

Nano-Papers: Institution - Organization - Society¹

Paper No. 9

New Directions for the Concept of the Institutional Script

Authors:

Judith Igelsböck, Technical University Munich, Johannes Kepler University Linz [judith.igelsboeck@tum.de]
Elke Schüßler, Johannes Kepler University Linz [elke.schuessler@jku.at]

Abstract:

The concept of the script has been a constant companion of institutional thinking of organization. This nano-paper is devoted to unpack aspects that have often remained implicit, particularly the questions of how to define scripts and how scripts relate to institutions. To address these questions, the paper reviews both classical and more recent work in the field of organizational institutionalism regarding the definitions and uses of the concept of the script. This is followed by a discussion of commonalities and differences among the identified script concepts, particularly a more cognitive understanding common in the sociology of knowledge and a more behavioral understanding rooted in interactionist sociology. The paper goes beyond the enduring controversy of how consciously actors perform scripts by considering the prototypical and heuristic character of the script, as well as the question of how scripts are embodied and circulated. In the concluding remarks, we offer new directions for the deployment of the concept of the script in the field of organizational institutionalism, highlighting its potential as a device for the development of an empirical understanding of institutional persistence and change.

DOI: 10.14459/2019md1470688

¹ The „Nano-Papers: Institution – Organization – Society“ are part of the DFG-funded scientific network “The dormant potential of Neoinstitutionalism. Theoretical challenges and empirical research perspectives.” and are published by the network’s coordinators: Dr. Stefan Kirchner, Dr. Anne K. Krüger, Dr. Frank Meier and Dr. Uli Meyer. (<http://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/251753753>)

Introduction

The notion of the script has accompanied the rise of organizational institutionalism during the past 40 years to highlight the influence of “culture” on action and actors, whether individual or collective. Action that is “scripted” or “following a script” is different from action based on rational-choice efficiency calculations, which is a central argument made by institutional scholars of organization. Jepperson (2002) speaks of the “construction of structure and actors within broad institutional frameworks, and the cultural ‘scripting’ of much activity within these frameworks” (p. 4). Similarly, John Meyer and co-authors (1987) define action as “the enactment of broad institutional scripts rather than a matter of internally generated and autonomous choice” (p. 12).

Given the multiple references to the concept of the script in institutional theory – ranging from “institutional scripts” over “cultural scripts” and “performance scripts” (see e.g. Jepperson 1991, 2002; Meyer et al. 1987) to notions such as the “in-scription” or “pre-scription” (see e.g. Czarniawska 2009; Halliday et al. 2010; Wessel 2014) – it is surprising that few authors have unpacked the relationship between the concept of the “script” and the one of the “institution”. In this paper, we aim to address this gap. In a first step, we review both classical and more recent work in the field of organizational institutionalism regarding the definitions and use of the concept of the script. In a second step, we discuss (partly implicit) commonalities and differences among the identified script concepts, particularly a more cognitive understanding common in the sociology of knowledge and a more behavioral understanding rooted in interactionist sociology, which have different implications for the role of scripts in institutional dynamics. In the concluding remarks, we suggest new directions for the deployment of the concept of the script in the field of organizational institutionalism.

Uses of the Script Concept in Organizational Institutionalism

Our literature review yielded two main uses of the script concept in the institutional literature: a more cognitive understanding of scripts – as schemas or templates for action –, and a more behavioral one of scripts as devices through which interactions are shaped and, as a consequence, through which institutions can be studied in situ. While each use is rooted in a different tradition of sociological theorizing, both uses are nonetheless highly related in that they share a reliance on dramaturgical or performative frameworks in which scripts get (re-)pro-

duced in their enactment. Berger and Luckmann (1967) describe “the institution with its assemblage of programmed actions” as “the unwritten libretto of a drama” whose “realization depends upon the reiterated performances of its prescribed roles by living actors” (p. 74-75). The actors embody the roles and actualize the drama by representing it on the given stage” (ibid.). Barley (2015: 35), thus, states that scripts “are both cognitive and behavioral phenomena”.

The Cognitive Script

Berger and Luckmann’s seminal work on the “social construction of reality” (1969) is a foundational text for organizational institutionalism and a key source when it comes to defining the concept of the script. Barley (1997), for example, states that “Zucker, Meyer, and Rowan initially drew on the work of Berger and Luckmann to argue that institutions are socially constructed templates for action, generated and maintained through ongoing interactions. From this perspective, actors create institutions through a history of negotiations that lead to “shared typifications” or “generalized expectations and interpretations of behavior” (p. 94). In this regard, Berger and Luckmann speak of “recipe knowledge” which they consider to be part of the “social stock of knowledge”. In the German research literature, this concept of the “recipe knowledge” sometimes gets referred to as “script-knowledge” (“Skriptwissen”, see e.g. Keller 2005: 222), which is understood as “knowledge limited to pragmatic competence in routine performances” (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 56) such as knowing how to use a telephone. Berger and Luckmann offer a whole range of concepts, such as the “recipe”, “typification schemes”, “programmed actions”, or “templates for action” that have partly been used analogously to the “script”. For example, Jepperson draws on Berger and Luckman’s idea of the “stock of knowledge” when arguing for the influence of different “national scripts” on the way individuals are forming opinions on political issues: “[N]ational politico-cultural systems contain stock or ‘recipe’ opinion scripts, from which individuals more or less randomly sample in assembling their talk” (Jepperson 1994: 4).

The cognitive script defined by the psycholinguists Schank and Abelson (1977) is another prominent source in the institutional literature. Schank and Abelson classify scripts as the “specification of the frame idea” and describe them as “predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that define a well-known situation” (1977: 151), adding that “[a] script is, in effect, a very boring little story” (ibid.). In this line of reasoning, Poole, Gray

and Gioia conceptualize scripts as a “type of cognitive structure that retains knowledge of events for a particular context” (Poole et al. 1990: 452). Boxenbaum et al. (2011) refer to Schank and Abelson in their attempt to carve out “epistemic scripts” that prescribe the deployment and presentation of theory use within academic disciplines. Scripts – in their understanding – “capture shared assumptions” (p. 278) and “refer to implicit, cognitive templates that underpin our collective understandings of how [as in the case of epistemic scripts] knowledge is produced” (p. 272).

Here scripts are conceptualized as carriers of institutions and as their manifestation: “Every institution has a body of transmitted recipe knowledge, that is, knowledge that supplies the institutionally appropriate rules of conduct” (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 83). Within this line of thinking, institutions are understood as “contextually retrievable cultural scripts of institutionalized action”, as Hericks (2011:13) stresses out with reference to DiMaggio und Powell (1991) und Jepperson (1991). All of these cognitive definitions primarily deploy the concept of the script, or its terminological relatives such as “templates”, to explain the highly prefigured ways of being and acting in modern societies (see e.g. Meyer and Jepperson 2002) and contrast these with rational choice frameworks (Jepperson 2002). While the cognitive script is seen as the carrier of institutions, these studies do not specify in detail how scripts get produced, reproduced and altered, or how they are circulated.

The Behavioral Script

In the institutional classics cited above, the script tended to remain an implicit concept. In contrast, Barely (1986) and Barley and Tolbert (1997) suggest using the concept more explicitly as a device to link the “institutional realm” to the “realm of action”. Barely and Tolbert define scripts as “outlines of recurrent patterns of interaction that define, in observable and behavioral terms, the essence of actors’ roles” (1997: 83). They engage in boundary work and insist that “instead of mental models or plans” (1997: 98), as in cognitive definitions, scripts should be regarded as “behavioral regularities.” (ibid.) For them, institutions are enacted through scripts. Consequently, scripts can be seen as essential epistemological devices through which institutions can be studied. As

outlined by Barley (1986), “scripts can be specified by sampling interactional episodes that occur in the social context under investigation. From details of actual behavior and speech, the analyst abstracts each episode’s logic in terms of turns, roles, and categories of acts that outline the episode’s unfolding” (Barley 1986:83). The idea is to reduce episodes to “their essential plot”. Recurring plots can then be identified as scripts underlying the “interaction order” (Goffman 1983), the “realm of action”, and linked back to institutional structures (Barley 1986).

As many other scholars, Barley explicitly refers to Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology when defining the script (see Goffman 1959, 1967, 1983), albeit in a rather cursory way. This is not entirely surprising, since Goffman operates with a writing style that is very inspiring but not necessarily characterized by the provision of “clear” definitions. Goffman tends to introduce terms in an anecdotal way, focused more on disclaimers than actual claims. At some point, Goffman defines the interaction order to “regulations and expectations that apply to a particular social situation” (1983: 4). These “orders” – and this might be the connection to institutions – are not “likely to be generated at the moment there” (ibid.). Rather, they could be understood as “a set of understandings” that have “come into being historically” and “spread and contracted in geographical distribution over time” (ibid.: 5). Interestingly, Goffman understands this “orderliness” as “predicated on a large base of cognitive presuppositions, if not normative ones, and self-sustained restraints” (ibid.: 5). He furthermore stresses that “[a]t the very center of interaction life is the cognitive relation we have with those present before us, without which relationship our activity, behavioral and verbal, could not be meaningfully organized” (ibid.: 4). Following this reasoning, sustaining a distinction between cognitive and behavioral scripts might turn out to be trickier than it had appeared at first sight. However, the behavioral definition of scripts in institutional theorizing directs our attention to questions regarding the enactment and re-enactment and/or modification of scripts “in action”, while the cognitive definitions in institutional scholarship seem more strongly focused on the deconstruction of the myths of autonomous individuals and organizations. Scripts, in this behavioral sense, are “pivots between an institution and action” (Barley and

Tolbert 1997: 99)². Scripts are therefore not only carriers of institutions, but also the vehicle through which institutions can be changed. Script changes, from Barley and Tolbert's perspective, typically occur intentionally when context conditions change (e.g. in the form of new technologies or economic downturns), as such changes allow for reflexivity regarding the nature of scripts. Idiosyncratic deviations from scripts in the sense of routines being a source of flexibility and change (Feldman and Pentland, 1991) are possible, but unlikely to lead to lasting institutional change.

Applications of the script concept in the "world polity" school of institutionalism can also be seen as standing in a behavioral tradition, even though they do not refer to Goffman's theorizing. Scientized scripts are seen as the tools through which world culture is shaped via international organizations (IOs) and the technocrats that work for them (e.g. Dori and Meyer, 2006). Furthermore, based on economic sociology and political economy research, scholars such as Halliday et al. (2010) and Kentikelenis and Seebrooke (2017) treat the policy scripts developed by international organizations (IOs) as actively developed and contested devices. Kentikelenis and Seebrooke (2017) explicitly open up the "black box" of intra-organizational script-writing in this context, indicating that actors within IOs have different interests and resources that shape how scripts are written. Contestation dynamics between these different actors - e.g. scientists working in IOs versus political representatives following a different logic - in turn shape whether scripts will institutionalize and diffuse. These studies do not only indicate that scripts mediate between structure and agency in processes of (de-)institutionalization (as Barley and Tolbert suggest), they also bring in actors, resources and politics regarding the deployment and adoption of (counter-)scripts.

Controversies and Black Boxes

The presumption that scripts are "enacted" and the fact that every enactment might provide a powerful moment for the revision or reproduction of the script, locates the script in the midst of analytically intriguing dynamics between structure and the question of agency of individuals and organizations (as highlighted by Barley and Tolbert 1997 or Drori et al 2009). In this regard, Meyer and Jepperson (2000) differentiate between "enactment" and "taking action" whereby "enactment" is related to the reproduction and transmission of scripts, while "taking action" means to contest the script. Thus, the cognitive and behavioral concepts of the script can be seen as related, but Goffman's role concept offers actors more possibilities for reflection and distinction than the one of Berger and Luckmann, in which roles based on societal norms are highly internalized.

An enduring controversy in the literature revolves around the question of how consciously actors perform scripts. Traditionally, institutional scholars would assume that scripts are "taken-for-granted" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), "performed mindlessly" (Ashforth and Fried, 1988) or are "habitually repeated without much mediating processes" (Zucker 1991). Even Barley and Tolbert perceive their enactment as "ritualized procedure" (Barley and Tolbert 1997, 99). This perception is challenged by the "inhabited institutions research stream in organizational theory."³ "[It] reinvigorates new institutionalism by arguing that organizations are not merely the instantiation of environmental, institutional logics "out there" where organizational actors seamlessly enact preconscious scripts, but are places where people and groups make sense of and interpret institutions" (Binder 2007: 547). Referring to Joas' (1996) theory of creative actions, Weik (2012) takes the critique further by addressing a "lingering cognitive bias" (p. 569) in institutional theory and arguing that script-interpreting agency cannot be reduced to the "rational mind" but can, for instance, stem from bodily or emotional, i.e. pre-reflexive sources. "Meaning, schemas, scripts and rules may be unreflected by individual agents, but always speak to their cognitive capabilities. Emotions, bodily coercion or, in fact, most topics related to the corporeal nature of agency remain underresearched." (Weik 2012: 569) Weik thus brings the human body as performer of

² Barley and Tolbert's (1997) model of institutionalization consists of different steps. Via socialization, institutional rules are encoded into scripts and as such "wittingly or unwittingly reproduced" (p. 102). "Enacting a script" then describes the not necessarily conscious reproduction of a script by action. In action, scripts can also be revised. Finally, through an "externalization of the patterned behaviors and interactions produced" scripts are objectified. The latter "involves the disassociation of patterns with particular actors or particular historical circumstances," so that "the patterns acquire normative, "factual" quality and their relationship to the existing interests of different actors becomes obscured" (ibid.).

³ For more details on the "inhabited research stream in organizational theory" see e.g. Leibel et al 2018

scripts into play and campaigns for considering the supra-individual dimension of emotions (“emotional scripts”), and – more broadly – the corporeality of collective actors.

Czarniawska (2009) draws on the notion of the “in-scription” (see e.g. Akrich 1992), to address another facet of the materiality of scripts, namely the role of machines and technologies as carriers of scripts. Using the example of the internet, she shows how scripts travel (partly unnoticed) via machines and technologies (in which they get “inscribed”) and in this way potentially challenge established institutions: “The main message and focus of interest of the work of Joerges and myself was the phenomenon of legitimate collective agents inscribing an institutional order into machines, partly unnoticed by the machine users, and partly controlled by other legitimate instances. The inscriptions arrived one by one, or at the most in sets, and blended with one another and with older inscriptions in ways that brought to mind the metaphor of palimpsest” (p. 55). Against this background, she emphasizes “that institutions do not change rapidly either by design or by acts of subversion” (p. 62). By mobilizing the notion of in-scription, Czarniawska points to the widely neglected question of the circulation and materiality of scripts. Institutional scholars tend to speak of the “social stock of knowledge” or of “institutions” as very abstract concepts, i.e. without addressing the question of their mediation.

New directions for studying the institutional script

The concept of the script gets deployed in organizational institutionalism to re-negotiate the question of agency of individual and organizational actors in relation to their environments. Newer articles express their discomfort with the portrayal of organizations as script-following actors and carriers of institutions defined by the “environment”. Instead of a pre-conscious adherence to scripts, they support the idea that actors adapt, contest or refine scripts. The script – in these accounts – develops into a contested site of institutional change, initiated by its constant re-enactment and potential transformation. Yet a variety of dimensions has remained underexplored so far. Oftentimes, the enactment or performance of a script is solely described in terms of the question of how consciously or unconsciously it gets applied. Institutional scholars tend to overlook the heuristic or prototypical character of scripts necessarily requiring improvisation (see e.g. Suchman 1987). Certainly, one can raise the question in how far improvisation is scripted as well. This question seems specifically interesting when

thinking of contemporary regimes of creativity or “out of the box-thinking” that have gained a vast popularity in organizational discourse. More recently, the actors, the idiosyncracies of the situation, as well as technologies and machines – as performers and transformers of scripts – are granted a more important role in the processes of de- and re-institutionalization. Formerly mostly conceptualized as carrier of institutions, the script is reconsidered as an empirical site to understand and also to provoke institutional change. Especially with its more material and interactionist connotation, the script concept allows us to bypass the “paradox of embedded agency” in institutional analysis: as actors perform scripts, they are able to improvise based on the materialities and emotional stimuli provided by a situation (cf. Weick, 2012). Concepts – such as the one of the “in-scription” (see above) – can be deployed to study the scriptedness of situated action in its material distribution. A consideration of the circulation, materiality and translation of scripts (e.g. via technological tools) allows for the development of an empirical understanding of institutional dynamics and provides possibilities to enhance Barley and Tolbert’s structuration model of scripts as mediators between structure and agency in that it considers more explicitly the question of where scripts come from, who produces and diffuses them, and how organizations select the scripts they follow.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks go to Katja Hericks and Anne K. Krüger for their invaluable feedback. We also wish to thank the members of the network “Das ungenutzte Potential des Neo-Institutionalismus” for their feedback on previous versions of the paper. The same holds for participants of the track “Institution and Organization” of the “14th New Institutionalism Workshop (NIW)” in Milano 2018 and participants of the 6th Austrian Early Scholars Workshop in Management in Linz 2018.

Literature

- AKRICH, M. 1992. The description of technical objects. In: Bijker, W. & Law, J. (eds.) *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- ASHFORTH, B. E. & FRIED, Y. 1988. The mindlessness of organizational behaviors. *Human Relations*, 41, 305-329.
- BARLEY, S. R. 2015. Why the internet makes buying a car less loathsome: How technologies change role relations. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, 1(1), 5-35.

- BARLEY, S. R. 1986. Technology as an occasion for structuring: Evidence from observations of CT scanners and the social order of radiology departments. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 31(1), 78-108.
- BARLEY, S. R. & TOLBERT, P. S. 1997. Institutionalization and structuration: Studying the links between action and structuration. *Organization Studies*, 18, 93-117.
- BERGER, P. L. & LUCKMANN, T. 1967. *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, London, Penguin P.
- BINDER, A. 2007. For love and money: Organizations' creative responses to multiple environmental logics. *Theory and Society*, 36, 547-571.
- BOXENBAUM, E. & ROLEAU, A. 2011. New knowledge products as bricolage: Metaphors and scripts in organizational theory. *Academy of management review*, 36(2): 272-296.
- CZARNIAWSKA, B. 2009. How institutions are inscribed in technical objects and what it may mean in the case of the Internet. *ICT and Innovation in the Public Sector*. Springer.
- DACIN, M. T., MUNIR, K. A., & TRACEY, P. 2010. Formal dining at Cambridge colleges: Linking ritual performance and institutional maintenance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 53: 1393-1418.
- DIMAGGIO, P., & POWELL, W. W. 1983. The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American sociological review*, 48, 147-160.
- DRORI, I., HONIG, B. & SHEAFFER, Z. 2009. The life cycle of an internet firm: Scripts, legitimacy, and identity. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 33, 715-738.
- DRORI, G. S., and J. W. MEYER 2006b. "Scientization: Making a World Safe for Organizing." Pp. 31-52 in *Transnational Governance: Institutional Dynamics of Regulation*, edited by M.-L. Djelic and K. Sahlin-Andersson. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- FELDMAN, M. S., & PENTLAND, B. T. 2003. Reconceptualizing Organizational Routines as a Source of Flexibility and Change. *Administrative science quarterly*, 48(1), 94-118.
- GIDDENS, A. 1984. *The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- GOFFMAN, E. 1983. The interaction order: American Sociological Association, 1982 presidential address. *American sociological review*, 48.1 (1983): 1-17.
- GOFFMAN, E. 1959. *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor.
- GOFFMAN, E. 1967. *Interaction Ritual*. New York: Anchor Books.
- HALLIDAY, T. C., BLOCK-LIEB, S., & CARRUTHERS, B. G. 2009. Rhetorical legitimation: global scripts as strategic devices of international organizations. *Socio-Economic Review*, 8(1), 77-112.
- HERICKS, K. 2011. *Entkoppelt und institutionalisiert: Gleichstellungspolitik in einem deutschen Konzern*. Springer-Verlag.
- JEPPERSON, R. L. 1991. Institutions, Institutional Effects, and Institutionalism. In: POWELL, W. W. & DIMAGGIO, P. (eds.) *The New institutionalism in organizational analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- JEPPERSON, R. L. 2002. The development and application of sociological neoinstitutionalism. In: BERGER J. and ZELDITCH, M. (eds.): *New directions in contemporary sociological theory*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 229-266.
- JEPPERSON, R. L. 1994. *National scripts: The varying construction of individualism and opinion across the modern nation-states*. PhD-Thesis.
- JOAS, H. 1996. *The creativity of action*. University of Chicago Press.
- LEIBEL, Esther, Tim HALLET, and Beth A. BECHKY. 2018. "Meaning at the Source: The Dynamics of Field Formation in Institutional Research." *Academy of Management Annals*, 12.1 (2018): 154-177.
- KELLER, Reiner. 2005. *Die diskursive Konstruktion von Wirklichkeit. Zum Verhältnis von Wissenssoziologie und Diskursforschung*. Konstanz: UVK.
- KENTIKELLENIS, A. E., & SEABROOKE, L. 2017. The politics of world polity: Script-writing in international organizations. *American Sociological Review*, 82(5), 1065-1092.
- MEYER, J. W., BOLI, J., & THOMAS, G. M. 1987. Ontology and rationalization in the Western cultural account. In: THOMAS G.M.; MEYER, J.W.; Ramirez, F.O.; Boli, J. (eds.): *Institutional structure: Constituting state, society, and the individual*, 12-37.
- MEYER, J. W. & JEPPERSON, R. L. 2000. The 'actors' of modern society: The cultural construction of social agency. *Sociological Theory*, 18, 100-120.
- POOLE, P. P., GRAY, B., & GIOIA, D. A. 1990. Organizational script development through interactive accommodation. *Group & Organization Studies*, 15(2), 212-232.
- SCHANK, R. C. & ABELSON, R. P. 1977. *Scripts, plans, goals, and understanding: An inquiry into human knowledge structures*, Psychology Press.
- SUCHMAN, L. A. 1987. *Plans and Situated Actions: The Problem of Human-Machine Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WEIK, E. 2012. Introducing "the creativity of action" into institutionalist theory. *Management*, 15, 564-581.
- WESSEL, L. 2014. *Inscribing as Institutional Work: A Case Study of the Implementation of an Inter-Organizational Information System in a German Integrated Care Network*. *Dissertation at the Department of Information Systems, School of Business & Economics, Freie Universität Berlin*.
- WRIGHT, A. L., & ZAMMUTO, R. F. 2013. Wielding the willow: Processes of institutional change in English county cricket. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56(1), 308-330.
- ZUCKER, L. G. 1977. The Role of Institutionalization in Cultural Persistence. *American Sociological Review*, 42, 726-743.

About the Nano-Papers

The Nano-Papers “Institution - Organization - Society” enable a pointed as well as profound examination of theoretical questions in the area of sociological Neo-Institutionalism. They thus serve both the exchange of theoretical ideas and the development of conceptual foundations. The goal of the short contributions is to present, critically examine and further develop theoretical concepts. The Nano-Papers, then, should not be understood as conclusive theoretical contributions, but rather as an invitation to exchange conceptual positions.

Editors of the Nano-Papers

Dr. Stefan Kirchner, University of Hamburg

Dr. Anne K. Krüger, Humboldt University of Berlin

Dr. Frank Meier, University of Bremen

Dr. Uli Meyer, Technische Universität München

Copyright and content

The copyright remains with the authors of the respective Nano-Papers. The authors are responsible for the published content. The Nano-Papers reflect the views of their respective authors and not those of the editors. Further development and the final publication of the content elsewhere by the authors are explicitly possible.

Image rights for the title page: <https://unsplash.com/@dmitriime2dev>

Place of publication: Technische Universität München, Munich