

Notes from Roundtable: 'Feminism and Institutionalism: promising synthesis or another case of "master's tools"?'

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Feminist Discursive Institutionalism

My interest in new institutionalism focuses primarily on the fourth and 'newest' new institutionalism: discursive institutionalism (DI). This approach has grown out of the problems of the three older new institutionalisms in explaining *change*, given their seemingly static view of institutions. DI differs from the other three 'new institutionalisms' in at least three ways. First, it places greater emphasis on the role of ideas and discourses in influencing actor interests, preferences, and behaviours (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Hay 2006). Second, it views discourse itself as a medium of power, able to reproduce the status quo through socialization, but also capable of transformation through processes of communication (Fischer 2003; Schmidt 2002). Third, it highlights the importance of discourse in generating and legitimizing ideas about political action, thereby outlining a theory of institutional change (Schmidt 2006, 2008).

Drawing on insights from DI, I see discourse as one particular type of informal institution. In my work I try to analyze how discourses can change the gendered characteristics of institutions and how they can alter the politics that they produce. Empirically, I have been working on debates over women's political representation and gender quotas in Sweden (and the Nordic countries) to show how ways of framing and speaking about an issue affect the prospects for – and eventual shape of – policy change. Focusing on discursive strategies for institutional reform, I have explored how discourses facilitate political change, but also limit its form, content, and impact, together with existing hegemonic rules, practices, and norms.

At the same time as this revised lens on institutions has a wide range of potential applications, especially in the area of public policy research, there are some limitations. Most important, we might ask: what is new with this 'newest' institutionalism? To what extent is the DI approach not already covered by the other new institutionalist approaches? Could not

it be argued that the DI focus on discourses is already in use by the historical institutionalist (HI) approach, and its focus critical junctures as an essential turning point between two structures of incentives, or two “logics” (See for instance, Hall and Taylor 1998, Thelen 2003, 2004)? Also, to what extent is the DI approach really focusing upon discourses as a concept? The DI usage of the notion of discourse differs from the one used in conventional discourse analysis (DA). The DI approach could, thus, be seen as an unwanted compromise between HI and DA, and this critique raises the question why we should bother with this approach in the first place. Consequently, should we keep this approach or should we dispose of it?

In this contribution, the following two questions will be focused upon: (1) What does the DI approach contribute to feminist scholarship on political institutions? (2) What does gendered and institutionally-focussed feminist work contribute to mainstream (including the DI approach) institutionalist understandings of structure and agency in political life?

What does DI offer us?

The three older ‘new institutionalisms’ have been criticized for having difficulty explaining institutional change, for being overly deterministic and static. Scholars working within the DI approach recognize the importance of ideas and discourse in explaining *change*. One of the biggest contributions of DI is, thus, to help us explain change. Needless to say, change is something all feminist scholars are struggling with.

Discourse

In order to assess change, a definition of discourses is required. Of course, there are, more or less, as many definitions of discourse as there are discourse analysis scholars and discursive institutionalist scholars. Maybe this is one of the most crucial problems in the DI approach.

According to Kenneth Lynggaard (2007) discourses unfold as ideas are articulated and, then, turn into systems of concepts and conceptions. Thus, change may be broken down into two processes: 1) the process of ideas being turned into discourse (articulation); and 2) the process of discourse being turned into institutions (institutionalization). According to Vivien Schmidt, one of the foremost proponents of DI, ideas are the substantive content of discourse, and discourse is consequently the interactive process of conveying ideas (Schmidt

2008). Ideas occur at three main levels - policies, programs, and philosophies. Her conceptualization of philosophies, which refer to the dominant worldview of a society or the 'everyone knows' or taken-for-granted assumptions prevalent in a society (and the ones least likely to change) seems to be in line with how the notion of discourse is used in discourse analysis. However, her operationalization of discourses seems to be comprised of a certain degree of intentionalism and rationality that most discourse analysts reject. This problem needs to be sorted out in order to develop DI as a convincing approach to institutions.

Dynamics of institutional change

According to DI scholars, the dynamics of institutional change may be captured by several concepts, such as conflicts over meaning and processes of translation. For instance, policy change depends on *conflicts over meaning* or the prevalence of alternative discourses that contest specific institutional contexts (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Hajer 1995; Lynggaard 2007). Kenneth Lynggaard suggests that although a certain solution may have reached an institutionalized position, conflicts may continue to grow around the particular nature of the problem that the prescribed solution is to solve (Lynggaard 2007:295-96). These conflicts, he argues, may in turn result in readjustments of the solutions and, consequently, pave the way for institutional change. Institutional change may also be promoted by *translation*. According to Kjaer and Pedersen (2001:219), translation may be defined as "the process whereby concepts and conceptions from different social contexts come into contact with each other and trigger a shift in the existing order of interpretation and action in a particular context". This view is not very different from the ideas of shifts in logics, proposed by the HI approach.

According to Vivien Schmidt, the dynamics of institutional change may be captured through the role played by actors in the articulation of problems (Schmidt 2006, 2008). The DI perspective differs from the three 'older' new institutionalisms, she argues, since it is centred on "who talks to whom about what, when, how and why, in order to show how ideas are generated, debated, adopted, and changed as policy makers, political leaders, and the public are persuaded, or not, of the cognitive necessity and normative appropriateness of ideas" (Schmidt 2006:11). Institutional contexts, such as material interest, matter, but they are viewed as constituted by ideas and discourse. Ideas in discourse, likewise, are seen not only as reflecting cultural norms but also as constitutive of the discursive frames that the

ideas are embedded within. However, at the same time as her notion of institutional change is convincing, it needs to be underlined that in conventional discourse analysis, the role played by actors is downplayed. Thus, a DI approach to institutions should not be mixed up with a DA approach to institutions.

What does feminism contribute to DI?

While DI scholars have contributed to new institutionalist theory, in particular by explaining the dynamics of institutional change and continuity through ideas and discursive interaction, and thus avoiding the static determinism of the other three ‘new institutionalisms’, they lack, from a feminist perspective, an explicit focus on (1) power and (2) gender.

Power

Many feminist discourse analysis scholars focus on the ways in which power operates through discourse to fix certain constructions of gender relations as dominant and to marginalize or exclude counter discourses. Carol Lee Bacchi, for instance, departs from a Foucauldian view on discourse and studies the construction of policy problems by the use of deconstruction. Her “What’s the problem approach” is an analytical tool for examining the construction of policy problems, and is based on the commonsensical insight that the ways in which we perceive or think about a problem affect how we think the problem ought to be combated. Briefly, the approach aims at understanding the presuppositions and assumptions in competing interpretations or problem representations, what effects follows from them, what is left unproblematic in this representation, and the ways in which identities are constructed within them. In particular, it seeks to “reflect upon the representations offered both by those who describe something as a problem and by those who deny an issue problem status” (Bacchi 1999:4). The purpose, thus, is “to create a space to consider competing constructions of issues addressed in the policy process, and the ways in which these constructions leave other issues untouched” (Bacchi 1999:4). By identifying and problematizing competing interpretations, one may tease out the value conflicts involved in problem representation, what assumptions are taken for granted, but also the limits of what is possible and desirable to talk about and what does not get problematized or fails to get onto political agendas.

Feminist scholars departing from a discourse analysis approach, such as Bacchi, seek to study how power operates through discourse to fix certain discursive constructions of gender and gender relations as dominant, at the expense of counter discourses which are marginalized or excluded. While many feminist discourse analysts reduce discourse to texts and readings of text, and where material interests are ignored in favor of viewing everything as socially constructed within a given context, Carol Lee Bacchi argues that it is crucial to pay attention to the institutional context (Bacchi 1999). Since discourses are institutionally embedded, being both constituted in and shaped by institutions and part of the constitution of institutions, it is important to pay attention to the relationship between discourses and institutions, and the ways in which particular discursive constructions receives a hegemonic status, and why some discourses become more institutionalized than others. Thus, a combination of feminist discourse analytic and DI approaches offers prolific prospects in understanding the complexity of institutionally embedded discourses and the ways in which political institutions reflect, structure, and reinforce gendered patterns of power.

Gender

At the same time as power should be a central aspect of both feminist theory and DI, since questions of power are inevitably linked to questions of institutional formation, change and resistance, the ways in which power and change are connected to gender seems to be missing in the DI approach. A gendered approach to the study of institutions may enrich DI approaches by a focus on the gendered nature of institutions and the ways in which institutions affects and structure gender relations and gender (im)balances.

In recent feminist theory, gender is understood as a complex frame of reference, insisting that the category 'woman' is historically contingent. Since gender is understood as something we 'do' or 'perform' rather than 'are' or 'have', the analytical focus may be shifted from the individual to the norms, rules, practices making up the social and political institutions. Thus, since gender relations are conceptualized as social structures, they could be studied from an institutional perspective. Furthermore, by asking questions such as how subjects are constituted within these representations – the way in which groups are assigned positions and value within discourse – one may analyse what can be said and done and by whom, etc. This perspective, thus, opens up for studies of fluid and non-fixed gender categories and identities and stable/shifting axes of power.

Some tentative conclusions

At the same time as there are certain advantages of DI – such as its potential to explain the dynamics of change and continuity by its emphasis on ideas and discursive interactions, there are some critical problems related to it.

One problem relates to the concern about using discourse analysis as a single approach. When discourse – or text – is used in isolation and when context is not taken into account, the approach runs the risk of being seen as intentional and, thus, as faced with the same kind of criticism as is raised against postmodernist approaches. Another problem relates to establishing of causality. This concern primarily revolves around the difficulties in separating discourse from other variables and, thus, identifying it as the independent variable. Schmidt suggests that instead of abandoning discourses all together, scholars should ask when discourse is *a* cause: “when does discourse serve to reconceptualize interests rather than just reflect them, to chart new institutional paths instead of simply following old ones, and to reframe cultural norms rather than only reify them” (Schmidt 2005:14). Another concern revolves around the question of subject agency within discourse methodology or the extent to which a subject can use discourse or is constituted by it. Is it possible to step in and out of discourses? – should we think of subjects primarily as discourse users or as constituted in discourse? To what extent are we able to use discourses for political ends? – can actors use discourse and or are discourse only structures/meanings that constitute subjects. Schmidt’s use of discourse deviates from the usage recommended by many discourse analysts. In my own work I try to apply a dual-focus, paying attention both to the ways in which we are all in discourses, and to the active deployment of language, including concepts and categories, for political purposes.

Returning to the question about the future of the DI approach – should we ditch it or keep it? I think we need to do both. Its potential utility is too good to dispose of, but it needs revisions in order to be analytically fruitful. In the first instance the issues raised above need to be seriously considered.

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