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New Institutionalism Through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism?

Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny and Louise Chappell

Introduction

New institutionalism (NI) may no longer qualify as being ‘new’, but since re-emphasizing institutions as a central explanatory variable in political analysis over two decades ago, it continues to provide scholars with a useful perspective through which to analyse political dynamics and outcomes that shape everyday life. The renewed focus on institutions has rebalanced the structure/agency scales back toward the former without losing important insights about the role and impact of political actors. NI has allowed for greater understanding about the co-constitutive nature of politics: the various ways in which actors bring about or resist change in institutions; and the way institutions shape the nature of actors’ behaviour through the construction of rules, norms and policies.

The utility of NI for explaining the complexities of political choices, institutional continuities and transformations has led to a burgeoning literature on the subject. In this article we provide an overview of this literature, focusing on four common variants of NI: the historical, rational choice, sociological (or organizational) and discursive (or constructivist) approaches. Our focus is not so much on the contentions between these various schools of thought, as has been the emphasis in earlier overviews (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Instead, in line with a trend towards convergence in recent institutionalist scholarship, we highlight some of their commonalities and main points of concurrence. Identifying similarities between existing analytical approaches provides a prism through which we can apply a gendered lens to the new institutionalisms.

NI, variously defined, continues to grapple with a number of intractable issues around the key themes of: formal and informal institutions, institutional creation, continuity and change, structure and agency, and power. We argue that a gendered analysis, which highlights the gendered aspects of the norms, rules and practices at work within institutions and the concomitant effect these have on political outcomes, and foregrounds power, provides important new insights into the core preoccupations of the new institutionalisms. Surveying recent applications of NI in feminist research, this article points to the characteristics of an emergent feminist institutionalism (FI); a new variant

Corresponding author:

Louise Chappell, School of Social Sciences and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, 130 Morven Brown Building, University of New South Wales, NSW 2052, Australia.

[email: l.chappell@unsw.edu.au]

of institutionalism that seeks to engage with both the strengths and limitations of existing paradigms. On the one hand, feminist institutionalism critiques and seeks to overcome the gender blindness of existing scholarship in the field, to include women as actors in political processes, to 'gender' institutionalism, and to move the research agenda towards questions about the interplay between gender and the operation and effect of political institutions. On the other hand, it responds to the considerable analytical strengths of NI and the potential use of new institutionalist concepts and tools to help answer key questions of concern to feminist political scientists. A dialogue across the approaches, we argue, provides important new insights for understanding and answering real world questions about power inequalities in public and political life as well as institutional mechanisms of continuity and change.

Mapping New Institutionalism

The basic premise of NI is that institutions 'matter', an 'argument that the organization of political life makes a difference' (March and Olsen, 1984: 747). The approach emerged as a reaction to the behavioural revolution of the 1960s, which viewed institutions as epiphenomenal, merely the sum of individual actions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Lowndes, 2010). In a seminal article, March and Olsen (1984: 747) observed that in a world increasingly dominated by social, political and economic institutions 'what we observe in the world is inconsistent with the ways in which contemporary theorists ask us to talk'. Building on earlier institutional foundations in political science, these 'new' institutionalists attempted to move beyond the largely descriptive approach of 'old' institutionalism to unearth the formal and informal institutional rules which structure political behaviour (Lowndes, 2010).

Yet, while the term 'new institutionalism' is widely used in political science, there is considerable debate over 'just what [it] is' (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 936). The field has developed around four main approaches: rational choice institutionalism; historical institutionalism; organizational or sociological institutionalism; and, more recently, discursive or constructivist institutionalism. This diversity of perspectives has enabled institutionalist theory to be applied to the study of a wide range of political phenomena. Less positively, it has resulted in compartmentalization and fragmentation of institutionalist research (Crouch, 2003). The four approaches to institutional analysis are characterized to a degree by distinct theoretical and methodological commitments, which lead them to analyse political phenomena using different sets of analytical assumptions. These differences are organized around levels of analysis, understandings of human nature, and conceptions of institutions and institutional transformation.

Rational choice institutionalists (RCI) focus largely on the micro-level, arguing that macro-level political outcomes need to be understood in terms of the strategic behaviour of individual actors (Weingast, 2002). Drawing on the insights of game theory, RCI scholars view institutions as structures of voluntary cooperation created by actors in order to overcome collective action problems (Ostrom, 1990) either by reducing uncertainty (North, 1990) or by restructuring incentives to cooperate (Weingast, 2002). This conception of institutions is predicated on the notion of individuals as rationalist actors who behave as strategic maximizers. As a consequence it is argued that institutions endure when they provide more benefits to relevant actors than those offered by the available institutional alternatives. Nonetheless, others within the broad RCI school, emphasize complexity: stressing that these dynamics do not necessarily result in the most efficient outcomes (North, 1990); and that in many cases, institutions are not only structures of coordination but may also be structures of coercion, power and domination (Knight, 1992; Lowndes, 2010; Moe, 2006).

Historical institutionalists are interested primarily in the meso-level, focusing their studies on tackling big 'real world' questions of politics and history (Pierson and Skocpol, 2002; Steinmo, 2008). In their efforts to explain variations in important or surprising patterns of events, historical institutionalist (HI) scholars take history seriously, adopting problem-driven, contextual and temporally sensitive research strategies (Waylen, 2009). Rejecting what they see as RCI's overly functionalist view of institutions, HI scholars view institutions as enduring legacies of largely contingent events and political struggles, working with a definition of institutions that includes the formal and informal rules, norms and practices embedded in the organization of politics, society and the economy (Hall, 1986; Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). In this view, both timing and sequence are seen to be crucial, as once institutions are created they tend towards 'path dependency', limiting what can be achieved and when it can be achieved (Pierson, 2004). Yet while HI is often criticized for overemphasizing structure and continuity, HI scholars draw attention to the ways in which institutions operate not just as constraints, but also as strategic resources for actors. In this view, individuals are conceived of as both rule-followers *and* strategic self-interested actors (Steinmo, 2008). While institutions constrain actors, they are themselves the outcome of 'deliberate political strategies, of political conflict, and of choice' (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992: 10).

Organizational or sociological institutionalists, in turn, adopt a position that focuses on both micro- and macro-level interactions, emphasizing the co-constitutive relationship between actors and institutions (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). In contrast to their RCI and HI counterparts, sociological institutionalist (SI) scholars emphasize the social and cognitive features of institutions, rather than structural and constraining ones. Institutions are not solutions to collective action problems, but rather reflect shared understandings of 'the way the world works' (Thelen, 1999: 386). They include not only formal rules and practices, but also the 'symbol systems, cognitive scripts and moral templates that provide the "frames of meaning" guiding human behaviour' (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 947). In the SI view, institutional actors are seen to be fundamentally social and they act in habitual ways, following a 'logic of appropriateness' that both prescribes and proscribes certain types of behaviour (March and Olsen, 1989). Yet, while institutions are seen to be powerful constraints on human agency, they are also viewed as products of human agency, constructed through processes of negotiation, conflict and contestation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991).

Discursive or constructivist institutionalists, finally, engage with multiple levels of analysis, ranging from the micro- to the macro-level. This newer school of institutional analysis includes an eclectic and wide range of scholars who place a greater emphasis on the role of ideas and discourse in influencing actor interests, preferences and behaviour; although both their definitions and uses of ideas and discourse vary widely (Campbell and Pedersen, 2001; Hay, 2006; Schmidt, 2008, 2010). Discursive institutionalist (DI) scholars are not simply interested in the substantive content of ideas and discourse; rather, they are interested in the interactive processes of discourse through which ideas are generated and communicated to the public (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). The focus, then, is not just on the communication of ideas or text, but on the institutional contexts 'in which and through which ideas are communicated via discourse' (Schmidt, 2010: 4). Institutions are seen as 'simultaneously constraining structures and enabling constructs of meaning' which are internal to strategic actors seeking to realize complex and contingent goals (Schmidt, 2010: 4). Yet, from a DI perspective, the interests and motivations of institutional actors are not a given fact, but are inevitably ideational (Hay, 2006). In other words, even when actors act on the basis of self-interest, this action involves ideas about interests that incorporate a wider range of reasons for acting (Schmidt, 2008).

Core Preoccupations and New Directions

While scholars distinguish between various schools of new institutionalism for compelling reasons, our emphasis in this overview is concerned with continuities rather than distinctions among these various approaches, in line with a growing rapprochement and synthesis within the field. A number of recent projects aim to overcome the divides between different NI schools by exploring what these various approaches might ‘learn’ from one another (Campbell and Pedersen, 2001; Pierson, 2004; Schmidt, 2010). Indeed, some observe that this process has already started to occur, noting that ‘the development of institutional analysis has muted the conventional distinctions among institutionalisms’ (Clemens and Cook, 1999: 446).

Formal and Informal Institutions

A common feature uniting all of the new institutionalisms – despite their differences – is the attention given to informal as well as formal institutions. North’s (1990: 3) widely-cited definition of institutions posits them as ‘the rules of the game in a society or [...] the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction’. Levi (1990: 409) goes on to argue that ‘the most effective institutional arrangements incorporate a normative system of informal and internalized rules’. These definitions suggest the object of inquiry in institutional analysis as a continuum between formal and informal institutions. However, in practice, NI does not necessarily confer the same theoretical, empirical and methodological status to both types of institutions. In debates about ‘where to draw the line on what counts as an institution’, there is a tendency to privilege formal institutions such as rules. Many new institutionalists are careful to dissociate themselves from broad conceptions of institutions, defining institutions in relatively narrow terms and explicitly rejecting, for example, SI constructions of institutions as shared cognitive templates (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). Therefore, while new institutionalists conventionally state their interest in both the formal and informal, both the specific influence of informal institutions and the interplay between formal and informal institutions are often under-theorized and underplayed in empirical studies (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004).

Recent work has attempted to specify more clearly why informal institutions exist and what work they do. In their path-breaking work on Latin America, Helmke and Levitsky (2004: 730–731) hypothesize that informal rules emerge when formal institutions are incomplete; when actors prefer, but cannot achieve, a formal institutional solution; or when actors are pursuing goals that are not publicly acceptable, either because they are unlikely to stand the test of public scrutiny or because they will attract international condemnation. Other scholars emphasize a more dynamic interplay between ‘rules-in-form’ (formalized rules) and ‘rules-in-use’ (the do’s and don’ts that actors learn on the ground) (Ostrom, 1990; see also Leach and Lowndes, 2007). On the one hand, rules-in-use may reinforce change when there is good fit and tight coupling between the old informal and the new formal. On the other hand, they may serve as a primary site of resistance ‘existing in parallel – or even in direct contradiction – to formal rules’ (Leach and Lowndes, 2007: 186). Informal rules can serve to modify changes in the formal institutional framework, reincorporating old ways and old paths and ‘leaving power relationships intact’ (Leach and Lowndes, 2007: 186).

Perspectives on Institutional Origins, Change and Stability

Explaining institutional origins and change are central ambitions for institutionalists, however, progress to date has been limited. RCI scholars, for example, have a tendency to fall back on

functionalist explanations that attribute a specific institution's origins and form to the functions it performs, either for the 'system' or for the powerful actors that benefit from a particular institutional arrangement (Thelen, 2004: 24). Due to the emphasis on a conception of institutions as structures of voluntary cooperation, the implicit argument is that institutions are 'good' things, designed for the beneficial effects that they generate for institutional actors (Moe, 2006).

Others offer an historical, rather than a functional explanation for the origin of institutions, suggesting that the functions that sustain any institution over time may be very different from the original intentions of the founding coalitions behind its creation. In this view, institutions arise through accident, evolution and by conscious design (see especially Goodin, 1996). Even if institutions are created as a result of conscious design for a specific function or to promote particular desired values, these scholars stress the difficulties and unintended consequences of institutional design and the inability to control the embedded and contested process of institutionalization as institutions evolve over the 'long haul' (Goodin, 1996).

Once institutions are created, they are seen to be difficult to change. Indeed, as Mahoney and Thelen (2010: 4) note: 'the idea of persistence of some kind is virtually built into the very definition of an institution'. As a result, much of the NI literature – particularly in the three 'older' schools of NI – focuses on institutional stability, seeking to explain the persistence of particular institutional patterns, even in the face of significant changes in background conditions. These accounts emphasize the self-reproductive properties of institutions – highlighting either the codes of appropriateness (SI), coordinating mechanisms (RCI) or increasing returns to power (HI) that sustain particular institutional arrangements over time.

Nonetheless, institutional change does sometimes occur. The predominant model in the field draws a sharp analytical distinction between moments of change and mechanisms of reproduction. This model typically involves a dynamic of 'punctuated equilibrium', in which moments of 'openness' marked by abrupt and rapid institutional innovation are followed by longer periods of institutional stasis (Krasner, 1984). These junctures – which are generally attributed to exogenous shocks – are 'critical' because they place institutional arrangements on particular paths or trajectories that are then extremely difficult to alter or reverse (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007; Collier and Collier, 1991; North, 1990). Once a particular path is taken, institutions become self-reinforcing, or 'sticky', and reforms that attempt to shift the path of an institution are difficult to effect, even when these choices appear better or more efficient (Pierson, 2004: 10–11).

This discontinuous model of institutional change has come under increasing challenge in recent years from scholars working in all four NI schools. Recent work in the field has moved towards more dynamic conceptions of institutional change, emphasizing the subtle and often gradual ways in which institutions evolve over time as a result of both exogenous and endogenous factors. For example, current work in RCI has shifted the focus to the dynamics of endogenous institutional change, highlighting the ways in which 'institutions organically evolve (or are intentionally designed) through changing, introducing or manipulating institutional elements while supplementing existing elements (or responding to their failure to generate desired behavior)' (Greif and Laitin, 2004: 640). Similarly, recent work in the HI field has proposed a 'realistic' conception of political institutions, arguing that institutional change is generated as a result of 'the normal, everyday implementation and enactment of an institution' (Streeck and Thelen, 2005: 11). Work in this area has introduced new and more gradual conceptions of change to the debate, such as *layering*, where some elements of existing institutions are renegotiated but other elements remain; *conversion*, in which existing institutions are redirected to new purposes; *drift*, in which institutional arrangements are actively neglected or coopted; and *displacement*, where existing rules are

discredited in favour of new institutions or logics (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Schickler, 2001; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). In many ways, this renewed focus on the ‘inner life’ of political institutions draws upon the earlier insights of SIs, who observed that institutional change occurs through internal processes of interpretation, imitation and adaptation. It is also the focus of various DIs, who attempt to ‘endogenize’ change and agency by exploring the ways in which ‘sentient actors’ attempt to consciously change institutions, through ‘deliberation, contestation, as well as consensus-building about ideas’ (Schmidt, 2010: 12).

Taken together, these insights comprise convergence around a set of assumptions that are closer to an incremental and bounded model of institutional change, opening the door for a more nuanced analysis of ‘*which specific elements* of a given institutional arrangement are (or are not) renegotiable, and why some aspects are more amenable to change than others’ (Thelen, 2004: 36, original emphasis). In doing so, these new approaches answer a wider call in the NI field to inject more structure at the ‘front end’ of the analysis of institutional change and development – namely showing how structures limit actors’ choices at ‘choice points’ or ‘critical junctures’ – while also injecting agency into the ‘back end’ of these arguments, emphasizing the ways in which institutions operate not just as constraints but also as strategic resources for actors through dynamic processes of daily contestation (Thelen, 2003: 213).

Structure and Agency

Despite these recent developments in NI conceptions of change, typically, the three original schools of institutionalism are criticized for their approach to the relationship between structure and agency. At its most extreme, rational choice institutionalism loses sight of structure altogether, while sociological institutionalism runs the risk of structural determinism, turning into ‘action without agents’ (Hall and Taylor, 1996, 954), and historical institutionalism is criticized alternatively as too structural or too agential.

However, in reality each ‘school’ of institutionalism has contained nuanced accounts of structure and agency. For example, many sociological institutionalists do highlight the ‘highly-interactive and mutually constitutive character’ of interactions between institutions and individual actors (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 948). In turn, while RCI appears to focus on self-interested, calculating individuals, at the same time, it argues that the ‘rules of the game’ – institutions – affect the behaviour of political actors (North, 1990). Meanwhile, historical institutionalism offers a distinctive and highly sophisticated view of the co-constitutive relationship between structure and agency (Hay and Wincott, 1998).

The structure agency question is far from settled, and remains an ongoing debate within the field; however, as the previous section outlines, there are emerging frameworks which posit structure and agency as a dynamic relationship between ‘institutional architects, institutionalized subjects and institutional environments’ where agency is understood to involve strategic, creative and intuitive action as well as calculating self-interest (Hay and Wincott, 1998: 955).

Power

Power presents another intractable issue for scholars in the field. New institutionalists are often criticized for underplaying the importance of power relations. Most strands of new institutional theory take a value-critical stance, acknowledging that some groups are privileged over others, yet, power remains a relatively ‘slippery’ concept in the literature (Lowndes, 2010). Power is at best a

'peripheral component' of rational choice institutionalism, and those RCI scholars who do emphasize the importance of power relations in institutional analysis remain the exception rather than the norm in the field (Knight, 1992; Moe, 2006). Historical institutionalism frequently adopts an overly conservative view of institutional power relations, emphasizing the power that past decisions hold for future developments. And sociological institutionalists' understanding of institutions as shared scripts and cultural understandings frequently ignores or overlooks power conflicts, failing to recognize that processes of interpretation are also processes of contention (Thelen, 1999).

When NI accounts do attend to power, they frequently rely on distributional models, emphasizing how powerful actors anchor their privileged institutional positions. Actors in positions of power can use their authority to change the 'rules of the game', increasing their own capacities for political actions while diminishing the power and authority of their institutional rivals (Pierson, 2004: 36). The employment of power, then, is seen as self-reinforcing, as power inequalities become amplified and more entrenched over time.

There are exceptions to this criticism of NI scholarship. For example, recent work in the HI field – particularly the work of Kathleen Thelen – puts a renewed central emphasis on power, arguing that institutional development and change are driven by ongoing political conflict and contestation. Institutional 'winners' may want to maintain their privileged positions, but 'institutions do not survive by standing still' (Streeck and Thelen, 2005: 24). Rather, they require active maintenance as well as the ongoing mobilization of political support (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Meanwhile, Vivien Schmidt's (2008, 2010) work on discursive institutionalism offers an important critique of power-distributional perspectives in the NI literature, pointing to the ways in which ideas and discourses construct and shape the very exercise of power, including subjective perceptions of positional power.

Gendering New Institutionalism

Bringing institutions 'back in' to political analysis through the various approaches outlined above has contributed to the development of a more sophisticated political science. Sensitive to the way institutions shape, and are shaped by the political, economic and social forces within which they are embedded, the new institutionalisms enable scholars to better assess some of the core questions of the discipline including the factors influencing stability and change in political life, the development and impact of laws and policies, and the nature of the relationship between social movement actors and formal political institutions.

However, to date, the relationship between gender and institutions has largely been overlooked in the NI literature (exceptions include Clemens, 1997; Pierson, 1996; Skocpol, 1992; Thelen, 2003). Unlike the welfare state field where mainstream debates have been influenced by the theoretical advances made by gender scholars in this area (O'Connor et al., 1999), NI scholars have, to date, failed to engage with the now extensive feminist literature concerned with women and political institutions, the gendered dimensions of political institutions and their performance, and gendered processes of political change, despite shared interests.¹ This has meant that the global and regional political trend of incorporation of women in formal institutions that arguably has left no political or state institution untouched, has passed 'under the radar' of NI scholars. For example, the remarkable diffusion of institutional reform strategies such as gender candidate quotas, gender mainstreaming policies, equality blueprints and state feminist initiatives have been almost completely overlooked by the NI 'mainstream' (Squires, 2007; see also Krook, 2009; McBride and Mazur, 2010; Outshoorn and Kantola, 2007). It has also meant that the potential role of gender dynamics in broader institutional processes has also been missed.

An emerging strand of institutionalism, feminist institutionalism (FI), has critiqued the gender blindness of the existing field, arguing that the application of a gender lens provides fresh insights into the core preoccupations of the field; as well as recognizing the shared challenges and potential for dialogue and mutual learning. It is distinctive in its systematic engagement with new institutionalism and its ambition for two-way dialogue and exchange. It has developed in response to both the strengths and the limitations of existing paradigms (Kenny, 2007; Mackay and Meier, 2003; Mackay and Waylen, 2009; Weldon, 2002).

Institutions and Gender

Gender is understood as a constitutive element of social relations based upon perceived (socially constructed and culturally variable) differences between women and men, and as a primary way of signifying (and naturalizing) relationships of power and hierarchy (Hawkesworth, 2005; Scott, 1986). Gender, therefore, not only operates at the level of the subjective/interpersonal (through which humans identify themselves and organize their relations with others); but is also a feature of institutions and social structures, and a part of the symbolic realm of meaning-making, within which individual actors are 'nested'. To say that an institution is gendered means that constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in the daily life or logic of political institutions rather than 'existing out in society or fixed within individuals which they then bring whole to the institution' (Kenney, 1996: 456). Not only are gender relations seen to be 'institutional', these relations are 'institutionalized', embedded in particular political institutions and constraining and shaping social interaction. Feminist theoretical and empirical work on gender and institutions suggests that gender relations are cross-cutting, that they play out in different types of institutions, as well as different institutional levels, ranging from the symbolic level to the 'seemingly trivial' level of interpersonal day-to-day interaction, where the continuous performance of gender takes place (Kenney, 1996: 458; see also Acker, 1992; Connell, 2002).

In the discussion that follows we highlight how a gendered analysis could enrich our understanding of institutions in the key areas of formal and informal institutions, institutional creation, change and continuity, structure and agency, and power; as well as the potential for feminist political science to gain from its engagement with new institutionalism.

Formal and Informal Institutions

A major point of commonality between feminist approaches to institutionalism and new institutionalism is the focus on both *formal* and *informal* institutions, and their interplay. The key difference is the feminist contention that these are gendered.

Research on the gendered effects of formal institutions such as electoral systems, political parties and bureaucracies is by far the most extensive within feminist political science to date, as well as the complex relationship between state feminism, women's movements and female politicians in pursuit of substantive policy change. In light of their interest in change, institutionally oriented feminist researchers have also paid close attention to the gendered state impact of regime change such as transitions to democracy (Waylen, 2007); and the political opportunity structures – such as the formal division of power and policy terrains – within which women's movements stake their claims and the consequent impact on women's status as citizens and on strategies for feminist engagement with the state (Banaszak et al., 2003; Chappell, 2002; Grace, 2011; Hausman et al., 2010; Kantola, 2006; Sawyer and Vickers, 2001; Vickers, 2011).

Although they rarely use the language of ‘institutions’ and ‘institutionalism’, feminist political science scholars have similarly examined the importance of informal norms and conventions (see review in Krook and Mackay, 2011). Recent work has built upon this foundation of rich insight and intuition to pay more systematic attention to informal rules and norms as *institutions*; and examined their interplay with formal institutions as a means for understanding wider processes of continuity and change and variable outcomes.

Recent research has highlighted the operation of informal mechanisms that shape institutional processes, developments and outcomes, examples include:

- (1) differing informal parliamentary conventions and norms, which structure the legislative process in ways that influence the actions of female legislators in Latin America, and either facilitate or obstruct favourable policy outcomes for women (Franceschet, 2011);
- (2) instances of powerful actors ‘forgetting’ innovations in new institutions in post-devolution Britain, and ‘remembering’ old rules and norms, including the reassertion of traditional gender relations and norms (Mackay, 2009);
- (3) strategies of partial or non-compliance by country signatories, and the reluctance of key personnel fully to utilize the extensive powers granted to the International Criminal Court, illustrated for example in judicial interpretations that uphold ‘gender norms that treat women’s rights as less significant than other rights’ (Chappell, 2011: 173);
- (4) the emergence of ‘informalization’ in candidate selection procedures in Scotland through various practices such as informally sanctioned rule-breaking, lack of rule enforcement and adoption of alternative conventions (Kenny, 2011);
- (5) the deployment of mechanisms such as stereotyping, exclusion, and marginalization to construct and reinforce power hierarchies in the US Congress on the basis of gender and race (Hawkesworth, 2003).

What is the added-value of these insights for institutionalists? Drawing on this emerging body of work, we argue that by failing to acknowledge the gendered patterning of institutional rules and norms, NI scholars miss the opportunity fully to discern the nature and interplay of formal and informal institutions and the differential effect they have on the men and women operating within these environments as well as the products – the norms, rules, policies and laws – these institutions produce.

Here we take the example of sociological institutionalism, an approach that emphasizes the centrality of rules and norms – as a logic of appropriateness – in influencing the operation of institutions (March and Olsen, 1989). More recently, Olsen (2009: 9) has reiterated this view that while institutions tend towards stability, they have the capacity to change. Change is driven more often by the internal dynamics of institutions than by external forces. For Olsen (2009: 9), understanding how this process works requires knowledge about:

... the internal success criteria, structures, procedures, rules, practices, career structures, socialization patterns, styles of thought and interpretive traditions, and resources of the entity to be in focus.

Olsen acknowledges that there are power differentials between institutional actors. These, he (2009: 9) suggests, arise from access to resources that are tied to ‘rules and worldviews’. What he does not elucidate, but what feminist accounts of institutions have shown, is that access to these resources, and the power they create, has a gender bias. The rules of the game – be they relating to

legislatures, courts, bureaucracies or federal structures – can be seen as gendered as they prescribe (as well as proscribe) ‘acceptable’ masculine and feminine forms of behaviour, rules and values for men and women within institutions (Chappell, 2002, 2006). Political and policymaking institutions are structured by gendered assumptions and ‘dispositions’ (Annesley and Gains, 2010; Weldon, 2002) and produce outcomes including policies, legislation and rulings that are influenced by gender norms. In turn, these outcomes help to re/produce broader social and political gender expectations. While constructions of masculinity and femininity are both present in political institutions, the masculine ideal underpins institutional structures, practices and norms, shaping ‘ways of valuing things, ways of behaving and ways of being’ (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly, 1995: 20), as well as constraining the expression and articulation of marginalized perspectives. With a few exceptions, women are most commonly associated with feminine traits, and are thereby disadvantaged in the power play over which ideas matter and who accumulates institutional resources.

Institutional Change and Continuity

Institutional continuity and change, and the contingent, and often unanticipated, consequences of institutional reform and redesign are of interest to NI scholars and feminist political scientists alike. It is accepted that better explanations of change are needed and there is growing agreement that additional concepts are required that take into account agency and that refine understandings of both exogenous and endogenously generated change, and their interconnections.

Feminist political science has as a central feature a transformative agenda. That is to say it is explicitly concerned not only with recognizing how institutions reproduce gendered power distributions, but also with how these institutions can be changed. As a result of this interest, scholars understand that multiple conceptions of change are needed. These must take into account different sorts of institutions and how they interact and interlock with others in dense institutional environments, as well as issues of different degrees and types of path dependency and change trajectories. Feminists pay particular attention to both endogenous sources of institutional change and stasis including dynamics of institutional power relations, resistance and reproduction (Kenny, 2011). At the same time, they are alert to external change drivers, and are especially attentive to the impact of changes in the wider gender order within institutional environments (Waylen, 2007, 2011).

On the critical questions of the nature and processes of institutional transformation (and stability), feminist approaches to institutionalism bring a number of insights: first, that gender relations and gender norms – and their institutionalized forms in what Connell conceptualizes as institutional ‘gender regimes’ (Connell, 2002, 2006) – are part of the wider legacies and ongoing dynamics with which reform efforts must contend; second, that gender relations and norms of masculinity and femininity provide important mechanisms by which particular arrangements and power asymmetries are naturalized and institutionalized, or resisted and discarded (Mackay, 2009); and, third, that changes to the structuring of gender relations (at micro-level or broader societal shifts) are important potential causes of broader institutional change. These insights increase the capacity of ‘new’ institutionalists to model causality; gendering new institutionalism in this respect would contribute further important insights into the dynamics of agency and change (Lovenduski, 2011; Waylen, 2011).

Structure and Agency

Feminist debates on the relative roles played by structure and agency in political life have, like those in NI, converged around ideas of bounded agency. The key feminist insight is that both

structure and agency are gendered. Gender relations and gendered institutions structure the context in which actors construct and deploy their gendered identities and interests. To paraphrase Hay and Wincott (1998: 955), the inclusion of a feminist perspective contributes to the development of frameworks for understanding a dynamic relationship between gendered institutional architects, gendered institutionalized subjects and gendered institutional environments where agency is understood to involve strategic, creative and intuitive action as well as calculating self-interest. Strategic actors initiate change within a context of opportunities and constraints. They are also embodied and gendered, an insight that echoes Schmidt's plea for analysts to remember that actors are 'real people' (Schmidt, 2010).

Gender and Institutional Power

Another limitation in the NI literature, which a feminist institutionalist approach can help to overcome, concerns the conceptualization (or lack thereof) of power. When NI accounts have attended to power, they frequently rely on distributional models, emphasizing how powerful actors anchor their privileged institutional positions, and have been less likely to employ Foucauldian concepts of power as dispersed and constitutive, unlike, for example, scholars of state feminism (Kantola, 2006).

Recent work in the HI field has begun to examine institutional power relations in a more dynamic way, putting a central emphasis on ongoing political contestation over the form and functions of particular institutions (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). However, even here, the implications of specific gender power relations are ignored. For instance, in explaining the development of institutional arrangements governing labour skill formation Thelen (2004) overlooks the masculinized nature of the union movements, how this plays out differently in different contexts, and the influence these dynamics have on institutional outcomes. Yet without this aspect of the story, it seems unlikely that we can fully understand the evolution of such institutions (Kulawik, 2009). For Lovenduski (2011) a central concern of institutionalism is to understand what it means to maximize power in a given situation. If this is the case, then the institutionalist researcher is required to construct a detailed and comprehensive account of all aspects of the political environment that frame an actor's choices and strategies. This is something that can only be achieved by understanding the operation of institutionalized gender power dynamics.

Feminist political science scholarship adds an important gendered dimension to NI understandings of power, providing critical insights into the institutional dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (for review, see Kenny, 2007). Research in the field demonstrates that the gendering and regendering of political institutions are 'active processes with palpable effects' (Hawkesworth, 2003: 531), highlighting the sometimes barely visible ways in which the power relations that sustain political processes are produced and reproduced through gender. The scholarship upon which feminist institutionalism builds has also provided rich material in the study of institutional resistance and the limits of reform, highlighting particular gendered mechanisms of reproduction that underpin political institutions and limit possibilities for change. Work in the field draws attention to the specific ways in which institutions and institutional actors 'accommodate changes in membership while simultaneously disadvantaging the newcomers' (Kenney, 1996: 462), for example, pointing to the ways in which male-dominated political elites have shifted the locus of power from formal to informal mechanisms in order to counteract women's increased access and presence in formal decision-making sites or 'take flight' to different institutional arenas (Hellsten et al., 2006). The application of a gender lens to the study of institutions makes visible gendered power relations and the processes that may reinforce or weaken specific configurations.

Conclusion

In the foreword to a new collection of essays that set out a feminist institutionalist agenda (Krook and Mackay, 2011), Lovenduski (2011: vii) asks:

Does institutionalism need a concept of gender? And does feminism need institutionalism? Probably the answers to these questions will turn on what we think is good social science. Good feminist social science is simply good social science, it is no more or less than good practice. It should concomitantly be impossible to imagine a good social science that ignores gender. Yet this is precisely what most political science does and the new institutionalism, despite its concern with power relations in institutions is no exception. Arguably any good institutionalist should realise the importance of gender relations to the configuration of institutions.

Although operating across the variants of NI, feminist approaches to institutionalism have many central concerns in common: they are pluralistic in approach; pay attention to both formal and informal institutional environments; see institutional change (and stability) as driven by gendered processes from within and without and consider actors as having agency, albeit bounded by various constraints. These core features are, we argue, enough to suggest that there exists an emergent feminist institutionalism. While it is obviously still a work in progress, the synthesis of institutionally focused feminist scholarship and NI into a feminist institutionalism has considerable potential to enhance our understanding and analyses of institutional dynamics, gender power and the patterning of gendered inequalities in political life.

According to its founders, NI remains a 'work in progress' animated by the impulse to supplement rather than reject alternative approaches. The diversity within the 'big tent' of NI is seen as the distinctive strength of NI as a broad organizing perspective. Each approach, in turn, provokes new questions and produces fresh insights (Lowndes, 2010: 78–79). Our contention in this essay is that the synthesis of NI and gendered analysis takes this work forward in important and exciting ways. There is enormous potential for these two approaches mutually to inform one another. NI offers tools and frameworks that will enable feminists to better capture multiple dynamics of continuity and change through concepts like informal institutions, critical junctures, path dependency, feedback mechanisms, and institutional conversion, layering, drift and erosion. Feminist research, in turn, can help NI scholars better to theorize the gendered nature of formal institutions, the operation and importance of informal institutions, the relations of power within and across institutions, and the sources and variable outcomes of attempted institutional change. NI and FI scholarship each provides important insights but further work is needed to synthesize analyses and to search for common causal mechanisms (of power, of continuity, of change). A commitment to problem-driven 'real world' research requires scholars to draw upon different tools and approaches, depending on the task at hand (Schmidt, 2006). A dialogue across approaches can thus offer important new insights for understanding complex relationships of structure and agency, thereby producing improved knowledge of political life.

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Note

1. For reviews of some of the relevant literature see Lovenduski (1998), Kantola (2006), Kenny (2007), Krook and Mackay (2011) and McBride and Mazur (2010).

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Biographical Notes

Fiona Mackay is Senior Lecturer in Politics and IR and Director of the Graduate School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK.

Meryl Kenny is an Economic and Social Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK.

Louise Chappell is Professor and Australian Research Council Future Fellow at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.