Understanding Political Institutions in a Messy World: Establishing Interdisciplinary Common Ground

by

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Abstract: This article, which presents an interdisciplinary research agenda grounded in a constructivist institutional approach, begins by unpacking relevant terms. It explains the new institutional approach in political science that simultaneously narrows the focus and broadens the scope of political research by encouraging a return to the "political" in political science while also opening political research to a variety of other disciplinary approaches. It then explores the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying a constructivist approach. Such assumptions are an integral if often unacknowledged part of any research effort, interdisciplinary or not. The main part of the article then offers an interdisciplinary research agenda describing how political science, sociology, and history can provide an integrated constructivist guide to the study of political institutions. The article suggests employing a field of consciousness approach to integrate the work of these three disciplines in order to situate interdisciplinary research on political institutions on the common ground of institutional standard operating procedures.

Keywords: common ground, constructivism, field of consciousness, interdisciplinary research, political institutions, standard operating procedures

This article presents an interdisciplinary research agenda grounded in a constructivist institutional approach to the study of politics. An interdisciplinary research agenda is "a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad and complex to be dealt with by a single discipline or profession" (Klein & Newell, 1997, p. 393). A constructivist approach to the study of politics focuses on understanding political relationships as reflections of the interpretations of their meanings by actors within a social context. Constructivists argue that "people do one thing and not another due to the presence of certain social constructs: ideas, beliefs, norms, identities, or some other interpretive

filter through which people perceive the world" (Parsons, 2018, p. 75). An institution is defined as "a relatively enduring collection of rules and organization practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resistant to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and outside circumstances" (March & Olson, 2006, p. 3). Within a constructivist institutional approach, institutions serve as the "interpretive filters through which people see the world" and as venues where actors interpret and seek to impact the world.

The characterization of institutions as "*relatively* enduring," "*relatively* invariant," and "*relatively* resistant" points to two aspects of institutional analysis of import in this article (March & Olson, 2006, p. 3). One, institutional practices are not deterministic; rather they are based in patterned and learned norms of behavior that have impacts on the political agents involved in them but that are also subject to change based on the interpretations and actions of these same agents. Two, institutional practices occur within a complex interactive system characterized by a variety of individual and group behaviors unfolding within a definable but nonetheless flexible set of constraints. "Structures provide the context within which agents act, but agents interpret structures and, in acting on them, change them, with these 'new' structures becoming the context within which agents subsequently act" (Marsh, 2018, p. 200). Newell (2001) affirms the importance of complex systems' structures and flexibility when he writes: "The pattern is not fully stable and deterministic, as it might be if the relationships were linear, but neither is it ephemeral and random. Rather, the pattern of behavior in a complex system is quasi stable" (p. 9). Given the fact that understanding political institutions is too intricate a task for any one discipline, it requires an interdisciplinary research agenda focused on actor interpretations of institutional objectives and practices.

This article begins by unpacking the notion of a constructivist institutional approach. First, it explains the new institutional approach in political science that simultaneously narrows the focus and broadens the scope of political research by encouraging a return to the "political" in political science while also opening political research to a variety of other disciplinary approaches. Second, it explores the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying a constructivist approach. Such assumptions are an integral if often unacknowledged part of any research effort, interdisciplinary or not. The main part of the article then offers an interdisciplinary research agenda describing how political science, sociology, and history can provide an integrated constructivist guide to the study of political institutions. The

article suggests employing a field of consciousness approach to integrate the work of these three disciplines in order to situate interdisciplinary research on political institutions on the common ground of institutional standard operating procedures.

New Institutionalism: The Return of the "Political" to Political Science

The behavioral revolution of the 1960s transformed the study of politics by challenging the discipline's then largely atheoretical and methodologically unselfconscious classical institutional perspective (Lowndes, Marsh, & Stoker, 2018, pp. 55-56). "Until the 1950s, the dominance of the institutional approach within political science was such that its assumptions and practices were rarely specified, let alone subject to sustained critique. Methodological and theoretical premises were left unexamined behind a veil of academic 'common sense'" (Lowndes, 2018, p. 54). Following the behavioral revolution the study of politics became political science and the discipline became focused on theory and methodology. This new approach analyzed the behavior of political actors and "formally organized social institutions [came] to be portrayed simply as arenas within which political behavior, driven by more fundamental factors, occurs" (March & Olsen, 1984, p. 734). As a result, in an understandable effort to move past classical institutionalism's formalisms, behavioralists wound up undervaluing political institutions as independent political forces (Lowndes, 2018; March & Olsen, 1984).

In subsequent years, behavioralist tendencies to marginalize political institutions were reinforced by structuralist economic paradigms. Marxists saw political institutions as reflections of the social relations of production structured into a particular historical period, focusing their attention on socioeconomic variables as explainers of political outcomes (Kiely, 2018). From a classical Marxist perspective "politics [was] reduced to a mere epiphenomenon, hemmed in by structures of individual economic choice and collective political cost" (Maguire, 2010, p. 142). And rational choice theorists argued that an inherent drive for utility maximization in a world of strategic competition was the explanation for political behavior (Hindmoor & Taylor, 2018). As Hay and Wincott (1998) argue,

> despite its putative concern with individual choice, rational choice strips away all distinctive features of individuality, replacing political subjects with calculating automatons….In this way rational choice analysis moves from an apparently agent-centered individualism centered in choice, to a deep seated structuralism. (p. 952)

Calling these perspectives to task in a seminal piece written in the 1980s, March and Olsen (1984) argued that "contemporary theories of politics tend to portray politics as a reflection of society" and suggested a reemphasis on the "relative autonomy of political institutions" (p. 734). These new institutionalists focused on institutions as independent actors with impacts on political outcomes. Lowndes (2018) argues that the new approach changed the institutional paradigm from one focused on static formal organizations to one emphasizing dynamic formal and informal rules; demanded a change from value neutrality to a "value-critical stance"; and moved from a holistic to a differentiated conception of institutions (pp. 59-64). In short, the new institutionalism proposed that iterative political interactions in the form of institutions matter; they are more than epiphenomena and can readily serve as independent or dependent variables in their own right.

From the beginning the new institutionalism was a broadly defined paradigm that lent itself to multiple approaches. Hall and Taylor (1996) identified historical, sociological, and economic variants of institutional analysis. Historical institutionalism focused on episodic conflict within institutions (1996, pp. 937-942), asymmetries of power, path-dependent options, and unintended outcomes while sociological institutionalism emphasized how norms and values form the framework for logics of social appropriateness (pp. 946-950). And economic theorists saw institutions as efforts to deal with collective action problems by lowering transaction costs among strategic political actors (pp. 942-946). By the 1990s institutionalism in its variety of forms had established itself as a major paradigm in political science (Lowndes, 2018). During this same time period, due in no small part to the influence of feminist scholarship, a constructivist perspective had also gained traction in the discipline (Parsons, 2018; Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2018).

The Ontological and Epistemological Bases of Constructivism

Now, given that this article suggests a *constructivist institutional* approach, ontological and epistemological questions raised by constructivism must be addressed. By addressing fundamental questions about what constitutes reality, ontology focuses on what is out there, a question with different implications for natural as opposed to social scientists (Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2018; Chatterjee, 2011). Philosophy of science questions about paradigmatic limits to scientific understanding aside (see Kuhn, 1962), natural scientists address ontological questions as scientific discoveries unfold, and the argument that natural scientists uncover something out

there, something separate from the scientist doing the discovering, is readily defensible. Ontological issues, however, are murkier when one is dealing with social behavior (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Social scientists are exploring phenomena not just identified but also created and continually recreated by human beings (Parson, 2018). Social behavior, whether as a manifestation of cultural norms, political values, or aesthetic tastes, is inherently part of the experience and understanding of the subjects researched as well as the researchers themselves. Moreover, understanding social behaviors is always in a state of flux as interpretations change and perspectives vary. In short, social behaviors do not exist independently of human experience; indeed, without human construction and interpretation, these phenomena simply do not exist.

Furthermore, ontological concerns in the social sciences necessarily involve epistemological questions about how scholars examine social phenomena (Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2018). There are those who view ontology as logically prior to epistemology. Hay suggests that doing so "is a point of logic, not of meta theory" (Hay, 2007, p. 117). Dixon and Jones, however, argue that it is problematic to assume ontology and then develop epistemology to explore what is a canonical assertion about the nature of social phenomena: "Ontological assumptions put the cart before the horse, for ontology is itself grounded in epistemology about how we know what the world is like" (as cited in Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2018, p. 180). It is clear that ontological and epistemological questions are at the very least challenging.

One approach to these questions is provided by constructivism, which emerged from the work of sociologists Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Constructivists see themselves as studying social relationships that are the unfinished products of an on-going interpretive process of becoming (Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2018; Parsons, 2018). From this perspective, social behaviors do not exist out there as objects to be explained but are instead phenomena grounded in the interpretations of situated social actors – subjects to be understood (Parsons, 2018; Searle, 1995). Indeed for many constructivists, the study of social relationships is defined by a double hermeneutic as interpretations of involved actors are analyzed through the interpretations of researchers (Kim & Keith, 2004; Giddens, 1987).

Constructivists confront the notion that on one level their worldview is utterly banal. Of course, social scientists are engaged in the process of researching human constructions – that is the point of social science. The constructivist contribution comes from their belief that attempting to specify causal relationships reifies social constructions to the extent that we are

alienated from our own creations (Parsons, 2018; Wenman, 2018; Bevir & Rhodes, 2002). Such reification produces situations where scholars seek to "predict" or "explain" social relationships without understanding them (Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2018). Indeed, understanding motivations is often bracketed empirically or assumed to be part of a larger theory that structures behavior. Constructivists insist that research should focus on understanding the subjects involved in a social relationship rather than on iterative patterns that are then interpreted as manifestations of an unforeseen driving force underlying the subjects' behavior (Parsons, 2018). Constructivists "argue that social science is about the development of narratives not theories" (Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2018, p. 192).

Constructivists see agents within political institutions as engaged in interactive relationships characterized by ongoing and sometimes changing interpretations of institutional behavior in the absence of complete information and subject to contingency. In this regard, institutions are seen as repositories of ideas, some reinforcing, others challenging, the existing institutional paradigm. Thelen and Steinmo (1992) contend that while institutions "shape and constrain political strategies [of their agents] in important ways,[…]they are themselves also the outcomes (conscious or unintended) of deliberate political strategies, of political conflict and of choice" (cited in Hay & Wincott, 1998, p. 955). From this perspective, institutional ideas serve "as cognitive filters through which actors can interpret environmental signals" (Hay, 2006, p. 65). But institutional analysis needs to dig deeper than this. It must also explore "the conditions under which such established cognitive filters and paradigms are contested, challenged, and replaced" (p. 65).

Constructivist Institutionalism as Interdisciplinary Research: Political Science, History, and Sociology

This section outlines an interdisciplinary research application of the constructivist institutional approach. As we have seen, a constructivist analysis is dependent on the interpretations and understandings of social actors (Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2018; Parsons, 2018). As we have also seen, the new institutionalism focuses on the standardized formal and informal interactions characterizing ongoing relationships among actors (March & Olson, 1984; Lowndes, 2018). As a consequence, a constructivist institutional interdisciplinary research process must begin by delimiting institutional boundaries, that is, defining the subject of analysis. From a constructivist

perspective, such clarification can only emerge from ascertaining actor interpretations of institutional interactions – a process requiring interdisciplinary qualitative research (Vromen, 2018; Marvasti, 2004).

In the research project considered here, the strategy to delineate institutional boundaries integrates insights from selected subfields in political science, sociology, and history. Two actions are necessary in order for an interdisciplinary approach to define institutional boundaries. First, researchers must provide a "research map" (Repko & Szostak, 2017, pp. 112-114) including the rationales for the selection of the disciplines and methodologies that will guide the research. And second, researchers must establish common ground for the interdisciplinary integration of the insights of the relevant disciplines.

Political scientists, sociologists, and historians each have pursued discipline-specific research on political institutions. Each of these disciplines incorporates a "natural focus" on institutional behavior; each "has produced a body of research" related to institutional development; and each has "generated one or more theories" focused on institutional dynamics (Repko & Szostak, 2017, p. 117). Interdisciplinary research on the same subject would focus on how insights from each of these disciplines either develop or challenge patterns of institutional relationships uncovered by the other disciplines. In the case of mutually reinforcing interdisciplinary development, integration results in elaboration of one discipline's insights by those of another as the different intellectual perspectives act to expand and reinforce each other's insights. In the case of interdisciplinary challenge, integration involves the paradigmatic destabilization envisioned by Szostak (2017) or reflects the impact of the complex non-linear relationships critical to Newell's (2001) analysis of interdisciplinary research.

Each of the selected disciplines includes a constructivist school. Constructivists from political science, sociology, and history believe that the "world is socially or discursively constructed…[that] social phenomena cannot be understood independently of our interpretations of them" and that researchers "themselves operate within discourses and traditions" (Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2018, p. 190). Constructivist scholars from these disciplines usually rely on qualitative research techniques because such techniques are rich in detail, address context, and concentrate on a "causes-of-effects" rather than an "effects-of-causes" perspective (Smith, 2014). Qualitative research is likely to involve case studies or small subject number research designs (Vromen, 2018; Mahoney & Goertz, 2006; Marvasti, 2004; O'Sullivan, Rassel, & Berner, 2003, pp. 38-48). As a consequence, interdisciplinary researchers employing qualitative techniques produce

"thick description" at the cost of generalizability of findings (Vromen, 2018, p. 237; Ercan & Marsh, 2016).

Political Science

The institutional approach emerged from within political science so it is not surprising that this discipline is relevant to the research agenda. Few disciplines have been more open to other disciplines' research models or more prone to create sub-disciplines grounded in these external research models than has political science. Political science research has been grounded in the utility maximizing notions of economics, psychological models of individual and group behavior, sociological ideas about group socialization, and structuralist perspectives about the fundamental nature of governance. In this respect, the discipline reflects Klein's (1993) rejection of the idea of disciplinary unity:

> The notion of disciplinary unity is triply false: minimizing or denying differences that exist across the plurality of specialties grouped loosely under a single disciplinary label, undervaluing connections across specialties of separate disciplines, and discouraging the frequency and impact of cross-disciplinary influences. (p. 190)

To establish disciplinary focus, this article will consider political science as the study of the struggle over the "authoritative allocation of values" or resources (Easton, 1965, p. 129). Politics involves the phenomenon of *struggle* because values, in this case those defining the norms of a political institution, are contested and institutional resources are in relatively short supply. The process of a*llocation* involves distributing or redistributing resources among institutional actors or revising institutional value preferences. (Ultimately, of course, all allocations involve some mixture of values and resources.) The defining component of *authoritative* allocation decisions is that they enjoy legitimacy and are binding on all institutional participants. Accordingly, political scientists focus on the individual and group strategies employed in the ongoing struggle for favorable institutional allocation outcomes.

For our purposes, the relevant political science subfield is public administration, which focuses on the internal dynamics and the external relationships of public organizations (see White, 1939; Waldo, 1948; Selznick, 1949). Two facets of public administration are of note in relation to institutional analysis. First, the organizational concepts of task specialization and hierarchy undergird the sociologists' concept of institutional roles, which, as we shall see in a subsequent section, is a crucial component of this

interdisciplinary research effort (Gerth & Mills, 1946). Second, the extent of agent discretion in interpreting the meaning of statutes and regulations is an important baseline for understanding how political institutions actually function (Peters, 2011; West, 2005; Matland, 1995). From the constructivist perspective, the struggles for increased institutional influence are a function of the interpretations of and adjustments to institutional dynamics by actors involved in the process. As a consequence, the optimal strategy to understand these interactions is qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and discourse analyses that solicit from these actors detailed assessments of their own perceptions of and roles within the institutional struggle (Vromen, 2018).

Sociology

Like political science, sociology is an eclectic discipline (Szostak, 2017, pp. 70-71; Little et al., 2014). Sociologists from the constructivist school "study the way in which institutions create meaning for individuals" (Lowndes, 2018, p. 60). One of the most common manifestations of institutional meaning is found in sociology's concept of habitualization, which serves as the basis for the roles that actors adopt for their institutional interactions (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Some scholars see institutional roles as reflections of the norms that define appropriate institutional behavior. "Individuals who have been socialized into particular institutional roles internalize the norms associated with these roles, and in this way institutions affect behavior" (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 948). To others, the role socialization process is less clearly derivative and "norms are said to provide merely a set of broad imperatives within which the details of roles can be worked out" (Biddle, 1986, p. 71). Whatever the particular take on the elasticity of the connections between individual roles and institutional norms, constructivist sociology seeks to understand social interactions from the point of view of the participants.

While conceding that institutional norms are cognitive filters constraining behavior, interpretive sociologists also emphasize the ongoing interpretation, reinterpretation, and adjustment of such norms by individual actors (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Parsons & Shils, 1951; Mead, 1934). They are concerned "with the conditions under which established cognitive filters as paradigms are contested, challenged, and replaced" (Hay, 2006, p. 65). Constructivist sociologists, many from sociology's critical social theory school, address the tensions that develop as agents carry out particular institutional roles within specific decision situations in light of

general institutional values and norms (Crossley, 2005). According to Repko and Szostak (2017) "what unites these [interpretive and constructivist] approaches in the more general sense is the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed and that knowledge exists in history that can change the course of history if properly applied" (p. 48). What also unites these approaches is reliance on qualitative research methodologies, like in-depth interviews and ethnographies, that allow for the unearthing of *Verstehen* through thick descriptions of the understandings of institutional actors operating under some prevailing social discourse (Vromen, 2018, pp. 244-249; Smith, 2014; Marvasti, 2004).

History

Historians emphasize two points concerning the evolution of political institutions. First, they contend that initial choices matter. "The argument is that these initial choices (structural as well as normative) will have a pervasive effect on subsequent policy choices….It appears in these arguments that even if subsequent structural changes are made, the initial choices have an enduring value" (Peters, 1999, p. 210). Therefore, from the historians' perspective, it is necessary to assess institutional decisions from some starting point whether it is the creation of the institution as a whole or the beginning of the aspect of institutional behavior that is the focus of the analysis or both. Second, historians emphasize the path dependent nature of short-term institutional decisions and longer-term institutional evolution (Mahoney, 2000). In describing the evolutionary nature of change, Hay (1998) provides a succinct description of path dependency within an institutional context.

> The order in which things happens affects how they happen; the trajectory of change up to a certain point itself constrains the trajectory after that point; and the strategic choices made at a particular moment eliminate whole ranges of possibilities from latter choices while serving as the very condition of existence of others. (p. 955)

The implications of path dependency go beyond the notion that the past matters. Historical institutionalists

> have been strong proponents of an image of causation that is "path dependent" in the sense that it rejects the traditional postulate that the same operative forces will generate the same results everywhere in favor of the view that the effect of such forces will be mediated by the contextual features of a given situation often inherited from the past. (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 941)

These scholars emphasize institutional evolution as a patterned but contingent process, not a manifestation of determinist mandates. It is this complexity, this patterned but nevertheless contingent temporal unfolding of institutional norms, practices, and roles in the struggle for favorable outcomes, that makes interdisciplinary integration necessary and fruitful in the study of political institutions, and a result that in its complexity is ultimately a more accurate representation of reality.

From a constructivist interdisciplinary perspective, path dependence manifests itself in ideas. "Institutions are built on ideational foundations which can exert an independent path dependent effect on their subsequent development" (Hay, 2006, p. 65). "Some social historians have begun to employ 'micro-history' or the new cultural history (a blend of social history and intellectual history) as a way of studying ideological structures" (Repko & Szostak, 2017, p. 49). The historical institutionalists' ontological and epistemological emphasis on context and contingency makes their research amenable to an interdisciplinary constructivist approach that seeks to understand actor ideas about institutional context in its research agenda (Berman, 2013; Hall, 1993). Indeed, role behavior in the institutional struggle can be addressed as both a reflection of existing ideas and as a progenitor of new or reformulated institutional norms. Moreover, the new historicism's emphasis on culturally-bound truth, amenable to the old historicism's notion of avoiding anachronistic historical analysis, requires substantial attention to institutional context, yet another factor amenable to interdisciplinary analysis (Eley, 2005; Atkinson, 1999). As Gordon Wood (2008) notes in a text skeptical of these new approaches, "historians have long winced at the crude ways that literary scholars and others have wrenched past writings out of their historical context for aesthetic and other present-minded purposes" (pp. 80-81). In terms of actual research, therefore, historical institutional analysis requires in-depth and often lengthy exposition of historical context and "employs much more narrative in setting out its causal chains; and, of course, its causal chains are much longer" (Sanders, 2006, p. 43).[1]

In summary, the emphasis on agency and contingency within the otherwise patterned features of institutional life represents the rationale for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of institutional behavior. Political scientists speak to the institutional struggle over authoritative allocations, sociologists address the issue of institutional role habitualization, and historians chronicle the patterns of institutional path dependency. Each of these disciplines addresses a crucial aspect of the institutional process, but each is limited by its disciplinary perspective that may ultimately act as

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[1] For an analysis of the ontological and epistemological issues around narrative constructivism, see Pihlainen (2013).

a blinder to more open-ended research.[2] Only interactive interdisciplinary research addressing how the struggle for favorable institutional allocations both defines and is defined by adoption and reinterpretation of institutional roles within a historically defined pattern of options for change offers the possibility for understanding how institutions change while maintaining their more or less stable cores.

Establishing Common Ground: Institutional Standard Operating Procedures

An interdisciplinary analysis of complex systems requires finding the common ground from which disciplinary scholars can integrate their insights. "Common ground is that which is created between conflicting disciplinary insights, assumptions, concepts, or theories and makes integration possible" (Repko, 2012, pp. 56-57). Researchers from different disciplines must communicate with each other in ways that maintain disciplinary integrity while permitting cross-disciplinary interactions.[3] Such efforts at cross-disciplinary cooperation involve "social interaction where two individuals enter into each other's frame of reference, attempt to discuss a problem, try to identify sources of disagreement concerning it, and arrive jointly at a resolution of it" (Repko & Szostak, 2017, p. 271).

Establishing common ground is a multi-faceted process focused on two elements of interdisciplinarity: the perspectives and assumptions characterizing the disciplines in the study and the phenomenon that is the research focus. It is clear from the presentation above that the three disciplines' various takes on institutions while distinct are not incompatible and that integrating the findings of political scientists, sociologists, and historians exemplifies "narrow interdisciplinarity," which "draws on disciplines that are epistemologically close" (Repko & Szostak, 2017, p. 272). This compatibility is reinforced because the proposed interdisciplinary research is grounded in a constructivist approach that helps address the common ground mandate that researchers "trained in different disciplines need to develop a collaborative language" (p. 272). Sharing a constructivist approach means that there is ontological and epistemological consensus among the involved researchers as well as a shared affinity for qualitative

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[2] Stephen Toulmin argues that "disciplinary emphasis on the technicalities of the human sciences imposes on newcomers…a set of professional blinders" (Toulmin, cited in Fuchsman, 2009, p. 82).

[3] Since disciplines are sometimes eclectic collections of perspectives, interdisciplinary research may involve the integration of findings from sub-disciplines (Fuchsman, 2009; Hyland, 2004; Szostak, 2002).

research methods. Given Repko and Szostak's assertion that "all research, including interdisciplinary research, [uses] some method or strategy to approach a problem" (p. 79) this consensus bodes well for interdisciplinary research in this area.

Researchers seeking common ground from within a constructivist perspective confront a two-pronged challenge. One, they must blend their own intellects and intuitions to achieve what Welch (2007) terms "wisdom" as the "synthesis of all avenues of insight – rational, experiential, intuitive, physical, cultural, and emotional"; and two, they must incorporate the differing perspectives and "wisdom" of the institutional actors involved in their research (pp. 149-150). It is also crucial to the interdisciplinary enterprise that the integration of findings occurs iteratively and interactively between and among the representatives of the relevant disciplines during the research process as first disciplinary findings and then early interdisciplinary integration of findings are presented, challenged, and ultimately modified by further interdisciplinary research. "The process is not a simple matter of moving from point 'A' to point 'B' to point 'C' and on to the end. Rather, when you get to point 'B,' you may discover that you need to revisit and revise the decisions you made at point 'A'" (Repko & Szostak, 2017, p. 81).

For our purposes, establishing common ground requires demarcating the boundaries of political institutions. The initial question is how to avoid the dangers of either under- or over-socialization in the conception of a political institution. By considering only *formal* organizations and rules, classical political scientists had used an under-socialized conception of political institutions, the deficiencies of which have already been noted (Lowndes, 2018; March & Olsen, 2006). But when the understanding of the term "political institution" is broadened to include *informal* rules and norms of behavior, there is a risk of over-socializing the approach (Rothstein, 1998). As Peters (1998) warns, "If the rules that shape behavior are expanded to include implicit rules and vague understandings, in order to cover instances in which observed behaviors do not correspond to the formal rules of an institution, then the theory may not be falsifiable" (p. 215).

One approach to resolving this dilemma is to adopt Peter Hall's (1986) suggestion that standard operating procedures (SOPs) serve as the conceptual tool for delimiting relevant institutional behavior. Such an approach provides the conceptual basis for the development of common ground that can then serve as the pivot for the interdisciplinary integration of the insights of the various disciplines. It allows us to define and assess the formal and informal rules of behavior that characterize a particular political institution or even a class of such institutions. These SOPs become the common ground from

which interdisciplinary integration can occur.

Establishing Common Ground through a Field of Consciousness Approach

Adopting a field of consciousness approach, which emerged from psychologists' analyses of selective attention, clarifies the process of interdisciplinary research into political institutions (Arvidson, 2014; 1998; 1992; Gurwitsch, 1964). Many scholars studying attention envision a bifurcated world composed of a primary focus and an area outside the focus. "An assumption of most contemporary research is that the field of consciousness…is made up of two types of data or two regions: the attended and the unintended. By attended, these researchers mean that which is focally selected" (Arvidson, 1998, p. 52). This conception of the field of consciousness complements traditional disciplinary research, which sees the world exclusively through its own uni-focused lens and marginalizes all other approaches. Other scholars, however, coupling the idea of relevant contextual phenomena with a "concern with phenomena as relational instead of isolated," envision a tripartite field of consciousness (Arvidson, 1998, p. 51). This reformulated approach to attention couples Gestalt psychology's insight that the whole is distinct from the sum of its parts with phenomenology's "conception of the invariant organization of consciousness" (Arvidson, 2014, p. 174). It represents a "new attitude that is just beginning to become less rare: namely, that a focal phenomenon is never presented as isolated from its context, it is presented within a sphere of relevance that must also be articulated in order to accurately describe the phenomenon" (Arvidson, 1998, p. 51). From this more nuanced perspective "attention is best thought of as a heterarchy, not a hierarchy," meaning "that the context of focal attention and focal attention itself may be presented together and affect each other" (Arvidson, 1998, p. 58).

In its application to interdisciplinarity, a field of consciousness approach envisions attention and, by extension, research as emphasizing a *primary thematic focus* with relevant and proximate aspects of a phenomenon in high relief as part of the *thematic context*, while all other distant aspects of a situation or phenomenon are held in the *margins* (Arvidson, 2014, pp.173-175). Emphasizing the notion of thematic context is crucial to the interactive and integrative dynamic of interdisciplinary studies because its inclusion means that the primary thematic focus is no longer isolated from the totality of external reality but is instead considered within a situated perspective of its relevant context, a reformulation with intriguing research implications. Considering

context as part of a thematic field allows investigation of a phenomenon from as wide an interdisciplinary perspective as can be coherently constructed. What is considered thematic and what is considered marginal are research questions that define the nature of the interdisciplinary study. Comprehensive understanding can be broadened by the inclusion of previously marginal perspectives into a more fully integrated study. In Arvidson's (1998) terms "the scientist has been brought into the *scientist*-apparatus world ensemble" (p. 74). Substituting the word "researcher" for the word "scientist" allows us to broaden the application of Arvidson's (2014) realism-based conclusion that "the scientist [researcher] is distinct…in that he or she can intentionally shift attention (and so become part of another ensemble)" to the constructivist-based, interdisciplinary approach in this article (p. 74).[4] SOPs form the common ground from within which each researcher from the three disciplines in this study begins with a disciplinary focal point considered within the context of the focal points of the other two disciplines.

Interdisciplinary research, then, defines the focus, context, and margins of a research topic according to the disciplines in the study.[5] For institutional research, the initial stages of the field of consciousness approach would position one discipline's perspective concerning an institution's SOPs as the thematic focus while the other two disciplinary perspectives are envisioned as relevant and proximate parts of the thematic context. Because the concept of SOPs is similar in all three disciplines, the process requires only minor "concept extension," that is, "extending…meaning beyond the domain of the discipline that originated" the concept (Repko & Szostak, 2017, p. 282).[6] The focus of political scientists is to assess SOPs through the thematic lens of the struggle over authoritative allocations; the context for political scientists is institutional role behaviors and path dependent historical evolution. The focus of sociologists is to assess SOPs with role behavior as the thematic focus; the context for sociologists is the struggle over authoritative allocations and institutional historical evolution. And the focus of historians is to chronicle path dependent institutional evolution;

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[4] Arvidson's (1998) focus is on "bringing context into focus in a realist philosophy of science" (pp. 62-68.)

[5] Moving toward a comprehensive interdisciplinary understanding from the field of consciousness approach involves adding disciplinary perspectives to the study and thereby transferring aspects of a particular phenomenon from the margins to the integrative process included within themes and thematic contexts.

[6] SOPs are examined differently by the three disciplines but the construct is similar within each discipline. Consequently, there is no need for "redefinition, transformation, or organization" of the conceptual definition of common ground in this study (Repko & Szostak, 2017, pp. 278-288).

the context for historians is the struggle over authoritative allocations and role behavior. The initial disciplinary findings, all of which are informed and impacted by the other two disciplines, would then themselves serve as thematic focuses in an iterative process until researchers feel comfortable that a comprehensive interdisciplinary narrative or even a new integrated theory of institutional behavior has been produced.[7]

Political Science, History, and Sociology: Formal Standard Operating Procedures

Interdisciplinary research on political institutions includes both objective and interpreted aspects of standard operating procedures. In objective terms, the *formal rules of behavior* included within SOPs are found in the statutes and regulations that govern institutional relationships (West, 2005). Although such formal rules are readily identifiable, their impact is less easily identified since ambiguity of language – a constant in resolving political struggles – often leads to conflicting interpretations of meaning (Peters, 2011; Matland, 1995). Moreover, formal rules are at times resisted or ignored in long-established institutions where newer rules supersede rules that may never have been formally repealed (West, 2005; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). As a result, although it is easy to identify formal SOPs, it is important to remember that they may not be enforced or, even if enforced, are open to interpretation. For our purposes, formal rules serve as reflections of authoritative resource allocations, progenitors of institutional role adaptation, and manifestations of path dependent tendencies first established at the time of institutional origins.

Integrating political science and history insights about the bases for and the consequences of formal rules is the first step in defining institutional SOPs. Formal institutional SOPs are founded on laws and administrative rules based on these laws (March & Olsen, 2006; West, 2005; Peters, 1999). The existence of laws in the first instance and the ongoing process of enacting formal rules and institutional roles grounded in these laws indicate that at points in time authoritative decisions have been made to resolve issues concerning the allocation of institutional values and resources (Kingdon, 2011; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). Because such decisions are constrained by past rule adaptations within existing institutions or by borrowings from the larger institutional context in the case of new institutions, the SOPs they implement tend to be path dependent (Peters, Pierre, & King, 2006; Hay &

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[7] Although "full integration" is desirable, "partial integration" may be the best that is possible (Repko & Szostak, 2017, p. 223; Fuchsman, 2009, pp. 77-79; Newell, 2007).

Wincott, 1998). And because they produce institutional winners and losers, such decisions both reflect existing and influence future power differentials among competing institutional interests (Moe, 2016).[8]

The main interest here is how decisions concerning laws and rules manifest themselves as formal institutional SOPs. Using the field of consciousness approach, political scientists and historians can each insert their primary disciplinary subject as the thematic focus of the research with the other disciplinary subject serving as thematic context. Political scientists would seek information about struggles over authoritative decisions within a historically path dependent context that limits but does not determine the nature or outcome of the struggle while historians would pursue path dependent tendencies of institutional evolution and development mindful of the relevance of the struggle over authoritative decisions as grounding for their research narratives. Within a field of consciousness approach, therefore, scholars can develop politically informed historical narratives chronicling the strategies employed by political victors to reconfigure institutional SOPs in an effort to confirm, continue, and augment their successes while also addressing how the temporarily vanquished search for new strategies to influence the future of the ongoing institutional struggle (Moe, 2016). Winning groups seek to institutionalize their gains in SOPs that insulate their wins from attacks by losing groups seeking redress in the hope of change. "The driving force of political uncertainty…causes the winning group to favor structural designs [standard operating procedures] it would never favor on technical grounds alone" (Moe, 2016, p. 209). At the same time, losing groups may well try to "impose structures that subvert effective performance" in order to rearrange institutional standard operating procedures (Moe, 2016, p. 210). In other words, the SOPs instituted by political winners reestablish a highly contested institutional mobilization of bias, a conflict dynamic only given meaning by ascertaining the perspectives of institutional actors (Schattschneider, 1960).

Political scientists contend that "openness in interpretation means that while institutions structure politics and governance and create a certain 'bias'…they ordinarily do not determine political behavior or outcome in detail" (March & Olsen, 2008, p. 8). And, as historians are well aware, options for mobilizing bias are constrained by what has occurred before, that is, by institutional path dependence (Peters, Pierre, & King, 2006). Two aspects of institutional life – creation and development – are of note

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[8] Political outcomes are measured in degrees, that is, *relatively* more value for one interest than another. Outcomes that emerge, however, from crisis periods may involve paradigmatic shifts that fundamentally alter the political discourse within an institution (Hall, 1993).

here. Institutional creation occurs in the generalist world of lawmaking; it involves broad, generally ambiguous, and sometimes conflicting ideas and objectives; it is a sporadic exercise; and it is the province of politicians and upper-echelon administrators (Roman, 2017; Berman, 2013; Stone, 2012; Schulman, 1975). Institutional development, on the other hand, involves the interpretation, operationalization, and application of existing institutional goals and objectives; it is an ongoing exercise; and it is the province of lower-echelon institutional actors (Lipsky, 1980; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980).[9] And so, a critical part of institutional development is manifest in the evolution of formal SOPs that guide but do not determine institutional interactions. "Observing that political actors sometimes deviate from what rules prescribe, institutional scholars have distinguished between an institutional rule and its behavioral realization in a particular instance" (March & Olsen, 2006, p. 9). A politically informed, historical narrative constructed around the notion of mobilization of institutional bias, then, would have to address actor agency and social contingency, two aspects of institutional life that lend themselves to constructivist interdisciplinary analysis.

The next step in this interdisciplinary research project involves addressing the tendency for SOPs to manifest themselves in institutional roles, a matter of interest to sociologists (Hall & Taylor, 1996, pp. 948-949; Biddle, 1986, pp. 73-74; Stryker & Statham, 1985; Kahn et al., 1964). At this point, the field of consciousness transforms to one where role theory is the thematic focus with political science and history interests serving as thematic context. Roles are characterized as procedural "scripts or templates given to [institutional actors] by the institutions in which they are acting" (Rothstein, 1998, p. 147). In sociology, "role theory has focused on the characteristic behaviors of persons who occupy social positions within a stable social system" (Biddle, 1986, p. 70). In symbolic interactionist role theory, "norms are said to provide merely a set of broad imperatives within which the details of roles can be worked out" (p. 71); in organizational role theory, role conflict is seen as producing "antithetical norms" of behavior that "must be resolved if the individual is to be happy and the organization is to prosper (p. 73); and in cognitive role theory, there is an emphasis on "the ways in which

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[9] This process is similar to that of bureaucratic politics where the behavior of "street-level bureaucrats" defines what formal rules mean in practice (Lipsky, 1980). In this light, ascertaining the interpretations of mid-level actors is critical to understanding institutional behavior, keeping in mind that mid-level actors "can reinterpret rules and codes of behavior, impact causal and normative beliefs… [and] improve adaptability…Yet, they cannot do so arbitrarily" (March & Olsen, 2008, p. 15).

a person perceives the expectations of others [in an institutional context] and [on] the effects of those perceptions on behavior" (p. 74). From a field of consciousness approach, sociologists would examine the evolution of institutional roles, using one or more of the role theories provided above, as their thematic focus with the thematic context being the struggle over authoritative decisions within a path dependent evolution of role definition.

Sociological research in the form of passive or participant observation, field studies, ethnographies, and/or open-ended interviews, can readily be integrated into the politically informed historical narratives, previously developed by political scientists and historians. Political scientists remind us that the creation and reformulation of institutional roles has long been one of the techniques employed to certify and standardize victories in institutional conflicts over resource allocation (Moe, 2016). And historians see path dependent institutional reconfiguration of the roles emanating from formal SOPs as an effort to influence future allocation outcomes through the creation of reformulated institutional path dependence (Moe, 2016; Peters, Pierre, & King, 2006). As a result, the integration of sociology insights into politically focused historical narratives can be complementary and mutually reinforcing. And, if the analyses of roles that emerge from the sociological research challenge the expected nature and direction of the historical narrative developed by political scientists and historians, they can readily be integrated into a constructivist approach asking institutional actors to clarify their interpretations of the connections of institutional rules to their roles.

In summary, explicating formal institutional SOPs in order to establish common ground requires interdisciplinary research. Using a field of consciousness approach, political scientists and historians research the origins of and adaptations made to the statutory and regulatory bases of a particular institution. In analyzing the day-to-day evolution of formal institutional SOPs, these scholars are joined by sociologists whose work focuses on the adoption and adaptation of institutional roles. Integrating the insights of these three disciplines allows us to define the formal aspects of an institution's SOPs.

Political Science, History, and Sociology: Informal Standard Operating Procedures

Informal SOPs, the second component of common ground, are more problematic to identify than formal SOPs because they have no official grounding in law or regulation. Identifying informal SOPs requires distinguishing patterned from idiosyncratic actor behavior so as to avoid

over-socializing this concept. Lowndes (2010) suggests a definition of informal SOPs that allows selective inclusion of norms and practices. "Informal institutional rules are…distinct from personal habits or 'rules of thumb': they are specific to a particular political or governmental setting, they are recognized by actors (if not always adhered to), and they can be described and explained to the researcher" (p. 73). Identifying SOPs that are both institutionally specific and recognizable to institutional actors requires qualitative research methods like passive or participant observation, field studies, or ethnographies. Such constructivist research strategies focus on discovering actor understandings of and adaptations to informal SOPs (Vroman, 2018; Ercan, 2016; Chatterjee, 2011; Marvasti, 2004). From the interdisciplinary perspective of this article, informal SOPs are ritualized in institutional roles developed to secure favorable institutional allocations in ways that are in part dependent on their historical evolution.

Informal SOPs arise from unofficial norms and patterns of behavior grounded in voluntary collective understandings of and adjustments to day-to-day institutional practice (Ostrom, 2005). Although, as noted, they are more difficult to identify than formal SOPs, once identified they lend themselves to the same type of field of consciousness interdisciplinary analysis as their more easily recognized formal counterparts. Unlike research on formal SOPs, which begins with the efforts of historians and political scientists, research on informal SOPs begins with the work of sociologists guided by the field of consciousness approach. The focus is an actor's role behavior in tending to institutional matters and the context is the authoritative allocation of institutional resources coupled with the path dependent evolution of institutional norms.

Field work research will allow observers to identify informal institutional SOPs including informal adaptations to the mandates of formal SOPs, the development of informal institutional normative values, and the use of various shortcuts in processing institutional information and operations (Marvasti, 2004, pp. 40-56). Once a variety of these potential informal SOPs have been identified, another sociological research tool – the reputational approach – can be employed to clarify and refine the initial observations by ascertaining which of the informal SOPs observed are most widely recognized by institutional actors (Lowndes, 2018, pp. 64-67). The reputational approach is a socio-metric technique employed by sociologists in their studies of community power (Hunter, 1953). It identifies influential members of a community based on the fact that "their past behaviors clearly demonstrate their former leadership in the community…their present behavior indicates that they are active participants in the affairs of the community….[and that]

they are potentially capable of influencing future community decisions"
(Abu-Laban, 1965, p. 36). Through its use in community-power studies,
the reputational approach is designed to identify leaders "who have actually
counted more than others on a wide variety of decisions" (Rossi, quoted in
Abu-Laban, p. 36).

Employing the reputational approach in institutional research would
involve replacing the focus on community leaders with one emphasizing
informal SOPs that are widely recognized and have counted more than others.
In this way, sociologists would focus on a set of informal SOPs, identified
through field study observation, in order to determine which of them are
identified most consistently by the subjects of the reputational study, that
is, the actors in the institution, as having impacts on institutional behavior.
Employing a field of consciousness approach, political scientists and
historians could then integrate these now institutionally connected informal
SOPs into their politically focused historical narratives in much the same
iterative fashion as they have integrated the more formal SOPs emerging
from the first stage of the research. Such an integration of disciplinary
insights would result in a more comprehensive understanding of both the
formal and informal institutional SOPs that constitute the common ground
for further exploration of influences on and impacts of political institutions.

Discussion and Suggestions for Future Research

This article originated in the realization that political science, sociology,
and history each have something useful to say about political institutions.
Political scientists describe the strategies involved in the institutional
struggles over authoritative allocation of resources; sociologists analyze
the adoption and implications of institutional role behaviors; and historians
chronicle narratives of path-dependent institutional development. Although
each disciplinary perspective contributes to a better understanding of
how institutions operate, it seemed clear that integrating insights from the
three perspectives into an interdisciplinary whole could lead to a more
comprehensive understanding of institutional behavior.

The constructivist interdisciplinary model developed here provides a
new way to analyze and understand institutional behavior. By emphasizing
interdisciplinary integration, grounded in a field of consciousness approach,
the research model promises a more comprehensive understanding of
how the standard operating procedures governing political institutions are
viewed by the actors working within them. In this fashion, the model opens
the door to a more complete understanding of how institutions maintain

their core values while adapting to social and political change. And in a time when virtually all national and international institutional arrangements are under intense political attack, the model offers a path to increased understanding of how institutional actors in diverse situational contexts may react to these challenges. In this way, a constructivist institutional approach has implications for the study of democratic theory as well as research into global social, economic, and political relationships.

There are several options for future interdisciplinary studies of political institutions. Scholars can refine the definitional issues explored in this research by reformulating the field of consciousness surrounding political institutions. The thematic context, for example, can be expanded to include previously marginalized disciplinary perspectives such as those in social psychology and economics, each of which has already evidenced research in the area. Scholars, with institutional definitions in hand, could also analyze the larger social implications of the balance between institutional stability and change.

The research approach portrayed here demands a significant commitment of time and effort. And admittedly the use of qualitative research techniques with their emphases on thick description and in-depth understanding of social phenomena comes at the cost of generalizability of findings. But in some ways the loss of generalizability may be the very point. A constructivist interdisciplinary approach rejects the idea that the subjects of our interest are best considered the objects of our research – something "out there" to be studied. Instead, it emphasizes the subjective nature of the research process in the totality of the phrase "subjective nature." There is the focus on the subjective interpretations of institutional actors; there is the open acknowledgement of the subjective values of researchers; and there is the recognition of the contingent nature of institutional contexts. In short, constructivist interdisciplinary research promotes understanding, albeit time-bound and apt to be altered by future reconsideration, about the relationships between the creators of social reality and their creations.

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