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***Capturing institutional change dynamics in public policy fields: a realist literature review
on institutional work***

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Purpose of the paper

When we think of institutions, we envisage powerful forces such as states, justice, economy, education. These are social constructs that shape the interactions of individuals and organisations in everyday life. ‘Institutions are comprised of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life’ (Scott, 2008, p. 48, as cited in Piezunka, 2019, p. 276). In organisational research, the institutional approach aids in elucidating the formal and informal ‘rules of the game in a society’ (North, 1990, as cited in Ramos-Mejía & Balanzo, 2018, p. 4) and the norms operating in organisational exchanges by allocating resources and providing standards and mechanisms of control. These norms are expected to guide behaviour in the relationships among organisations and the associated costs of their nonconformity (Lawrence et al., 2011).

In neo-institutional theory, the early works of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Oliver (1991, 1992) centred their analysis on how institutions govern action. Research on institutional work (IW) reverses this scope by addressing ‘the impact of individual and collective actors on the institutions that regulate the fields in which they operate’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 218). IW represents ‘the broad category of purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 216). These dynamics occur within organisational fields, which has been recognized as a dominant boundary of interest in organisational research (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). In this context, a burgeoning volume of literature has focused on analysing the dynamics of institutional change at the field-level.

We conducted a realist literature review with the overarching goal of explanation building (Paré et al., 2015). We aim to answer the following research question: *How has the institutional work framework been used to analyse public policy fields?* More specifically: What are the forms of

institutional work whereby organisational actors shape or transform public policy fields? How can these actors encourage institutional change or continuity in the institutional arrangements within these fields? What are the complementary research streams explaining these practices of institutional work? How can future research in IW be guided by the insights gained from this review?

Methodology

We followed the RAMESES publication standards (Wong et al., 2013), modifying our flow diagram to align with the PRISMA method (Page et al., 2021), thereby illustrating our review protocol. After applying the protocol for identification, screening, and inclusion, we retained 74 articles for analysis. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first literature review proposing a content analysis of IW research conducted at the field-level. In addition, we adopt a narrow scope, focusing on inter-organisational interactions as our unit of analysis.

Findings

Public policy fields have been extensively explored through this theoretical stream. Our results indicate that the implementation of public policies serves as a rich context to explore the IW practices, as actors engage in a range of purposive actions to shape policy outcomes in line with their interests and values. In this review, we have identified 17 different public policies that span a variety of sectors, including sustainable economic development, healthcare, water supply and sanitation, regulatory policy, welfare, and transportation, among others. Results show how research in public management can be nurtured by examining the ways in which IW unfolds at the field-level within each policy environment.

The corresponding literature emphasises the role of public policy implementation in fostering the creation of new institutions (Canales, 2016; Crawford & Branch, 2015), practices (Håvold et al., 2018; Opara et al., 2022; Svensson et al., 2017), or professions (Piezunka, 2019; Sajtos et al., 2018) within the public sector, as well as in adopting new regulatory frameworks for innovations (Duygan et al., 2019; Smolka & Heugens, 2020). In this regard, institutional creation within public policy fields has been analysed with respect to the intentionality of actors, the use of discourses as a key mechanism for legitimising new practices, and the strategies actors employ to manage uncertainty and facilitate the stabilisation of new policies within these fields. Besides, we assert that maintenance emerges during the implementation of public policies either as a strategy to resist change (Coule & Patmore, 2013; Perner & Skjølvik, 2018; Pernicka & Glassner, 2014; van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019), or as a means to ensure

stability once change has been achieved (Bækkelund, 2022; de Lima et al., 2020; George et al., 2018; Jacometti et al., 2022). Herein, IW manifests as driven either internally or externally. Specifically, maintenance work may manifest as defensive, resistant or reparative actions, underscoring power dynamics, shifts in positions, and deviant actions. These features are significant in strategies aimed at preserving institutional arrangements. Furthermore, we highlighted that disruption, often considered as antithetical to maintenance or as a precursor to institutional creation, is predominantly characterised by discursive (Möllering & Müller-Seitz, 2018; Waldron et al., 2015) and opportunistic actions (Ben Slimane, 2012; Rohde & Hielscher, 2021).

In addition, several authors indicate that the forms of IW emerge iteratively and simultaneously rather than in a sequential order (Malsch & Gendron, 2013; Hayne & Free, 2014). Our results further this observation in the context of public policy fields (Dowling & Smith, 2016; Gluch & Svensson, 2018). Moreover, the IW appears to be a dynamic approach since some forms can cross categories depending on the specific change settings (Currie et al., 2012; Herepath & Kitchener, 2016; Rohde & Hielscher, 2021).

Nearly two decades since its emergence, research on IW has witnessed an increasing number of conceptualisations concerning new categories of practices. Our review identifies such emergent categories at the field-level, which may serve methodological purposes in discerning forms of IW within specific empirical settings. Nevertheless, we advocate for a concerted effort among scholars to explore the lacunes related to the accomplishment of successful IW practices and their symbolic, material, and relational nature. We outline an integrative framework that holds promise for addressing these gaps, yet its empirical validation remains outstanding.

It is apparent that whilst significant strides have been made in understanding the nuances of IW dynamics, substantial gaps remain, especially within the realm of public sector institutions coping with major social challenges. For instance, effectively harnessing technological innovations serves as a lever for tackling such challenges. Indeed, public organisations are impacted by technological disruptions, and a major challenge for the public sector involves managing and adapting to these innovations (Bartoli & Blatrix, 2022). In this light, our review seeks to propose a research agenda whose aim is to enrich the stream of research on IW by applying it as a policy-focused approach (Hampel et al., 2017). Consequently, future research should aim not only to diversify empirical settings within the public sector but also to enhance

our understanding of how IW practices can reconcile market logic with public interest logic in adopting platform-based solutions for public service delivery.

Our review synthesises studies that exemplify the necessary convergence of field-level logics as potential focal points for IW. Despite several calls for research on this topic (Gawer & Phillips, 2013; Hampel et al., 2017), a decade has elapsed and this notable literature gap persists. This promising research avenue could provide evidence that IW is an apt framework for elucidating and informing transformations in management practices, public strategies, and policymaking. Such an approach can offer better understanding about how public administrations manage change and adapt it to improve the quality of public service.

Furthermore, we argue that researchers should advance empirical studies by applying the lens of IW across diverse cultural contexts. It is important to carefully consider the specificities of political and administrative systems different from the Anglo-Saxon milieu, where this stream has predominantly evolved. Thus, a more nuanced perspective of IW practices and institutional logics may better inform those “big public institutions” from which much is needed to tackle the great challenges of our present and future.

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