

**“COPE”ing with Institutional Pressures: A Reintroduction of  
Pragmatism to the Study of Organizations**

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# **“COPE”ing with Institutional Pressures: A Reintroduction of Pragmatism to the Study of Organizations**

## **ABSTRACT**

Recent organizational scholarship has begun to rekindle an interest in the study of pragmatism and our goal in this manuscript is to demonstrate that pragmatist thought has important implications for organizational studies that have been overlooked due to contention over nuances of the theory. As such, we propose a synthesis of pragmatism through the COPE typology (Boje, 2014) that represents our view of the four main tenants of pragmatism: Critical, Ontological, Positivistic, and Epistemic. Further, we utilize COPE by applying it to the question of organizational heterogeneity within institutional theory. In doing so, this manuscript makes important contributions to the study of pragmatism and institutional theory while providing new insights to predict how internal organizational processes are developed and how organizations respond to environmental pressures.

**Keywords:** *pragmatism; institutional theory; strategic decision-making; organizational change*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Defining organizational structure has long been the province of the legitimizing processes within institutional theory. Despite its many contributions, however, institutional theory has been unable to fully explain organizational variety and is silent about the process by which organizational change takes place. It is our belief that explanations for these two dilemmas can be found within pragmatic thought and, as such, beckons for a reintroduction of pragmatism into organizational studies. Just as pragmatism explains the acquisition of knowledge based on acting in the world, the structure of organizations is explained both by the legitimization processes of institutional theory and by pragmatic action.

Recent scholarship has encouraged scholars of organizational studies to “engage with American pragmatism more widely” (Kelemen & Rumens, 2016: 9). Scholars in a variety of disciplines have begun to heed this suggestion as pragmatism has been discussed as “an important paradigm for qualitative research in information systems” (Goldkuhl, 2012: 135) and, as a frame of reference, “has considerable potential to enrich and expand the scope of entrepreneurship research” (Watson, 2013: 16). In this manuscript, we propose a naturalized and pragmatized version of the Kantian notion that knowing is an act of imposition on the world and apply it to organizational studies. We formulate a fusion of pragmatist perspectives that we reintroduce to organizational scholarship through a typology using the acronym COPE (Boje, 2014), which represents a synthesis of the four main tenants of pragmatist thought: critical, ontological, positivistic, and epistemic. We use this COPE typology for unifying pragmatist theory to

illuminate organizational interpretations and explain responses to varied macro-environmental institutional pressures.

The manuscript begins by describing our path towards an understanding of pragmatism with a brief history of the philosophy and by demonstrating the various uses of pragmatism in current organizational scholarship. Following our reintroduction of pragmatism, the work then moves to demonstrate how COPE provides a contribution to institutional theory. In particular, we use COPE to describe how organizations respond to the legitimizing pressures postulated by new institutional theory and provide a rationale for organizational heterogeneity. Lastly, we discuss how COPE can be successfully applied more generally to traditional management theory and lay the groundwork for future relevant research.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 A History of Pragmatism**

Pragmatism has a long and muddled history. In 1785, Immanuel Kant introduced the term pragmatics, which translates as “works relevant to well-being.” Many of the influential pragmatic thinkers such as Charles Saunders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, Jurgen Habermas, George Herbert Mead, Josiah Royce, Hilary Putnam, Joseph Margolis, Richard Bernstein, Cornell West, and Richard Rorty maintained differing interpretations for the usefulness of pragmatism - which later became known as a philosophy (a thought) of linking theory and practice. Pragmatism is also known through the act of Praxis (Freire, 1970), in which theory and practice co-create each other and can be viewed as the study of the ways that Praxis is an effective tool to relate to phenomenon.

Our desire to develop a comprehensive understanding of pragmatism, in order to solve paradoxes within institutional theory, is based on essential philosophical assumptions about the role of philosophy in our applied field of organizational studies. We assume a level of polyvocality (Bakhtin, 1981) in the life world experienced by individuals and organizations. Further, we assume a kind of spiral causality that iteratively reconfigures the structure of causal entities and decision points (Boje et al, 2014). We also assume that the nature of practical rationality is built upon a logic of practice that defies the logic of scientific rationality (Carter, Clegg & Kornberger, 2008; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Perhaps our most fundamental assumption is that there is value in clarifying and developing theory out of an understanding of philosophical disagreements. The primary disagreement is the long-standing debate of incommensurability between the idealists, for whom the epistemic is privileged, and the empiricists, for whom instrumental observation is emphasized.

As early as 1907, William James himself observed that “the tower of Babel was monotony in comparison” to the confusions over pragmatism. Over time, his hope was that “little by little the mud will settle to the bottom” (Thayer, 1982: 134). Unfortunately, pragmatism has remained philosophically confused and application of the theory has suffered as a result. According to Ulrich (2007: 1110), “the pragmatist tradition has not been particularly successful in articulating practical methodological principles and corresponding conceptual frameworks for research. In the old struggle between relevance and rigour, pragmatist philosophy is (potentially) strong in making a difference that matters, but (actually) weak in securing methodological rigour.”

James, an empiricist psychologist, was critical of ideal-system unities and proposed the plurality of partial systems, or what has been called partial systemicities (Boje, 2014). James argued that the plurality of systemicities was a pragmatic alternative to the ideal-types of whole system: unity of purpose, unity of aesthetics, unity of influence connections, or unity of discourse. Charles Saunders Peirce initiated pragmatism in his neo-Kantian critique of universalism (Rosile, Boje, Carlon, Downs, & Saylor, 2013). John Dewey's initial pragmatist standpoint was that of an empiricist, however, after reading Heisenberg's (1927) Uncertainty Principle, he argued for a new pragmatism where indeterminacy and the Observer Effect prompt a 'quest for certainty' that is unrealizable. James and Dewey refer to their approach as instrumentalist, meaning that the consequences of action can be verified pragmatically in experiments and in experiencing. James, however, went further (and some would argue that he went too far in a utilitarian direction) with his theory of 'cash-value' in his analogy with financial marketplace outcomes.

The privileging of the physical real is alternatively called the world of instrumentality (Peirce, 1878), empiricism (Dewey 1929; Merleau-Ponty, 1962,1968), ontic (Heidegger, 1962), and the world of work (Arendt, 1958). Peirce's attention to instrumentality sets up a semiotic triangle of representation, signal, and signified wherein a kind of hermeneutics of symbolic meaning takes place (Peirce, 1998). From this perspective, the empirical instrument is representation, while the epistemic state, or signified, is a negotiation between the signaler and the signaled over the meaning of the signal. Ultimately, Peirce's pragmatism suggests that signs stand for something to

somebody and that not all aspects of the sign bear equal import to the object but that the effects are what matter.

Dewey, and in a more proto-pragmatic way Maurice Merleau-Ponty, disseminate an empiricism in scientific investigation that offers a representation of an underlying physical reality. From this perspective, Merleau-Ponty argues for a phenomenology of perception that draws on biophysical responses while Dewey draws on an empirical world that is indeterminate in aggregate, but experientially situated as physical for the individual. Martin Heidegger's ontic is the physical real that becomes manifest anthropologically only after there is some ontological intentionality through it. For Heidegger, instrumentality exists as a kind of way of being toward some end. Hannah Arendt pulls from this Heideggerian worldview a kind of work-world in which a physical environment is made out of that through which work is completed. From this perspective, intentionality toward some end may be as a function of utilization of a much wider definition of equipment than Heidegger stated explicitly.

The link between the utilitarian and instrumental approaches can be found in the a priori Kantian transcendental (Kant), a utilitarian pragmatism (James, 1907), quantum uncertainty (Dewey, 1929 citing Heisenberg, 1927), the ontological, (Heidegger 1962, Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1968) and the political actor (Arendt, 1958). While we explicitly assume the importance of drawing forward philosophical positions, we accept that the role of pragmatism in the extant literature should be established so that the ideas found herein can advance our theoretical discourse.

This fundamental disagreement goes to the heart of our application of pragmatism to institutional theory. Namely, the question is this: is knowledge legitimated pragmatic

practical rationality or institutional power? It is our contention that the epistemic versus empiric debate is itself myopic and that an understanding of organizational structure as the result of a coordinated pragmatism consisting of epistemic, empirical, ontological, and critical approaches is vital to solving the dilemmas present in institutional theory.

As demonstrated, while Peirce, James, and Dewey succeeded in elucidating pragmatic philosophy, their unique conceptions of pragmatic thought diverged in key aspects (Raposa, 1984). These divergences, unfortunately, have become the focus of subsequent analysis to the detriment of the discipline. We argue that despite the polarizing of pragmatic views in an effort to achieve primacy of thought, attacks among the aforementioned pragmatisms have largely failed. We believe that rather than being preoccupied with differences among varying perspectives, pragmatism is best moved forward by their synthesis.

It is no Sisyphean labor to demonstrate areas of convergence among the schools of pragmatic thought. For example, Koprowski (1981) explains that for Peirce, something *worked* when it helped to illuminate the understanding and clarity of an object. On the other hand, for James, it *worked* if it contributed to human positive emotions such as happiness and cultural development. For Dewey, something *worked* if it added to human growth and development. Finally, for Habermas, something *worked* if it allowed speaking and acting subjects to acquire knowledge. While the distinctions among the leading pragmatist thinkers are evident (Dewey, for example would have disagreed with James that the growth of a person was associated with human happiness and rather through societal enhancement), all pragmatic descriptions of something that *works* can be reduced to a common theme of human development.



## 2.2 Pragmatism in Organizational Studies

Recent organizational scholarship has begun to reconsider the importance of pragmatism and its varied applications in the discipline. It has been discussed while considering the evolution of effectuation theory (Reuber, Fischer, & Coviello, 2016), in developing an understanding of moral imagination in the workplace (Whitaker & Godwin, 2013), and positive organizational scholarship (Carlsen, Hagen, & Mortensen, 2012). It has also seen a resurgence of use by varied disciplines as diverse as knowledge management systems (Linh-Chi, 2012), gender studies (Harding, Ford, & Fotaki, 2013), and conscious capitalism (Fyke, & Buzzanell, 2013).

Osmerod (2006) synthesizes three approaches by their pragmatic essence: scientific for Peirce, personalistic for James, and democratically populist for Dewey. Other recent scholars have begun to see the benefit of combining pragmatic thought into a coherent whole within organizational studies as well. In an important contribution, Shepherd and Sutcliffe (2011) have used a synthesized pragmatic approach to introduce an inductive model for top-down theorizing that can generate new ideas and theories of an organization. They borrow particularly from Dewey and Peirce's theories of hypothesis and abduction to describe their model. Koprowski (1981) examined the definition of a "good" manager using aspects of leadership promulgated by James, Peirce, and other pragmatists. Mason (2008) showed how Dewey and Peirce's recognition of continuity in nature helped in the development of systems, including complex and organic structures.

Scholars such as Litzinger and Schaefer (1966), Wicks and Freeman (1998), and Shepherd and Sutcliffe (2011) have called for a pragmatist approach to management

theory. With few exceptions (i.e. Freeman, 1999; Wicks & Freeman, 1998), institutional theory has not addressed pragmatist theory directly. Despite this, the implicit, or indirect, utilization of pragmatism within the context of theories about institutions is commonplace. Ken Smith (2007) has utilized his institutionally powerful role within the Academy, as president, to push for utilitarian pragmatism. Shepherd and Sutcliffe (2011) have utilized Gross's (2009) utilitarian-pragmatism theory of social mechanisms. Webb (2007: 1070) has developed a process-oriented understanding of Dewey and Peirce found in the initial investigation of the plurality of pragmatisms. While Suchman (1995) utilizes pragmatism as one of the central aspects of mimetic pressure in institutional theory, he offers *zero* citations of the core pragmatists nor does he offer any philosophically grounded definition for pragmatism!

Our review of the application of pragmatist philosophy to management suggests that it is common to see not *a* pragmatism that is being employed but several competing, sometime incompatible, pragmatist interpretations of the American pragmatists Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Our COPE typology attempts to ameliorate this ill-defined usage of the term by applying a framework to guide the discussion of pragmatism. Following a number of authors (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Richardson & Kramer, 2006; Suddaby, 2006; Holyoak & Simon, 1999; Simon & Holyoak, 2002; Simon et al., 2001), we argue for abductive logic as a method of constant comparison by “testing” sensory representations in an “emerging explanation of greater coherence” (Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011: 371). Abductive theorizing in practice often occurs through the constant comparative method (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) and is useful when considering the fluctuation of pragmatist data present in organizational scholarship.

The presentation of pragmatism in management literature has lacked cohesion and we believe that a more comprehensive approach is necessary to be optimal for use in organizational studies. Thus, we propose a framework that synthesizes pragmatic thought, the COPE system, to help guide the conversation in order for pragmatism to be used as a heuristic in the study of organizations. COPE represents both a theoretical contribution to pragmatism in general and a valuable instrumental approach to employing the lessons of pragmatism within organizational studies. While a consideration of every scholar of pragmatism is beyond the scope of this paper, Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the multiple scholars of pragmatic philosophical thought that comprise our COPE typology.

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Insert Figure 1 Here  
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To demonstrate the utility of the COPE typology as a joining of pragmatic thought, we will use it as a tool to fill in gaps within institutional theory. Doing so promotes the effectiveness of this new perspective on pragmatism. To quote William James, “a scientific theory was to be understood as ‘an instrument’: it is designed to achieve a purpose—to facilitate action or increase understanding” (James 1907: 33). For James and Dewey, this premise holds for all of our concepts and theories - we treat them as instruments, as artifacts to be judged by how well they achieve their intended purpose. Thus, the content of a theory or concept is determined by what we should do with it. In the next section, we will briefly describe new institutional theory and discuss its limitations in order to demonstrate the applicability of our COPE typology within the theory.

### **2.3 Merging Pragmatism with Institutional Theory**

Utilizing the varieties of pragmatism, we follow the lead of Joseph Margolis, Hilary Putnam, Cornell West, Richard Bernstein, and Jurgen Habermas to apply the concept of a non-foundational realism that is useful for organizational studies writ-large and is absent in institutional theory in particular. According to institutional theory, a firm is shown to have legitimacy when its actions are consistent with general norms and beliefs that are accepted and approved by internal and external stakeholders (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999) leading to the survival of the organization (Oliver, 1997). How then do we explain the wide variety in organizational types? If the isomorphic pressures of institutional theory were the only factor driving organizational design then we would expect much more homogeneity in organizational structure. In this paper, we argue that it is not the legitimizing pressures postulated by institutional theory alone that dictate organizational structure but pragmatic action as well. In this section, we provide an overview of pragmatism's presence in organizational studies and our synthesis of its history through the COPE typology.

New institutional theory (sometimes referred to as neo-institutional theory) came about in the 1960's as a reaction to older institutional theory and its reliance on political economist theories (Veblen, 1904; Commons, 1931) and functionalist approaches (Parsons, 1960; Selznick, 1957). New institutional theory attempts to determine how "social choices are shaped, mediated, and channeled by institutional arrangements" (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). The new line of thinking originated from macro sociology, social history, and cultural studies and disregards behaviorists' approaches.

Institutional theory attends to the more ensconced aspects of social structure. It addresses the processes by which structures, including schemas, rules, norms, and routines, become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior. It inquires into how these elements are created, diffused, adopted, and adapted over space and time, as well as how they fall into decline and disuse (Scott, 2005). Although the subject of institutional theory is stability and order (through consensus and conformity), appropriate theory must address conflict and change as well.

While there has been no universally agreed upon definition of institutions, it can be said that they are social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience. They are comprised of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that provide stability and meaning to social life. Institutions operate at different levels of jurisdiction, from the world system to localized interpersonal relationships, and are transmitted by various types of carriers, including symbolic systems, relational systems, routines, and artifacts (Scott, 1991).

Institutions connote stability but are subject to change processes, both incremental and discontinuous. According to Powell and DiMaggio (1991), the new institutionalism in organization theory and sociology comprises a rejection of rational-actor models, maintains an interest in institutions as independent variables, turns toward cognitive and cultural explanations, and is interested in properties of supra-individual units of analysis that cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individuals' attributes or motives.

Another cognitively oriented view is that institutions are encoded into an actor through a socialization process. When internalized, it transforms to a script (patterned

behavior). When (or if) the actor behaves according to the script, the institution is enacted. In this manner, institutions are continuously produced and reproduced. The enactment of an institution externalizes so other actors can see that the institution is in play, and a new round of socialization starts. Then, after some time, the institution (and the resulting patterned behavior) becomes assumed and taken for-granted. At that point, it becomes difficult for the actors to even realize that their behavior is, in fact, partly controlled by the institution since acting in accordance with that institution is a rational behavior.

A primary focus of new institutional theory is on socially constructed meaning, and the relationship between symbolic action and agency. As stated by Oliver (1997: 146), “Institutional theory examines the role of social influence and pressures for social conformity in shaping organizations’ actions.” It focuses on an organization’s life cycle, the organizational processes, structures and practices, and how organizations interact with their environments. Among other things, new institutional theorists explore how organizational structures and processes become institutionalized (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

In the late 1970’s, organizations were mostly shown as ‘agentic actors’ reacting to their environmental circumstances (e.g., structural-contingency theory, resource-dependence theory, Greenwood, et al., 2008). The seminal articles of Meyer and Rowan (1977), Lynne and Zucker (1977), and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), set the stage for the conceptual foundation for the new institutional theory, emphasizing the role of ‘institutional context,’ ‘relational, complex networks,’ ‘institutional processes,’ and ‘rationalized myths.’ Powell and DiMaggio (1983, 1991) built upon the legitimacy-

seeking aspects of Meyer and Rowan's (1997) work, as well as the life cycle ideas from Selznick (1957). 'New' institutional theory moved away from epistemic approaches to unity of values, norms, or central policy to focus on theories of action.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) advanced a 'social reality' theory and introduced the idea of institutionalized beliefs, rules, and roles whereby institutionalization leads to legitimization. These legitimization processes and social reproduction became the focus of new institutional theory (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) and the investigation of competitive and cooperative exchanges amongst organizations (Miles, 2012). A firm is shown to have legitimacy when its actions are consistent with general norms and beliefs and are accepted and approved by internal and external stakeholders (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Legitimacy and conformation lead to increased chance for survival for the organization (Oliver, 1997).

A large question remains within institutional theory, however. If institutional processes and pressures are so influential, then why do we see organizational variety? Powell (1991) pointed out the role of 'resource environments', a variety of structures, governing requirements, and 'sources of constraint' in accounting for diversity amongst organizations. Competing interests can also lead to ambiguity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and exogenous shock can lead to change (Jepperson, 1991). Greenwood and colleagues (2008) believed that the notion of isomorphism does not mean that organizations always react the same way; rather, their actions will be determined by the institutional context and the availability of several equally legitimate alternatives.

This lack of sameness necessitates a different approach to understanding institutional development processes. Not only do organizations not react identically

when faced with similar environmental pressures, it is also safe to say that processes *within* organizations do not respond in predictable ways. This phenomenon requires a new method by which to explain organizations, which we attempt to achieve by utilizing our COPE synthesis of pragmatist perspectives.

Viewing institutions more widely as social constructs, and by taking into account the influence that institutions have on individual preferences and actions, new institutionalism has moved away from its institutional (formal, legal, descriptive, historical) roots and become a more explanatory discipline within politics. New institutional theory operates from a social constructivist paradigm in which organizations and its actors are living entities capable of influencing, and being influenced by, their institutions. It is this agential power of the organization that makes for a natural link between new institutional theory and pragmatism.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

Utilizing a cohesive perspective of pragmatic thought as demonstrated through the COPE typology has powerful implications for understanding organizations when coupled with the forces of legitimization postulated by institutional theory. In order to fit with modern organizations, a relaxation of some of the key legitimization assumptions of institutional theory is necessary. As has been previously discussed, various resource environments, governing requirements, competing interests, and exogenous shocks can lead to change that divergent from what is hypothesized by the theory. Greenwood and colleagues (2008) went so far as to show that the presence of isomorphic pressure does not result in organizations reacting predictably – the very behavior that institutional theory purports to explain.



It remains that institutional theory cannot stand alone in this regard and benefits by a more nuanced understanding of organizational structure. While isomorphic pressure toward legitimization can be the impetus for organizational change, the way organizations respond to that pressure involves a pragmatic action and response. For example, organizations faced with an externally imposed dictum routinely consider all the facts, in all their plurality and particularity, independent of organizational environment before fashioning a response. This response is in line with James' pragmatism wherein he supported a positivist position moving away from the epistemic (unity of systems, or ideation) approaches and leaving all that is critical and ontological outside its bounds. The organization taking action in line with positivistic pragmatism will look quite different than another organization faced with the same pressure that chose to employ critical methods to ameliorate the deleterious effects of coercive isomorphism (via the seeking of loopholes, or engaging in heavy lobbying efforts or advertisement campaigns, etc.).

Normative and mimetic pressures can bring about a punctualization effect (Latour, 1987) within an organization. The realization that aspects of organizational culture are deficient, i.e. "business as usual" is no longer sufficient, is often the genesis for change. Dewey's ontological pragmatism addressed this noting that there is a "need to break through the imprisoning crust of outworn traditions and customs" (Boydston, 1989: 17). Charismatic leaders strive to provide an ontological moment - a strong association, an embodiment, or a being with the change - in order to move away from ossified organizational culture deficiency to an alternative arising from isomorphic pressures. The organization that adopts an embodied, ontological, approach to its

response to normative or mimetic isomorphic pressures will also look differently than the organization that adopts a cognitive, epistemic response. Abductive processes where the premises do not guarantee the conclusion, although more parsimonious, will not inspire the same level of organizational belief in the response.

Thus, the type of pragmatic action chosen by an organization faced with the legitimization and isomorphic pressures described by institutional theory has a direct influence on organizational structure. Institutional pressures cause a rational evaluation process within organizations of various pragmatic responses. It is our contention that organizations most often act in response to institutional pressures with a singular aspect of the COPE pragmatism (e.g., a critical response, an embodied response, an abductive, or a positivistic response) as opposed to a synthesis of all possible pragmatic responses as demonstrated in the COPE typology. This narrow perspective accounts for differing response to similar pressure and explicates organizational variety in a way that institutional theory alone cannot manage.

In our experience, most organizational improvement efforts reside in only one sphere on the periphery of the COPE typology (Figure 1) and could benefit greatly from a holistic effort. Identifying the type of isomorphic pressure at play as postulated by institutional theory (normative, coercive, mimetic, political) and the corresponding pragmatic action implemented by the organization as a response could yield rich opportunities for constructive intervention based on the COPE pragmatism suited to counteract the deleterious effects of that pressure. Shifting to the center and, thereby, considering each approach to pragmatic action versus a single oft-repeated paradigm in organizational decision-making provides a broader perspective for managing institutional

pressures.

## 4.0 RESULTS

To demonstrate the utility of the COPE typology, we will highlight how it aligns with institutional theory. The results of that process are described below and outlined in figure 2:

**Figure 2: The alignment of COPE with Institutional Theory**

<b>C:</b> Critical Pragmatism	<i>aligns with</i>	Coercive Isomorphism
<b>O:</b> Ontological Pragmatism	<i>aligns with</i>	Political Pressures
<b>P:</b> Positivist Pragmatism	<i>aligns with</i>	Mimetic Isomorphism
<b>E:</b> Epistemic Pragmatism	<i>aligns with</i>	Normative Isomorphism

### 4.1 Coercive Isomorphism ⇒ Critical Pragmatism

Early in his career, Jürgen Habermas focused on a Parsonian approach to institutions (Habermas, 1972), and later moved to Luhmann’s systems approaches (Habermas, 1985). At the same time, he expands his epistemic approach into critical and positivist directions, although he does seem opposed to the work of ontological approaches of Heidegger and Deleuze (Habermas, 2000). One significant difference is that Parsons did not emphasize the distinctiveness of the ‘informal organization.’ From a critical pragmatist theorists approach, Parsons functionalist orientation ignores the role of ‘humanization.’ as suggested by Habermas (2000). Coercive isomorphism, on the other hand, imposes dictums that severely curtail individual freedoms. This research suggests that utilizing Habermas’ critical theory can ameliorate the effects of coercive isomorphism that run directly counter to the premise of organizations as self-determining.

### 4.2 Ontological Pragmatism ⇒ Political Institutional Pressures

DiMaggio (1991) summarized the aspects of institutionalization that had received little attention: diffusion, tension within the institutionalization process, and conflict

mostly occurring on field level (not internally). The field level, in a general institutional sense, refers to the environment, and can be associated with ontological pragmatism. In DiMaggio's (1988) opinion, institutional theory could not explain fundamental change processes without an understanding of the field level and, thus, could not provide answers to the critical questions in addressing agency concerns.

For Dewey, the knowing and doing components are essential in his pragmatic approach on inquiry where he relies on the societal and communal values (Dewey, 1929). For this reason, Dewey held a more situational approach with a wider context and holistic view. In his view, human beings are in a state of nature where there is no distinction between knowing and doing. The separation of knowing and doing is what leads to intelligent inquiry, which includes self-correcting, reflection, judgment, observation, and imagination (Dewey, 1998). Zucker (1983: 24) offered an organic view on institutionalization - when an organizational form becomes institutionalized "it is diffused outward to other kinds of collective activity, including political systems and, most recently, social movements." This type of holistic, exogenous perspective can also be found in Dewey's writings when he advocated for a breakthrough of old traditions and into a new paradigm (Dewey, 1929).

For Karl (1990), institutions are politics - they are the substance of which politics is constructed and the vehicle through which the practice of politics is transmitted. He understands institutions as constraining elite actors' preferences and policy choices during transitions. Viewing institutions more widely as social constructs, and by taking into account the influence that institutions have on individual preferences and actions, new institutionalism has moved away from its institutional (e.g., formal, legal,

descriptive, historical) roots to become a more explanatory discipline within politics. If, as in the political realm of institutional theory, institutions are viewed as social constructs then we must take into account the influence they have on individual preferences and actions. In this way, institutional theory has moved from its descriptive roots to become more explanatory and prescriptive by adopting political realities.

### **4.3 Positivist Pragmatism ⇒ Mimetic Isomorphism**

Exploring how organizational structures and processes become institutionalized is a multi-faceted approach that creates a logical link to theories that make up American pragmatism. James (1907) outlined a plural/partial system that attempted to provide an overarching philosophical explanation for modern reality. He supported a positivist position and moved away from the epistemic (unity of systems, or ideation) approaches. Institutional theorists are also interested in institutionalized activities that cannot be justified under rational choice frameworks, those that do not provide efficiency or financial gains (Oliver, 1997). Irrational choices can be justified under James's partial systemicities theorem, particularly the 'individual purposes vs. unity of purpose' idea.

According to Selznick (1957), institutions differ from organizations since institutions are "a natural product of social needs and pressures - a responsive, adaptive organism." This appears to be an early indication of a trend toward legitimization. Pfeffer (1982), too, discussed how this adaptation results in organizational actions that become patterns and change over time and that are legitimated within the organization and the given environment (Judge & Zeithaml, 1992). In pragmatist terms, legitimization fits best with the positivist approach (i.e., James, 1907).

“To institutionalize is to *infuse with value* beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (Selznick, 1957). This concept links well with James’ (1907) theory of ‘cash value’ where he states that every action/decision should have a useful, practical outcome. Connecting these two ideas together, we can see an institutionalized organization becoming stabilized. The result of this stabilization is an organization that becomes a recognized and useful pillar of the society – albeit sacrificing the ability to change with ongoing cultural evolution. Positivist pragmatism places all that is critical and ontological outside its bounds. It is consistent with empiricist relativism, where the observer is capable of existing independent of the experiment. The objective within the positivistic pragmatic intervention is to consider all of the facts, in all their plurality and particularity, independent of organizational environment.

#### **4.4 Epistemic Pragmatism ⇒ Normative Isomorphism**

New institutional theory describes normative isomorphism as the establishment of professional standards and practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In *The Monist* series, Peirce (1905: 168) postulates, “ideas tend to spread continuously and to affect certain others which stand to them in a peculiar relation of affectability. In this spreading they lose intensity, and especially the power of affecting others, but gain generality and become welded with other ideas.” Like later institutional theorists, Peirce considered this process to be a normative force.

A primary focus of new institutional theory is on socially constructed meaning and the relationship between symbolic action and agency, both concepts that were acknowledged by earlier pragmatist authors (socially constructed meaning for Dewey and symbolic action for Peirce). Another important factor is way in which institutional forces

shape social action, the state, the self, and citizenship (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Developing a thorough theory of signs was a central philosophical and intellectual preoccupation for Peirce (1977). Although semiotic theories certainly pre-dated his writings, Peirce's (1977) accounts are distinctive and innovative for their breadth and complexity. What is perhaps his most important contribution is his demonstration of the importance of interpretation to semiotics.

## **5.0 DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Contributions**

There is an increasing interest and need for a deeper, more pragmatic understanding of the institutional processes outlined in institutional theory. It has been argued that the “potential American pragmatism holds for informing how scholars and practitioners understand, analyze, and improve forms of organization and management...is largely unrealized” (Kelemen & Rumens, 2016: 4). In a recent paper, Suddaby (2010) also pointed out that neo-institutional theory had been stretched beyond its core purpose, and suggested that research should focus on the original core assumptions and objectives: categories, language, work, and aesthetics. Each of these core assumptions can be seen in the four pragmatist ideologies: categories = ontological, language = epistemic, work = empiric/positivistic, aesthetics = critical.

Our goal through this research has been to illuminate the potential for a unification of pragmatic thought to be useful in organizational studies. We believe that we have achieved that unification in the COPE typology and have therefore reintroduced the study of pragmatism into management literature writ large and institutional theory in

particular. This research focuses more on the processes than the product of institutional pressures, as well as considering organizational level collective interpretation.

We argue that a cohesive perspective on pragmatic thought answers two conundrums in institutional theory: why does institutional variety exist despite legitimizing pressures and what is the process by which organizational change takes place. Our answer to both questions is pragmatic action that occurs in one of the spheres of our model (outlined in Figure 1). Organizations respond using different pragmatic viewpoints and thereby achieve different results and create the space for organizational heterogeneity. By demonstrating this link between pragmatism and new institutional theory, our research works to accomplish Suddaby's (2010) goals of exploring the micro-foundations of the isomorphic effects of new institutional theory.

## **5.2 Implications of the Research**

The synthesis of pragmatic thought into the COPE typology has important implications for future research. The presentation of pragmatism in management literature has lacked cohesion and, as demonstrated through the literature, a more comprehensive approach is necessary to be optimal for use in organizational studies. Our COPE typology attempts to ameliorate ill-defined usage of the term by applying a framework to guide the discussion of pragmatism henceforth. Thus, we propose the framework that synthesizes pragmatic thought, the COPE typology, to help guide the conversation in order for pragmatism to be used as a heuristic in the study of organizations.

## **5.3 Limitations of the Research**



As with any attempt to synthesize disparate perspectives, our COPE typology makes agential cuts (Barad, 2003) that necessarily diminish some schools of pragmatic thought. Employing a Venn Diagram to capture the linkages between aspects of pragmatic thought limits certain scholarship that merits attention when considering the instrumentality of pragmatism. In particular, the works of Richard Rorty defy categorization. However, as our goal was to develop a useful heuristic out of pragmatic thought, identifying and highlighting important commonalities was of more import for this research than inclusivity.

#### **5.4 Areas for Future Research**

In this manuscript, the COPE typology was used to demonstrate organizational variety that is not adequately informed by new institutional theory. Pragmatic thought has implications for various other theoretical paradigms and scholars are likely to witness new horizons when considering the view from pragmatism using COPE. In particular, pragmatism has interesting ramifications for open systems theory as suggested by Barton (1999) and ethics as proposed by Wicks and Freeman (1998). We believe that these are two of many aspects of organizational studies that will benefit by observation through the lens of pragmatism.

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**FIGURE 1**

