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Citation: Lok, J. & Willmott, H. (2019). Embedded Agency in Institutional Theory: Problem or Paradox. *Academy of Management Review*, 44(2), pp. 470-473. doi: 10.5465/amr.2017.0571

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2017.0571>

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Review

Embedded Agency in Institutional Theory: Problem or Paradox?

Journal:	<i>Academy of Management Review</i>
Manuscript ID	AMR-2017-0571-Dialogue.R2
Manuscript Type:	Dialogue
Theoretical Perspectives:	Institutional theory, Philosophy of science and/or sociology of knowledge, Sensemaking and Cognition
Topic Areas:	Social Construction < Organization and Management theory, Social construction of organizational phenomena < Managerial and Organizational Cognition, Managerial and organization cognition (General) < Managerial and Organizational Cognition
Abstract:	In "Beyond Constraining and Enabling: Toward New Microfoundations in Institutional Theory" Professor Cardinale (2018) seeks to expose and correct "shortcomings" (p.133) in institutional theory's conceptualization of structure, agency and their relationship. To this end, he theorizes the "different mechanism[s] through which actors are embedded in structure" (p.134). We agree that institutional theory's microfoundations merit theoretical attention and development. However, we question the premise that the issue of agency in institutional theory is adequately, or even plausibly, formulated as one of "embeddedness". We also challenge the relevance of Professor Cardinale's engagement of Husserl to help solve what we argue to be a phantom problem central to his theory.

**EMBEDDED AGENCY IN INSTITUTIONAL THEORY:
PROBLEM OR PARADOX?**

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Key words: Institutional theory, agency, social theory, phenomenology, Husserl

In “*Beyond Constraining and Enabling: Toward New Microfoundations in Institutional Theory*” Professor Cardinale (2018) seeks to expose and correct “shortcomings” (p.133) in institutional theory’s conceptualization of structure, agency and their relationship. To this end, he theorizes the “different mechanism[s] through which actors are embedded in structure” (p.134). We agree that institutional theory’s microfoundations merit theoretical attention and development. However, we question the premise that the issue of agency in institutional theory is adequately, or even plausibly, formulated as one of “embeddedness”. We also challenge the relevance of Professor Cardinale’s engagement of Husserl to help solve what we argue to be a phantom problem central to his theory.

Embedded Agency as a Phantom Problem

When Seo and Creed (2002) introduced the term “paradox of embedded agency” in institutional theory they stressed that it only entailed an “apparent” contradiction; one that, to their satisfaction at least, had already been addressed by Barley and Tolbert (1997) who, drawing on Giddens (1984), conceived of the “*mutually constitutive* relationship between institutionalized scripts and [their] local reenactment” (Seo & Creed, 2002: 224, italics added). So, how did this “apparent” contradiction come to be treated as a central problem in institutional theory, as claimed by Cardinale (2018), rather than as a paradox?

We believe the answer lies in the naturalization¹ of the metaphor of “embeddedness” in institutional theory, and the associated theorization of the relation between structure and agency as semi-independent forces that influence each other. “Embedded” means “set firmly into a mass or material” (Merriam-Webster, 2017): it implies that “agency” is “set firmly into” a surrounding “mass” called “structure”.

¹ Following Berger and Luckmann (1966), by “naturalization” we mean the unreflexive rendering of a particular understanding of the world as normal, self-evident, and commonsensical. This meaning is derived from Husserl’s (1910) “natürliche Weltbegriff” and Scheler’s (1960) “relativnatürliche Weltanschauung”.

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Giddens (1984) has likened this type of conceptualization to the walls of a room from which an individual cannot escape (signifying “embeddedness”), but inside of which s/he can move around at whim (signifying “agency”).

Cardinale (2018) refers to “embedded(ness)” more than 40 times in his paper, and, as a result, nearly literally reproduces Giddens’ metaphorical room when he posits that structure “provides (...) a *space* of open possibilities (...) enjoy[ed]” by actors (p.133-145; italics added). It is this particular conceptual framing that produces his central problem: Is action really “fully autonomous” (p.148) in the space of possibilities that is “created” (p.142) by structure? And, if not, what are the “mechanisms” (p.133) through which action is still “influenced” (p.133) by structure within this space? What was originally presented by Holm (1995) and Seo and Creed (2002) as a paradox is, in this way, transformed into a seemingly tractable problem that admits a solution. Crucially, however, it is only when conceiving of the relation between structure and agency in terms of embeddedness – taken literally rather than paradoxically - that a search for mechanisms through which agency and structure exert their mutual influence is necessitated.

Holm (1995), who never actually used the term “embedded agency”, as well as Seo and Creed (2002), were, arguably, aware that this apparent necessity is dispelled when the relation between structure and agency is understood as mutually constitutive; or, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 20) more incisively put it, as “ontologically complicit”. This alternative understanding is advanced in strands of social theory that explicitly challenge Professor Cardinale’s thinking of agency and structure as existing on “distinct levels” (p.146) that influence each other. Practice theorists like Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984) – to whom Cardinale (2018) liberally refers - conceive of agency as enabled and constrained “through” structure,

not “by” it; and, relatedly, structure is theorized as “both medium and outcome” (Giddens, 1984: 25) of agentic practice.

This practice-theoretic perspective is widely cited by institutional theorists but often selectively translated into a more familiar, affirming form – a general issue of imported ideas being “lost in translation”, to which we will return in the second part of this comment. Practice theory’s reconceptualization of the relation between structure and agency in terms of ontological complicity casts radical doubt on the coherence of “embeddedness” as a way of characterizing it. This, in turn, raises critical questions about the intelligibility of a research program that aspires to identify “mechanisms” of “embeddedness”. Whereas the reasoning of Holm (1995) and Seo and Creed (2002) is broadly congruent with a practice-theoretic perspective, Cardinale (2018) subscribes to a literal use of the embeddedness metaphor, which results in a Quixotic quest to solve a phantom problem of his own creation (see Planck, 1946). His search for mechanisms to connect structure and agency affirms and normalizes, rather than debunks and dispels, the theoretical difficulty that arises when agency and structure are conceptualized as oppositional, and/or existing on distinct levels. Unfortunately, Cardinale’s (2018) remedy for the “problem” of embedded agency in institutional theory reproduces its fault lines.

Our difference with Cardinale (2018) could be reduced to a mere disagreement about whether to conceptualize action as enabled, constrained, or guided “by”, or “through”, structure, which may then be dismissed as a petty squabble over semantics. However, we believe that much more is at stake: failure to reflect critically on the effects of the widespread, naturalized use of the embeddedness metaphor in institutional theory impedes future theory development. In its absence, the appreciation of embedded agency as a paradox, rather than a problem, goes missing.

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This, in turn, leads to increasingly technical and abstract attempts to identify mechanisms that are conjectured to connect structure and agency, as exemplified by Cardinale’s (2018) appropriation of the Husserlian concept of protention. Such attempts inevitably result in the perpetuation of the very problem they seek to overcome, because they leave its source intact: the conceptualization of the structure-agency relation as semi-independent, counterposed forces, sustained by a literal reading of the embeddedness metaphor. More importantly, the preoccupation with phantom problems that this never-ending cycle fosters diverts valuable research attention away from other important research problems that have more direct relevance for the analysis of organizational life. This includes, for example, the research questions that animated the seminal contributions of Holm (1995) and Seo and Creed (2002): when and how can people engage in change-oriented behavior? Ironically, the phantom problem of embedded agency that is commonly misattributed to these authors risks displacing important and relevant questions such as these.

Using an Exotic Metaphor to Solve a Phantom Problem

We now turn to a second, broader issue that arises from Professor Cardinale’s introduction of the Husserlian concept of “protention” as a resource for identifying mechanisms central to his theory. Namely, how are scholars to handle the importation of foreign intellectual traditions into management and organization theory?

Cardinale (2018) commends protention “as a useful means of capturing the idea of proximity towards valuing some course of action rather than others” (p. 134) such that agency is guided or oriented to incline in a direction that “appears as inevitable” (p.147). This pre-reflective facet of agency, he contends, “has often gone unnoticed, and its implications are largely ignored” (p. 133). The first thing to note about this appeal to the concept of protention is its tenuous connection to Husserl’s coinage of

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3 the term, which relates to time consciousness, and specifically to the temporal horizon
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5 against which the present is perceived (Husserl, 1999). It is very difficult to connect
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7 or reconcile this meaning with Cardinale's (2018) use of protention in relation to
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9 actors' pre-reflective dispositions towards preferring particular courses of action. This
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11 difficulty is compounded by the absence of any considered discussion or justification
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13 of the concept's importation and subsequent translation in Cardinale's (2018) theory.
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15 Based on his brief acknowledgment that he uses the concept "more broadly" (p.136),
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17 we speculate that protention is deployed as a loose metaphor for a phenomenon that,
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19 at best, lacks a direct connection to, or basis in, Husserl's phenomenology.
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22 As Oswick, Fleming and Hanlon (2011) point out, the importation and translation
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24 of foreign concepts and forms of theorizing can sometimes be productive for theory
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26 development. However, such borrowing or blending also frequently involves a
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28 process of domestication or colonization in which nuance and challenge is sacrificed.
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30 With regard to institutional theory, for example, this can have the (possibly
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32 unintended) deleterious effect of stifling or disarming challenges to its dominance in
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34 organization theory, with damaging consequences for theoretical pluralism (Willmott,
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36 2015; Lok, 2017). Before contemplating or commending the importation of exotic
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38 traditions like Husserl's phenomenology, it is therefore appropriate to assess whether
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40 equivalent or greater inspiration or insights may be gained from theoretical traditions
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42 that are already influential in institutional theory.
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46 Through his many references to Giddens and Bourdieu, Cardinale (2018) takes the
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48 practice-theoretic tradition as his starting point for developing "new
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50 microfoundations", yet he neglects to consider that this tradition incorporates an
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52 attentiveness to how, in his formulation, "structure actively orients actors toward
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54 some possibilities rather than others" (p.144). The process is illustrated at some length
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in Giddens’ commentary on Willis’ *Learning to Labour* (Giddens, 1984: 289-307). More generally, the practice-theoretic tradition is also richly appreciative of pre-reflective agency, including the influence of unconscious conditions of action. As Giddens (1984: 6) writes: “Unconscious motivation is a significant feature of human conduct” which includes “forms of cognition and impulsion which are either wholly repressed from consciousness or appear in consciousness only in distorted form”. Informed by such understandings, a number of institutional theorists have begun to study the psychodynamics of human agency (e.g. Voronov & Vince, 2012; Lok, Creed, DeJordy & Voronov, 2017). We therefore consider Cardinale’s (2018) resort to Husserl in his search for a pre-reflective dimension of agency largely redundant.

With regard to the relevance of Husserl’s phenomenology for the advancement of institutional theory more generally, there are testing questions to answer about the commensurability of these two perspectives. Even though Husserl’s position within the realism-idealism spectrum has been subject to debate (e.g. Ameriks, 1977), his phenomenological method was specifically designed to break out of the representationalist onto-epistemic boundaries in which institutional theory, and with it most social science, are confined. At the core of Husserl’s mature work is a deep skepticism about the adequacy of what he calls the “natural attitude” as a basis for positive (social) science. As Giddens (1977: 10) puts it, footnoting Husserl’s *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, “Positive thought supposedly provides a medium for the principled corrigibility of the world of lay beliefs or the ‘natural attitude’, but actually accepts implicitly some fundamental elements of the natural attitude which remain concealed and therefore unexplicated.” Like most social science, institutional theory assumes and reproduces this natural attitude through, for example, the deployment of naturalized meanings ascribed to concepts like “embeddedness”,

“agency” and “structure”. Husserl’s invitation is to suspend and replace causal theorizing that is based in such naturalized concepts through what he called “radical self-understanding”:

[T]heoretical achievement (...) can only be and remain meaningful in a true and original sense if the scientist has developed in himself the ability to inquire back into the original meaning of all his meaning-structures and methods, i.e., into the historical meaning of their primal establishment, and especially into the meaning of all the inherited meanings taken over unnoticed in this primal establishment, as well as those taken over later on. (Husserl, 1970: 56)

To be clear, we are not advocating a Husserlian approach, which we acknowledge to be highly problematical, and not least for advancing any form of social analysis. Where we consider Husserlian phenomenology to be of potential value is in its intrinsic orientation to exposing and problematizing the “unnoticed”, as explicitly formulated in the previous quote from Husserl (1970). This orientation enables a critical exploration of the “historical meaning” of concepts as a way of unearthing some of the “unnoticed” effects of their unreflexive appropriation and deployment in institutional theory. This possibility is frustrated when exotic concepts, such as “protention”, are engaged for purposes that are disassociated from their epistemic tradition. In our reading, Cardinale (2018) misjudges how the phenomenological tradition - established by Brentano and Husserl and then developed and applied by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Schutz, Ricoeur and many others – may potentially contribute to the reconstruction of institutional theory’s microfoundations. For example, it might be asked: What is *not* seen when we naturally and “realistically” apprehend institutions in elemental terms of “structures”, “actors”, “embeddedness”, and “protention”?

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