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A Gap Year for Institutional Theory: Integrating the Study of Institutional Work and Participatory Action Research

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Abstract

Institutional theory has energized a large and vibrant academic community, but it is largely unknown to managers and inconsequential with respect to the management of organizations. This is despite what the authors believe is an immense potential practical contribution. In this article, the authors suggest that institutional theory needs a gap year—a period in which core frameworks and insights from an institutional perspective are brought into contact with complex social problems. The authors focus on the study of institutional work and argue that an extended encounter with the world of participatory action research could lead to new answers to key questions and energize the development of institutional theory as both an academic and a practical project.

Keywords

institutional theory, institutional work, participatory action research

A "gap year" refers to the practice of taking a year out, usually between high school and university or college, to travel, volunteer, work, and generally engage with the world in a way that is exciting and personally transformative. For many young people, an increasingly common part of taking a gap year is volunteering with mission-driven organizations, both to contribute to society and to learn about oneself. In this article, we argue that institutional theory needs a gap year—a period in which core frameworks and insights from an institutional perspective are brought into more intimate contact with individuals and organizations attempting to address complex social problems. We believe this would represent a chance for institutional theory to find itself and learn and contribute in new ways.

At first glance, institutional theory appears in great shape and not in need of a reorientating and formative experience. It is recognized as one of the most dominant approaches in understanding organizations (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008). And yet, much like an overachieving high school student who has spent the past few years in writing essays and studying for exams, institutional research leads a closeted life. It tends to circulate only within arbitrarily defined boundaries, refining its technical prowess, and impressing its appointed judges. This perspective has energized a large and vibrant academic community but is largely unknown to managers and inconsequential with respect to the management of organizations. The insights derived from institutional research remain locked within academic circles—published in journals with limited circulation, written for insiders, with attempts to explore practical implications confined to cursory final paragraphs. The result is a significant disconnect between theory and practice that leaves both the poorer.[1] One obvious solution would be for academics to invest in translating their institutional studies by writing for practitioner journals or undertaking consultancy. But we believe this would not be enough. We argue that institutional theory needs to "get dirty"—to move away from largely "hands-off" research approaches and revitalize its connections to individuals and organizations in-situ, both to foster greater relevance and to reenergize its theoretical development.

In exploring the potential to reorient institutional theory, we focus on the emerging conversation around "institutional work" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). This approach to institutional analysis has focused on the practices and strategies through

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which individuals and organizations intentionally shape the institutional arrangements within which they operate (DiMaggio, 1988; Dorado, 2005; Lawrence, 1999; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). It highlights the effort required to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions, as well as the complex relationships between these forms of work (Hirsch & Bermiss, 2009; Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen, & Van de Ven, 2009). Studies have shown that actors rarely engage in only a single form of institutional work and are more likely to be involved in a complex mix of creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions. Despite its potential, the study of institutional work shares with traditional institutional research a significant disconnect from practice. In this article, we explore how the study of institutional work could both contribute to the construction of new solutions that make a practical difference as well as energize the development of institutional theory as an academic project.

Gap years need a destination and a purpose. To provide that for the study of institutional work, we examine its potential integration with "participatory action research"—an approach to research that involves the co-construction of practical knowledge by all participants, through processes of research, action and reflection (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Wadsworth, 1998). Orientated toward social change, participatory action research encourages its practitioners to think about:

> how to effectively provoke action by research that engages, that reframes social issues theoretically, that nudges those in power, that feeds organizing campaigns, and that motivates audiences to change both the way they think and how they act in the world. (Cahill & Torre, 2007, p. 205)

At first glance, the potential connections between the institutional work approach and participatory action research may seem obscure. As studies of institutional work have academic legitimacy, focusing primarily on the dispassionate search for enduring patterns of social interaction and published in academic journals, participatory action research is openly ideological (Fals-Borda, 2006), motivated to empower participants to transform their lives (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), and rarely published in mainstream management journals. And yet these two approaches share some important common ground—both approaches emphasize the need to understand the interaction of social structure and agency in creating conditions for stability and change. Thus, the question that motivates this article focuses on what the results would be if studies of institutional work engaged with participatory action research, either by adopting some of its tenets or by seriously engaging with its methods, insights, and implications.

Motivating the Journey: The Questions and Challenges of Studying Institutional Work

The challenge we set in this article is to shift the study of institutions and organizations toward relevance and closer connection with the practices of individuals and organizations as they work to cope with and influence their institutional context. We take as our point of departure the study of "institutional work"—"the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). The concept of institutional work highlights the intentional actions taken in relation to institutions, especially those that are less visible and more mundane—the day-to-day adjustments and compromises of actors as they attempt to create new institutions, maintain existing ones or disrupt institutional arrangements. The study of institutional work highlights the messiness of institutional arrangements (Seo & Creed, 2002), and the importance of agency not only in constructing new institutions (DiMaggio, 1988; Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Maguire et al., 2004) but also in maintaining and disrupting institutions (Colyvas & Powell, 2006; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Oliver, 1991, 1992). The study of institutional work, thus, represents a framework with a potential to help connect institutional theory more closely and explicitly to practice, both in terms of understanding the nature of organizational practices and making institutional insights more accessible and available to organizational actors.

The study of institutional work has, however, a long way to go if it is to make a significant contribution to practice. Our understanding of institutional work is just emerging—as it stands it is both variable and partial. In relation to creating institutions, although the skilled, effortful practices through which actors attempt to create new institutions have been illustrated in a range of domains, ranging from high-tech innovation (Garud et al., 2002) to complex social change (Maguire et al., 2004), existing research has focused less on the work of creating institutions and more on the accomplishment of institutional creation. So when we have made considerable progress in understanding how institutional entrepreneurs effect institutional change, relatively little attention has been paid to why they do so—what triggers lead actors to engage in work to create new institutions. There are also significant gaps in our knowledge about the work of maintaining institutions. Despite the durability of social and organizational structures as a central, defining feature of the institutional perspective (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), relatively little is known about the forms of work that go into maintaining institutions over time (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Scott, 2001). In particular, why actors disadvantaged by institutional arrangements are seen to not only comply with institutional demands

but also actively work to maintain them. There are also questions about the work of actors to disrupt institutions. Although the disruptive potential of individuals and collective actors has long been recognized by institutional researchers (Selznick, 1949), it is often subsumed within accounts of institutional creation. Oliver (1992) identified the erosion or discontinuity of existing institutions as a distinctive process, but this has remained largely unexplored as well as the challenges of embedded action (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005): how actors are able to marshal the resources, including the emotional and cognitive as well as material resources, necessary to engage in attempts to disrupt institutions.

For the study of institutional work to move institutional research closer to the day-to-day concerns and experiences of organizational actors, it must engage with these sets of questions that are explicitly concerned with the motivations, meanings, and relationships that shape actors' attempts to engage with institutions. Research focused on institutional work is, however, only emerging and faces considerable challenges. Particularly important to our discussion is that although institutional work demands research that recognizes institutional processes as "local and particularistic, context-sensitive, conflictual and ongoing" (Zilber, 2008, p. 163), existing theoretical and methodological frameworks usually applied to institutional studies may leave institutional researchers ill-equipped to achieve this. Studies of institutions and organizations are typically based on primarily retrospective accounts of "successful" institutional change and are consequently less sensitive to how meanings, practices, and structures are interacted *in situ* and *in vivo* (Zilber, 2008). Thus, if the study of institutional work is to develop a more nuanced understanding of the role of agency in institutional dynamics, it requires engaging with research subjects and topics in fundamentally new ways.

The Destination: Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research begins from a position of close identification with the actors on which it focuses. The individuals who in other traditions might be viewed as "subjects," a "population," or a "sample" are understood from this perspective as active, engaged, and equal participants in the research process. Participatory action researchers seek to "get up close and personal" with participants and focus on valuing and understanding their insider knowledge (Park, 2001) that stems from their everyday experience and unique situations (Swantz, 1996). Participatory action research encourages full and active involvement of all participants, usually of a defined community, with the hope that critical reflection will lead to an awareness of their positions in society as well as their own resources (McIntyre, 2008). If successful, participatory action research leads to the development of new practices that deliver substantive change in the conditions of participants (Hall, 2005), through a process sometimes termed "transformative praxis" (Fals-Borda, 1991). Priorities in participatory action research include giving "voice" to the experiences of those who are often overlooked in a society and collaborating with those people to find practical solutions to problems they identify.

Participatory action research often occurs as an emergent and local process. Maguire (1993) described, for example, how a participatory action research project grew out of her response to a request on a laundromat bulletin board asking for volunteers to help women and children who had experienced domestic violence. Participatory action research often employs creative methods such as drama (Conrad & Campbell, 2008) and fotonovela (Kirova & Emme, 2008) to raise the consciousness and confidence of marginalized groups. McIntyre (2008), for example, invited a Northern Irish working-class women's group to tell a visual story of their daily lives using Instamatic cameras. The aim of the project was to raise awareness of and attention to their experiences of Northern Ireland's political conflict over 30 years and the important roles they had played as "vocal and visible champions of justice, freedom and equality for themselves, their families and for their overall communities" (McIntyre, 2008, p. 3). Frequently carried out in developing countries where the issues of marginalization are more apparent, participatory action research can take many years to build the necessary commitment and trust of local members. Swantz (1996), for example, described spending more than 25 years observing the everyday practices and values in Tanzanian communities to understand how those practices and values might persist as the country modernizes.

Although participatory action research has a rich history with significant successes, it is also an approach that faces significant challenges. First, participatory action research has been most successful in dealing with issues that are local to small groups, often temporarily isolated from their contexts, leaving the approach open to the criticism that the emphasis on a "micro-level of intervention can obscure and indeed sustain macro-level inequalities and injustice" (Cooke & Kothari, 2001, p. 14). Consequently, participatory action research has been largely unable to engage with large-scale issues, such as global poverty or climate change (Reason & Bradbury, 2007). Second, the role of organizations in participatory action research is theoretically and practically underdeveloped. In fact, participatory action research is often focused on communities and takes an antagonistic view of organizations that are cast as sources of oppression and exploitation (Cameron, 2007). In the cases in which participatory action research has been adapted for use inside organizations, the result has been a rather technical, action research model (Conrad & Campbell, 2008), which has tended to adopt a somewhat selective

Table 1. Finding Common Ground

	Institutional Work	Participatory Action Research
Heterogeneous agency	The importance of individual and collective actors and their awareness, skill and reflexivity. Recognition of the 'janitors' and 'mechanics' in institutional processes that have been overlooked.	Participants viewed as competent, reflexive and capable of participating in exploring their social worlds and realizing change. Focused on assisting powerless groups of people, for example, the exploited, poor, oppressed and the marginal.
Emphasis on practice	In studying the practices that create, sustain and disrupt institutions, wider effects might be explained. Interest in understanding how diverse actors combine on common projects.	Understanding practice as the basis for action and change. The development of new shared practices to transform social arrangements.
Situated knowledge	Actors are embedded in institutional contexts. Agency and practices operate within institutionalized rules.	Participants are knowledgeable of their specific situation. Recognizing tacit knowledge can enable actors to engage in substantive change.

view of participation (e.g., Sense, 2006), often within a prescribed model of change set by the leaders of the organization (e.g., Street & Meister, 2004). Looking across these challenges, it seems that participatory action research may develop rich understandings of collective meanings and practices, but it lacks a theoretical lens that would facilitate making sense of them in ways that could lead to more fundamental social change.

Common Ground

Without a doubt, studies of institutional work and participatory action research make a somewhat unlikely pairing. Although studies of institutional work are primarily focused on engaging an academic community, the overarching goal of participatory action research is to change the conditions of a marginalized group practically (Hall, 1992) or transform an organization (Greenwood et al., 1993). Moreover, legitimacy for participatory action research depends on engagement with participants in ways that allow them to influence the research agenda directly (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), whereas legitimacy for the study of institutional work relies on the rigor of its methods and its engagement with theory. Despite these undeniable differences, however, we suggest that the two perspectives share important common elements, which could provide the foundation for extending both lines of inquiry. Three ideas, in particular, connect them: the primacy of heterogeneous agency, the importance of practice, and recognition of situated knowledge (see Table 1 for a summary).

Primacy of heterogeneous agency. Both perspectives place a premium on the role of agency in understanding and effecting social change and point to the wide variety of actors and actions this can involve. Studies of institutional work view individual and collective actors as intelligent, creative, and purposive, pointing to their "awareness, skill and reflexivity" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 219). Drawing on DiMaggio's (1988) discussion of institutional entrepreneurship and Oliver's (1991) strategic responses to institutional processes, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) argued that more attention needs to be placed on the intentional activities of actors and their work in not only creating but also maintaining and disrupting institutional arrangements. For its part, participatory action research is committed to replacing the traditional subject–object relationship between the researcher and researched with a subject–subject relationship (Fals-Borda, 1991) in which participants are understood as competent, reflexive, and capable of participating in exploring their social worlds and realizing change (McIntyre, 2008). Both perspectives also share a concern to engage with a broad range of actors who are often less visible in traditional research. The concept of institutional work points not only to the entrepreneurs who create new institutions but also to the "janitors" and "mechanics" who maintain them, the "homeless" who fall outside of normal institutional boundaries and the malcontents who disrupt institutional arrangements (Lawrence, 2008; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Participatory action research is concerned with engaging often overlooked actors but emphasizes the recognition of those without "voice" (Hall, 1993) who occupy peripheral positions in society and are in some way oppressed or disadvantaged.

The importance of practice. Both the concept of institutional work and participatory action research highlight the role of practice—routine, legitimate sets of skilled social behaviors (Bourdieu, 1977). This focus provides insights into processes of institutionalization, as well as the need and potential for social change. In both cases, practices are understood as "embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding" (Schatzki, 2001, p. 2). For studies of institutional work, this idea shifts attention away from the effects of institutions toward the practices that create, maintain, and disrupt them. The theoretical challenge moves from understanding the diffusion of institutions to understanding the nature of shared practices and their institutional effects (Lawrence & Suddaby,

2006). For participatory action research, practice represents both the target of change and the basis for action. Rooted in Lewin's (1946) action research methodology with its emphasis on resolving social problems and conflict (Conrad & Campbell, 2008), participatory action research proponents work to expose the oppressive effects of existing practices and experiment with new, emancipatory practices in an iterative cycle of research, action, and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Through this process, individuals and groups are encouraged to reflect on taken-for-granted practices critically, resulting in the identification of individual and collective capabilities as well as an awareness of how they are disadvantaged.

Recognition of situated knowledge. The importance of agency and practice in both perspectives leads to the recognition of actors as knowledgeable agents whose skills and intelligence are rooted in their unique contexts. The concept of institutional work is explicitly concerned with "intelligent, situated" action (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 219), reflecting the ability of actors to tailor their institutional strategies to the specific contexts in which they operate. This approach assumes culturally competent actors able to creatively leverage the sets of institutional rules and resources that structure their day-to-day lives. Participatory action research is similarly sensitive to the local context and the situated intelligence of participants. It focuses on the needs of a particular group or community, with researchers spending substantial lengths of time situated "inside the culture" (Swantz, 1996, p. 124) to understand how participants relate to their contexts, the survival strategies they adopt, and the resources at their disposal. From a participatory action research perspective, participants have unique, often tacit, knowledge of their own situations, and their community's rules and norms (Coghlan, 2003), which makes them distinctively well placed to organize and implement change. Although participants' tacit knowledge may be difficult to access and articulate (Collins, 2001), the participatory action research approach emphasizes the value of this knowledge in terms of understanding the creativity and complexity of everyday life and the untapped skills and abilities that may be key to social change (McIntyre, 2008).

In a Foreign Land: Studies of Institutional Work Informed by Participatory Action Research

A key feature of the cross-cultural and volunteering experiences associated with gap years is their potential to transform the individuals involved—affecting their outlooks, their values, the questions they ask, and the ways in which they interpret their own worlds upon returning home. But what might this look like for the study of institutional work? How might an encounter with the methods, insights, and problems of participatory action research help find answers to some of the questions faced by this emerging perspective? We explore this potential by examining the insights of a set of illustrative participatory action research studies for the three categories of institutional work—creating, maintaining, and disrupting intuitions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Participatory Action Research and the Work of Creating Institutions

Studies of actors attempting to create new institutions have dominated the area of institutional work. Following DiMaggio's (1988) discussion of institutional entrepreneurship, organizational scholars have invested significantly in understanding how and under what circumstances individuals and organizations are able to effect new institutions (Garud et al., 2002; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire et al., 2004). We have argued that missing in these discussions has been a serious consideration of what triggers actors to engage in the effortful, risky work of creating new institutions. We believe that participatory action research may be particularly well situated to help answer this question and draw on a project that was done in post-war Guatemala City focusing on the creating of a new model of child discipline.

The study involved a series of processes, beginning with a survey carried out by 14 local women to explore the factors associated with "'normative' disciplinary practices (such as smacking), 'severe' [actions] (the use of the belt) and 'extreme' violence (burns, abrasions and whips)" (McMillan, 2007, p. 522). The survey evolved into a set of discussions among the local women and academic researchers concerning the survey's methodology and their findings. McMillan (2007, p. 524) argued that these "discussions marked a critical transition in the project. 'Maltreatment' (and extreme deprivation even by local standards) was not 'out there' but suddenly visible around them." As the funding for the initial survey wound down, the 14 local researchers enrolled in a biweekly parenting workshop through which they carried on their individual and collective exploration of the issues around violence toward children. The process then developed in multiple, unexpected ways. Some local women became involved in exploring issues of ethnicity, particularly with respect to the division between mixed-race and indigenous people. The parenting workshops led to the formation of a set of formally constituted women's organizations, which led to women becoming involved, for the first time, in the civil development of the neighborhood. Finally, nearly every member of the original survey group began literacy and vocational training.

Although the story of this project appears primarily about action rather than scholarly reflection or analysis, it provides important insights into why actors engage in the difficult, risky work of attempting to create institutions. Although

examining the work of impoverished, politically disadvantaged people may seem idiosyncratic, we believe it has general implications well beyond the context of Guatemala City. Several themes emerge. The first is the importance of protected spaces that allow individuals to engage in sharing and collective reflection on their situation and experiences. McMillan (2007, p. 525) reported that in the first set of parenting workshops, maltreating practices came to be "recognised to be part of the experience of those present," with participants coming to "recognise that physical violence had eroded their confidence and engendered 'bitterness' (amargura) that they sometimes vented on their own children." These protected spaces highlight the importance of collective action in creating institutions and especially how such collective action can be engendered. Unlike research on institutional entrepreneurship, participatory action research tends not to elevate the role of individuals. Moreover, this study reinforces lessons from social movements with respect to the importance of collective processes that are at least as meditative as they are strategic. It suggests that although resources and skills may be necessary to accomplish institutional creation, engaging in the work to do so may be better explained by intense, emotional collective experiences that forge common understandings and identities.

A second theme that emerges is the role of controlled escalation of agency. One example of this is the seeking out of literacy and vocational training by the original local researchers. A second involves the way in which local women came to protect children who they learned were being maltreated:

> If the situation involved a family member or close acquaintance, they acted alone; if a neighbour, they generally teamed up with another friend in the group to address the problem. They did not discard the option of informing the courts responsible for child protection, but did so only in two cases of strongly suspected sexual abuse. This was a dangerous step, given the possibility of reprisals by the abuser and an indicator of an increasing awareness and sense of shared responsibility for the protection of children. (McMillan, 2007, p. 527)

This example is particularly telling with respect to understanding how actors come to the point of working to create new institutions—new ways of disciplining and protecting children in this case. It suggests that they do so neither alone, nor all at once. It suggests that the institutional work of creating institutions involves sets of practices that are learned, often slowly and out of necessity, and that they are truly "practices," in the sense that they belong not only to an individual but also to a community of actors. In this case, the community of women itself was transformed, both as individuals and as a collective through their development of shared practices and institutionalization of new routines and understandings. These processes echo those described by Bradbury and Reason (2003) who argue in their study of participatory action research in The Natural Step that individuals behaved more like "change enzymes" than change agents, both acting as catalysts for change and being transformed in the process.

Participatory Action Research and the Work of Maintaining Institutions

Although both participatory action research and institutional research have primarily focused on understanding change, the combination may generate particularly nuanced and sophisticated understandings of how and why actors work to maintain institutions, and the consequences of that work. Fine et al. (2004) reported on a participatory action research project in a New York women's prison that illustrates the potential for such work to shine a light on the motivations, resources, and consequences associated with maintaining institutions. The institution in question was a college program that had been running for 15 years in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, when a shift in the political climate led to its closure along with more than 340 other prison-based college programs. The reaction among Bedford Hills inmates was "a sea of disappointment, despair, and outrage" that led a coalition of inmates, the prison superintendent, a volunteer, and a local college president to resurrect the program as a private, voluntary consortium dedicated to inmate education. The aim of this project was to assess the effect of the college program "on the women, the prison environment and the world outside the prison" (Fine et al., 2004, p. 102).

This study provides an intimate view of how people work to maintain a threatened institution, why they do so, and the potential consequences of this work. A key issue that surfaced in this study is the complex relationship between the work done to maintain the institution in jeopardy (the college program) and the work needed to maintain other institutions. Maximum security prisons are designed to control the daily lives of prisoners. Inmates are not free to leave and are subject to continual surveillance, confined to specific areas, and expected to comply with the instructions of prison staff. Failure to conform can result in further restrictions and punishments. The study suggests that working to maintain an educational facility within this environment requires a variety of work that reinforces this system of control. On an ongoing basis, inmates must conform to prison-control systems to gain and keep access to college programs. For the participatory action research team, working to maintain the college program meant keeping in line with the dominant institutionalized systems of control in the prison, both formal and informal. Inmate researchers needed to exhibit consistent compliance with prison rules to keep their place

on the team, whereas also complying with the secrecy and privacy norms of the inmate culture. "An inmate doing research is also a person trying to survive and get out of prison" (Fine et al., 2004, p.112). A significant concern of inmate researchers was the reactions of other inmates: "Our relationships with our peers are a basis for survival. We live in a closed community in which everything is tied together. There is no exit" (Fine et al., 2004, p. 112). Thus, we see that both inmate and Graduate Centre researchers worked to maintain the systems of control within the prison while working to, and sometimes in order to, maintain the college program.

The interplay of institutional work focused on the college program and the work of inmate and graduate-center researchers in support of existing systems of control in the prison points to important insights regarding why people might sometimes maintain institutions that appear to disadvantage them. In particular, it suggests that to understand the motivations of institutional work and why actors choose particular strategies, we must account not only for the institutions on which the work focuses but also the system of institutions within which that work occurs. In this case, focusing on either the college program that the inmate researchers were working to preserve or on the formal and informal systems of inmate control they were reinforcing would lead to a partial and misleading understanding of the motivations of the inmates. The institutional work of maintaining the college program and the more mundane work of complying with prison control systems were highly interdependent: compliance allowed the inmate researchers to engage in the participatory action research project, whereas the participatory action research project, and involvement in the college program more generally, bolstered the motivation of inmate researchers to cope with the indignities of prison life. The project team decided that some aspects of their study could not be shared for fear of possible retribution from prison authorities. If compliance to prison rules resulted in maintaining college programs then that was deemed an acceptable trade-off.

This leads to a consideration of the effects of maintaining work on those who carry it out. For the inmate researchers in particular, there were significant costs to their work. College programs ran counter to the survival strategies in which passivity was a key means to early exit. Participation also made inmates vulnerable to greater levels of surveillance: Inmate researchers, for example, were subject to books and diaries being searched and notes taken away. Moreover, exposure to education was at times painful for inmates because it disrupted established ways of thinking and behaving and brought into sharp focus the power differentials that characterized their lives, inside and out of prison. At the same time, involvement in and working to maintain the college program also had powerful positive effects:

> For the women at Bedford Hills, 80% of whom carry scars of childhood sexual abuse, biographies of miseducation, tough family and community backgrounds, long lists of social and personal betrayals, growing back the capacity to join a community, engage with a community, give back, and trust are remarkable social and psychological accomplishments. (Fine et al., 2004, p. 102)

The implication is that the work of maintaining institutions may involve a complex juggling act of costs and benefits in which individuals find themselves having to cope with and manage complex social and psychological tensions. The inmates invested in college work were committed to education and its power to "liberate" but had to recognize that its message of freedom would be partial and that the work of maintaining access to the freeing power of education would also reinforce the restrictions under which they lived.

Participatory Action Research and the Work of Disrupting Institutions

We have argued that studies of institutional work and institutional research more generally have largely overlooked the issues of what motivates and mobilizes different interests to disrupt established practices and the skills and resources that enable actors to engage in institutional disruption, such as "cultural competence" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 238) or status (Battilana, 2006). An encounter with participatory action research could provide a way to explore the motivations and orientations associated with actors working to disrupt institutions. Participatory action research could also offer a way to explore the resources and skills associated with disrupting institutions. Existing institutional research has connected the disrupting of institutions to direct influence over control mechanisms, as with professional associations, regulatory agencies, and the courts (Dezalay & Garth, 1995; Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Jones, 2001). Less explored are the skills and resources available to those most disadvantaged by existing institutional arrangements—marginalized actors who have perhaps the greatest motivation to disrupt established practices.

A powerful illustration of how and why actors might work to disrupt institutions comes from a participatory action research study situated in Guatemala following the 1996 Peace Accords (Lykes, Blanche, & Hamber, 2003). The project focused on "recording and critically analyzing multiple stories of daily living, that is, of war, its effects, and ongoing poverty." A total of 20 local Maya Ixil women photographed life in their own and neighboring villages, taking pictures of women and their families. From the thousands of pictures and hundreds of stories collected, the PhotoVoice participants selected 60 photos and 11 stories "though which to

re-story the massacres, displacement, death and destruction that characterized life among them during the war" (Lykes et al., 2003, p. 82). The following is a brief excerpt from one of those stories.

> There were 200 people massacred in 1982 in the village of the Finca La Estrella. We feel extremely resentful because of this terrible tragedy and we are saddest of all for these victims who were murdered so suddenly. They didn't know that they were going to die because they were *campesinos*, [peasants] workers, who were guilty of nothing. They didn't owe anything to anyone, but what is saddest is that the children and babies were murdered and they were only children, no more. (Women of PhotoVoice/ADMI & Lykes, 2000, p. 27)

The work of this participatory action research project was disruptive in a number of ways. At a local level, the project disrupted the traditional relationship between Mayan people and photography, which has been dominated by tourists and professionals seeking to capture exotic customs. In contrast, the participants in this project became the first rural Ixil and K'iche' women to become "professional" photographers, with computer skills and with the ability to balance financial accounts, write grant proposals, and speak at national forums. It disrupted the relationship between local people and social science by allowing peasants to appropriate "the skills and techniques of social scientific research in the service of speaking out about past horrors" as well as gender roles and other cultural practices through the introduction of cameras into the local economy. Most generally, the project has disrupted the scientific and human rights discourses about state-sponsored violence by injecting rural women's voices, thus "transforming the 'talk' as well as the lives of those who speak their truths" (Lykes et al., 2003, p. 85).

This participatory action research study provides significant insights into why and how actors, and especially marginalized actors, attempt to disrupt institutional arrangements. Examining the motivations of these actors highlights the importance of the local and the personal. Unlike relatively elite actors examined in other contexts (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Sherer & Lee, 2002), these women were attempting to effect incremental shifts in the local village economy through the development of increased capacity. These motivations are reminiscent of those examined by Marti and Mair (2009) in their study of entrepreneurship in Bangladesh, in which they argue that the institutional work of the very poor is often distinctively experimental, provisional, and simultaneously transformative and enhancing of existing institutions. At the same time, the motivations of the Guatemalan women were deeply personal and political, connected to their experience of the war, in which they were "silenced by ongoing terror, gender relations in rural communities, local political and religious power dynamics, and pressing concerns for the material survival of themselves and their children" (Lykes et al., 2003, p. 81). Thus, the participatory action research study was for these women a means of giving voice to their experience and transforming the public record of the war, its meaning, and its effects on rural Guatemalan women.

This study also sheds light on the issue of how marginalized actors might gain the resources and skills to disrupt institutions. In this study, several factors emerge as critical to this issue—collective organizing, connections to elites, developing a language for reflection and action, and remaining grounded in one's own life experience. An important factor in understanding how the rural Guatemalan women were able to engage in disruptive action was their collective organization as the "Association of Maya Ixil Women-New Dawn." Collective action has long been associated with the empowerment of marginalized actors (Alinsky, 1971; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2009), facilitating both the consideration of more radical alternatives and greater risk taking. A second important factor highlighted by this study is the importance of connections to elites. Although the photographers were rural women with very little access to economic resources or political power, the success of the project was also dependent on the involvement of a professor from an elite U.S. university, who was able to furnish the project with the necessary hardware as well as training in both social science and photography practices. Critical to the success of this participatory action research study was the participants' acquisition of a system of representation—a language—for critical reflection and action. This language was both visual and verbal, involving the use of photographs to document their conditions and the collection and analysis of women's stories. These practices represented the construction of a shared cultural toolkit (Swidler, 1986) that allowed the participants to construct disruptive representations of their own realities. Finally, this study shows the importance of disruptive action being grounded in the personal experiences and emotions of the actors. Disruptive action is often difficult, risky, and slow and so can require a certain faith and patience that may be difficult to maintain if the task is not directly meaningful to the actors. In this case, the women were photographing and analyzing their own stories and the stories of women with whom they closely identified, focusing on the horrific experiences of a very recent war.

Reflections: Photographs, Memories, and Plans for the Future

All gap years come to an end, and the traveler is faced with some significant choices. Does he or she choose to see his or her experience as an interesting and stimulating but ultimately unique event? Or does he or she work to translate and integrate his or her discoveries into his or her "'normal" life?

We have argued that an encounter with participatory action research could offer the study of institutional work a way to address a set of issues that have been somewhat neglected within institutional research. We conclude this article by considering the relative merits of three stances toward the potential role of participation action research in the study of institutional work: a thought experiment, a research method to be leveraged, or an approach, the central tenets of which could be actively adopted.

Happy memories: A thought experiment. As far as we know, no studies have explicitly connected institutional work with participatory action research, and this may remain the case. It may be that institutional scholars will at best see connecting with participatory action research as the basis for useful thought experiments. Through such experiments, institutional researchers might explore protracted puzzles and challenges in a new light without needing to leave the comfort of their intellectual homes. Such an approach would not require institutional scholars to actually do anything different beyond engaging in, potentially generative, cognitive play. But this would be a substantially missed opportunity. First, if we accept that organization studies, and institutional theory in particular, have become increasingly disconnected from real-world issues, then thought experiments alone are unlikely to foster the substantive investment needed to establish research agendas "grounded in the real world of organizations and people" (Lorsch, 2009, p. 111). Second, much of the value of participatory action research is gained only from participation—by engaging in the practices that connect academic and non-academic researchers and foster the development of novel insights and solutions. It is one thing to acknowledge the value of the lived experience of participants and how it could engender understanding of institutional dynamics, but it is quite another to actually see the relationship between lived experience and institutions in practice. This requires an approach that gets "up close and personal," to observe and engage with the day-to-day realities of individuals and organizations to understand how patterns of thinking and acting are created, maintained and disrupted.

New tools: Participatory action research as method. An alternative approach is to draw on the methodological practices of participatory action research and integrate them into institutional scholarship. Participatory action research has drawn on a wide variety of creative modes of engagement with participants (e.g., Ospina, Dodge, Foldy, & Hofmann-Pinilla, 2007) such as storytelling, photography, poetry, drawing, sculpture, drama and popular theatre. Adopting more flexible research approaches and styles might facilitate creative collaborations among researchers from different disciplines and backgrounds, as has long been called for in our own publications (Polzer, Gulati, Khurana, & Tushman, 2009; Zald, 1993). But there are real problems with this approach. First, research methods require influential academic arbiters to accept their legitimacy. Even with the substantial investments of time and energy by institutional researchers to acquire the necessary skills, these tools may not sit comfortably with existing methodologies. Methods associated with participatory action research emphasize the active involvement of participants in the research process, and in doing so, they can challenge well-established measures of research quality, such as researcher objectivity. Second, these new methodologies may lose their foundational and motivating roots in translation. The eclectic use of research methods in participatory action research is motivated by a goal to assist individuals and organizations to affect social change. The research methods in themselves are merely the means to reach a greater end. This is in contrast with mainstream academic practice where method selection is the preserve of "expert" researchers and where demonstrating methodological mastery can be prized over results.

Integration: Participatory action research as foundational. A third option for those seeking to connect to participatory action research is to actively integrate its foundational elements into their work. At the end of a gap year, some returning travelers bring home not only photographs and memories but also new ways of thinking and acting in the world that they integrate into their home environments. We recognize that significant risks accompany an integrative approach. Objectivity is a highly prized quality in academic discourse. Empirical settings are described in terms of their potential for providing theoretical insight rather than for the chance to effect social change. Agnosticism with respect to the impacts of institutional arrangements, however "unjust or dysfunctional," is the dominant orientation in published institutional accounts (Greenwood et al., 2008). Institutional scholars seeking meaningful connections with participatory action research may find themselves straining against the demands that accompany academic privilege or living in between two worlds, unable to reconcile the differences. Despite these risks, we believe that the potential gains from truly integrating participatory action research into the study of institutional work would make the effort worthwhile.

For institutional scholars seeking a substantive connection would mean incorporating central ideas from participatory action research, including the importance of tacit, local knowledge, the coupledness of action and insight, and the role of research in social change. We believe that adopting these ideas could significantly affect the study of institutional work in a number of ways—the questions we ask, the goals of our studies, our relationship with our research "subjects," the epistemological bases of our analyses, and what we mean by dissemination. Studies of institutional work might begin to focus on research questions developed in conjunction with members of the communities we study, with the aim of both developing theoretical insights and improving the living conditions of participants. These shifts could

lead to exciting new directions for institutional research that significantly enhances its impact on the world outside academe and injects new life into its theoretical discourse.

In this article, we have sought to explore an unlikely pairing and examine the potential value of taking the study of institutional work on a trip to encounter the strange world of those who want to change the world through participatory action research. We have tried to show the potentially deep, but unexplored, connections of institutional work research with participatory action research, as well as how it might be directly affected by a more extended encounter with the aims, methods, ideas, and practices of this change-oriented approach to research and action. What we found was a wealth of potential new insight and direction for the study of institutional work—changes that could make it more effective both as a source of scholarship and as a foundation for action. In truth, we do not expect all institutional scholars to "drop their tools" (Weick, 1996) —our intellectual and practical commitments tend to make us reluctant to accept radical epistemological or methodological shifts. But we do believe that for those researchers seriously interested in getting at the practices of institutional work, adopting some of the approaches and ideas of participatory action research could be of tremendous value. Moreover, for those of us who long for a more impactful institutional theory, we hope that engagement with the tenets of participatory action research might provide a path forward.

Note

1. This problem is not specific to institutional theory, of course. A range of authors (Dess & Markoczy, 2008; Lorsch, 2009; McGahan, 2007; Pfeffer, 2007; Rynes, 2007; Shapiro, Kirkman & Courtney, 2007; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006) have argued that management theory in general is problematically disconnected from practice. We focus on institutional theory here, not because of its distinctiveness, but because we believe that overcoming this disconnect will be achieved most effectively within academic subcommunities that share important assumptions about social reality and the practice of management.

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