The articulation of ‘agency’: How can public relations scholarship and institutional theory enrich each other?

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Abstract

A recent critical turn to both public relations and institutional studies has highlighted ‘agency’ as a shared important theme. While public relations scholars call to bring back ‘agency’ into analysis of practice and process of public relations, neo-institutionalists use ‘agency’ to explain heterogeneity and innovation in institutional outcomes. In this context, this paper proposes to use ‘agency’ as a meeting ground to explore how the two disciplines could engage in a dialogue that improves mutual understanding and theoretical enrichment of each other. It argues that institutional thoughts such as ‘embedded agency’, ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ and ‘institutional work’ advance understandings of the downplayed issues of power, diversity and activism in the public relations literature. In turn, the multi-paradigmatic public relations scholarship provides useful tools for analysing institutional agency. Also, this paper discusses future research agenda to advance fruitful collaboration between the two domains.

Keywords

Public relations, institutional theory, agency, theoretical reflections, future directions

1. Introduction

The recent years have witnessed growing interaction between public relations (PR), interchangeably called strategic communication, and institutional theory mainly neo-institutionalism [See special issues of Public Relations Inquiry 2(2) and International Journal of Strategic Communication 3(2)]. On one hand, PR and communication scholars (e.g., Frandsen et al., 2016; Fredriksson et al., 2013; Hou, 2016; Sandhu, 2009) draw on insights from institutional theory (e.g., fields, institutional logics, legitimacy) to understand the ‘sociological root’ of public relations and its specialised practices (e.g., crisis communication, corporate social responsibility). On the other hand, institutional theorists (e.g., Cornelissen et al., 2015; Lammers, 2011; Suddaby, 2011) attempt to invoke PR scholarship such as rhetoric and discourses to explain how communication diffuses and reproduces institutions.

However, the interpenetration between the two domains is far from completion due to insufficient recognition of each other’s theoretical richness. For example, the primary use of
institutional theory is to examine either the institutionalisation of PR as an organisational function (e.g., Frandsen and Johansen, 2009; Invernizzi and Romenti, 2009; Wakefield et al., 2013), or the translation process of PR as a new practice (e.g., Grandien and Johansson, 2012; Grandien and Johansson, 2016). Limited PR research has thoroughly engaged with the vibrant development of institution theory foregrounding agency and creativity. Exceptions are few empirical case studies that applied segments of institutional theory to understand the various agency of PR enacted in such as navigating institutional complexity (Frandsen et al., 2016), translating reputation management in hospitals (Wæraas and Sataoen, 2014), and promoting a new orthodoxy of veterans as heroes (Thompson, 2018). Built on existing findings, there needs a timely and comprehensive inquiry into the conceptual relevance and potential of institutional agency theory to PR. Meantime, institutional theorists have not yet realised the theoretical breadth of PR. They tend to subordinate PR scholarship to neo-institutionalism by viewing PR as ‘mere conduits’ to institutional ends (Suddaby, 2011: 184). Such a linear and transmissive view of communication has essentially overlooked the agency of PR in shaping institutional process.

To facilitate mutual understanding and cross-fertilisation between the two disciplines, this paper proposes to use ‘agency’ as a critical juncture to explore how PR scholarship and institutional theory can enrich each other. ‘Agency’ is defined as the capacity of human actors, being either individuals or collectives, to act independently and reflectively while interacting with contexts (DiMaggio, 1988; Koene, 2006). Based on Weik’s (2011) literature review, ‘agency’ has three characteristics: First, it exists in Giddens’ (1984) ‘structure vs. agency’ dialectics, namely, agency is shaped by and reshapes structure; Second, agency involves subjectivity of actors, whose conscious or unconscious thoughts, feelings and emotions influence their responses to institutions; Third, agency manifests itself in practice to either maintain the status quo or initiate changes.

By using ‘agency’ as a bridge, this paper argues that public relations should learn from institutional theory especially its multi-dimensional views of agency, to break through the ‘iron cage’ of rationalist-managerialism thinking of PR that serves organisational predetermined goals (L’Etang et al., 2014). Absorbing institutional agency thinking is conducive to developing open and reflective understandings of PR. In turn, the multi-paradigmatic (e.g., functional, rhetorical, critical) PR scholarship offers prime resources to analyse institutional agency, especially to reveal the power asymmetry, micro-level interaction, and communication strategies involved in agency. This paper makes twofold contributions: 1) advance theory building in public relations through articulating implications from the agency-focused institutional theory; and 2) offering additional insights into institutional theory by illuminating the ‘constitutive role’ (Cornelissen et al., 2015) of PR to institutions.
The remainder of this paper starts with introducing the multi-dimensional views of agency in institutional theory including embedded agency, institutional entrepreneurship, and institutional work (i.e. translation). This is followed by an overview of the multi-paradigmatic PR scholarship ranging from critical, rhetoric, and functional-managerial approaches. Revolving around the shared theme of ‘agency’, the next section illustrates how the two disciplines could borrow insights from each other to deepen understanding and reflection of key issues in their respective area. Lastly, this paper proposes future research agenda to further collaboration and dialogue between the two domains.

2. The multi-dimensional views of ‘agency’ in institutional theory

There is no single, unified institutional theory about ‘agency’, but neo-institutionalism developed after 1980s strives to address a paradox: If institutions control human conduct, how do institutions become established themselves or change over time (Willmott, 2011)? This question indicates a shift from institutional determinism on human action to actors’ situated agency that strategically operates within or transforms institutions. It is through sharing this paradoxical assumption that institutional scholars approach agency from different angles, each with its own central tenet. In institutional literature, three prominent notions of agency are: (1) ‘Embedded agency’ (Seo and Creed, 2002), as an overarching guideline to interpret the ongoing dialectic interplay between institutions and agency; (2) ‘Institutional entrepreneurship’, featuring the heroic agency of powerful actors in creating new institutions, but flawed in explaining the significance of action in social reproduction (Delbridge and Edwards, 2007); (3) ‘Institutional work’ (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), along with subsequent ‘Scandinavian institutionalism’ (i.e. Translation theory) (Wedlin and Sahlin, 2017), bringing distributed agency among individuals back to analysis and embracing the myriad, day-to-day equivocal instances of agency. Institutional work differs from translation in its experimental and developmental nature, whereas the latter exercises agency as local interpretation, modification and sense-making of new ideas or practices.

This paper introduces these multi-dimensional views of agency to PR for twofold reasons. For one thing, it is more beneficial to build a complete understanding of agency through juxtaposing different but interrelated perspectives than cherry-picking a single viewpoint. As elaborated below, each conception of institutional agency offers its own competitive advantage but also complements others’ drawbacks. Only through this reflection is it possible to identify each conception’s affordance and limitation. For another, each dimension of institutional agency contributes different inspiration to key issues in the PR literature, such as ‘embedded agency’ corresponding to the ‘cultural embeddedness’ of PR (Edwards, 2018), ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ pointing to the agency of powerful professional actors, ‘institutional work’ directing attention to activist PR, and ‘translation’ stressing the neglected role of PR as a change agent. Therefore, it merits an inclusive approach to systematically review what the multi-dimensional views of institutional agency are and could offer to PR.
Embedded agency. ‘Embedded agency’ was first coined by Seo and Creed (2002) to address the age-old question: if actors are embedded in institutions (structures), how can they envision new practices and subsequently persuade others to adopt them? This concept alludes to how actors seek power, status and interest while their agency is constrained by institutional contexts. ‘Embedded agency’ differs from context-free agency that overemphasises the will and power of actors to dramatically change institutions. Embedded agency can only be understood within social structure in which actors are embedded (Clegg, 2010). Following this perspective, actors are not always ‘prisoners’ of existing institutions, but rather take agency to yield deviance, creativity and innovation within confinements.

Further, Battilana and D’Aunno (2009) clarify that embedded agency is not a constant attribute but a temporal orientation towards past, present and future, namely, evolving through time. They follow Emirbayer and Mische’s definition of agency as “an actor’s engagement with the social world that, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, can both reproduce and transform an environment’s structures” (Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009: 46). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) propose three aspects of embedded agency: (a)Iteration. Actors orient toward the past and selectively repeat the established patterns of thought and action; (b) Projectivity. Actors creatively imagine future trajectories of action, in relation to their hopes, fears, and desires; and (c) Practical evaluation. Actors respond to present demands and contingencies, or the exigencies of changing situations. In short, this multi-faceted embedded agency indicates the reflexivity of human agency to mediate structuring contexts.

Institutional entrepreneurship. Under the umbrella of embedded agency, ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ refers to the agency of elite, powerful actors who purposefully pursue institutional changes. Maguire et al. (2004: 657) define ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ as the “activities of actors who have interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones.” This definition underscores the heterogeneity and innovation in institutional outcomes led by impactful and resourceful actors (e.g., politicians, entrepreneurs, professionals). As Greenwood et al. (2014) clarify, institutional entrepreneurship portrays the ‘heroic’ feature of agency. It pinpoints the strategic intention and driving force of actors toward institutional renewal, leaving behind the agency required in maintaining institutions (for an overview see Garud et al., 2007).

Studies on institutional entrepreneurship often explain agency through institutional logics. Thornton and Ocasio (2008) define ‘institutional logics’ as a set of values, beliefs or prescriptions that govern and legitimise related practices. Institutional entrepreneurship unfolds when actors try to either elaborate macro-level frames, categories and meanings (institutional logics) within organisations, or to establish new logics that later become taken-for-granted. As such, ‘agency’ around institutional logics follows a top-down approach and takes place at organisational or field (inter-organisation) levels. Whether and how higher-
order cultural frames are instantiated at lower levels involve subjectivity of actors, whose professional values, thoughts and emotions play a key role in decision-making (Waldorff, 2013). In this sense, it is the ‘heroic’ institutional entrepreneurs who determine what is eventually being established as institutions.

**Institutional work (and translation).** Lawrence and Suddaby (2006: 215) define “institutional work” as “the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions.” Agency in institutional work is often distributed among different actors who may engage with varied institutional arrangements in coordinated or uncoordinated ways. Instead of focusing on stabilised outcomes, institutional work attends to the emergent, experimental and fluid institutional process. As Marti and Mair (2009) find, the agency of institutional work in developing contexts appears to be developmental, wherein powerless actors take subtle, hidden and incremental steps. They may not adopt an aggressive style of institutional work when strong hierarchies exist in society. In this context, the agency of under-resourced actors is not necessarily to create new ways of practice or initiate changes, but more one of enlightenment and emancipation from institutional frames.

Institutional work challenges ‘heroic’ institutional entrepreneurship in several aspects. First, institutional work embraces a broad spectrum of actors, including “both those with resources and skills to act as entrepreneurs and those whose role is supportive or facilitative” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006: 217). Second, institutional work shifts attention away from dramatic actions of heroic entrepreneurs to the mundane, continuous practice of actors who reproduce but also resist or disrupt institutions. Third, unlike strategic institutional entrepreneurship, institutional work “may or may not achieve its desired ends” while interacting with social structure in unintended or unexpected ways (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006: 219). Mollering and Muller-Seitz (2018: 13) add that institutional work is more about finding a way (direction) to act than providing a solution. This purports the discursive nature of agency and “the degree of variation in reflexivity and agency in processes of institutional work” (Muzio et al., 2013: 708).

A modified or advanced version of institutional work is called Scandinavian institutionalism, commonly referred to as ‘translation theory’ (Fredriksson et al., 2013). Translation theory explains how new ideas travel, get embedded, and become material practices in local contexts through the work and values of those carrying, translating or altering them (Wedlin and Sahlin, 2017). It highlights the micro-level, process-oriented agency resulting in organisational variation and distinctiveness (Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009). In translation process, actors locally interpret, modify, and make sense of institutional models in relation to the value-system that governs the new context. Consequently, the agency in translation leads to changes in both the spreading construct and the adopting organisation. The agentic practices range from taking a reflective stance towards established social orders, leaving routines behind, and/or resisting dominant systems in implicit ways.
To summarise, institutional theory offers ample insights into the multi-faceted agency. ‘Embedded agency’ differs from conventional agency in its emphasis on contextualisation—different contexts foster varied forms and degrees of agency. Given actors’ temporal orientation toward past, present and future, embedded agency ranges from iteration (reinforcing established patterns), projectivity (imaging future alternatives), and practical evaluation (responding to contingencies). ‘Institutional entrepreneurship’ underlines ‘heroic’ agency of powerful and resourceful actors who strategically pursue institutional outcomes. As a complement, ‘institutional work’ and Scandinavian translation covers mundane, distributed, or discursive agency of broad actors including both entrepreneurs and the powerless, to achieve (or not) institutional outcomes in unintended and unexpected ways. While institutional work takes note of the lived experience of individuals, translation theory preferably situates agency in organisational settings.

Nevertheless, there remains a few ‘blind spots’ in institutional theory which compromise its explanatory power of ‘agency’: (1) The power asymmetry underlying agency. ‘Embedded agency’ is criticised for assuming that everyone desires the same institutional result and thus agency happens unanimously. However, marginalised actors may have to suppress opinions due to imbalanced power relations or resource allocation. Likewise, translation theory often perceives the receiving organisation as a coherent unity, thus ignoring the power differentials and struggle among different translators (Lundberg and Sataøen, 2019).

(2) The micro-level, interactive agency as a mediator. While institutional theory (i.e., translation) has identified a micro-level, bottom-up approach to institutions, it mainly focuses on the performative role of language, symbols and editing in translation, leaving the ‘micro-interaction’ among different actors largely unnoticed (Vossen and van Gestel, 2019). As boundary spanners facilitating social interaction, PR can fill this gap by unpacking the co-creational, interactive meaning-making between translators (coders) and recipients (decoders).

(3) The material aspect of agency. Although institutional theory has articulated the discursive agency in generating influential texts and thus discourses, it falls short in explaining the material dimension of agency, such as developing relationships and networks to support institutional change (Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016). The question of ‘how agency actually happen’ still needs elaborating: how are new ideas promoted to others? How are they legitimised in new contexts? How to build or mobilise a network of actors for collective agency? There will be much to gain from the functional-managerialist PR dedicated to material tactics of communication. For this reason, the next part reviews the multi-paradigmatic PR scholarship.

3. An overview of the multi-paradigmatic public relations scholarship
The current application of PR/communication theories in institutional studies can be grouped to two camps: ‘conduit metaphor’ and ‘rhetoric institutionalism’ (Cornelissen et al., 2015). In the ‘conduit metaphor’, communication is treated as a ‘conduit’ of transmitting message so that the agency from both senders and receivers is downplayed. ‘Rhetoric institutionalism’ acknowledges the agency of communicators in using language (i.e., rhetoric) to produce cognitive content for institutionally prescribed action, but neglects agency from audiences. Thus, Cornelissen et al. (2015) call for ‘communicative institutionalism’ to put the constitutive role of communication at centre and front. For this purpose, this section introduces the multi-paradigmatic PR scholarship, wherein different approaches to PR interpret agency differently. The scholarship presented here is admittedly only selective, yet it provides useful pointers related to institutional theory.

A critical approach: PR as discourse production with hidden power asymmetry

In a critical including post-modernism approach (Holtzhausen, 2012; L’Etang et al., 2014), PR is defined as a meaning-making process to produce discourses that privilege the interests of those who they serve or represent. By nature, the agency of PR lies in building consensus among publics through legitimising dominant voices while excluding competing ones. As Motion and Leitch (1996: 299) reveal, PR practitioners are “discourse technologists”, who are “involved in the maintenance and transformation of discourse primarily through the production and distribution of texts. They participate in discursive struggles by shaping texts and by strategically deploying texts which facilitate certain socio-cultural practices and not others.” In practice, most of PR activities deal with message-crafting and distribution in wide-ranging formats from texts, symbols, narratives, definitions, and arguments. As a result, the agency of PR generates hidden power asymmetry through wielding unjustified social influence on behalf of the privileged.

Critical PR scholarship inquires the discursive nature of discourses that perpetuate power imbalance between the dominant and the subordinate. For example, one critique over the normative, two-way symmetrical communication is about the assumption that the powerful and powerless have equal access, resources and skills to represent themselves in public discourses (Roper, 2005). Critical PR scholars (e.g., Heath et al., 2010; L’Etang et al., 2014) reveal that consensus-building through PR is essentially hegemonic to legitimise certain perspectives and action as objective knowledge. Edwards (2009) draws on Bourdieu’s symbolic power to articulate that the process of PR is a struggle for symbolic power, through which PR actors misrepresent, disguise and normalise dominant interests to public through producing discourses via written materials and spoken presentations. In this sense, the agency of PR is “making concessions in order to maintain hegemony” (Roper, 2005: 70).

Within critical PR scholarship, the fully developed framing theory (See a summary from Hallahan, 1999; Lim and Jones, 2010) is instrumental to institutional study for two reasons. First, framing theory involves multi-level analysis, thus fitting well with the cross-level
institutional study. As per Hallahan (1999), framing, with a goal of presenting messages in particular ways to influence recipients’ decision-making, can be analysed from seven aspects: situations, attributes, choices, actions, responsibilities, issues and news. Second, framing theory especially interactive framing acknowledges the influence and agency from recipients. Gray et al. (2015) claim that interactive framing views frames rooted in ongoing negotiation and interaction between multiple actors. Thus, framing theory bridges micro-interactions with macrosocial order, recursively linking communication to institutions.

A rhetorical approach: PR as advocacy, persuasion and co-creational meaning-making

A rhetorical approach to public relations highlights the persuasive rhetoric used in PR messages. By nature, PR is promotional through its agency of advocating a particular idea, interest, or practice (Edwards, 2018). The agency of advocacy is chiefly implemented through using symbolic rhetoric that represents an entity and advances a viewpoint in a public forum (Borchers, 2013). Compared to the discursive nature of discourses, rhetoric is explicit and persuasive to pursue a pre-determined goal. Nonetheless, Heath (2009) clarifies that PR as rhetorical persuasion can be ethical if it is an organic, interactive process between people and ideas, namely, adjusting ideas to people and adjusting people to ideas. As such, Heath believes that PR is committed to discovering truth through facilitating the free exchange of, and fair competition among, ideas in society.

For the purpose of advocacy, the persuasion skills applied in PR range from coercion, inducement and rhetorical appeals. Coercion involves forcing conformity through suppressing opponent opinions and creating public pressure. For example, propaganda became a useful weapon for the US government to engineer consent during the World Wars, when all non-state actors were vulnerable to coercive influence. The costs associated with being an outlier can be prohibitive. Conversely, inducement functions through providing incentives or rewards to trigger compliance with the promoted idea or behaviour (Bitektine and Haack, 2015). Rhetorical appeals frequently used in PR messages include source credibility (ethos)—the level of credibility of persuaders, emotional appeal (pathos)—emotional resonance with target audience, and scientific argument (logos)—logic reasoning (Kent, 2011).

A new rhetorical approach to public relations has emerged in recent years to argue that meanings are co-created by communicators and publics. Botan and Taylor (2004) call this a ‘co-creational perspective’. Informed by this perspective, subsequent dialogue and engagement theories embody the agency from both speakers (i.e. organisations) and listeners (i.e. publics). For example, Kent (2011) argues that PR plays a big role in civil societies through creating and enacting dialogue so that citizens can not only hear multiple and competing viewpoints, but also articulate their own. Johnston (2014) promotes engagement as an essential trait of organisations to be open to the meanings and values that evolve from
interactions with diverse stakeholders. In a word, the rhetorical approach to PR calls to marshal rhetoric to facilitate dialogue and engagement more than persuasion.

**A functional approach: PR as relationship management and network building**

A functional (mainly relational) approach defines public relations as managing relationships between organisations and publics (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). This approach constitutes the mainstream PR scholarship that distinguishes itself from general communication theories in focusing on relationship management with stakeholders. As Holtzhausen (2012) points out, PR’s agency is mostly understood as building, maintaining or restoring relationships with vital publics on behalf of organisations. Following this approach, PR serves to improve organisational efficiency and performance. While the functional approach recognises the environmental impact on PR, it mainly sees the impact as one-way, deterministic and constraining. Consequently, the agency of PR is confined to execute decisions from an organisation’s top management, or help organisations accommodate and adapt to environment (i.e. institutions).

Through putting relationship at centre, PR has developed a strong body of organisation–public relationship (OPR) scholarship over the years. Led by Ledingham and Bruning (1998) and succeeded by many others (e.g., Huang, 2001; Jo et al., 2005; Ki and Hon, 2008), a relational approach to PR offers abundant resources to analyse the dimensions of a relationship (e.g., trust, openness, commitment, involvement, investment), types of OPR (e.g., symbolic, behavioura, personal, professional), and models of relationship building strategies (e.g., Organisation-Public, expanded, developmental, personal, SMART models) (see a summary from Ledingham, 2003). These theoretical tools explain the process of relationship building and how to use PR to create alignment between organisations and environments. In particular, relationship strategies help organisations to build coalition across different social groups who uphold shared or conflicting interests, norms and values.

Apart from formal relationship management, the recently developed PR theories about social networks and social capital (e.g., Edwards, 2009; Sommerfeldt and Taylor, 2011) depict the cross-cutting or ‘weak’ ties (less formal relationships) among loosely-connected actors. For example, the social capital perspective emphasises creating generalised trust, developing shared values, and delivering collective voices. All these indicators are useful to assess the network quality. As Cloutier et al. (2016: 275) corroborate, the mobilisation of “relational spaces” grouping together proponents of reform initiatives may be productive in enabling people to build mutual trust, commitment, and to develop the tactics needed for institutional change. In other words, actors benefit from systematically engaging in the creation of such enabling, yet not-too-formal spaces as networks.

**4. ‘Agency’ as a bridge: how can the two disciplines enrich each other?**
Based on the previous overview of the multi-dimensional ‘agency’ in institutional theory and the multi-paradigmatic PR scholarship, this section illuminates how the two disciplines, via the bridge of ‘agency’, can enrich each other in a direction that is more mutually informing, rather than predatory in intent. Firstly, it explains how the multi-dimensional views of institutional agency advance understandings of three key yet downplayed issues in PR including power, diversity and activism, followed by exploring how the multi-paradigmatic PR scholarship substantiates institutional theory through revealing the hidden power asymmetry, explicating the micro-level, interactive agency, and providing a toolkit of PR strategies for analysing the material aspect of agency.

**How the multi-dimensional institutional agency advances understandings of PR**

**Power.** One of the main benefits of invoking institutional agency theory is to facilitate a reflective and nuanced understanding of public relations power. In the mainstream PR literature, power and agency are under-analysed (Edwards, 2018). Agency is often depicted in a simplified and casual way, and power is deemed as a property conferred by top management (Holtzhausen, 2012). The ‘power’ of PR is regarded associated with structural hierarchy, thus gaining access to an organisation’s dominant coalition (e.g., C-suite) is crucial to gaining power. However, applying the notion of ‘embedded agency’ enables us to discern the duality of the agency of PR: While its agency is constrained by contexts to execute organisational demands, PR can still act reflectively and strategically to overcome environmental limits. In doing so, the power of PR does not always reside in structures, but instead comes from interaction with structure.

The agency thinking from institutional theory also broadens the scope of agents who can practice PR. Agents include not only organised, elite actors (institutional entrepreneurs) but also those underprivileged with poor resources. Since agency takes place at multiple levels, the agents of PR range from individuals, organisations, and social groups as long as they take initiatives while being embedded in social structure. For this reason, the defining and theory-building of PR should go beyond the predominant ‘organisation’ focus (Edwards, 2018) to embrace a wide array of actors, either being individuals or collectives, organised or spontaneous, professional or amateurish, trained or untrained, holding or not holding an office, title or credentials. PR should no longer be treated as a privilege of those who can hire or purchase PR services. Should PR continue to narrowly focus on formal organisations or institutions, PR scholarship will continue to fail in questioning organisations or institutions per se as oppressive forces in society.

In addition, the multi-dimensional institutional agency informs developing a holistic and balanced account of the nature of public relations power. As reviewed earlier, embedded agency consists of three dimensions: iteration (repeating the past), practical evaluation (dealing with the present), and projectivity (planning the future). Following this rationale, we can fully understand the nature of public relations power being negative, pragmatic and
transformative. PR as negative hegemony, domination or manipulation is already well-documented to maintain vested interest and status quo (iteration) (L’Etang et al., 2014). Through the lens of ‘practical evaluation’, we can observe the pragmatic power of PR to resolve contingent issues. The future-oriented agency (projectivity) points us to the transformative power of PR. Instead of serving the privileged, PR has the potential to disrupt hegemony. PR can become a source of intervention through constantly negotiating, resisting or reforming institutions. As such, institutional agency theory helps to not only unmask the power of PR in sustaining domination, but also discover its revolutionary force to perhaps overcome the ingrained social deprivations.

**Diversity.** Lack of diversity and difference is another long-standing issue in the mainstream PR literature (Edwards, 2018). As a US-originating product, PR is characterised by managerial rationality to support corporate, governance and civic expert systems (Halff and Gregory, 2014). Such institutional logics determine what PR is and what it does. The main body of PR theories has thus been dominated by a single genre of ‘consensus’ discourse, based on which normative concepts such as symmetry and excellence prevail (Holtzhausen, 2012). The framework and principles from North American have rapidly permeated the rest of the world, as evidenced by the ever-present Grunigian models and Excellence Theory in non-Western contexts (Edwards, 2018). Also, international PR scholarship tends to use country-specific data to test or modify the US-originating models, rather than attending to local agency that fosters variation, innovation and diversity.

To combat the dominant ‘consensus’ discourse and add epistemological diversity to PR, institutional entrepreneurship and Scandinavian translation theory spark an inclusive approach to embracing local heterogeneity, nuances and dynamics. Specifically, ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ inspires PR scholars to observe local resistance to seemingly universal standards, and to identify efforts that shift the institutional logics prevailing in Western PR to new ones tailored to non-Western contexts. Scandinavian translation theory explains how differences in concepts and practices of PR result from a discursive process of actors’ recontextualising, reinterpreting, and reframing the US-originating PR. It is due to translation that new meanings of PR emerge locally, disseminated nationally and globally, and deconstructed locally again, often far removed from its origin. Thus, the diversity of PR is best understood as a product of actors’ deep learning and interaction with local institutions, values and beliefs.

Through drawing on institutional entrepreneurship and translation theories, PR scholars can create ‘agency-driven’ knowledge that allows alternative theorising and discourses (beyond consensus) emerging from local contexts. In doing so, peripheral or underrepresented views and epistemologies of PR originating from Global South, Global East and indigenous cultures will be able to flourish within the dominant framework. Thus, it is advisable to redefine PR as a free-flow communication that takes varied forms and configures its own way through
continuously interplaying with multi-layer contexts. PR should highlight a new role of ‘change agent’ in addition to its traditional binary role of ‘technicians’ or ‘managers’. Especially the leading PR actors (e.g., multinational corporations, international PR firms, global professional associations) should be examined as institutional entrepreneurs. They actively negotiate the status, identity and autonomy of PR to pursue ‘professional projects’ (Salomonsen and Andersen, 2014) while being embedded in various institutions. Their dynamic local translation contributes to diversity.

**Activism.** Despite gaining increasing research attention, activism is often excluded from the public relations orthodoxy or portrayed as the domain of enemy to PR (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). The exclusion is mainly because activists may not always look for compromise and symmetrical solutions, or even refuse to engage in relationships based on goodwill. Activists are thus seen more as external publics to be managed than as practitioners of PR. However, critical PR scholars has recently called for the conflation between PR and activism because activists also skilfully use PR techniques (e.g., rallies, speeches, media relations) to either defy existing institutions or creating new ones (Holtzhausen, 2012). If activism is continuously being excluded, the mainstream PR scholarship that claims for building consensus may be actually damaging the most defensible and applauded role of PR in democratic societies (Demetrious, 2013).

Institutional work theory, given its focus on broad actors engaging in distributed yet collective agency for changes, offers rich insights into integrating activism in public relations orthodoxy. Learning from institutional work, PR should expand its research objects from large, resourceful organisations (institutional entrepreneurs) to a wide spectrum of actors including under-resourced activists. Through putting ‘agency’ at centre, PR scholarship will become resilient enough to absorb marginalised voices, subaltern groups and reform forces into its realm. Activists can be seen as both PR practitioners and ‘institutional workers’ as they seek to either elicit or resist changes on the part of target organisations or individuals. Through the lens of ‘institutional work’, it is likely to develop a comprehensive understanding of the agency in activist PR as being purposive or discursive, organised or spontaneous, strategic or emergent. This variety of agency suggests that the identities of activist PR could be always manifold and fluid.

Also, institutional work theory facilitates better understanding the nature and characteristics of activist PR, which is constrained by institutional contexts. Now that institutional work involves everyday mundane practice in unintended or unexpected ways, we will discover the emergent (not always deliberate) strategies used by activists who may not professionally be trained in PR. In other words, ‘institutional work’ assists capturing the ‘improvised’ PR strategies, thus challenging the colonisation of conceptualising PR as a carefully calculated management science. Knowing the improvised strategies is beneficial to unearth ‘the weapons of the weak’—how activists pursue changes and what mechanisms are at play.
Nevertheless, institutional work theory cautions that activists are not purely free players as their choices of strategies and the extent of activism are subject to institutions.

Additionally, activist PR could learn from institutional work to theorise the impact of PR at various levels. At the organisational level, activist PR undertakes institutional work to resist dominant coalition, represent underprivileged employees, or change executives’ misperceptions of PR (e.g., smoothing over problems, telling half-truth) in ethical dilemmas. At the field (inter-organisational) level, activist PR can reconfigure the traditionally contract-based hierarchy between the principal (i.e. clients) and the agent (i.e. PR consultancies). PR should progress from acting on the will of the principal to build equal partnership. At the social level, activist PR can pressure organisations to fulfil social responsibility. For example, Greenpeace activists push large businesses to follow public policies that protect environment. In this sense, institutional theory not only provides conceptual tools to incorporate activism in the PR domain, but also drives the development of activist PR scholarship in a compatible and fruitful direction.

**How the multi-paradigmatic PR scholarship substantiates institutional theory**

*Revealing the hidden power asymmetry underlying agency.* As mentioned earlier, embedded agency is criticised for overlooking the power asymmetry and the ostensible unanimity among individuals. As Bitektine and Haack (2015) point out, ‘embedded agency’ assumes that all individuals endorse the same institutionalised judgement and hence agency happens unanimously. However, the reality is the overall conformity does not mean everyone agrees. While the majority approves the institutional result, the rest may have to reserve opinions or pretend to agree because of disadvantaged positions. The observed macro-level consensus around the proposed institution could have disguised not only the conflicting viewpoints, but also the mechanism that sustains domination or restrains expression of differences. Thus, ‘embedded agency’ flaws in revealing the hidden power asymmetry among individuals that contributes to an illusion of ‘unity’.

Critical PR scholarship, with its strength in articulating the invisible power asymmetry in consensus-building, is helpful to identify the hegemonic mechanism underlying agency. As elaborated earlier, a critical PR perspective holds that PR is used to serve those in power through prioritising and representing self-interested discourses as normal, prominent and popular. Consensus-making through PR involves three steps: normalisation, domination, and silencing the opposite voices. Firstly, framing theory (Lim and Jones, 2010) helps institutionalists to analyse how resourceful actors use frames in preferred ways which, in turn, become normative pillars of institutions. This normalisation process happens in subtle and discursive ways by using such PR techniques as celebrity endorsement, opinion leaders, and emotional appeal. Through framing, certain ways of thinking and talking about an issue may be “ruled in” (visible and deemed acceptable) and others “ruled out” (fading away or downplayed) in public arenas (Grandien and Johansson, 2016).
The second step of consensus-building entails making the prioritised value dominant among all competing views. For example, PR specialises in media exposure, publicity and advocacy, to not only bring issues in spotlight but also channel public opinion to a certain direction. Through drawing attention (preferably affection) among constituents, the necessity, desire and support of changing an institution are enlarged. Especially when both rhetorical appeals (e.g., ethos, logos, pathos) and modern persuasion techniques (e.g., influencer engagement, advertising campaigns) are strategically used, the promoted value or voice will stand out to overwhelmingly influence audiences across geographies, contexts, and situations. In this sense, PR plays a significant, mediating role in the structuration process—shaping structural environment in which privileged actors mobilise resources to establish new narratives in favour of dominant interest.

Based on normalisation and domination, a third step of consensus-building through PR is to silence the opposite voices. This silencing process occurs through the ‘public opinion’ pressure, that is, PR creating a supportive opinion environment for dominant interest, wherein the minority feel pressured to follow the majority to avoid being ‘outliers’. As Clemente and Roulet’s (2015) find, the ‘Spiral of Silence Theory’ explains how the minority are co-opted in and aggregate to form a ‘unified’ opinion because of fear of being in ‘minority.’ Also, the minority may not have equal access to delivering their voices as the well-resourced do. In this regard, critical PR scholarship with its insight into hegemony and consensus-making helps to reveal the institutional suppression overlooked in the agency process. By learning from PR, institutional theorists can better understand how the heterogeneity in propriety judgments at the lower, individual level is covered, and how the expression of deviant judgements is discouraged to support a seemingly unified institutional project.

Explicating the micro-level, interactive agency as a mediator. In general, institutional theory is robust in explaining the macro-level agency driven by institutional logics. Agency driven by institutional logics follows a top-down approach to elaborating or adapting abstract frameworks at lower levels (Bitektine and Haack, 2015). Communication in this process is mostly seen as a ‘conduit’ of carrying institutional logics, or plays a performative role through texts, symbols, and narratives with limited agency. Institutional literature lacks a coherent theory about how diverse, local, and ephemeral communication creates, contests or negotiates meanings on the ground which, in turn, aggregate to form the building blocks of macro-level social orders (Vaara et al., 2010). While recent institutional work (e.g., Gray et al., 2015) details a bottom-up approach to institutional creation, it still neglects the mediator of interactive agency—‘agency’ from both communicators and audiences—on institutional process (e.g., co-shaping sense-making).

Rhetorical PR scholarship characterised by a ‘co-creational perspective’ (Botan and Taylor, 2004) assists unveiling the micro-level interactive agency in meaning-making. As introduced earlier, a ‘co-creational perspective’ of PR entails dialogic, interactive and socially oriented
communication between communicators and audiences. PR enacts agency to code, interpret and promote meanings to audiences. Audiences also take initiatives to decode, reinterpret or reconstruct the meanings received from PR. Agency involved in this interactive process develops shared meaning systems as part of institutional logics. In this sense, the interactive agency informed by PR literature complements institutional theory that focuses on the field or organisation-level agency (Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009). Further, Kent’s (2011) dialogue theory helps institutionalists to understand the enabling condition of an interactive ‘dialogue’, in which multiple parties should have access to articulate, hear, and debate pluralistic viewpoints. Also, Johnston (2014)’s thesis on ‘engagement’ facilitates conceptualising the co-creational institutional process as ongoing and evolving interactions between diverse stakeholders.

Further, the PR literature lends theoretical tools to explain how the micro-level, interactive meaning-making converges on common categories that become durable institutional logics. As Ocasio et al. (2015) specify, four distinct communicative elements connect local act of meaning-making with higher-order institutional logics: (1) Coordinating fosters collective attention to practices understood in relation to existing value systems. (2) Sense-giving, through using rhetoric and its political influence, enables production of general meanings applicable to current activities. (3) Translating develops common narratives across contexts and links interrelated categories to a broad swath of current activity. (4) Theorising generates abstract principles of system-level practices. All four communicative elements are critical to producing or changing institutional logics. Hence, much of the usefulness of PR scholarship for institutional theory lies in its ability to bridge macro-level meaning structures with micro-level interactions, through which meanings are constantly contested, negotiated, and refined.

Providing a toolkit of PR strategies to analyse the material aspect of institutional agency.

While institutional scholars acknowledge both material and discursive aspects of agency, they have focused on explaining agency from a discursive perspective (e.g., discourses). Detailed account and analysis of how agency is materialised in practice or embodied in action are still underdeveloped (Waldorff, 2013). There is need to understand the material element of communication especially the toolkit of strategies and tactics that actors mobilise to enact agency in a substantial way. For this reason, the well-established, mainstream PR scholarship offers abundant resources to analyse or evaluate the ‘material work’ entailed in institutional agency. Due to the space limit, this paper mainly discusses two PR strategies that are useful to substantiate analysis of institutional agency: legitimacy-building and relationship (network)-building.

In essence, PR has a reflective function to create alignment between organisations and their environments to gain public support (Verčič et al., 2001). On one hand, PR serves as a bridge between actors (i.e., organisations) and environments (i.e. public expectations) to translate, adopt and adapt institutional requirements to local practice, tradition and values. As Waaraas
and Sataoen (2014) assert, PR consultants apply different strategies in response to institutional models: copying (replicating the original), omission (selective adoption), and addition (adding variation to the original). Such legitimation efforts target actors (i.e., organisations) per se. On the other hand, PR serves to (re)shape public expectations and assumptions of legitimacy that make up institutions. In a ‘space of reasons’ (Schildt et al., 2011) where multiple arguments co-exist, PR shapes the defining of what is reasonable (and should be widely accepted) and what is not. This legitimation process can be accomplished through PR delegitimising existing values (e.g., problematising, questioning, attributing blame) and simultaneously endorsing new institutions (e.g., justifying, priming, privileging).

In addition, relationship (network) building is a key area that PR theory can contribute to institutional agency. As noted in institutional literature, leading actors engage with various stakeholders to amass resources and form wide-ranging coalitions for collective action. Agency is best analysed in webs of social relations characterised by multi-way connections, nested structures, and everyday interactions (Garud et al., 2007). In this regard, the preceding relationship management theories provide tools to analyse or evaluate the types, dimensions, and quality of relationships and relationship cultivation models, strategies and impacts. This theoretical toolkit assists institutionalists comprehending how highly embedded constituents build alliance for distributed yet collective agency. Apart from formal relationship building, the newly developed PR theories about social capital (networks) (e.g., Edwards, 2009; Sommerfeldt and Taylor, 2011) offer additional insights into analysing the creation of cross-cutting or ‘weak’ ties among loosely connected actors. For example, ‘social capital’ theory highlights generalised trust, shared values, and collective voices. All these constructs are relevant to assess the network quality required in institutional agency.

5. Discussion, conclusion and future research agenda

Through articulating ‘agency’ as a critical juncture, this paper has explored how institutional theory advances understandings of public relations, and how multi-paradigmatic PR scholarship substantiates analysis of institutional agency. The significance of introducing institutional theory to PR is to refocus on the human agency that interplays with socio-cultural contexts which, in turn, brings back subjectivity and reflexivity into PR analysis. As Brown (2015: xv) purports, PR scholars need to think out of the box, not viewing PR as “a container for managerial abstractions—objectives, strategies, tactics, and outcomes—but as the lived, dramatic experience of human beings in the social world.” The value of introducing PR to institutional theory is to fully recognise its ‘constitutive role’ to institutions and the rich potential offered by the multi-paradigmatic PR scholarship. As Cornelissen et al. (2015) corroborate, communication should no longer be treated as a ‘conduit’, but instead it is in and through communication that institutions exist, are performed, and given shape.

Specifically, the multi-dimensional institutional agency theory emancipates the mainstream PR scholarship in several aspects. ‘Embedded agency’ spurs a reflective and nuanced
understanding of public relations power. The power of PR does not necessarily reside in structures but ongoing interactions with contexts through negotiating, resisting, and spanning environmental limits. Given the multiple forms of embedded agency (i.e., iteration, practical evaluation, projectivity), the nature of public relations power turns out be negative (domination), pragmatic (problem-solving), and transformative (revolution). ‘Institutional entrepreneurship’ and Scandinavian translation theory alert PR scholars to halt the hegemony of US-based PR theories and models but embrace dissensus and alternative theorising from local practices. Highlighting ‘agency’ in PR will thus nourish epistemological diversity such as contextualised, indigenous knowledge outside the US origin and modernism colony. In addition, ‘institutional work’ with its focus on broad, distributed agency exercised in everyday mundane practice, provides a useful tool to integrate activism scholarship as “a natural part of public relations” (Ihlen and Verhoeven, 2009: 334).

On the side of institutional theory, this paper has illuminated how the multi-paradigmatic PR scholarship fills certain ‘blind spots’ in institutional agency. Critical PR expertise about hegemony in consensus-building helps unmasking the hidden power asymmetry underlying embedded agency which, inadvertently, assumes all individuals agree on unified institutional arrangement. Using PR theory (i.e. framing) of misrepresenting and normalising a particular interest aids institutional scholars to explain how “hegemony becomes taken-for-grantedness and ideology becomes logic” (Munir, 2015: 91). The rhetorical PR scholarship especially a ‘co-creational’ approach to meaning-making complements the dominant analysis of ‘top-down’ institutional logics. In particular, the ‘co-creational’ PR perspective underscores the interactive agency from both communicators and audiences in meaning-making which, in turn, aggregates to develop institutional logics. Such a ‘bottom-up’ approach enables capturing the “beating heart of institutions” (Hallett and Ventresca, 2006: 215). Lastly, the functional PR theory featured by relationship management and network building provides a rich account of the toolkit useful for actors to materialise agency in building coalitions, developing allies, and leveraging resources.

Overall, this paper contributes to both public relations and institutional theory. On one hand, it probes into the less-explored, multi-faceted theoretical potential of institutional agency to extend PR scholarship. Through highlighting an ‘agency’ perspective, PR theory-building will become robust, inclusive, and sensitive to contexts, for example, to ignite the transformative power of PR as ‘change agent’, foster diversity in global PR scholarship, and re-energise activism as part of PR orthodoxy. On the other hand, this study furthers Cornelissen et al.’s (2015) call to enhance understanding of the ‘constitutive’ (not instrumental) role of communication to institutions. Through presenting the affluence of PR scholarship, this study offers insights into amplifying the explanatory power of institutional theory. This study proposes future research agenda to enable further cross-fertilisation between the two domains. For instance, an ‘agency’ perspective inspires PR scholars to ask and theorise the following questions:
• Given agency taking place at various levels, how can public relations be redefined to move from the organisation centricity to embracing a broad range of agents?

• If public relations is constrained by, and also exercises agency over institutional environments (embedded agency), what would be the conditions (antecedents), strategies, and mechanisms to activate and maximise the agentic role of PR?

• Informed by institutional entrepreneurship and translation theory, is it possible to develop a global PR framework that reflects various dialectics (e.g., commonality vs. speciality, consistency vs. inconsistency, continuity vs. change) inherent in PR?

• Borrowing the idea of institutional work, how can we theorise the nature, content, and multi-level impact of activist PR?

To fully explore the theoretical potential of PR, institutional theorists should rethink the following questions to dismantle the ‘institutionalisation’ of institutional theory:

• How does a process of institutional agency typically unfold when it applies or engages with PR activities (e.g., meaning-making, advocacy, relationship building)?

• Instead of conducting case studies, is it possible to develop a typology of institutional agency shaped by different PR approaches (e.g., critical, rhetorical, functional/relational)?

• How and to what extent can public relations account for the homogeneous or heterogeneous institutional process?

• What specific roles does PR play in shaping different outcomes of institutional agency (e.g., institutionalisation, deinstitutionalisation, re-institutionalisation)?

These are but a few of the questions being raised to spark a deep conversation between public relations and institutional theory. Through demonstrating the intellectual breadth and openness of the two areas, this paper has affirmed their mutually-informed compatibilities that were mentioned at the beginning of this article. In their respective most recent development, each discipline lends itself as a fertile ground to enrich the other. The possibilities are limitless. Serving as a point of departure, this research invites scholars from both sides to continue this dialogue and explore further collaboration in light of ‘agency’.

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