

INSTITUTIONAL FACETS OF CONFLICT

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Summary

Institutions can be thought of as overcoming resource problems and regular patterns of action produced because of support from people in a society, even strangers, although this can be shaped without planning in many cases. This definition can include ritual actions of interaction as well as formal institutional actions from bureaucracies such as governments and schools. The key feature is that it is supposed to “work” for all the people even if they do not know one another. This has been studied as interaction rituals, conformity and obedience, although another line of research shows how minorities can overcome a majority-institutionalized pattern of action. Formal institutions work through rule-management but there are interesting trickle-down effects from this, not always good ones. A recent idea is that all modern institutions are becoming McDonaldized through an overemphasis, often encouraged by either governments or through profit-making, on having ultra-efficient, calculable, predictable, and controlled service provision. This begins to make universities and welfare offices resemble fast-food outlets rather than “caring” institutions. Examples are also given on the role of institutions in environmental management.

1. Introduction

The term “institution” is used in at least two ways. One way is to refer to a repetitive pattern of actions, such as in: “We visit the Smiths every Friday; it has become an institution for us” and “Helping out strangers is an institution around here.” It is also

used to refer to various government and non-government organizing bodies, such as parliament, welfare offices, schools, universities, companies, Drug and Health Administration, and other bureaucracies. Both usages are based upon the same basic analysis, that to deal with resource (in the widest sense we have taken) management, socially sanctioned authority is given to a group of people in the community to deal routinely with the administration and problem solving related to that area or issue.

The main ingredient holding together all these forms of referring to institutions is that the resource power behind the repetitive actions carried out comes from a society as a whole, not from individual whims. This does not mean that people sit down and plan what they want from institutions; they most often are already in existence and resist our attempts to change them (see *Social Change, Conflict and Conflict Resolution*). This means that we can without embarrassment include together in our conceptual thinking ritual actions, common social etiquettes, manners, government departments and offices, wearing ties to work, telling a stranger in the street the time, and the workings of the unemployment or welfare benefit office.

In our analyses, however, we will make a distinction between informal institutions (cultural practices, folkways, everyday niceties) and formal institutions (bureaucracies and offices) that have been institutionalized for the society by the governing forces (see *Political Facets of Conflict*). Both arise from the general population to become commonly repeated structures, but the first arises without formal planning and the second arises initially informal but then regulated and more or less politically planned.

It has sometimes been tempting for social scientists and others to speak as if such regularities arise “because the people want them” or because “they are the will of the people,” but it is all much more complex and more chaotic than that. Even informal cultural practices change, and this can come from elites or from the mass of “ordinary” people (see *Social Change, Conflict and Conflict Resolution*). All the factors discussed about forming alliances can also play a role (see *Alliances: Sanctioning and Monitoring*). For example, the introduction of a capitalist economy changes the way people interact with each other and most especially interactions between strangers, and this changes the society-level institutions markedly. A large increase in population size also affects how people interact and can change the informal institutions. There is a big difference in helping and smiling at every stranger you meet in the street depending upon whether you live in a little village or a mega-city such as Tokyo or New York.

One attempt to compile some of these ideas about institutions has been made by Crawford and Ostrom. They attempted to devise a “grammar” of institutions based on the idea (similar to that given here) that institutions are regular patterns of actions that are structured by rules, norms, and shared strategies. Moreover, as will be presented here, the rules, norms, and shared strategies arise from interactions within a society although not in any planned or intentional way. From these ideas they propose terms and some syntax rules to make predictions about institutions.

2. Informal Institutions

The study of informal institutions is usually listed under conformity in social psychology, folkways or interaction rituals in sociology, and cultural practices in social anthropology. In each case we find people adhering to regular patterns of acting as though, and only “as though,” they were following some rules. A closer look at the historical and social context always reveals that there is actually change occurring and the patterns are not static.

2.1. Interaction Rituals between Strangers

There are many approaches to researching "non-intimate sociality." By this is meant relationships that involve only one or two types of exchanges. So, for example, when we visit the bank we might make a transaction through a person at the counter, perhaps ask them about their day, but that is probably all. We do not invite bank tellers out to dinner to repay them for making a transaction for us. That would be considered weird. With family and kin, on the other hand, we exchange many different things and events, which might be totally unrelated. This has some interesting properties and produces the strongest forms of sociality, such as social identity, altruism, and families. It is when we have multiple or generalized exchanges that we talk about having a group or social identity (see *Why the Social Sciences are Different II*).

Much of this material was outlined by the sociologist Erving Goffman in a series of books and papers about the "interaction rituals" we go through with (relative) strangers. While our behaviors towards strangers are not governed by explicit, verbal rules, there are definite patterns that people follow. These patterns might differ between different communities, however, and certainly between different cultural and national groups. For example, Goffman nicely gleaned material from old books of etiquette (below from *The laws of etiquette*, by "A. Gentleman"), verbalized rules of how one should behave in different social situations:

If you should happen to be paying an evening visit at a house, where, unknown to you, there is a small party assembled, you should enter and present yourself precisely as you would have done had you been invited. To retire precipitately with an apology for the intrusion would create a scene, and be extremely awkward. Go in, therefore, converse with ease for a few moments, and then retire. Take care to let it be known the next day, in such a way as that the family shall hear of it, that you were not aware that there was any company there.

Goffman also writes from his own experience:

I cite a personal example from informal social life at a provincial British university, circa 1949. When a junior staff person and a senior staff person who were acquainted came into the staff common room at the same time when few other persons were there, then the junior sometimes felt that sitting far away from the senior was an act of unfriendliness, and sitting within easy chatting distance a presumption, and so the junior would sometimes take up a chair on the boundary between these two distances, placing the senior in the position of being able to determine how much spoken interaction, if any, was to occur.

Obviously, and as Goffman himself pointed out, these particular patterns do not occur everywhere the same. Professional observers get a feel for them, however, and learn to identify the patterns in their own lives and those around them. Being able to analyze them is more important than memorizing the features of any particular examples. Notice, also, how the elements of game theories seem to be involved here; the junior officer's solution is a solution to a complex Chicken game. But the resources are tricky to analyze, and involve resources of status, reputation, and trust: all part of the multiple resource exchanges that occur in closer groups and communities (see *Small Groups and Conflict*).

Why do these patterns occur? Why do people continue to use regular forms of interaction, especially with people they do not know very well? Most often in academic books this is "explained" by appealing to "things" such as conformity, norms, or a desire or need to affiliate with people. Obviously these are short-hand forms which need further explanation in terms of resource exchange. People do not always conform nor keep on conforming; changes in resource allocations will change conformity. That is, they are built on the analyses outlined in other chapters (see *Structural Sources of Conflict, Alliances: Sanctioning and Monitoring, Political Facets of Conflict*).

This, then, is the real reason why strangers bother telling you the time when you will never meet them again. By telling you the time the stranger is participating in a generalized social exchange (over time and over persons) of the whole community. Such exchanges will not mean that a stranger or even a neighbor will lend you \$10,000 - - only families will typically do that -- but that a whole range of lesser but still important actions can be maintained by a large and perhaps impersonal community in this way. The generalized social exchanges are therefore the glue that holds this together but they are hidden and overlooked in social science analyses.

So what sorts of things can we expect to happen in such neighborhoods or communities, even when they are impersonal? There are many types of exchanges within larger communities of societies.

These ties might individually be weak, but the overall generalized effect can make them quite powerful determinants of specific behaviors. So a person whom you do not know, living in your city, will not lend you \$1,000, but they will tell you the time and probably help you if you fall down. The ties are weak but still important (see *Small Groups and Conflict*). They make possible only a certain restricted range of resources, but they can be quite powerful in doing that.

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Biographical Sketch

Bernard Guerin is Professor in psychology at the University of South Australia. Before this he studied at the University of Adelaide, took a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Brisbane, and taught at James Cook University in Townsville, Australia. His interests span the entire realm of social science, and he has been concerned for some years about the superficial barriers erected between the "different" social sciences. He has finished two new books: one on integrating the social sciences and one on practical interventions to change the behavior of both individuals and communities, again incorporating all social science approaches. He has published over 45 peer-reviewed papers, and has presented this integrative material on invited visits to Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Hungary, Sardinia, and across the United States. His two earlier books are *Social Facilitation* (CUP) and *Analyzing Social Behavior: Behavior Analysis and the Social Sciences* (Context Press).