

## **Beyond Ethos: Outlining an Alternate Trajectory for Emotional Competence and Investment**

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Recently, the cognitive emphasis within institutional theorizing has been challenged and emotions have been proposed as a key but neglected component of institutional processes (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014; Massa, Helms, Voronov, & Wang, 2016; Voronov, 2014; Voronov & Vince, 2012; Wright, Zammuto, & Liesch, 2015). The paper by Voronov and Weber (2016) moves this conversation to a higher level, theorizing beyond the simple (though important) idea that emotions occur and matter in social life, to a more fundamental engagement of emotions as a defining aspect of “institutional actorhood”.

We start by acknowledging the important contribution provided by the paper with its compelling introduction of the ideas of “emotional competence” and “emotional investment”. Emotions, Voronov and Weber argue, are “institutionally conditioned and thus endogenous to institutional orders” (2016: 5), and emotional competence enables people to perform prescribed roles and inhabit institutional orders. Such competence leads to emotional investment. Voronov and Weber argue that “institutional ethos” is the basis of emotional competence.

We take issue with this characterization of ethos and its relationship to the ideas of emotional competence and investment. For us, the ethos concept is confusing and, perhaps more importantly, unnecessarily detached from more established concepts in the institutional literature. This detachment not only adds to the “conceptual muddle” (Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011: 27) of institutional theorizing, but risks undermining the important contribution that emotional competence might make if linked to a more fruitful avenue of future research.

We suggest an alternative framing – namely, connecting emotional competence to the more established concept of “institutional logic”. Doing so connects emotional competence and emotional investment to the values that are embedded within institutional logics (Dunn & Jones, 2010; Greenwood & Hinings, 2006; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Zilber, 2002). In turn, this allows emotional competence and investment to provide significant insight to several developing literatures, such as that

on hybrids and complexity (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011).

## **Emotions**

The significance of emotions has been observed in previous studies (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014; Dejordy & Barrett, 2014; Fineman, 2000; Goodwin & Jasper, 2006; Gooty, Gavin, & Ashkanasy, 2009; Grant, Morales, & Sallaz, 2009; Grodal & Granqvist, forthcoming; Hallett, 2003; Jasper, 2011; Moisander, Hirsto, & Fahy, 2016; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Turner & Stets, 2006; Wharton, 2009). For example, Gabbioneta and colleagues observed how analysts with contrary opinions were “ridiculed” and shamed into silence (2013: 499); Wright and colleagues revealed that physicians were motivated by moral emotions in their efforts to maintain professional values (2015); and Weber and colleagues found that grass-fed beef farming created emotional energy for farmers (2008). Yet, for the most part, emotions remain “conspicuously absent from institutional research” (Voronov & Vince, 2012: 59). Accordingly, recent work has argued that emotions should be given greater attention (Creed et al., 2014; Voronov & Vince, 2012) and a small but encouraging stream of empirical work demonstrating the importance of emotions has begun to appear (Moisander et al., 2016; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016).

Voronov and Weber, however, go beyond simply saying that emotions matter. They provide a compelling analysis that incorporates emotions into the “inhabited institutions” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) discourse, and that describes the microprocesses by which institutional arrangements are socially constructed and maintained. As Voronov and Weber put it, “emotions are central to the very constitution of people as institutional actors that hold a personal stake in an institution” (2015: 2). To perform their institutionally prescribed roles, individuals acquire “emotional competence”, i.e., the “capacity to belong in and inhabit an institutional order” (2015: 5).

Emotional competence connects emotions to institutions in a meaningful way, and goes beyond

that offered by the related concept of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence reflects an individual's ability to perceive, generate, understand and regulate emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997); emotional competence, in contrast, reflects a skillful (natural and authentic) enactment of an *institutionally prescribed* register of emotions. Put another way, emotional intelligence is analogous to the ability to speak and choose between several languages; whereas emotional competence, in contrast, is equivalent to having fluency and eloquence in the language of a given context. Put simply, emotionally competent actors appreciate how and which emotions are expected in the performance of a role; *and*, they (the actors) become emotionally invested *in* those arrangements and their reproduction. For us, the idea of emotional competence and emotional investment opens up strikingly new understandings of institutional formation, stability and disruption. However, Voronov and Weber connect emotional competence to institutional “ethos”, which raises our concern.

### **Ethos?**

Voronov and Weber first define ethos as the “fundamental institutional ideals” (2015: 4), yet we are confused about what ethos is. We find the concept of ethos unclear because both the definition and the level at which it operates are underspecified. At times, it seems to refer to an emotional energy generated by and from the institution: “it draws and captures emotional energy—often subconsciously” (Voronov & Weber, 2015: 13). Yet, simultaneously, ethos is referred to as “the disciplinary dimension” of institutions (2015: 13) and “the basis of competence” (2015: 6). Is ethos “a spirit”, the result of emotional investment; or, is it “the moral and aesthetic worth” of an institution (Voronov & Weber, 2015: 12)? The definition is unclear, particularly when ethos is categorized as institutional but at the same time as being trans-institutional. Does ethos both permeate multiple institutional orders such as “the family, profession or corporation” (2015: 15) even as it “defines an institutional order” (2015: 13)? We find ourselves wondering *where* an ethos is, what it is, and whether it may be even necessary.

While this confusion could, perhaps, be remedied, Voronov and Weber's portrayal of ethos seems unnecessarily removed from previous related work – especially from the concept of institutional logics. As a result, instead of pulling the literature together, the paper creates unnecessary distinctions. Specifically, Voronov and Weber suggest that ethos is distinct from institutional logics: it is “complementary to institutional logics but is more central to understanding lived experience and the emotional dynamics of institutions... Logics prescribe norms and beliefs (what should be done), ethos the moral and transcendent ideals for why these norms are desirable” (2015: 14). By “moral” we assume that they include values within ethos.

We see Voronov and Weber's presentation of logics as cognitive and as lacking any moral/value or emotive components as misleading. Institutional logics, for example, have been defined as “the socially constructed, historical pattern of material practices, assumptions, *values*, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999: 804, emphasis added). Moreover, they have also been explicitly theorized as containing emotions (Friedland, 2013; Friedland, forthcoming; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016). As Voronov proposed, a “category of appropriate emotions” could be specified on the Y-axis of institutional logics (2014: 27).

Moreover, it has been empirically demonstrated that logics have an “emotional register” that outlines the “norms regarding the use and expression of emotions” (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016: 4). Similarly, Friedland (forthcoming) suggests that, for those embedded in an institutional logic, to act in a way that is contrary to either the emotional register or the values embedded in an institutional logic would be emotionally difficult, stimulating shame (Creed, Dejordy, & Lok, 2010; Creed et al., 2014). In similar vein, Kraatz (2015), building upon Selznick (1957), argues that identification with an institutional value *is* an emotional identification. It is in this way that logics, values and emotions are inextricably connected.

In short, if, as Voronov and Weber claim, “ethos” is “complementary to logics”, it needs to be clearly distinct for that complementarity to be understood. Yet, in the Voronov and Weber paper the concept of ethos is not clearly defined, and the logics perspective is unnecessarily and misleadingly stripped of its emotional and value-laden elements. These weaknesses risk undermining the contribution of emotional competence and investment. While much of the work directly tying emotions, values and logics has emerged contemporaneously with Voronov and Weber’s work, it is important to raise this issue now before the work that will inevitably be stimulated by Voronov and Weber’s article continues down a path which we feel will be less fruitful for the field.

Emotional competence is a powerful idea but it need not be rooted in ethos. Instead, placing it within existing understandings of logics as constituting cognitive *and* emotional competencies would not only avoid further cluttering the institutional vocabulary, but would also significantly enhance current lines of research and theorizing. For example, consider the debate over the management of institutional complexity and hybrids that Voronov and Weber discuss. If logics are seen as having emotional registers, emotional competence is the ability of actors to practise *that* register. Further, it means that they will be emotionally *invested* in its enactment, and it will feel wrong to them to act in any way that is inconsistent with the prescribed emotional register. Understanding the problem of hybrids, and complexity, in other words, involves not only a cognitive but also an emotional component.

The implication is that the challenge of institutional complexity, which is currently attracting much attention (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Besharov & Smith, 2014; Greenwood et al., 2011), becomes more complicated if cognitive *and* emotional dimensions of incompatibility are considered. It is thought provoking to wonder whether the emotional aspect of logics might be more challenging to manage for hybrids than the cognitive. In short, the ways by which the emotional competence of actors

embedded in hybrid organizations aggravate or enhance the experience and management of complexity provides exciting opportunities to expand our understanding of this literature.

In addition, connecting emotional competence and investment to the literature on hybrids raises the significance of two levels of analysis that are only implicit in Voronov and Weber's discussion. The focus of analysis in their paper is the individual. But the term emotional competence is also applicable at the levels of the organization (notably the hybrid) and the field (something raised by Illouz, 2007). As such, it raises the interesting question of how, in order to gain social endorsement, hybrid organizations might successfully signal to field-level audiences upon whom they are dependent the several emotional competences associated with the different logic registers within the hybrid format. The concept of emotional competence thus raises interesting puzzles. Do field level organizations – such as professional associations – require different emotional competences in discharging their roles as, first, policy advocates, and then, second, as enforcers of normative frameworks? How are those different emotional competencies orchestrated in the same organization? And, do those competencies differ from the competencies of the organizations being policed? If so, how are the different sets of competencies reconciled?

We similarly see emotional investment as an important construct and see merit in seeking to better understand what drives an actor's emotional investment in institutions. Yet, rather than lean on ethos to help us examine this important question, we believe that emotional investment could contribute significantly to the emerging work on *values* (Gehman, Trevino, & Garud, 2013; Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015) which already provides important advances in this direction and that could be built upon, and enriched, rather than redirected.

Wright and colleagues (2015), for example, have shown how professional values can act as a driver of institutional work within organizations: the emergency room doctors they studied took extraordinary actions to ensure patient care. Similarly, nurses in a study by Piliavin, Grube and Callero

(2002) were able to stand up to physicians despite institutionalized norms of accepting physician direction when they felt their professional values of patient care were being thwarted. In both cases, values trumped institutionalized practices and power structures, because of the professionals' emotional investment in them. Commitment to values drove their proponents to display emotional competence while taking action to disrupt normal practice. Emotional competence, in other words, may be a means by which to demonstrate investment in the values that constitute a given professional sphere and its governing logic.

Again, this line of thinking opens up interesting questions, such as whether or not emotional investment is more likely in institutional logics that have more clearly specified values (such as the medical profession) as compared to those that do not. Furthermore, it may be that investment in particular values can motivate disruptive behavior within highly institutionalized settings despite punitive consequences. For example, Vaccaro and Palazzo (2015) studied activists' efforts to deinstitutionalize the payment of protection money to the Mafia, which was the norm for roughly 90% of businesses in Sicily. Despite the real possibility of reprisals and even death, the activists "use[d] values strategically to transform a highly resistant institutional setting" (2015: 1076). We are suggesting, in other words, that linking "emotional investment" to the values embedded in logics opens up important conversations. Again, there is no need for "ethos".

## **Conclusion**

Voronov and Weber's ideas about emotional competence and investment add valuable insights into existing institutional debates. Their paper is a powerful and important contribution. Our concern is that by connecting the terms to the somewhat vague idea of ethos, the contribution might be unduly and unnecessarily narrowed. Connecting emotional competence and investment with the exploration of institutional logics, in contrast, promises to raise stimulating and theoretically provocative questions



that, if addressed, would not only advance understanding of the play of emotions, but also further the institutional perspective in a more coherent and co-ordinated way.

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