



# Institutional maintenance in an international bureaucracy: Everyday practices of international elites inside UNESCO

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have recently called for an organizational sociology of international experts and expertise, the production and functioning of elite worlds. Meanwhile, efforts have been made to refocus organization studies of institutions towards the lived experience and everyday working practices through which organizational actors perceive, reproduce and revise the institutional structures within which they operate. The purpose of this paper is to bridge the study of international elites in the context of international policy making and emergent research on how actors actively accomplish institutional maintenance, the intent being to advance a more differentiated understanding of agency of international elites in micro-institutional maintenance. This research is based on an organizational ethnography among international program experts at the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris. The study contributes to knowledge about how maintenance of institutional frameworks of policy making is accomplished by program specialists as they continually apply the legitimate language of the institution, endow it with institutional authority in everyday practices and navigate in hierarchies and social networks. The paper discusses contributions to extant research on international elite worlds, power and agency in institutional reproduction.

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## Introduction

Organization studies have seemingly drifted away from original concerns with elites, power and politics (Mills, 1956; Zald & Lounsbury, 2010). Yet, lately organization scholars have called for renewed attention to such concerns (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006; Kerr & Robinson, 2012; Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2010; Maclean, Harvey, & Kling, 2014; Reed, 2012). To make the sociology of organization further policy relevant, institutional analysts have proposed an institutional analysis of international elites, of new forms of expertise and command posts (Zald & Lounsbury, 2010). Zald and Lounsbury (2010) put forward an agenda for an organizational sociology of international elites operating across nation states in the context of international policy making, drawing on contemporary theories of how power becomes embedded in culture. Such an approach to international elites and expertise could concern itself with professional experts staffing command posts – organizational centres of societal power, e.g. national bureaucracies such as the Federal Reserve, and international bureaucracies like the World Bank, the IMF and the UN. These comprise elites staffing institutions of power in overseeing and aiming to maintain order in economy and society.

Recent contributions draw attention to the relevance of scrutinizing micro-practices and forms of agency of organizational elites (Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012). Still, however, research efforts are needed with regard to how international expert worlds function and how these worlds are produced and reproduced in specific organizational infrastructures (Maclean et al., 2012; Zald & Lounsbury, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to bridge the study of international elites in the context of international policy making and emergent research on how actors actively are involved in institutional maintenance, the intent being to add to a more differentiated understanding of agency of international elites in micro-institutional maintenance. This speaks to current concerns to refocus institutional studies of organizations towards the lived experience and everyday practices through which organizational actors perceive, reproduce and revise the institutional structures within which they work (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011; Powell & Colyvas, 2008). Particularly, nascent research calls for uncovering the micro-foundations of institutional maintenance as a non-static process, thus providing a more differentiated view of agency than offered by some traditional institutional theorizations (Dacin, Munir, & Tracey, 2010; Lok & de Rond, 2013; Zilber, 2002, 2009). Hence, the topic to be confronted by this paper is framed by the following questions: how do program experts in an international bureaucracy cope and work with imposed institutional mechanisms? And how does

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their agency in this process actively maintain institutional patterns? This study thus elucidates the stabilizing and destabilizing influence of everyday bureaucratic work on institutional structures of policy and strategy making (Bourdieu, 1981; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).

The paper is based on a six-month organizational ethnography among program experts in an international policy institution, namely UNESCO's headquarters in Paris. First of all it is worth noting that for the staff occupying the corridors of UNESCO, the world is connected. As Calhoun (2003, p. 543) points out: “‘Good’ passports and easy access to visa, international credit cards and membership in airline clubs, invitations from conference organizers and organizational contacts, all facilitate a kind of inhabitation . . . of the world as an apparent whole.” Secondly, there is not only a strong *esprit de corps*, but much of the professional staff also identify with the ideals and goals of UNESCO. In Hoggart's (1978, p. 112) words, UNESCO can “form a total world” for staff, who do not belong anywhere anymore except in the international corridors of UNESCO. The Culture Sector of the UNESCO headquarters thus constitutes a fertile institutional setting for the study of how elites are involved in the production and reproduction of international policy frameworks. The professionals staffing UNESCO's headquarters belong to what has been termed the new elites of globalization (Robinson, 2011; Wagner, 1998). The research thus provides a view into the everyday institutional dynamics of international governance and international communities (Djelic & Quack, 2010; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006b).

Moreover, this international policy institution is of particular relevance as extant research on UNESCO and similar international policy institutions from an ethnographic insider perspective is scarce. The literature is often informed by formalistic inquiries where institutional rules and regulations, concerning the political structure of the UNESCO bureaucracy and management, are largely taken at face value. Through this lens, institutional rules and regulations are assumed to structure actions inside the organization as well as policy making in a highly linear and transparent fashion, thus missing all that which the neo-Weberian, old institutionalists showed was important in bureaucracies (Hinings & Greenwood, 2002). That is, they are not linked to an analysis of practice, of how institutional rules and regulations are infused with value, sustained or counteracted by bureaucratic actors, and how social and institutional power is patterned and operating through recognition, admiration, alliances and fear (Selznick, 1949). In different terms, what is missing in most accounts of UNESCO is the ‘guts of institutions’ (Stinchcombe, 1997), i.e., that institutional rules and values only work insofar as somebody holds them to their standards and they impact or resonate with the beliefs, concerns or interests of people staffing bureaucratic institutions (Bourdieu, 1981; Herzfeld, 1992; Selznick, 1996; Stinchcombe, 1997; Suddaby, Elsbach, Greenwood, Meyer, & Zilber, 2008).

The remainder of this paper is split into the following sections: first, the conceptual foundation of the study is presented. The subsequent section outlines the ethnographic methodology applied. Then the findings are presented. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing contributions to extant research on experts, power and agency in institutional reproduction.

### Theoretical foundation: a practice approach to institutional (re)production

This study leverages practice theory to elucidate the involvement of elites in institutional maintenance in the context of international policy making and expertise. Thus, on the one hand, we conceptualize UNESCO as a semi-autonomous, loose-coupled institutional order or field (Goffman, 1983; Vaughan, 2008). It is semi-autonomous in the sense that it is related to the larger UN system

and to the field of international institutions; yet micro-practices inside UNESCO, through which local institutional patterns are (re-)produced, are not determined by these framing relations (a focus we pursue below in the section ‘situating UNESCO’). On the other hand, we draw inspiration from and expand literatures on the role of institutional language and practical sense in institutional (re-)production, especially in regard to everyday practices inside the organization. We link these through theory of practice which has gained increasing currency in organization studies (Gomez & Bouty, 2011). DiMaggio and Powell (1991) proposed theories of practice to serve as one potential micro-foundation for researching institutions. Numerous strands of theories of practice have emerged (Rasche & Chia, 2009). This study draws inspiration from Bourdieu (1992, 1990) on language and practical sense. In this vein, this research extends current interest in institutional (re)production from a practice-based view (Jarzabkowski, Smets, Bednarek, Burke, & Spee, 2013).

Hence, this perspective is grounded in a social research tradition that concerns itself with how bureaucratic and organizational power operates through everyday acts of support and contestation over institutional rules, values and resources, and with the formation of informal social orders and conflicting interests (Gouldner, 1954a; Herzfeld, 1992; Rocha & Granerud, 2011).

This analytical orientation focuses attention on how social processes of bureaucratic authority and power, such as censorship and hierarchy, influence policies as certain policy keywords become endowed with institutional legitimacy and thus institutional authority. Such bureaucratic acts of institution silence the ongoing contestation of notions of culture in policy making (Bourdieu, 1992). As we will demonstrate in the findings section, inside UNESCO institutional authority is sustained due to overlaps of hierarchy, actors and their notions and networks (Shore & Wright, 1996). This theoretical underpinning is particularly fertile for illuminating how institutional norms and values of legitimate policy making are promoted, produced and sustained through everyday interactions of multiple actors as they struggle for influence, recognition, upward mobility and resources. Thus, we conceptualize institutions as ‘social forms’ of as well as for social interaction (Barley, 2008; Bjerregaard & Jonasson, 2013; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006b; Hughes, 1942; Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen, & Van de Ven, 2009). We elucidate the maintenance of institutional patterns of and for micro-level bureaucratic interaction at UNESCO headquarters, yet patterns that are shaped by a wider field of international institutions.

### Agency in institutional maintenance

An institutional logic can be considered a means-end framework shaping the actions that are considered appropriate and legitimate for achieving a given end in a field of activity (Boxenbaum & Battilana, 2005; Dobbin, 1994; Scott, 1987; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Institutional theory has for long depicted logics as taken-for-granted social facts and institutional reproduction as being based on taken-for-granted, mindless participation (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Scott, 2008; Seo & Creed, 2002). Therefore, most scholarly attention with regard to agency has been accorded to projective and foresighted action in purposely accomplishing institutional change, as also reflected in the initial conceptualizations of ‘purposeful’ institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Iterative and practically-evaluative forms of agency in institutional settings remain comparatively under-researched (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). With regard to the reproduction of institutions, institutional analysts have lately categorized various practices which maintain institutions by reproducing existing norms and belief systems (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). One line of inquiry focuses on policing work. That is, the maintenance of institutions through

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