘because that is how the system functions’. More than that, though, he argued that the system would come to undermine its own social function and would come to constrain people and even exert a political pressure on the leaders whom it aimed to serve.

Weber’s methodologies for conceptualizing human action connect strongly with interactionist concerns. Firstly, Weber argued that sociological analysis of social actions and their (idealized) forms must arise from an analysis of the meanings that these things have for people. So, if you want to understand what the typical bureaucracy looks like, you need to talk to the typical bureaucrat in order to see what s/he thinks of and understands by that work. This general methodological principle, which Weber called Verstehen, is central to all interactionist work, although it is developed in very different ways in the different perspectives.

Secondly, Weber described his approach to studying society as methodological individualism. Weber’s articulation of this approach is just one of very many formations of the idea, which have been common in the social sciences since their inception. His iteration is what Udehn (2002) characterizes a ‘strong version’ of methodological individualism, and amounts to a claim that there is, ontologically, no such thing as a ‘social structure’, which is a term that simply serves to characterize the commonalities of action that arise through conventionalized actions. It is common to describe interactionist research as a form of ‘methodological individualism’, but while there are obvious similarities with Weber’s work and that of the approaches we will discuss in this book, there are also important differences. Knorr-Cetina (1988) suggests that a better term for how interactionists approach their work is ‘methodological situationalism’, where the focus of analysis is on social situations and behaviour rather than on individuals as such. Like Weber and Simmel, micro-situationalism treats
‘macro’ phenomena as emerging through interaction. However, implicit in the notion of methodological individualism and particularly in some of the ways it has been developed in disciplines such as psychology is that it treats people as separate from social contexts. In interactionist perspectives, individuals are always social beings and decision-making and action are necessarily social. In Chapters 2 and 3 we will outline in detail the theoretical basis of these ideas, but suffice to say here, it is the social situations that they find themselves in (which, to be clear, is all situations, whether or not they are shared with others) that are of methodological interest.

Thirdly, the use of ideations through ideal types to study society involves a theoretical abstraction that pulls away from the practical actions (the situations) of people in real-world contexts. For instance, the ideation of ‘bureaucracy’ is in some senses entirely recognizable to us as a form, and we can all probably invoke an experience that helps us to contextualize this in a concrete way. It is, however, an idealization and a reconstruction of people’s real-world action and it is removed from the practical work of real people in real contexts (Bittner 1965). In a sense, in invoking real-world contexts to make sense of a theoretically abstract one, we are reversing sociological theory by putting the social back into the concept. Turning a practical action of ‘doing efficiency’ into an abstract concept and an abstracted characterization of action does not help our understanding of the processes we want to analyse, but actually remove the very social practices that are constitutive of ‘doing efficiency’. The interactionist focus on situations involves a clear commitment to the social actions of people, rather than abstracted theoretical concepts.

Alfred Schutz

The final scholar we would like to turn to in this part of the introduction is Alfred Schutz (1899–1959). As a student of the German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, Schutz pursued the development of a sociology that strives to examine the social world from the actors’ point of view. He began his work with a close examination of Max Weber’s concepts and was particularly interested in the construction of ideal types. Despite being a great admirer of Weber and his studies, Schutz argued that Weber’s approach was not suitable for producing adequate descriptions of the social world. He suggested that Weber had set sociology on the right path to examine the actors’ subjective orientation to situations, but by introducing the construction of ideal types as a concept to arrive at social-scientific descriptions Weber created distance between his social-scientific descriptions and the perspectives of ordinary people, and Schutz aimed to produce an analytic approach that could overcome this distance.

Schutz suggested that it is necessary to reveal how people are able to behave and interact in the social situations that they find themselves in. When a person enters a social situation they need to figure out how to behave or ‘act’: by
drawing on previous experiences they can compare the situation and people they encounter with other encounters, and through this comparison, they can come to understand the situation as a particular type, such as a party, a wedding, a classroom, or a business meeting. Schutz argues that people’s ability to use past experience for the construction of typologies of situations, objects, actions and people is critical for their ability to act; the typologies function as ‘recipes’ which they use to devise their actions in those contexts.

The typologies that Schutz’s analysis refers to fundamentally differ from Weber’s ideal types in that they are not constructed by social scientists, but are the visible strategies and practices of understanding found in everyday life. Schutz proposes typologies that are grounded in the actor’s experience of the social world and, in this way, makes a much closer connection between concept and social practice than Weber had done. He describes the typologies as ‘first order constructs’, which he contrasted with the ‘second order constructs’ (such as ideal types) created by social scientists (Schutz 1953). These actor-constructed types are not idiosyncratic and subjective but are shared between people and acquired through socialization and education.

Schutz developed a sociology that was designed to reveal how actors generate a reality that is perceived as being shared between them. The concept of reciprocity of perspectives (Schutz 1967a) was important in this respect and is based on two general assumptions; first, that, in principle at least, the geographic standpoints of actors are interchangeable, and second, that when in the same situation actors agree on the system of relevances that are to apply (Schutz 1967). Essentially, people assume that were they to physically switch places in the world they would ‘see the same’ thing as the other person – the same objects, people, actions and so on. They may pay attention to different things of course, but they would be physically able to identify the same things, should those things be pointed out. Further, they assume that people share understandings of what those things are – what type of person that is, what kind of activity they are undertaking. Again, they may evaluate those things differently (a good person/thing, a useful/not useful activity/object), but they would be able to reach an agreement on what those people/activities/things were.

To give an example, a woman may see a man walking down the street who she falsely identifies as someone she and her husband know. She may point out this man to her husband, who, having seen him, indicates other features of the man which suggest to him that it is not the person that his wife thought it was. Regardless of whether they reach agreement, the participants assume that each is able to see the man, that they will understand what is meant when they say ‘he is shorter’ or ‘he walks with a limp’ or whatever. They assume, that they are able to unproblematically point to and share obvious features of the world. In Schutz’s view, social relations are based on actors mutually assuming that they orient to a situation in the same way.
For Schutz, it is the task of sociologists to produce adequate descriptions of the social world, so that when a sociological concept is used people can easily see how their own actions may fit into that model. As Schutz and Luckmann put it:

[E]ach term in a scientific model of human action must be constructed in such a way that a human act performed within the life-world by an individual actor in the way indicated by the typical construct would be understandable for the actor himself [sic] as well as for his fellow-men [sic] in terms of common-sense interpretation of everyday life.

(Schutz and Luckmann 1974: 235)

For the purpose of producing adequate description Schutz had planned to develop a sociology based on phenomenological principles that aim to elaborate the invariant structures of the life-world (Eberle and Hitzler 2004). It is beyond the remit of this text to explore these theoretical ideas in much more detail than this. What is particularly relevant here is that these ideas are important context for understanding Garfinkel’s development of EM (Heritage 1984) (see Chapter 3). More generally, Schutz shares with Weber and Simmel a general interest in social action at the level of interaction, but he contrasts with them in his conceptual approach. As we saw, Simmel distinguishes concepts that refer to the specifics of social situations from ‘forms’ that describe more abstract comparable properties of social life, which cut across specific instances. By focusing on abstractions like forms or, in Weber’s case ideal types, sociologists produce social-scientific descriptions that differ from the actors’ experience of the world of the everyday. Schutz has tried to address this critique by turning to the typologies that the actors themselves use to guide their actions.

Simmel, Weber and Schutz all showed a concern with interaction, and they all had a profound influence in sociology in general, but particularly on SI, EM and CA. In treating seriously people’s ordinary activities as sites of sociological analysis, they showed that a different kind of sociology is possible – one that involves not the elaboration of large theoretical meta-descriptions, but the careful and detailed analysis of people’s actions.

Contemporary studies of institutions

Having established this general context of interactionist work, we will now return to the concept of ‘institutions’ and discuss the relationship between interactionist approaches to the study of institutional action and how these differ from what we characterize as the more ‘mainstream’ methods and frameworks. By ‘mainstream’ we mean the body of work that has taken an interest in the operation of social structures and how those structures ‘act on’ or, more nebulously, relate to local instances of behaviour in particular organizations (Scott 1995). It is worth noting that institutional scholarship intersects with many
disciplines, including sociology, history, political science, psychology, management studies and economics. We do not focus our critique on one or other particular areas, but towards the issues that cross-cut all of these areas, which is the conception of social action that they orientate towards. That said, as our own work is sociological in character we will draw more on research in that area throughout this book in making our arguments.

Organizations, institutions and social actors

We said earlier that in this text we will not be using the distinction between organizations and institutions that is prominent in institutional scholarship. In this section we will outline how this distinction commonly works and why we regard it as problematic. The term ‘institution’ typically refers to the broad sets of cultural norms or values relating to a given practice (such as education, religion, law, or the operations of a state). ‘Organizations’ are the specific instances of activity where those practices are carried out, like particular schools, churches, governmental offices, and so on. We can speak of the institution of education that is enacted by organizations such as schools, colleges and universities, or the institution of religion, and the enactment of religion by particular religious organizations. To take a slightly different example, we can think of the institution of patriarchy (that is, a set of norms about gender relations), and its realization or expression in particular organizations (particular schools, private companies, newspapers, and so on).

The relationship between institutions and organizations is often conceptualized in the following way: ‘Institutions shape organisations by providing a normative context within which organisations seek their ends. Organizations reproduce institutions by conforming to their norms and from time to time seek to change institutions’ (Bouma 1998: 236). So, an institution is something like a ‘socio-cultural context’ (Bouma 1998: 237) within which particular organizations operate. Schools are instances of education that sit within broader cultural frameworks of understanding relating to the purpose of education, and ideas about who should provide it, how it should be organized, and so on. However, organizations can change and challenge institutional frameworks. A small business may alter its hiring and staff payment practices to promote the employment of women, and therefore resist institutionalized practices of ‘patriarchal’ domination resulting in gender inequality.

The general framework outlined above is used to conceptualize and to analyse a broad range of issues and problems: how organizations compare in different contexts (often across national borders); the ways that organizations may change over time, or the different administrative/economic/political forms that they can take; how institutions adapt or develop in relation to other social processes, such as the development of technology or socio-economic forms; how particular personnel, such as customers or managers, impact on the
form/development of an organization. To focus on our own discipline of sociology, organizational theory of this type is a well-established and core area of study in sociology that undergraduates are often introduced to as a matter of course (for an example, see Bryman 1993). Ritzer (1975) argued that as early as the 1960s the analysis of the distinction between the ‘social facts’ of institutions and social structures has operated as one of the main paradigmatic features of sociology, one that has often involved a view that human behaviour is determined by institutions.

New institutionalism is an approach (or, more accurately, a series of approaches (Schmidt 2010)) to the study of institutions/organizations that has become popular in recent years in the social sciences. There is a very substantial body of work in this area that we cannot hope to thoroughly summarize here. Instead, we wish to provide a rough sketch of the general interests of this area. Broadly speaking, new institutionalism has been concerned with the relationship between institutions, organizations and the social actors that make up those settings. Early work in institutional scholarship focused substantially on the similarities between organizations, and the effects of institutions on organizational practice. In recent years one of the visible trends in the field is a shift to focus on the actor’s point of view, and the way that organizations are produced through people’s actions. Concepts such as ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ have been invoked to explain how some individuals are able to effect changes to organizations (e.g. Marti and Mair 2009). The concept of ‘institutional work’ is also used to focus on the actors, and its aims are nicely characterized as in the following quote:

The concept of institutional work is based on a growing awareness of institutions as products of human action and reaction, motivated by both idiosyncratic personal interests and agendas for institutional change or preservation. The aspiration of the concept of institutional work is that, through detailed analyses of these complex motivations, interests, and efforts, institutional researchers will be able to better understand the broader patterns of intent and capacity to create, maintain, and alter institutions.

(Lawrence et al. 2009: 6)

To the extent that it highlights the importance of a focus on actors, the quotation could stand as a pretty good example of our own interests and focus in this book. Indeed, there are substantial links between new institutionalism and symbolic interactionism in particular. Hallett and Ventresca (2006) have provided an excellent review of the interconnections between SI and institutional scholarship. Further, Berger and Luckmann’s general constructivist framework, which is very much an outshoot of symbolic interactionism, is highly influential on some of the ‘actor-oriented’ thinking in new institutionalism (Fine 1993: 67). Goffman’s work (which, as we have noted, is also closely linked to SI),
Introduction

particularly his notion of the ‘interaction order’ (see Chapter 2), has also had a strong influence on this area. However, the broad range of studies that grew out of work at the University of Chicago under the instruction of E.C. Hughes and the continued application of those ideas in numerous fields of scholarship remain an area that is largely missed by new institutional scholars. The ‘alternate’ interactionisms of EMCA are entirely absent from institutional scholarship.

However, it is important to emphasize that in orientating towards the interactionist traditions there are substantial challenges for scholars of institutions, which is perhaps one of the reasons why they have not done so. This difficulty relates to the fact that new institutionalism and institutionalist scholars more generally deal with a particular set of conceptual problems that, in different ways, SI and EMCA eschew. In essence, new institutionalism tries to solve the problem of the relationship between broad social structures and instances of social practice. This is a version of the structure/agency debate that remains a central preoccupation for sociology. For new institutionalism the problem can be paraphrased as ‘how to give an adequate account of organizational practice in a way that, firstly, takes account of wider social practices and, secondly, pays adequate attention to the role of social actors in shaping those contexts’. The three-way split between institution, organization and social actors is one way to deal with this problem, by displaying these as lodged one within the other. The visible shift in new institutionalism from what we might call a ‘social forces’ approach (i.e. how institutions’ impact on organizations) to a ‘social actors’ approach (i.e. how people make sense of institutional action) (Tolbert and Zucker 1996) involves an attempt to work through the relationship between the three-way split. Throughout new institutionalism there is a clear concern to juggle the three ‘levels’ of analysis: for instance, in their description of an approach to studying institutional work, Lawrence et al. (2009) emphasize that their interest is to:

[e]stablish a broader vision of agency in relationship to institutions, one that avoids depicting actors either as ‘cultural dopes’ trapped by institutional arrangements, or as hypermuscular institutional entrepreneurs.

SI approaches the structure/agency problem rather differently. As a component ‘theory’ of what Ritzer characterizes as the ‘Social Definition Paradigm’ in sociology, SI argues that by focusing explicitly on the actors’ perspective we are by default analysing ‘wider social processes’. In line with the general interactionist perspectives that we outlined earlier, and consistent with the conceptions of theorists such as Simmel, Weber and Schutz, ‘[s]ocial reality is made up of actors’ points of view and …, therefore, to treat social wholes as phenomena sui generis simply means reification’ (Sharrock and Button 1991: 138). So, for SI, the notion of an external social context (institution) that informs action is unnecessary as such ‘institutional processes/norms’ are actually constituted in
people’s own social worlds. We will see in Chapter 2 in more detail how this idea is formulated conceptually, particularly in relation to the work of E.C. Hughes. More generally, though, SI is a largely empirical discipline and has shown little concern with the theoretical problems such as the structure/agency debate. Instead, its aim is the generation of practical understanding of social worlds. EMCA has a slightly different orientation to this issue. Briefly, EM treats the structure/agency problem as one of sociology’s (or of social science’s) own making, and one that is actually irrelevant to the proper understanding of the social organization of action.

The point we wish to emphasize here is that neither SI nor EMCA invokes the institution/organization distinction in the same way that mainstream ‘institutionalists’ do. For SI/EMCA, the terms can be (and often are) used interchangeably as they do not represent different ‘levels’ or processes. Where the terms are invoked they often are used in the same way as they are in everyday life – to describe some kind of social practice that we recognize as being a social organization. We will come back to this in Chapters 2 and 3 when we discuss each perspective in detail, but for now the point is that institutions/organizations can be studied through a close focus on people’s actions, and without a need for the kinds of theoretical distinctions common in institutional theory. We should perhaps clarify at this point that while we will be using the terms organization and institution as largely synonymous with each other, there will be moments where our discussion of other people’s work will require us to invoke the kinds of distinctions signalled above. Where this is the case, we will endeavour to make that more specialist usage explicit.

Theory and the Study of Social Institutions

Before closing this chapter, it is important to emphasize a more general point about the role of theory in interactionist studies of institutions. The specific problem we highlighted in the previous section relates to the difficulty of theorizing the relationships between actors, organizations and institutions, which is an area that has preoccupied institutional scholarship. We argue that this problem is of significantly less importance than gaining a detailed empirical understanding of how institutions function. This raises a more general question, though, about what role concepts and theoretical models should play in empirical research into institutional/organizational action.

The interactionist approaches that we discuss in this text are not unified in how they approach the role of theory in social research. As we will see in the next chapter, SI makes ready use of concepts to explore the ways that people experience institutions and the impact that they have on people’s working practices and their sense of themselves. Following Blumer’s (1954) work, concepts are often thought of as ‘sensitizing’ in that their role is not to define in absolute terms the character of the social world, but to help us to see how commonalities
between people/actions/contexts and so on are ‘expressed in a distinctive manner in each empirical instance’ (Blumer 1954: 8). So, for instance, where a researcher compares the ways that two private organizations implement promotion procedures, any concepts employed should draw out both similarities and differences between those settings; the concepts must be seen not as fixing some objective character between the two contexts – rather, the researcher should explore the distinctive form of expression that the concepts have in each instance. This idea has been developed substantially in the methodologies of Grounded Theory, which emerged out of symbolic interactionism (see Chapter 8).

EMCA also use concepts to make sense of how people produce social order in the everyday practices that they study, although they are generally strongly resistant to the idea of replacing people’s own sense-making schemes with ‘second order’ sociological concepts. Instead, the interest is in the operation of people’s own conceptual/theoretical schemas as resources to the production of the social world. The concepts employed in EM research are used to reveal the ‘orderliness’ that is achieved by people’s own interactions: it is not seen as sociology’s job to replace this work with a new theoretical schema, but, rather, to reveal the operations of the ‘lived understandings’ and the mundane theories and actions of everyday people. In the case of EM, studies tend to be rich in ethnographic detail, while in CA the work usually provides very close description of the conversational actions that people employ when communicating. The commonality between EM and CA is a commitment to seeing the richness of the actions themselves.

The conceptions of the role of theory found in SI, EM and CA serve as a model for scholars of institutions, and act as a contrast to how theory work is undertaken in much if not most of the social sciences. The general point we would emphasize is that theory and concepts are a resource to understanding localities and actions: they are, as Becker (1993) puts it, a ‘necessary evil’ that should be treated with caution, and should not be an aim in their own right. This is not to say that theoretical work and concept development are not relevant or important, but that they should be informed by a very detailed analysis of the context under study, and that their purpose is only to help our understanding of those contexts. We will return to this point in more detail in the concluding chapter of this text.

Organization of the Book

The remainder of this book is divided into two sections. In section one (Chapters 2 and 3) we will describe in more detail the theoretical context of SI and EMCA and their relation to the study of institutions. Chapter 2 outlines how the work of E.C. Hughes and others informed the study of institutions at the University of Chicago. While perhaps not elaborately ‘theoretical’ compared with other areas of sociology, researchers in this area use a number of ‘sensitizing concepts’
that facilitated the examination of institutional behaviour. Their studies were usually ethnographic in character and involved understanding regularities of behaviour typical of ‘institutional’ interaction. The chapter will outline some of the most central of these concepts, and look at how they were used by researchers in this area to make sense of institutional action. It will also discuss some of the central ideas in Erving Goffman’s work and their relevance for the study of institutions.

Chapter 3 focuses on how EM and CA both developed a concern with behaviour in institutions, and the ways that they studied the practical reasoning present within a variety of contexts. The chapter explores the emergence of Garfinkel’s analysis of the problem of ‘adequate description’ and the need to gain a detailed view of social practices from the inside. We look at some of the core analytic debates in EM and how these differ from mainstream sociological approaches. The chapter moves on to look at CA’s interest in how people display meaning in their talk and actions with one another, and the distinctive methods of analysis that they use to capture the sense-making that is visible within everyday talk both within everyday life and in institutional settings. Finally, we reflect on the recent convergence of EM and CA in the field of workplace studies and how scholars in this field approach the study of institutions.

In section two (Chapters 4–7) each chapter will take an area of study related to institutional scholarship and will explain the contributions that interactionist scholarship have made to this field.

Chapter 4 reflects on three core areas of debate related to healthcare provision – knowledge construction, globalization and professional practice – and reviews the ways that studies in interactionism contribute to them. We show how symbolic interactionist informed work has explored the construction of patient and medical practitioner identities (such as how hospitals categorize patients, and how patients make sense of these categories), and how EM has looked at the interactional achievement of patient assessments. We go on to look at how technologies are employed and configured in interaction to create diagnoses, how they are used as ‘rhetorical devices’ to achieve particular social (institutional) ends. Following this, we review studies that use SI concerns with identity as a practical issue for non-native healthcare workforces and, afterwards, EMCA studies of doctor–patient communication as means of exploring ideological claims about how healthcare organizations ought to function. Through these themes we demonstrate the importance of concentrating analysis on people’s meanings and actions as lived interactional processes rather than as abstract theoretical concepts.

Chapter 5 begins by examining contemporary debates in education, arguing that interactionism has the ability to inform our understanding of the practices of education at a local level. Focusing on critical pedagogy and on constructivist learning, we demonstrate the importance of understanding the social
organization of action that occurs in classrooms and other spaces of learning. We go on to look at SI studies of how people experience and ‘implement’ (or, perhaps, ‘translate’) policy at the local level, and how the neoliberal policies of education impact on the identities and practices of students and tutors. This includes a discussion of how people negotiate institutional meanings, and the ways that labelling theory has been used to analyse these processes.

Following this, the chapter looks at how CA has been employed to study the structures of educational talk as pedagogic encounters, and to see how students and teachers achieve learning through sequential exchanges. We explore the use of distinctive educational structures such as giving feedback or asking ‘questions with known answers’, and show the value of CA in characterizing how these sorts of actions relate to general pedagogic ideals. From here, we move to look at the use of the concept of ‘repair’ in CA to explore the ways that institutional action shows a preference for very particular formats of interactions, and that these formats are themselves contingent on achieving successful learning.

Chapter 6 turns attention to the analysis of the operations of market institutions. We begin by showing the difference between economistic approaches to the market and sociological approaches, highlighting the social basis of economic actions. We show the ways that market activity has been conceived as institutional practice, and emphasize the interactionist alternative to this view, with its focus on local ‘micro’ activities. The body of the chapter teases out these arguments, showing how ethnographies of market activities (from street markets to Wall Street trading) have highlighted the complex social relations between markets and communities, the cultural organization of market work, and the broad social functions that markets can have beyond simply the exchange and accumulation of capital. We go on to look at practices of pricing and to discuss studies of market exchange as interactional events, illustrating the ways that prices are set not through institutional agendas, but by local exchanges where conventions of market practice are worked out in real time between participants.

Chapter 7 discusses arts and culture by, first, looking at some of the central technology-driven changes that have happened in the culture industries, and then exploring the contribution of interactionism in exploring the institutional implications of these changes. The chapter describes Becker’s ‘art worlds’ perspective, and shows how it provides an important symbolic interactionist frame for the analysis of art production as conventionalized and institutional activity. We show how the focus on conventions of action helps us to understand art as an institutional activity, and focus our discussion on the themes of technology and art; occupational careers; learning to do art; and markets, marketing and consumption. One of the key arguments we emphasize in this discussion is the limitations of an institutional framework for understanding art, as so many artistic practices occur outside of or across institutions, and take their form
because of the ad hoc work that artists (and many other personnel) have to undertake in the absence of strong institutional structures.

The second half of the chapter turns to the analysis of the ‘reception’ of art, and the construction of understanding by audience members. We take a detailed look at a piece of video data of two visitors at an art gallery, and examine how the participants build a ‘sense’ of the work for one another in their communicative actions. This EMCA approach represents an alternative to the conceptual study offered by SI (and new institutionalism) and treats art ‘work’ (including art reception) as an interactional phenomenon that is visible and intelligible within people’s communications. Through this example, we highlight that the institutional framing of the painting being discussed is, in this case, of minimal importance to the ways that the participants interact with it. This again highlights the limitations of a strong institutional lens in understanding art practices, even when they do occur in institutions.

In Chapter 8 we conclude the book by returning to a consideration of the relationship between these interactionist perspectives and the broader studies of institutions in the social sciences. Focusing on the area of new institutionalism, we show that the concern with ‘actors’ has been a substantial one in recent years, and we illustrate further the limitations with how action is approached as a conceptual issue rather than as a substantially empirical one. We move on to look in detail at the differences between SI, EM and CA, focusing on the issues of ‘meaning’, ‘actors’ and ‘social contexts’, and then explain how these differences take route in particular methodological preferences. After this, we explore the relationship between SI, EM and CA to the broader social scientific community. We highlight that while many of the central ideas in SI have been accepted widely in the social sciences, the attitude of a strong empirical concern with people’s meanings as they occur in social encounters is often absent (Atkinson 2015). Both EM and CA have occupied a marginal status, stemming largely from their radical approach to re-thinking the sociological project of studying society, a project that, for them, involves abandoning the theoretical preoccupations found in institutional scholarship.

Finally, we spell out the particular contributions that interactionisms can make to the field of institutional scholarship. In relation to methodology, we highlight how institutional research could benefit from ethnographic studies and, more generally, from detailed studies of meaning-making as a situated practice. While institutionalism has shown a concern with ethnography, it tends to be a rather ‘lite’ version, and a more serious commitment to the methodology would, we suggest, be of substantial benefit in understanding institutional action and interaction. We argue that the absence of a radical turn to the ‘micro’ analysis of action through video illustrates that the broader community of institutional scholarship has quite some way to go in terms of developing a more robust methodology for the study of action, and that the debates from the fields we have reviewed here should form the basis for substantial innovation in the field.
How to Use This Book

This book is not written with the intention that it is read chronologically. Readers who feel that they need an introduction to the interactionist perspectives may benefit from reading Chapters 2 and 3 before the empirical ones. The chapters in the main part of the book, Chapters 4–7, have been written as stand-alone discussions of studies related to institutions. Readers from backgrounds such as business studies, management studies, marketing, political science or other areas outside of sociology may find it useful to read some of the later ‘empirical’ chapters first, and then move to the two ‘theory chapters’ later on. This strategy would help to illustrate in practical terms the connection between interactionist approaches and more mainstream institutional scholarship. Readers coming from sociology may find it beneficial to start with Chapters 1 and 2 first in order to understand the institutional framing that we are giving to SI and EMCA. Those readers who wish to understand in more detail the relation between interactionist scholarship and mainstream institutional approaches could start with the conclusion first as this takes forward the points we have raised in this introduction, outlining the problems of what we describe as the issues of ‘meaning’, ‘actors’ and ‘context’ in interactionism(s) in contrast with ‘institutionalist’ ideas.

However it is approached, our modest hope is that this text will introduce new readers to the extremely rich traditions of research, and will remind those who already have some familiarity with interactionism of the strong contribution that these areas continue to make to our knowledge of the workings of institutional action.
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