

SECTION 4

COMMUNICATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON MICROFOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER 1

ARGUMENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Institutions are built upon language. Although we have a number of linguistic perspectives already in our arsenal, this chapter seeks to convince you of our need for just one more. The primary claim is that because the structure of arguments uniquely maps onto the latent structure of institutions, the use of arguments in institutional analysis may help us gain more traction on three important topics – the nature taken-for-grantedness, the macro-micro divide, and the political dynamics of institutions. This chapter thus offers a starting point for how to use an argumentation perspective when studying institutions.

Keywords: Language; communication; arguments; institutions; methods; viewpoint

INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful window through which to observe and understand institutions. Since institutional meanings get codified in how actors commonly express their ideas and justify their actions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Schutz, 1967; Zucker, 1977), language usage can serve as a proxy for otherwise unobservable institutional dynamics. Moreover, since actions can be strategic and deviate from the norms, values, or beliefs of a broader institutional collective (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1967), language can also help explain how and why institutional meanings evolve. In this sense, language is useful for institutional analyses because it is both the residue from how institutions think (Douglas, 1986) and the motor for how institutions change (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

Microfoundations of Institutions

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It is perhaps unsurprising then that the number of linguistic perspectives used to study institutions has proliferated over the last few decades. A large body of research, for instance, draws on discourse (Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004), rhetoric (Green, 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), or vocabularies (Loewenstein, Ocasio, & Jones, 2012; Ocasio & Joseph, 2005) to explore the processes of institutional maintenance and change. Other scholars have leveraged theories on impression management (Elsbach, 1994; Lamin & Zaheer, 2012), framing (Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Rhee & Fiss, 2014), or narratives (Garud, Schildt, & Lant, 2014; Vaara, 2002) to examine how organizational actors justify their actions and manage legitimacy in institutional settings. Given this already crowded set of linguistic perspectives, I can imagine what you might be thinking – do we really need yet another?

The aim of this chapter is to convince you that arguments are related to institutions in such a unique and useful way that the answer is yes, we do need just one more perspective. My primary claim is that the structure of arguments maps directly onto the latent structure of institutions. Arguments are thus unique in that they are structurally equivalent linguistic expressions of our institutions. I propose that this relationship between arguments and institutions gives us more traction, both theoretically and empirically, on three topics of increasing interest to institutional scholars – the nature taken-for-grantedness, the macro–micro divide, and the political dynamics of institutions. This chapter first introduces what arguments are and discusses their key structural characteristics. I then unpack how an argumentation perspective provides insight into these three core topics in institutional theory, followed by a discussion of several methodological considerations. Finally, I close by reflexively examining the argument outlined in this chapter to demonstrate the usefulness of an argumentation perspective not only to studying institutions but also to the very practices scholars employ to describe them.

ARGUMENTATION THEORY

What is an Argument?

Arguments are a way of reasoning with others. They are used when opinions concerning a particular topic differ, or appear to differ, and the individuals involved want to address such differences by either justifying their own standpoint or refuting someone else's. Arguments emphasize the offering and weighing of evidence, supporting one's position against contradictory pieces of evidence, and negotiating with others as to the reasonableness of one's conclusions. Arguments, therefore, enable public deliberation and provide a basis for collaborative engagement between interested parties. In this sense, the use of arguments is fundamentally a social activity that captures the meaning-making activities of institutional life.

Arguments historically have been conceptualized in two distinct ways (van Emmeren, Grootendorst, & Henkemans, 1996). First, from a normative perspective, arguments are a way to persuade others. Since arguments are offered to convince an audience of a position, many scholars study the types of strategies that

are most successful in accomplishing this goal. Considered in this way, normative argumentation theory is a subset of what organization scholars today call rhetorical theory (Green, 2004; Green, Li, & Nohria, 2009; Harmon, 2016). Second, from a descriptive perspective, arguments are examined for how they are presented and executed in everyday practice (Goodnight, 2006; Harmon, Green, & Goodnight, 2015). Thus, while this chapter itself is a normative argument to convince you of specific claims, the content of this chapter focuses on the descriptive perspective and outlines how argument structure in particular might serve as a useful basis to the study of institutions.

Argument Structure

Argument structure refers to how we naturally organize our reasoning when offering arguments to others. Aristotle (1991) developed one of the first approaches to conceptualizing argument structure, suggesting that arguments are naturally arranged into syllogistic forms. Syllogisms traditionally contain three structural components: a *major premise* (e.g., all men are mortal) and a *minor premise* (e.g., Socrates is a man) that necessarily lead to a *conclusion* (e.g., therefore, Socrates is mortal). According to Aristotle, arguments were structured as deductive, logical proofs that necessarily produce a conclusion.

However, with the advent of the linguistic turn in philosophy during the early twentieth century, scholars began viewing these logical deductions with suspicion. Wittgenstein (1953), among others (Habermas, 1973; Heidegger, 1927; Rorty, 1980), turned reason and rationality on its head by inverting Aristotle's core thesis – indeed, the world was not in need of formal proof, but of informal justification. By realizing that we can never stand objectively outside of the social world, they argued that imposing formal proofs upon it to deduce necessary conclusions is presumptuous, if not impossible. This shift in focus – from formal logic to informal justification – also began to resonate with what many saw in daily social life. We, of course, do not walk around providing syllogisms to others, we merely offer justifications if and when they are socially required.

It was around this time that Stephen Toulmin entered the scene. Born in London, Toulmin attended Cambridge University, earning his bachelors in 1943, his masters in 1947, and his PhD in philosophy in 1950. It was during his time at Cambridge that Toulmin came into contact with Wittgenstein, who taught in the philosophy department from 1929 to 1947 and deeply influenced Toulmin's understanding of the relationship between the uses and meanings of language. Toulmin started his career by studying argumentation in the field of law, believing that this was a useful setting in which to study a stable structure of argumentation. He saw the courtroom as a constellation of propositions, where claims were always open to reinterpretation and people were always jockeying for positions. However, he soon realized that this was how argumentation operated everywhere. Eight years after finishing his PhD, Toulmin wrote a book called *The Uses of Argument* (Toulmin, 1958) where he developed what is today known as one of the most authoritative ways of understanding argument structure, commonly known as the Toulmin Model of Argument.

The Toulmin Model of Argument

As shown in Fig. 1, the Toulmin Model of Argument contains four primary components – *claim*, *data*, *warrant*, and *backing* – which serve as the core structure of an argument, and two secondary components – *qualifier* and *rebuttal* – which serve to further reduce the strength of the core argument. According to Toulmin, informal argumentation is structured as follows. People in daily life typically reason with others by first asserting *claims* (i.e., conclusions). To the extent those claims are not credible or are questioned, they will move to justify their claims first with *data* (i.e., evidence), then with *warrants* (i.e., explanations for why this data support this claim), and if the claim is still in question, eventually with the *backing* (i.e., the generally understood assumptions, or “rules of the game,” for why these data and warrants are even appropriate in the first place). Speakers offering this argument can temper their claim by adding a *qualifier*, and audience members can offer different forms of *rebuttals* to further weaken or get others to reject outright such a claim.

To unpack these six components, consider the following example. During a quarterly earnings call, management wants to assure analysts that their decision to acquire a foreign company is a good decision for their investors (*claim*). They may start by justifying this claim by providing metrics from a discounted cash flow (DCF) model (*data*), and then potentially provide some sort of caveat to their level of certainty by saying that such data “appears to” supports their decision (*qualifier*). If pushed to further justify this claim, they might go on to explain in more detail exactly how such DCF metrics justify the acquisition (*warrant*) and maybe even go so far as to point out that acquisition decisions like these are normally based on financial considerations (*backing*). Analysts, in response, could of course ask questions to challenge this argument in all sorts of ways (*rebuttal*). For instance, they might ask what “appears to” really means, question the use of the discount rate in the DCF model, or reject that such metrics actually support this particular acquisition. They might even argue that the decision to make this acquisition should not be based on financial considerations at all and, instead, that this is really a decision concerning environmental or national security concerns.

From this example, we can observe three characteristics about the Toulmin Model that begin to reveal why this perspective might be particularly useful

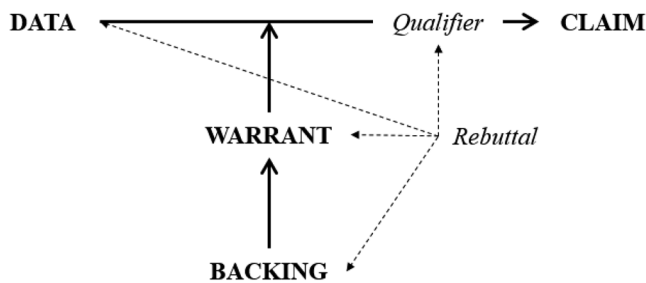


Fig. 1. The Toulmin Model of Argument.

when studying institutions. First, argument structure does not vary across fields. While the content that fills these six different structural buckets can change with the context, the basic structure within which argumentation unfolds does not. Second, this is a theory based on justification, where equally important to what *is said* is what *is not said*. For instance, the fact that a warrant or backing is left implicit in an argument carries with it an implication and meaning that contains as much meaning (albeit different ones) as stating them explicitly. Third, argumentation is always open to debate. Because arguments are no longer formal proofs, believability is based not on logic but on reasonableness and plausibility (Toulmin, 1958; Weick, 1995), validating that matters are never closed and always open to reinterpretation.

ARGUMENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

Argument structure, as captured in the Toulmin Model, lays the theoretical groundwork for making additional headway on the three important institutional theory topics – the nature of taken-for-grantedness, the macro-micro divide, and the political dynamics of institutions. This section offers a preliminary outline of how an argumentation perspective might begin to shed light on these topics and related research areas.

Topic #1: Arguments and the Nature of Taken-for-Grantedness

Taken-for-grantedness is arguably the most essential characteristic of an institution (Phillips & Malhotra, 2017, p. 201). Typically associated with the concept of cognitive legitimacy, taken-for-grantedness is the process or state of viewing institutional meanings as fact-like, natural, or objective (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). When meanings become taken-for-granted, their origins become detached “from the presumed control of the very actors who initially created them” (Suchman, 1995, p. 583), which obscures their social origins (Douglas, 1986; Schutz, 1967) and makes alternatives to the current conditions “literally unthinkable” (Zucker, 1983, p. 25). While this end state of being completely taken-for-granted is rarely, if ever, attainable, the basic notion of increasing or decreasing levels of taken-for-grantedness undergirds questions related to the maintenance or change of institutions as well as the processes of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization.

Despite the importance and centrality of taken-for-grantedness, we rarely theorize about it or directly test it empirically. Most studies that emphasize legitimacy focus on substantive forms of legitimacy (e.g., pragmatic or moral), which are positive or negative social evaluations of an organization, practice, or idea (Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2017; Tost, 2011). In contrast, cognitive legitimacy, and more specifically taken-for-grantedness, instead reflects the increasing absence of these substantive evaluations. The very nature of taken-for-grantedness thus presents a problem when trying to study it – how can one study something if it is the absence of an evaluation, and when drawing attention to it will change the very nature of the concept

itself? As Green, Li, and Nohria (2009) accurately point out, this has left institutional theorists to simply infer the role of taken-for-grantedness in their studies (e.g., that taken-for-grantedness is likely increasing when institutionalization is occurring) without being able to examine it directly. A way to directly theorize about and empirically examine the nature of taken-for-grantedness, therefore, would be useful for further developing our understanding of institutions.

The first and most important claim of this chapter is that the structure of arguments map onto the taken-for-granted structure of institutions. Taken-for-grantedness is the degree to which institutional actors assume certain meanings to be fact-like, natural, or objective (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and, thus, simply go without saying (Suchman, 1995; Zucker, 1983). Evidence of low levels of taken-for-grantedness should be able to indicate that these meanings do not go without saying and need to be discussed, while evidence of high levels of taken-for-grantedness should be able to indicate that these meanings need not be stated explicitly. Arguments operate in a parallel fashion. People offer claims, then data, then warrants, and finally backings, but only do so to the extent such justifications are needed. If these justifications are not needed, these structural components of the argument literally go without saying. Thus, I propose that the presence and absence of these components of argument structure in daily discourse can serve as a theoretical and empirical proxy for the level of taken-for-grantedness (see Fig. 2).

Let us return to the example where management is justifying their acquisition decision to analysts. Consider several counterfactual situations that would indicate decreasing levels of taken-for-grantedness within the institutional context. First, consider the baseline – if analysts knew that the organization had a successful track record of foreign acquisitions, then perhaps management offering only the claim that they were going to acquire one more would have been entirely sufficient (i.e., no additional justification would be requested). But imagine if analysts instead demanded justification for this acquisition (i.e., data requested), and then followed it up by probing the appropriateness of certain discount rates used in management's DCF models and how this supported an acquisition (i.e., warrant

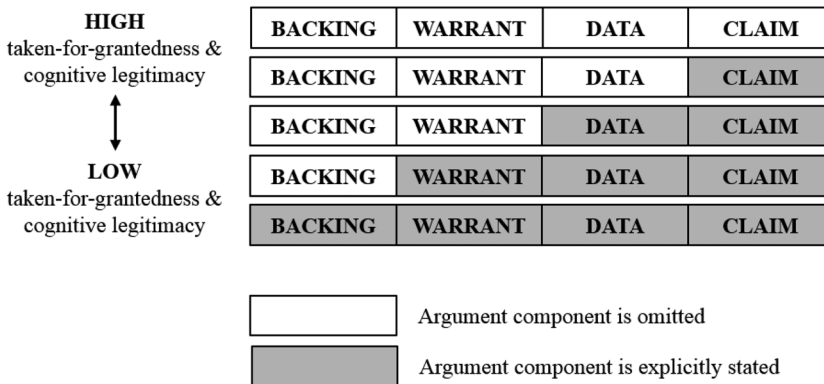


Fig. 2. Argument Structure and the Structure of Taken-for-Grantedness.

requested). One might even imagine analysts eventually pushing management to explain why they were basing this decision on financial considerations in the first place (i.e., backing requested).

By requiring management to provide the data, then the warrant, and ultimately the backing, the level of taken-for-grantedness became weaker as more components of argument structure were made explicit (see Fig. 2). Indeed, as the data, the warrant, and the backing no longer “went without saying,” management had to provide them as further justification for their claim (Kim & Harmon, 2014; Werder, 1999). Note that this mapping of argument structure to decreasing levels of taken-for-grantedness can be seen even in the simplest contexts, like when a child keeps asking an adult “why?” Asking “why?” may seem silly to adults in many situations, but it is only because we take many of our “would be” justifications for granted. Children do not, and they are genuinely curious about why the world is the way it is, since, to them, it could be otherwise. This suggested mapping of argument structure onto the structure of taken-for-grantedness also has potential implications for specific research areas within institutional theory.

Institutionalization and Deinstitutionalization

The processes of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization can be viewed, at least in part, as the increasing and decreasing of taken-for-grantedness, respectively (Zucker, 1977). If argument structure mirrors the structure of taken-for-grantedness, then the usage or omission of different components of an argument’s structure might be able to tell us something about such processes. Green, Li, and Nohria (2009) provide some initial validation of this intuition in their exploration of how argument structure changes as the practice of total quality management (TQM) institutionalizes. They examine managerial arguments that justify the use of TQM and find that, over time, the use of the warrant and then the data disappears, leaving only the use of the claim in discourse. They conclude that this “collapse of argument structure” is evidence that the warrant and data were no longer needed to justify TQM and, as a result, is evidence of the symbolic institutionalization of the practice.

Harmon and Rhee (2019) recently took this intuition in a different direction by examining how new valuation metrics emerge and get institutionalized. They explore this by looking at how entrepreneurial firms justify their value to investors when going public. Typically, value is justified using financial metrics (data) to convince others to invest in them (claim). However, when new organizations enter a nascent market, such as Internet firms during the late 1990s, organizations often do not have any financial operating histories and, as a result, do not have the commonly accepted forms of data to justify their value. What Harmon and Rhee show is that these entrepreneurial firms, over time, collectively constructed new Internet-related metrics (e.g., daily active users, online users, etc.) by first constructing a new valuation schema that made these new metrics intelligible. By first constructing a new backing, these entrepreneurs were thus able to provide new forms of data that were previously non-sensical.

Harmon (2018) shows that this story works equally well in reverse. In particular, he explores what happens when the Chair of the United States Federal Reserve explicitly reaffirms assumptions (or the backing) that are already taken-for-granted. What's interesting is that the Fed Chair often reaffirms the backing in their speeches to increase transparency and ensure the market is crystal clear about the basis of their decisions. They assume that doing so will increase confidence in their policies and reduce uncertainty in the market. However, Harmon finds the opposite to be true. Once such meanings are already taken-for-granted and assumed to be a closed matter, explicitly reaffirming them only opens this taken-for-grantedness back up and makes these meanings debatable once again. Consistent with this reasoning, Harmon finds that the more the Fed Chair reaffirms the backing, the more market uncertainty increases.

These observations thus point to argument structure as a conceptual and empirically observable aspect of language that relates directly to taken-for-grantedness, cognitive legitimacy, and the stability of our social institutions. The increasing disappearance of argument components, from backing to warrant to data to claim, provides an increasingly strong signal that the institutional foundations are becoming more stable. In contrast, as these argument components increasingly appear in discourse, whether it is because audience members demand justification or speakers preemptively provide it, this provides an increasingly strong signal that the previously agreed upon aspects of the institution are at risk to be challenged or even changed (Harmon et al., 2015). Thus, we might think of this linear dimension of argument structure – backing-warrant-data-claim – as the linguistic fulcrum upon which the stability of our social institutions rests (see Fig. 2).

The Meaning of Silence

These observations also shed light on a related topic of interest regarding the meaning of silence (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Green, 2004; Zucker, 1977). That is, when we observe behavioral conformity across actors in an institutional context, and there is no obvious evidence of coercion, existing scholarship often assumes that silence from these actors means that their behavioral conformity is consensual (Green et al., 2009). Yet this is an oversimplification for two reasons. First, complete silence is actually not that common. In an age where markets demand increased transparency and communication from civic and organizational leaders, and where social media is constantly buzzing with people's private thoughts made public, we might be better served paying more attention to variations in near silence rather than searching for pure silence. Second, consensus itself can mean many things, and knowing what underlies such apparent agreement might be useful.

The mapping of argument structure onto the structure of taken-for-grantedness might provide insight into these issues. In particular, if we look at the Toulmin Model, we can begin to imagine a typology of institutional silence. We might think about what silence from one of these argument components means in isolation, or what silence from one component and the explicit expression of

another might together signal about the stability of the institution. For example, the presence of data without the presence of the other argument components might indicate a reasonably high degree of certainty between actors about the truth of a claim. This context might represent what some have called a thick consensus (Goodnight, 2012), where all the data within the “rules of the game” are generally pointing in the same direction. In contrast, the presence of data and rebuttals, with the omission of the backing, might instead indicate a thin consensus (Goodnight, 2012), or a situation in which actors recognize and accept the same “rules of the game” but do so for different reasons. While evidence of the former suggests a strong basis for future institutional stability, the latter suggests the increased possibility for future instability. Future research might benefit from the explication of such a typology of silence.

Topic #2: Arguments and the Macro–Micro Divide

Institutions are multilevel social constructions (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). In most conceptualizations, the “macro” is paired with the collective-level, captured by a group or larger number of actors, while the “micro” is paired with the individual level, captured by people’s personal beliefs or judgments. The macro or collective thus influences individual micro behaviors through conformity and social influence, while individuals can disrupt this institutional reproduction and produce collective-level change. Thus, institutions represent a reciprocal relationship between the collective and individual levels of analysis (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Jepperson, 1991; Jepperson & Meyer, 2011).

Yet this mapping between macro-collective and micro-individual can present several problems (Harmon, Haack, & Roulet, 2018). First, institutional scholars and social psychologists alike show that we can examine macro considerations at the individual level. Indeed, Bitektine and Haack (2015) point out that individuals have both propriety judgments, which are idiosyncratic personal preferences, as well as validity judgments, which are beliefs about what “one does” in such a situation. And although sometimes these judgments are aligned, often times they are not. Second, social movement scholars also show that we often see micro-level changes emerge out of macro collectives. Together, this suggests that while this mapping of macro-collective and micro-individual is true in some sense and is certainly useful, there might be another way of thinking about the macro-micro divide.

The second claim of this chapter is that the structure of an argument, specifically with respect to the presence or absence of the backing, might provide an alternative way to conceptualize and bridge this macro-micro divide. While still acknowledging existing conceptualizations “macro” and “micro” (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Cardinale, 2018; Harmon et al., 2018; Harmon, Kim, & Mayer, 2015; Jepperson & Meyer, 2011), I suggest that the explicit discussion of the backing is one way to capture actors’ engagement of macro-level meanings, while leaving the backing implicit in discussions is one way to represent their engagement of micro-level meanings. This mapping is based on the idea that the backing

represents the “rules of the game” that underpin an institution, while the data-warrant-claim microfoundational triad is used only to the extent that they are validated by this taken-for-granted macrofoundation.

This conceptualization of the macro-micro divide echoes the nested systems perspective proposed by Holm (1995) in his study on the Norwegian fisheries. He provides the following analogy to explain this distinction.

Professional soccer, for instance, is played by rules set down by the international soccer federation, FIFA. Players might be unhappy with the rules. To change them, however, they must engage in a rather differently structured game than soccer, i.e., that of influencing FIFA’s policy-making body. While the mode of action at the first level can be characterized as practical, the mode of action at the second level is political.

To map Holm’s analogy onto the terminology used here, I propose that openly discussing the backing engages the political level and argues *about* the “rules of the game,” while leaving implicit the backing engages the practical level and argues merely *within* the “rules of the game.” One can see that this conceptualization already begins to hint at the political implications of argumentation theory, and we will engage this next in Topic #3. However, before doing so, I outline the implications of this new macro-micro conceptualization for several existing areas of research.

Bridging Levels of Analysis

This understanding can shed light on the pivotal moments of transition across institutional levels of analysis. For instance, Glaser, Fast, Harmon, and Green (2016) used this perspective to explain how macro-level meanings get pulled into micro-level decision-making. One common explanation of this process is based on a normative mechanism, where individuals recognize the “rules of the game” and that others appear to be abiding by such rules and, as a result, choose to play within those rules as well (Jackall, 1988; Loewenstein et al., 2012; Scott & Lyman, 1968). In Holm’s analogy, this is where players recognize the rules of soccer and, for various reasons, elect to play within them. Yet Glaser et al. demonstrate another explanation based on a cognitive mechanism, where macro-meanings unconsciously prime individuals’ implicit theories – theories about why people act the way they do – which, in turn, leads to behavioral conformity. Across several experiments, they show how actors, when primed with a backing related to the market, justified their claims using market-related data, despite not being able to articulate why they choose to use that data in the first place.

Harmon et al. (2015), in contrast, used this perspective to explain how micro-level activities percolate back up to macro-level meanings. Specifically, they leveraged the Toulmin Model to theorize how this very distinction between arguing *within* versus *about* the “rules of the game” helps us understand how institutions maintain their resilience or change over time. Their argument is that when we observe little to no backing in public discourse, this indicates that individuals are operating within the “rules of the game” and that the macro-level meanings are being implicitly reproduced, pointing to a case of institutional maintenance. However, when we observe the increasing use of backing, this indicates

that individuals are openly discussing and talking about the “rules of the game,” pointing to a situation in which these macro-level meanings are open to debate and have the increased potential to change.

Harmon (2016, 2018) recently provided empirical evidence of these dynamics in his study on the speeches given by the Chair of the Federal Reserve. Harmon created a measure called the “backing ratio,” where he coded each paragraph of a Fed Chair speech as either talking about the backing that undergirded the monetary policy framework or not, and then dividing the number of backing-related paragraphs by the total number of paragraphs in the speech. When plotting the average backing ratio over time from 1998 to 2018, Harmon showed that the amount of backing in the Chair’s speeches began to increase in 2007, and then decreases again after 2013. This period of increased backing-related talk coincides with the financial crisis and its lingering ripple effects across the financial system. Specifically, it was during this period that the Fed was openly talking about whether their assumptions about monetary policy-making were sound or not, which opened up the possibility for a potential change in their “rules of the game.” By 2013, however, many of these discussions had passed and the Fed was trying to get back to “business as usual,” evidenced by the drop in backing-related talk that showed that they were back to talking more within the “rules of the game.”

Institutional Complexity at Two Levels

This structural distinction that separates talk within versus about the “rules of the game” also offers a potentially useful insight into the study of institutional complexity (Goodnight, 2006; Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; McPherson & Sauder, 2013; Raaijmakers, Vermeulen, Meeus, & Zietsma, 2014). This growing body of work focuses primarily on identifying types of institutional complexity as well as how such complexity arises and is managed. Yet one topic not yet explored has to do with where this complexity is specifically located within the institution.

The perspective elaborated here suggests that institutional complexity might actually occur at two structurally distinct levels. At one level, complexity occurs within the “rules of the game.” These are situations in which the rules across different systems or logics are established and stable, but nevertheless conflict in a given situation, and actors are faced with the challenge of juggling these prescriptions without being able to recognize or even acknowledge the rules directly (Heimer, 1999; McPherson & Sauder, 2013). At another level, complexity can be about the “rules of the game.” These are situations where the complexity of the assumptions underlying institutions are precisely the object of inquiry, whereby actors are not simply coping with multiple prescriptions but navigating and sorting out the boundaries and appropriateness of the prescriptions themselves (Harmon, 2018; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

Topic #3: Arguments and the Political Dynamics of Institutions

Political considerations have long been a central element of institutional studies (Clegg, 2010; Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). This topic typically arises in two

different forms. First, political considerations are often viewed through the lens of power and control (Phillips et al., 2004). Indeed, if macro-level institutional considerations are sufficiently influential in affecting and shaping micro-level activities, then institutions can be a form of hegemony or repetitively activated controls (Jepperson, 1991). And depending on which actors have access to or influence over these “rules of the game,” concerns over power dynamics can arise (Holm, 1995; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Second, political considerations are also viewed through a lens that conceptualizes an institutional order as an open and contingent system that is always up for grabs or open to revision (Dalpiaz, Rindova, & Ravasi, 2016). Viewed in this manner, to understand the political dynamics of institutions is to understand the micro-level work engaged by actors on a daily basis (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009).

Yet lingering behind these considerations is a question institutional scholars have yet to ask – what is the structure of these political dynamics? Despite the acknowledgement of the political dynamics of institutions, we have not explicitly considered the structural rules actors themselves implicitly follow when engaging in such activities. Yet there is good reason to believe that strong norms of political interaction exist, constraining the way in which actors are able to engage in the first place. For example, sociolinguists have long acknowledged that, irrespective of the topic about which one is discussing, people tend to engage such topics in a predictable and collectively understood format (Grice, 1968, 1975). That is, to engage in politics, one typically follows the “rules of how one plays politics” in order to make a difference. (Although note that in 2019, on the American political scene, we can see that actors are actually trying to change the very rules by which politics is played.) To understand the structure underlying how one engages politically, therefore, may provide a latticework upon which to extend our understanding of the political dynamics of institutions.

Thus, the third and final claim of this chapter is that the argument structure depicted in the Toulmin Model might also provide a useful infrastructure upon which to begin building a better understanding of the political dynamics of institutions. Political dynamics, just like any social enterprise, have “rules of the game” that underlie its basic functioning. Given Toulmin’s belief that his model of argument provides a universal structure of how arguments unfolds, regardless of the context, I outline below two major ways argument structure might help institutional scholars deconstruct such political dynamics.

Power and Hegemony

One way to use the Toulmin Model to unpack these political dynamics is to think of such dynamics as an expression of control or power (Holm, 1995; Hsu & Grodal, 2015; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). While language is often thought of as a tool to actively frame certain realities (Rhee & Fiss, 2014) or provide stories to shape an audience’s interpretations (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001), *not* saying something is equally if not sometimes more powerful. Indeed, not bringing up a particular idea helps the speaker maintain control over the situation by ensuring that this idea cannot become a topic of conversation. This is especially

concerning when public discourse is one-sided, such as when organizational or civic leaders speak publicly but are not subject to questioning. Under such conditions, leaders might deliberately avoid discussing certain issues so as to reinforce the status quo. As Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, p. 24) warned, “Hegemony, at its most effective, is mute.”

Understanding the implications of what is not said is easy with the use of the Toulmin Model. Perhaps the most consequential omission in public discourse is the backing. Indeed, strategically omitting the backing serves as an implicit (and often non-conscious) reminder to an audience that the “rules of the game” are not up for debate, thereby reinforcing and reproducing the prevailing system. Harmon’s (2018) study on Fed communications speculates on this very idea, suggesting that the Chair choosing not to discuss the backing in certain circumstances might reflect a situation in which they do not want the markets to be able to question their monetary policy decisions (see also Abolafia, 2012).

It is not a coincidence that this discussion surrounding the meaning of not saying certain things sounds similar to the earlier discussion surrounding the meaning of silence. Power and taken-for-grantedness are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, our civic leaders might omit a discussion of the backing because they and everyone else knows that these “rules of the game” are a given in that context. Omission of the backing, in such cases, reflects the taken-for-grantedness of the collective. This taken-for-grantedness is useful for institutional functioning and makes society less complex. On the other hand, our civic leaders might omit a discussion of the backing despite the fact that the audience actually needs to hear them talk about it, or even worse, the audience does not even recognize that the current “rules of the game” are, in fact, detrimental or unfair to them in some way. Omission of the backing, in these cases, reflect power, domination, and hegemony. Is there a way to tell the difference between these two situations? More work could be done on this topic.

A Theory of Institutional Politicization

A second way to use the Toulmin Model to unpack the structure of these dynamics is to examine the everyday work actors engage in to reproduce or change institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009). Existing scholarship helps us think about institutions as systems that are contingent and always open to revision (Dalpiaz et al., 2016). But how exactly are they open to revision? The argument component of a *rebuttal*, which explicitly opens up the prevailing argument to debate, provides a potentially interesting way to answer this question. While Toulmin did not view the rebuttal as a primary component of argumentation, he thought it was by far the most flexible (Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1984). Indeed, rebuttals can be waged against all other argument components (i.e., qualifier, data, warrant, and backing).

This flexibility surrounding the use of rebuttals suggests that one might generate a typology of rebuttals to create what might be thought of as a theory of institutional politicization. For example, while rebutting a qualifier merely challenges the certainty of an already acknowledged claim, rebutting the data throws

into question the legitimacy of that justification itself. Moreover, rebutting the backing undermines the entire institution, as it ignores the argumentation within the “rules of the game” and makes perfectly clear that it is those very rules that are now open to debate. These dynamics are quite obvious during election season in politics, where candidates sometimes rebut each other while accepting their opponent’s backing, while other times they openly rebut the entire game upon which their opponent seems to be playing. By disentangling these different types of rebuttals, we might begin to understand where actors are entering an argument to challenge it and what aspects of the institution are at risk.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS: FROM CONTENT TO STRUCTURE

Using argument structure as a lens to study institutional processes and dynamics requires several important methodological considerations not to be overlooked. The primary reason for this is because the structure of argumentation is what Toulmin calls “field invariant.” That is, while the content (i.e., what is talked about) can change across institutional contexts, the structural buckets within which that content falls (i.e., the six components of the Toulmin Model) does not. This represents both an enormous benefit as well as a challenge. The benefit is that this approach enables scholars to begin studying the underlying structural dynamics of institutions, which might be viewed as the tectonic plates of our daily activities, rather than only looking at its content, which can be idiosyncratic to the context, the actor, or the audience. The challenge, of course, is empirically capturing these structural components as constructs when most of our methods to study language assesses its content.

What I mean by this last statement is that our methods to reduce the dimensionality of language tends to ignore its structural aspects, but does a very good job capturing its content. For instance, content analysis (Krippendorff, 2003; Neuendorf, 2001) is used to identify specific phrases or ideas expressed in the language. This method has been used by impression management scholars (Elsbach, 1994; Lamin & Zaheer, 2012), framing scholars (Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Rhee & Fiss, 2014), and narrative scholars (Martens, Jennings, & Jennings, 2007; Vaara, 2002). Closely related to content analysis is discourse analysis (Phillips & Hardy, 2002), which overlays the theoretical discursive perspective on the same content analysis methodological principles. More sophisticated, computerized methods have been developed, such as dictionary approaches (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003), topic modeling (Kaplan & Vakili, 2015), and vector analysis (Goldberg, Srivastava, Manian, Monroe, & Potts, 2016; Hoberg & Phillips, 2010). While these methods dramatically increase the speed and volume of text we can analyze at any given time, they are simply more sophisticated versions of dimensionality reduction techniques that take the ideas being discussed (i.e., the linguistic content) and isolate different constructs of interest.

But the content is not the direct object of interest when studying argument structure. Instead, the overarching goal for a structure-based approach is to code

for and capture the structural components of the Toulmin Model, irrespective of the content that falls within it. Of course, the content within these component buckets matters, especially to how we interpret the data and our conclusions. For instance, a conflict in backings between a financial understanding versus an environmental understanding matters and cannot be ignored. Indeed, such content-based considerations can lead to specific research questions, like who initiated or resolved the conflicts. However, structure-based considerations can get at entirely different questions, like assessing the level of stability within an institution. What this means is that an explicit emphasis on structure does not ask scholars to ignore linguistic content. However, in order to study the explanatory power of the latent structure of argumentation embedded within our social institutions, this approach does require that scholars background the focus on content and foreground the focus on structure.

Harmon (2016) suggests that one way to do this is to identify the structural components of the Toulmin Model within a bounded discourse, and then identify the content-related linguistic markers within those structural buckets so that one can still leverage existing linguistic methods to capture and analyze them. Harmon (2018) followed this approach in his study on the Fed Chair communications to code specifically for the backing in their speeches. By identifying consistent and reliable content-markers for how the Chairs talked about their assumptions, Harmon was able to reliably code (using both a hand-coding method and a computerized machine-learning method) the structural element of backing across 17 years of communication. Harmon and Rhee (2019) also followed this approach in their study that examined how entrepreneurial firms collectively constructed new valuation metrics. In this study, they identify reliable content-markers for both the backing and data, and were able to code for talk about this new valuation schema as well as new valuation metrics over 16 years of IPOs.

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Once the specific argument component of interest has been coded for, a researcher must then convert it into a measure that captures the theoretical construct of interest. For example, in the aforementioned studies, the coding of backing was converted into a construct called “backing ratio,” which captured the total amount of backing-related talk in related to the total amount of talk in the document. A similar approach was used with the coding of data in order to create a constructed called “data ratio.” However, these are only two examples, and one of the exciting aspects of the Toulmin Model and its underlying structural components is the amount of flexibility it provides in capturing precisely what a scholar is looking for theoretically. For example, perhaps just the number of rebuttals is of theoretical interest, or perhaps a ratio of rebuttals to data could be more theoretically useful. A number of opportunities to empirically unpack the underlying structure of our institutions awaits.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that language is a powerful window through which to observe and understand our institutions. While we indeed have a number of linguistic

perspectives already in our arsenal, this chapter sought to convince you that we might benefit from just one more. I argued that because the structure of argument maps onto the latent structure of institutions, using an argumentation perspective might help institutional scholars gain more traction on three important topics – the nature taken-for-grantedness, the macro-micro divide, and the political dynamics of institutions. By outlining the potential implications for these topics, it is my hope that I have offered at least a starting point for how to use an argumentation perspective when studying institutions.

Yet a second and equally important takeaway lingers in the background of my argument. For most of this chapter, I have been arguing within the rules of my own game, leaving largely implicit a backing that quietly sits behind these very words. Indeed, since you, as my reader, are likely an institutional theorist like me, you may not have noticed or even thought to question the numerous assumptions I have left implicit in my argumentation. Did I do this because I think you already agree with me and, as a result, such assumptions simply go without saying? Or did I do this because I think you might object to some of these assumptions, and omitting them left the possibility of a fundamental disagreement off the table? These considerations shouldn't come as a surprise though, since it is precisely the practice by which we all write papers. However, what I hope these concluding thoughts do is highlight the usefulness of an argumentation perspective not only to the study of institutions but also to the very practices we employ to describe them.

AQ3

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