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Emotional Competence, Institutional Ethos, and the Heart of Institutions

Advancing theory often requires researchers to weigh using existing concepts in the interest of continuity with prior work against developing new concepts or invoking less commonly used concepts in pursuit of a distinctive and coherent line of

inquiry. This is especially true when the purpose of theory development is not so much the elaboration of settled frameworks but an examination of existing questions from a new perspective, or the integration of distinct theoretical domains. We grappled with this tension when writing our original article (Voronov & Weber, 2016) and, in the end, favored the internal coherence needed to articulate a view of institutional actors that starts and ends with emotions. In Karl Weick's (2016) terms, our inquiry pursued acts of differentiation, conjecture, and attachment to help make sense of organizational realities, even though this may not fit perfectly with advancing "settled science."

The very thoughtful reactions to our article from Lindebaum and Ashkanasy (2017) and Toubiana, Greenwood, and Zietsma (2017) are further evidence of this trade-off. Lindebaum and Ashkanasy laud our effort to integrate emotions into institutional theory, but they ask us to clarify boundary conditions of our theorizing and wonder whether the concept of emotional intelligence is not sufficient for representing much of what our notion of emotional competence (EC) is designed to do. Toubiana et al., in contrast, find the idea of EC useful, but they question whether the concept of ethos is truly necessary and whether our theorizing would not be stronger if we connected EC more directly to institutional logics, without the addition of ethos.

In this response to both dialogue pieces, we hope to clarify ambiguities in our reasoning that were created at least in part by the practical limitations of formulating an article-length statement and the peer review process. As it happens, EC and ethos are rather central constructs in our theorizing, and we envision them as deeply intertwined and mutually necessary. We will first respond to Lindebaum and Ashkanasy to better articulate why we establish EC as distinct from emotional intelligence and what we propose to be the relationship between EC and emotional intelligence. We will then respond to Toubiana et al. to elaborate the reasoning for inserting the concept of ethos and how our ideas consequently relate to and are, in fact, quite compatible with the institutional logics perspective, and even more so with institutional analysis more broadly.

WHAT IS EC AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Lindebaum and Ashkansy (2017) raise three main issues: (1) the scope of our theoretical model is narrower than we claimed, since not all workers

are as invested in institutions as we say they are; (2) our theorizing could be combined with work on collective emotion recognition and norms; and (3) EC is not as distinct from emotional intelligence as claimed and could possibly be integrated in Mayer and Salovey's (1997) ability model of emotional intelligence.

Lindebaum and Ashkanasy suggest that our argumentation in regard to EC applies only to a "cohort of committed workers who form the core of institutional identity" (2017: 548), and they rightly point out that other forms of control abound in organizations that are not based on identification with institutions. We would first like to point out that the idea that people have a personal stake in institutions allows for a range of modalities. These include singular identification but also being more instrumentally invested in an institutional order for the pursuit of personal ends, or being dependent on others who evaluate, reward, or sanction displayed emotions based on institutional criteria. But we readily acknowledge that not all organizational behavior is driven by a stake in an institutional ethos, primarily because not all organizations and organizational behaviors are highly institutionalized. Our theory refers to institutions and allows for situations, including situations in organizations, that are not governed by strong institutions. At the same time, this does not limit the applicability of our theorizing to a narrow set of persons, because our framework treats the extent of institutionalization and, hence, the strength of institutional control as variable. While institutions may not dominate all behavior in organizations, we believe they play at least some role in most. Moreover, the two dimensions used to evaluate EC—competence and authenticity—are continuous. Thus, it is possible for some individuals to have lower EC than others because their behavior is deemed less authentic/less competent by relevant audiences or because they feel less competent/authentic in their role.

In fact, the authenticity dimension is particularly relevant for the extent to which a person is committed to an ascribed actor role. For example, in Studs Terkel's (1974) classic book *Working*, there are a number of vignettes of workers who are competent (i.e., they feel capable of performing their roles and are deemed as competent by others), but these workers do not feel authentic doing so. Thus, Sharon Adkins, a receptionist in a large firm, described her relation to her role as follows: "You know you're not doing anything, not

doing a hell of a lot for anyone. Your job doesn't mean anything. Because you're just a little machine" (Terkel, 1974: 28–29). In other words, she seems to be low on the authenticity dimension of EC, although her account indicates that she is relatively high on the competence dimension.

Lindebaum and Ashkanasy also urge us to pay closer attention to the multilevel dimensions of EC and institutional norms. We largely agree and embrace their contention that

it is arguable whether the notion of "institutionally conditioned" yields identical interpretations across, for instance, the individual and organizational levels of analysis. . . . [and] it seems appropriate for future researchers to consider the possibility that interpretations of events can differ between levels of analysis, therefore leading to more nuanced theorizing around the concept of EC (2017: 550).

Work on emotional aperture (Sanchez-Burks & Huy, 2009) can help elaborate processes of EC, not least because collective emotion as much as role-specific emotion may be institutionally prescribed. And work on the varying strength of collective display rules (Diefendorff, Erickson, Grandey, & Dahling, 2011) is resonant with the idea put forward above that the degree and depth of institutionalization in organizations may be variable, and, hence, the extent of self-regulation and other-authorization is an empirical question.

Perhaps the most critical point in Lindebaum and Ashkanasy's piece concerns the distinction between EC and emotional intelligence. They are not convinced that our conceptualization of EC is "sufficiently distinct to qualify as a new construct" (2017: 549) and suggest, instead, that it should be seen "as a subset of emotional intelligence rather than as a stand-alone construct" (2017: 549). Here we disagree. Two constructs can be related, as we noted in our article, yet they can serve rather different purposes. Thus, we see EC and emotional intelligence as orthogonal rather than competing concepts. Lindebaum and Ashkanasy suggest that people high in emotional intelligence may, on occasion, resist institutions, which would seem to support the distinctiveness of the two concepts: EC serves the institution, emotional intelligence the person. Neither is a subset of the other.

Emotional intelligence researchers have not focused much on divergences between the well-being of person and organization (or institutional order; Fineman, 2004), and emotional intelligence research has traditionally been used to explain prosocial behavior of individuals. There is, of

course, a latent recognition that emotionally intelligent people might engage in antisocial behavior (Lindebaum, 2012)—a notion that still rests on an understanding of emotions as universal and fundamentally intrapersonal, with context (whether organizational, institutional, or societal) playing a moderating “downstream” role (Elfenbein, 2007). This is an inside-out view of emotions, starting with the individual self.

In contrast, our premise is that individual selves are social constructions that emerge from taking the roles of “managers,” “employees,” or any other “actors” (Mead, 1934; Willmott, 2011) and that complex human beings are shaped into “actors” in the service of the existence and reproduction of an institutional order. Accordingly, we adopt an outside-in view of emotions (Barbalet, 2001; Emirbayer & Goldberg, 2005) whereby institutional orders codify the kind of emotional experiences that are necessary for their continued existence. Thus, rather than seeing EC as a special case of emotional intelligence, we believe it is equally plausible to view emotional intelligence as a specific manifestation of EC whereby institutional orders are prone to develop and codify certain emotional experiences and displays—especially those valuable for the maintenance of the status quo—as emotional intelligence. This argument parallels Fineman’s (2004, 2006) observations and might explain why emotional intelligence researchers have struggled to integrate negative emotions as emotional intelligence (Lindebaum, 2012; Lindebaum & Gabriel, 2016): they are less conducive to maintaining an institutional order (for an exception see Wright, Zammuto, & Liesch, 2017). In sum, the convergence of emotional intelligence and EC is, in our mind, not a definitional but an empirical question with situation-specific answers.

It is clear that there is much value in further engagement between research on emotional intelligence and institutional theory. Institutional researchers can benefit from a deeper understanding of the micropsychological processes and psychologists from a deeper treatment of societal and institutional context. Keeping EC and emotional intelligence distinct does not muddy the waters but stimulates dialogue and promises to add precision and nuance to each body of literature.

ETHOS, LOGICS, OR BOTH?

Toubiana et al.’s (2017) piece centers on the concept of ethos, which they find lacking in definition,

not well founded in contemporary institutional research, and, hence, a potentially unnecessary addition that adds “conceptual muddle” (p. 552) to the institutional vocabulary. They specifically propose that the concept of values may substitute for ethos and allow for a better integration of emotion into institutional theory. We do see more bridges between our theorizing and the work on institutional logics than we were able to articulate in our article, and an analysis of the emotional foundations of institutions can by no means be detached from contemporary institutional analysis. We also suggest, however, that the specific concept of ethos is a useful and, in fact, necessary differentiation of institutional theory’s conceptual apparatus if emotions are to be taken seriously. Conceptual muddles arise when analytic distinctions are brushed over or concepts are overextended to do theoretical work that they are not designed to do. In our view ethos adds precision to our understanding of institutions by offering an account of the source of emotional attachment to institutions that values, norms, or practices cannot.

The concept of ethos is not new, either to the social sciences or to institutional analysis. It has deep roots in sociology and anthropology as a means for understanding the basis of social solidarity and institutional order. The definition of ethos used in our article—“the tone, character, and quality of . . . [a people’s] life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects” (2016: 460)—was taken from Geertz (1957: 421), who dedicated substantial space to ethos for understanding cultures (Geertz, 1973). Much earlier, Max Weber (1958/1904), in examining the Protestant work ethic, put moral and aesthetic ideals at the heart of the emergence of institutional systems of capitalism and their ideologies. Ethos, then, gives meaning to institutions in the form of moral worth that infuses practices and values with worth beyond tradition or convention. In this sense the concept of ethos captures Durkheim’s (1965/1915) important distinction between the sacred and the profane. Ethos refers to the set of collective ideals that imbue institutional orders with transcendental, quasi-religious, and profound qualities. The argument is that these ideals, rather than simple conventions, give rise to social solidarity, even among members of differentiated institutional systems with multiple logics. We claim that this quality of institutions,

diffuse as it may be, is central to the appraisal and regulation of emotions in particular institutional orders and roles.

We thus reintroduced the concept of ethos in theorizing about institutions from an emotions perspective because it recruits a robust set of literature that asserts people's desire to invest in sacred, fantasmic ideas as necessary for social order and institutional domination. In addition to the historical predecessors noted above, this includes psychoanalytic social theory (Stavrakakis, 2008; Žižek, 1999), symbolic interactionism (Barton & Hardesty, 2010), social movement studies (Goodwin, 1997), moral psychology (Haidt, 2012), and communication studies (Lakoff, 2010), as well as perspectives within management and organization studies (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002; Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2014; Kraatz, 2009; Wright et al., 2017). The investment in ethos captures and directs emotional energy and provides a moral justification for these processes that is aligned with institutional order (Voronov & Weber, 2016).

The role of the quasi-sacred social imaginary behind emotional investment in institutional orders is not well addressed by contemporary work on institutional logics, which most often represents practices, norms, values, and beliefs on a single plane to emphasize their alignment. When human experience is seen as fundamentally affective, ethos makes an institutional order real and important to a person's self- and other-understanding. Institutional practices and specific norms are cues, "manifestations" of ethos that can represent but not animate a society's worth and character. Formal organizations similarly embody ethos, some as iconic entities that are ascribed quasi-human qualities (e.g., Ashforth, Schinoff, & Brickson, 2016), and all through the actor roles they create. And general values or ideologies help theorize and interpret ethos. But they cannot, as abstract principles, constitute a person's desired self without a separate reason for the importance of some values over others (for an elaboration of this dominant view in cultural sociology, see, for example, Swidler, 1986).

To be clear, we do not suggest that the concept of ethos stands above institutional logics. Both are necessary and valuable for understanding emotions. We are excited by efforts to integrate emotions in research on institutional logics, especially by the idea that logics entail emotional registers (Fan & Zietsma, in press; Toubiana & Zietsma, in press). Institutional logics likely

prescribe certain emotions and effectively generate field-level emotion cultures (Hochschild, 1979; see also the affinity to collective-level emotion research discussed by Lindebaum & Ashkanasy [2017]). The idea of ethos does not deny that but asks what organizes these emotional registers and how they can be quite distributed at the level of particular actor roles. Ethos is thus not the same as an institution's aggregate emotional register—the means for becoming an institutional actor—but the *object* of emotional investment by people inhabiting the institution—the ends of institutional actorhood.

We believe that this distinction offers conceptual advantages to institutional researchers. For example, ethos allows for the emotional registers of logics to overlap. Ethos can, in principle, form the basis of social solidarity and social order across a society's differentiated interinstitutional system. It may be the case that in some societies ideals associated with particular logics or domains dominate and become central to ethos (e.g., market logics and rational economic man in market capitalism), but we see this as a matter of empirical investigation, not definitional necessity. Ethos, by facilitating the alignment of the self with an institutional order that allows for multiple actor roles, also makes it possible for people to occasionally transcend their home logics (Fan & Zietsma, in press) and for some people to have more difficulty doing so than others (Toubiana & Zietsma, in press).

In sum, there are many connections between our theorizing and the work both on emotional intelligence and on institutional logics, but these connections can only be researched and elaborated when we employ constructs that bring into focus different analytic lenses. In this regard, EC and ethos are important concepts for understanding actorhood—a central fulcrum between institutional orders and people's life experience. EC and ethos then promise to clarify rather than muddle the conceptual waters of studies of emotions and institutions.

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