

## **Institutional Theories and Levels of Analysis: History, Diffusion, and Translation**

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### **Abstract**

Contemporary institutional theory spans multiple levels of analysis and includes several loosely related conceptual streams developing in parallel. A number of these perspectives address how and why social structures spread. In this study we show how drawing on three forms of institutionalism – historical, world polity, and Scandinavian approaches – can provide nuanced insights into diffusion. These three theories similarly reject strong notions of rational choice and functionality as the explanation for diffusion, but they emphasize different facets of diffusion and levels of analysis. Historical institutionalism, and its attendant concepts of critical junctures and path dependency, can shed light on how and when ideas emerge and gain traction. The world polity approach helps to explain macro-level global diffusion of formal structures and decoupling between policy and practice. Ideas such as translation from Scandinavian institutionalism help to clarify the role of individuals and micro-processes in diffusion, revealing that “variation within diffusion” is a common, if not expected, outcome. Rather than challenging or displacing one another, attention to historical context, macro- trends, and micro-processes can add richness to our understanding of the flow of social phenomena. Using the case of human rights education in U.S. universities, we build on these institutional perspectives to develop a research agenda that will provide a holistic understanding of an expanding social phenomenon.

Keywords: institutional theory, human rights, diffusion, translation, path dependence

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*It was six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.*

*The First approach'd the Elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
"God bless me! but the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!"*

*The Second, feeling of the tusk,  
Cried, -"Ho! what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me 'tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant  
Is very like a spear!"*

*The Third approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a snake!"...*

*And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!*

- Excerpt from John Godfrey Saxe's  
(1816-1887) adaptation of "The Blind  
Men and the Elephant" parable found in  
Jain, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi folk lore

## Introduction

Like the blind men in the proverb speculating on the nature of an elephant by touching only one part, a single, specialized theory can illuminate only a fragment of any given social phenomenon. In many instances stressing one theory has a great deal of value, affording the opportunity to develop an expansive argument and marshal evidence that has not received sufficient attention in alternative lines of inquiry. In other instances theory-building efforts can produce a focus that prioritizes some issues and topics over others, creating the impression (whether real or perceived) that explanatory elements have been overlooked or ignored. Much of the literature in comparative education fits this latter pattern, particularly with respect to levels of analysis and the nature of actors.

Studies in comparative education tend to focus either on cross-national diffusion or local variation, and as a result some of the research insights and conclusions are not entirely commensurable. For example, the majority of research on cross-national diffusion of education policies and practices stresses causal dynamics that operate at a transnational or global level, and variation in the object that spreads is less interesting than understanding why a policy or practice gains traction in the first place. Much of this work also emphasizes the socially constructed nature of actors and action rather than “muscular” conceptions of power and action (Meyer 1996). With this view of embeddedness, external models or blueprints provide a framework for identity enactment, meaning that mimetic and coercive mechanisms are not sufficient for explaining why policies and practices diffuse (Ramirez 2012).

By contrast, the majority of research on “policy borrowing and lending” in comparative education attends to demonstrating divergence or variation in something that spreads (Schriewer 2000). Rather than trying to understand why some ideas, concepts and reforms are more likely to diffuse broadly than others, these studies either leave the question unaddressed or view diffusion as too superficial to merit much attention. Moreover, because the level of analysis tends to be a country case study, terms emphasizing agency and intentionality like selective borrowing, local adaptation, rejection, power, politics, subversion, contestation and resistance are fundamental to the line of work. Beyond these differences, over time some of this literature has become self-consciously opposed to frameworks that prioritize similarity and diffusion, making integration challenging (Steiner-Khamsi 2004; Carney et al 2012; Steiner-Khamsi 2012).

In a recent study, for instance, Steiner-Khamsi (2012, pg. 469) stated: “the local policy context – rather than the global education policy – as the object of analysis, places great weight on the agency, process, impact, and timing of policy borrowing. It is that context that provides the clues for understanding why a borrowed reform resonates” (469). Though the local policy context can provide some clues to why a reform resonates, this approach takes a very strong view about the irrelevance of the wider environment. Whether or not a given policy diffuses depends almost exclusively on the power and the interests of the players involved, and a key goal is to reveal the purposiveness of policy entrepreneurs – globalization is salient only in the sense that a borrowed policy somehow came from elsewhere.

In part because of the intensifying differences in research approach (macro / micro) and views of actors (constructed and embedded / robust and self-interested), syncretic approaches remain uncommon. Nevertheless, some new studies are developing a much more integrated and nuanced

perspective, acknowledging value in the combination of elements and levels of analysis (Bajaj 2011; Schriewer 2012; Takayama 2012; Ramirez and Christensen 2013; Wiseman et al 2013). A particularly useful synthesis (Takayama 2012, pg 519) claims that: “Overstressing the transformative role of domestic actors and specific contexts may lead to a naïve optimism about agency” but also clarifies that a problem with “the isomorphism thesis is its failure to grasp the processes and mechanisms which are typical of the always selective re-contextualization of global models, ideas, and policies.”

In this study we extend research on diffusion that takes local variation seriously without discounting the salience of globalization and the constitutive role of the external environment. We make several contributions to comparative education by drawing on three institutional theories: historical institutionalism, world polity institutionalism, and Scandinavian institutionalism. First, we demonstrate how these lines of thought can be combined to develop a holistic understanding of diffusion and variation. Second, we build on these three theories to establish a research agenda on the spread and implementation of human rights education in U.S. universities.<sup>1</sup> Human rights education has diffused to many countries and has emerged in primary, secondary, and tertiary education (Suárez and Bromley 2012). Using the United States as a case for the research agenda allows us to consider variation within a country that tends to be viewed as a hegemonic, unitary actor. Moreover, the U.S. is an intriguing case because it is a policy borrower rather than a lender – several countries developed university human rights programs before the U.S. (Suárez and Bromley 2012). Finally, by focusing on the United States as a case for the research agenda, we acknowledge the importance of studying variation on many different levels.

Some universities offer human rights degrees, some create research centers, and many do not incorporate human rights at all. Among those that do offer degrees, options include an undergraduate major, a professional Master’s degree, and an even more specialized Master of Laws (LL.M.) credential in human rights. In considering variation and diffusion, we contextualize a global reform that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative elements. Many cross-national studies of universities demonstrate that the mechanisms or motors of change are global, but this research generally does not address variation within countries (Schofer and Meyer 2005; Frank and Gabler 2006). By contrast, many national-level studies of universities demonstrate that internal processes and local dynamics matter for explaining change, but these studies generally do not discuss cross-national pressures or trends (Clark 1996; Gumpert 2000; Brint et al 2005; Olzak and Kangas 2008). Our research agenda on human rights education in the United States thus strives to build on the strengths of three different types of institutionalism and apply them to a topic of great interest to comparative education scholars.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to our setting, within one nation, it might seem more appropriate to use the label of “neoinstitutionalism” rather than “world polity” or “world society” theory. We choose, however, to use world polity to indicate the phenomenological emphasis that is stronger in this strand of research than in other forms of sociological neoinstitutionalism (e.g. often found in research using terms like “institutional entrepreneurs”, “institutional work”, or “institutional logics”). Furthermore, although our example is domestic the underpinning conceptualization assumes a world culture and the setting we examine extends on prior work documenting the cross-national diffusion of human rights programs (Suárez and Bromley 2012).

### Three Institutionalisms

In this section we provide an outline of some key concepts in historical, world polity, and Scandinavian institutionalisms. These primers are followed by a discussion of the central points for theoretical integration between the three perspectives.

#### *Historical Institutionalism*

Historical institutionalism, especially prevalent in the study of comparative politics, focuses on temporal processes that explain how institutions emerge and change. The central insight is that institutional formations are borne of temporal historical circumstances; this research often pays great attention to the context and scope conditions for observing a particular outcome (Thelen 1999). This is not a simple matter of tracing the origins of phenomena back to some arbitrary sequence of past events or characteristics of key actors. Instead, these scholars have developed general causal explanations that involve time and political sequences that usually are beyond the control of self-interested players. Perhaps not surprisingly, research in this tradition often takes a critical stance toward functionalist and teleological explanations about the emergence of institutions, and this literature also challenges rational actor accounts of change that fail to recognize the salience of dynamic thresholds, unintended consequences, and unexpected events (e.g. Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997; Mahoney 2000).

“Path dependence” and its related concepts are the central conceptual tools in historical institutionalism (see e.g. Collier and Collier 1991). These paths often begin at a “critical juncture,” the term used to capture moments of change in macro-level institutions (Mahoney 2000; Thelen 2004; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). These are relatively rare, but crucial, points when there is a relaxation or opening up in the range of potential paths or choices available. Often some fundamentally new macro-social process or a combination of processes (e.g. industrialization, growth of the working class, retreat of colonial powers) creates a new but very important choice point. A contingent process determines the particular path followed, but once an organization starts in a particular direction there are second- and third-order effects that make it increasingly difficult to turn back (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000). Path dependence refers specifically to the dynamics of self-reinforcing systems or positive feedback loops whereby initial effects trigger responses that reinforce the recurrence of a pattern. Given the nature of these systems, the more time that goes by the more difficult it becomes to reverse or change course.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of path dependence leads to a particular focus on sequence and timing. Sequencing and timing are significant because much of the literature on historical institutionalism highlights the increasing returns to institutions – since actors usually benefit from conforming to norms and expectations they reinforce those institutions in the process – yet the ordering of events and the specifics of when events occur can disrupt this tendency. For example, in a ground-breaking comparative study of eight countries in Latin America, Collier and Collier (1991) illuminate how

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<sup>2</sup> At the organizational level, Stinchcombe’s notions of “imprinting” and “historical causation” have much in common with historical institutionalism. “Imprinting” suggests that organizations bear structural similarities of the time in which they were founded (Stinchcombe 1965). He argues this may occur because an event or process that begins at one point in time triggers a set of dynamics that reproduce themselves, even in the absence of the original set of circumstances (Stinchcombe 1968).

state responses at a critical juncture shaped subsequent political trajectories. Early in the twentieth century Latin American leaders faced a critical decision; how to respond to newly organizing labor movements and increasingly class-conscious workers. Varied strategies for control led to particular forms of political engagement and conflict, which in turn influenced the nature of regime changes (democratic and authoritarian) in the 1960s and 1970s. Other studies of state-building and democratization in this vein similarly invoke long-term, multi-stage causal processes. Mahoney (2001), for example, uses the ideas of critical junctures and path dependence to study democratization. Other nuanced approaches to sequencing and timing include: interactions between proximate events and those in the far distant past (Aminzade 1984; Orren and Skowronek 2004); the idea of threshold effects – that some social processes have little significance until they attain a critical mass (Goldstone 1991); and efforts at sorting out necessary and sufficient conditions (e.g. for a focus on structural preconditions see Collier 1999; for more on the logic of combinatorial causation including necessary and sufficient conditions see Ragin 2000).

Once a country (or organization) is on a path, the gradual and unanticipated modifications that unfold over time are as important for understanding institutional change as the more dramatic punctuations. Institutional change has become an important focus in this body of work (e.g. Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Streek and Thelen 2005). A central approach is to develop accounts or typologies, as in the extensive ‘varieties of capitalism’ literature (Hall and Soskice 2001). Rather than viewing capitalism a fixed package of ideas that remains stable over time, this research acknowledges that capitalism itself is not static and has evolved in several distinctive and unexpected directions. A general point is that massive social changes, especially large-scale ones, often evolve quite slowly (Pierson 2000; Suárez 2007b; Broschek 2014 [this volume]). Studies adopting short time frames can mistakenly attribute causality to idiosyncratic factors or to an immediate precipitating factor, while missing the broader structural story. This is akin to arriving at the conclusion that the proverbial straw did break the camel’s back, but failing to notice the enormous haystack that came first.

#### *World Polity Institutionalism*

Like historical institutionalism, world polity studies focus on macro-level processes (Ramirez 2014 [this volume]). World polity theory is, in essence, an application of the broader lens of sociological neo-institutionalism to the global arena. It takes a particularly strong view of institutional effects; actors and organizations are not only shaped by external influences, but also constituted by them. The seminal theoretical article in this tradition, *World Society and the Nation-State*, spells out the critical elements of the theory (Meyer, Boli et al. 1997): Universalistic models, such as citizenship, socioeconomic development, and human rights, have become widely prevalent at the world level, evolving through long and complex historical processes. These global models define the structure and activities of contemporary actors (including countries and organizations). A core point, therefore, is that actors are not solely driven by the strategic pursuit of an inherent self-interest or by clear functionality. Rather, actors and their interests are constructed and constituted by their environment. This emphasis gets back to the core insight of institutionalism writ large, which was largely conceived in the 1970s and 1980s in reaction to the dominance of functionalism and realism in American sociology.

A main observation of the world polity tradition is that global models shape countries in ways that conform to world cultural principles of progress and justice, generating isomorphism in the structures and policies of nation-states. Countries go to great lengths to conform to the expectations of nation-statehood, often leading to extensive decoupling between official policies and actual practices. A contribution of this work is to explain why so many countries adopt similar policies in the face of highly variable national contexts. Nation-states and organizations have distinct and complex histories and needs, yet many of them developed in structurally similar ways. Early studies documented the expansion of educational enrollments across countries with vastly different economies and levels of development, and education remains a focus of contemporary work, expanding to topics like human rights and higher education (Meyer et al 1992; Baker and LeTendre 2005; Schofer and Meyer 2005; Suárez 2007; Meyer et al 2012). National-level isomorphism occurs in an array of related domains, including legal reforms, environmental protection, and the growth of associations (Frank et al 2000; Meyer et al 2000; Drori et al 2003; Schofer 2003; Elliott 2007; Frank et al 2009; Longhofer and Schofer 2010; Schofer and Longhofer 2011).

In keeping with the core insight that countries seek to conform to legitimate world models, empirical research has privileged institutional processes that produce commonality rather than variation and uniqueness. However, two forms of variation are central. First, there are variable adoption patterns. Countries more linked to world culture are expected (and generally seem to) conform to world models. In world society research, the classic indicator used to explain variable adoption is a country's linkage to world culture (typically measured by a logged count of national memberships in international non-governmental organizations). Some countries continually flout widely-accepted global principles. For example, the United States, Somalia, and South Sudan have, for years, been the only countries to resist signing the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. Conceptually, variation in national adoption patterns is expected from the world society perspective. World models are "universalistic," meaning in theory they are thought to apply to all actors everywhere. The highly abstract character of world models allows them to spread to unexpected locations and beyond the specific context where they emerged. But a universalistic model is distinct from a model being adopted universally.

Second, the concept of decoupling predicts that local circumstances condition both the ability and will to implement global models. The idea of decoupling is not specific to the world polity tradition, it comes from the foundational studies in open systems views of organizational theory (Weick 1976; Meyer and Rowan 1977) and has been widely applied in many settings (e.g. for firms see Westphal and Zajack 2001, for schools see Coburn 1994, for nonprofits see Gronberg 1992; for a review see Bromley and Powell 2012). The idea is that countries (or organizations) adopt formal practices in order to gain legitimacy by conforming to expectations in the environment. The process leading to adoption occurs separately from implementation and new formal structures can remain highly buffered from existing activities and/or exist largely as window dressing, either due to lack of capacity or lack of will. For instance, Cole and Ramirez (2013) demonstrate the effects of national human rights institutions on two kinds of human rights outcomes: physical integrity rights and civil and political rights. They find that human rights institutions improve long-term physical integrity outcomes, but local circumstances mediate civil and political rights practices. As the study suggests, a challenge in many existing conceptions of decoupling is that there is little understanding of a temporal element. Policy and practice can be

loosely coupled initially, and then over time the linkages sometimes deepen and come into alignment. Furthermore, studies rarely emphasize varied causes (e.g. capacity versus will), and decoupling does not capture the full range of ways that a practice could vary as it spreads.

### *Scandinavian Institutionalism*

Unlike world polity research, Scandinavian institutionalism places great emphasis on the local variations and interpretations of elements that diffuse (e.g. Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996; Engwall, 2003; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008). As Czarniawska and Sevón (1996: 6) eloquently describe, the phrase “diffusion” (commonly used in world polity research), “suggests a physical process, subject to the laws of physics, and thus the explanation of phenomena denoted by this term provokes a train of physical metaphors, like ‘saturation’ or ‘resistance.’” For example, a widely-cited world polity study shows that domestic “receptor sites,” such as ecological associations, are positively related to the cross-national diffusion of national environmentalism structures, such as national parks and ministries for the environment (Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000). Here, the emphasis is on the spread of a formal structure with little attention to local variability. In contrast, in Scandinavian institutionalism attention is focused on the re-construction and co-construction of external models and local adaptations. This leads to an emphasis on transcending conventional oppositions such as stability-change, internal-external, imitation-innovation (Sevón 1996; Westney 1987).

Drawing on Serres, Latour, and Callon, Scandinavian institutionalists emphasize how elements drawn from external sources are reshaped in each new instantiation (Latour 1986, Callon 1986, Callon and Latour 1981). Two concepts have been developed as alternatives to the phrase diffusion. The first alternative, “translation”, is used to simultaneously convey movement and transformation of an element (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996). The emphasis of translation is to draw attention to the fact that management practices, formal structures, or ideas are typically not passively transferred wholesale from one setting to another. Instead, they are changed as they are copied in new contexts. Today, this approach is applied by a range of scholars, beyond the Scandinavian researchers that introduced it. (An irony that is not lost on us; to take the theory seriously this spread should not be seen as diffusion of a theory but rather translations of it.) For instance, in a study of the transfer of Western organizational practices to Japan, Westley (1987) shows how imitation creates innovation rather than replication. Looking within organizations, Hwang and Suarez (2005) show how nonprofits adapt websites and strategic planning to their specific context.

The second conception, developed to sharpen notions of how translation processes occur, is captured in the phrase “editing” (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008). The “edited corporation” is one where organizational templates are drawn from the environment, but actively reshaped by local participants (Sahlin-Andersson 2006). A great deal of organizational activity is directed towards editing externally-derived influences. Thus, individual actions and variation are central. Three general rules govern the editing process (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008): (1) As models or templates are incorporated from the environment, they are made more abstract by excluding time- and space-bounded features. (2) As models spread the account for why adoption takes place becomes reformulated in rationalistic terms. Thus, even when functionality is obviously unclear in early stages, ad hoc rationales are developed that bury this uncertainty. Practices are not adopted because they work, they are said to work because they are adopted. (3) As an idea spreads, it



becomes reformulated to be conveyed more cleanly and dramatically. For instance, models that are initially rather vague become packaged with specific labels such as “Education for All” or “Human Development” that are easily remembered (although the underlying definition may remain contested). Importantly, this reformulation can alter both the form and content of a model.

Although individuals are central to Scandinavian institutionalism, and many of the studies are case studies of particular organizations and organizational participants, these persons are not normally the robust actors of rational choice theories. The people involved are not even as autonomous and interest-driven as other, typically American, individual-level institutional studies commonly suggest, which use concepts like institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012), institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio 1988), institutional work (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca 2009), or inhabited institutions (Hallett and Ventresca 2006). The people in Scandinavian institutionalism are not assumed to be sovereign actors with *a priori* interests that drive their behavior. Instead, they have been called “soft actors” (Meyer 1996) or, drawing on Mead, “rationalized others” (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). Persons and their preferences are understood to be socially constructed, with their autonomy and identities dependent on and drawn from external sources. As the people within an organization respond to an array of external pressures, the effort to conform generates a great deal of irrationality (Brunsson 2000, 2002), some of which is similar to the world polity notion of decoupling. The individuals depicted in Scandinavian institutionalism are very much the sort of persons envisioned in world polity research, and the variable enactments are not inconsistent with world polity thinking (although not a focus of it). In many ways, the two approaches are similar worldviews espoused at different levels of analysis.

### *Integration*

The theoretical sketches above provide insight into how these three approaches can be usefully applied together to gain a more complete understanding of cross-national social phenomena. They are compatible because all of these institutionalisms generally contrast themselves with realist or functional views of the world. Most unlike a realist or functional lens, actors’ preferences are assumed to be endogenous to their social system and, thus, are not considered an adequate explanation for institutional equilibrium or change (Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth 1992). Historical institutionalists, and their world polity and Scandinavian cousins, argue that “the definition of interests and objectives is created in institutional contexts and is not separable from them” (Zysman 1994:244). The three theories also are compatible because of what Roland Robertson has characterized as the compression of the world – globalization and glocalization (Robertson 1992). Economic, social and cultural globalization shape why ideas spread and how they are received, contributing to a new research agenda within Scandinavian institutionalism on “global ideas” and how they are translated – or glocalized (Czarniawska and Sevón 2005).<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, when they are combined the theories differ enough to shed light on issues that do not always receive sufficient attention. World polity research and Scandinavian institutionalism generally start from the assumption that pressures exist in the environment, and the environment itself is causal rather than just contextual. As the foundational text in

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<sup>3</sup> This concept of glocalization shares some similarities with “externalization,” or the process by which local actors look to international scripts or reforms for domestic purposes (Schriewer 1990).

Scandinavian institutionalism clarifies, the theory “espouses the basic tenets of the new institutionalism and addresses the issue of change in a different way” (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996, pg. 5). To a great extent, Scandinavian institutionalism builds on the premises of world polity research and then extends into “micro” processes and mechanisms that often are left unaddressed in world polity research. For instance, whereas world polity research generally emphasizes receptor sites for global ideas, Scandinavian institutionalists stress the carriers of ideas that edit those ideas across contexts. The most common editors include researchers, professionals, leaders, consultants and planners, legitimate players on the global stage. An integrated approach to diffusion therefore will recognize that translation is fundamentally important to the process, and “merchants of meaning” play a pivotal role in carrying those ideas across time and space (Czarniawska-Joerges 1990; Suárez 2007).

Moreover, unlike Scandinavian institutionalism, world polity research rarely focuses on variable enactments of an element that diffuses, although it does not deny such changes occur. Scandinavian institutionalism provides a rich look at how the diffusion of an object or practice simultaneously follows a logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness. In practice, elements drawn from the environment are enacted in highly variable ways, even though Callon (1981, 211) notes that “translation involves creating convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different.” When a practice is adopted in a new place, Scandinavian institutionalists also clarify that the practice can hold different meanings for recipients. A very passionate adopter might transform a practice in a manner never intended by originators, and other factors like the nature of contact and the object itself can influence translation (Powell et al 2005). Translation thus involves the creation of similarities at the same time that it involves the creation of differences. When an idea is taken from elsewhere, enough of the concept or idea remains to merit recognition of similarity, yet the carriers and receivers almost never embrace or enact an idea without changing it in the process.

Integrating Scandinavian institutionalism with world polity institutionalism obviously poses some challenges because the two theories privilege different levels of analysis. World polity institutionalism requires variability in context in order to demonstrate that commonalities transcend local conditions, and Scandinavian institutionalism almost requires a micro-level context in order to demonstrate how an idea or artifact is shaped and received. Historical institutionalism can be used to fill the meso-level gap between the global and the local. Many world polity studies point to historical arguments to explain the rise of a world culture in the wake of World War II. It is often noted that the particular configuration of circumstances following the war (e.g. declining nation-state charisma, Anglo-American dominance) gave global legitimacy to ideas of human rights, education, liberal individualism, and related issues (e.g. Meyer et al 1997). But world polity studies tend not to address the issue as a core focus of research, instead focusing on the worldwide spread of ideas, policies, and practices, beyond evidence of their known utility or when implementation is unlikely.

By attending to “thick” history and long trajectories for change, historical institutionalism adds additional layers of explanation to any analysis of diffusion and translation. Just as historical institutionalism can take globalization and cross-national trends into account for explaining national-level outcomes, world polity theory can consider national sequences, critical junctures, and enduring national paths as intermediary variables that provide a holistic explanation for

diffusion. Similarly, just as historical institutionalism can focus on variability in the enactment of a local institution, Scandinavian institutionalism can consider how sequences of actions and critical junctures at a national level shape both the likelihood of adoption and the translation of a practice itself. When the three institutional theories are viewed as bridging levels of analysis, the benefit of combining the perspectives becomes particularly apparent. World polity theory offers a causal explanation for processes of global diffusion and provides an argument for why some ideas are more likely to spread than others (Meyer et al 1996). Critical junctures and path dependence, though, channel diffusion processes in novel directions, and translation takes place as the “meaning constellations” of recipients filter and refract global ideas (Czarniawska and Sevón 2005; Schriewer 2014 [this volume]).<sup>4</sup>

When the three theories are considered independently of one another, by contrast, they sometimes prove the adage that “where you stand depends on where you sit.” As a macro-level theory, world polity institutionalism understandably compares itself to alternative macro-level perspectives (like modernization theory and world systems theory) rather than to micro-level arguments. Similarly, national level studies utilizing historical institutionalism usually compare themselves to functionalist or neo-realist theories that also operate at the national level. Finally, with its interest in translation at a micro-level, Scandinavian institutionalism gains little traction or explanatory power by revealing cross-national similarities. In order to demonstrate translation, local differences rather than similarities must become the outcomes of interest. Studying a phenomenon with a consistent level of analysis has great value and should continue; our main contribution is to demonstrate that syncretic approaches that bridge levels of analysis offer many complementarities with conventional lines of research. The following section builds on our integration, establishing a research agenda on human rights education in universities that utilizes all three perspectives.

### **A Research Agenda on Human Rights in Higher Education**

The human rights movement is an ongoing global effort to promote the social, cultural, economic and political rights of individuals and marginalized groups (Lauren 2003; Cole 2005). Although much of the work in the movement has involved the protection of victims, the creation of international standards, and the dissemination of information about human rights, the prevention of human rights abuses through education has become increasingly central. To begin with, the number of organizations dedicated to human rights education has increased dramatically over the last few decades, and the number of publications on human rights education has expanded as well (Ramirez et al 2006). Second, the United Nations created a Decade for Human Rights Education that began in 1995, and these efforts have been reinforced by separate projects in other multilateral agencies. Third, the number of countries incorporating human rights into the formal primary and secondary curriculum has increased, and these curricular changes have percolated beyond education policy into textbooks (Meyer et al 2012).

The transformation of human rights from radical social movement to subject matter for schools reveals the extent to which human rights language has become acceptable and legitimate. Historically, schools have been considered essential for “forming the national character” and socializing individuals to national norms or values, yet the emergence of human rights education dramatizes the permeability of traditional institutions to global reforms. To explain this pattern

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<sup>4</sup> The authors would like to thank Jürgen Schriewer for suggesting this avenue for linking the three theories.

many studies draw on world polity theory, suggesting that the human rights movement reflects widely held cultural scripts about progress, justice, and the individual (Meyer, Boli et al 1997). Though policy and practice often are radically decoupled, human rights ideals structure the discourse of nation-states in a globalized world. Consequently, many countries become infused with human rights standards and policies, and human rights knowledge emerges in all levels of education. Our interest here in human rights education, though, pushes the world-society agenda beyond its traditional concern with state-level policies. By focusing on university practices, we propose to look at deeper changes within society itself.

What explains the adoption of human rights programs in educational institutions within a decentralized nation-state? Among universities in the United States, for instance, Columbia University established the first human rights program in 1978. Many additional human rights programs have been created throughout the country since that time, several types of graduate degrees in human rights are offered, and in 2007 the University of Dayton introduced the first undergraduate degree in human rights studies. Why and how did human rights become university knowledge, what types of degree programs and research centers exist, and which universities develop human rights programs? World polity institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and Scandinavian institutionalism can provide important insights into these core questions, building from the extensive prior work on the global rise of human rights education in primary and secondary school curricula (Ramirez et al 2006).

Before developing arguments for our research agenda on human rights in universities, we begin by documenting general growth over time. To constrain our search we limited our dataset to colleges and universities. Consequently our sample consists of 1,488 universities in the United States that were listed as colleges or universities by the Carnegie Classification System in 1976, 1994, or 2000. Figure 1 presents an overview of the establishment of human rights programs and research centers in U.S. universities. We propose three core lines of argument to explain this growth and variation with quantitative research, building primarily on historical institutionalism and world polity theory: path dependence and imprinting, diffusion effects, and the global legitimation of human rights. We also suggest qualitative analyses that build mainly on Scandinavian institutionalism and can take a more textured approach, elucidating both the diversity of human rights programs and the localized processes involved in the creation and development of programs.

[Figure 1 about here]

Many factors are likely to contribute to change in academia, ranging from micro-level processes to macro-level global transformations. Beginning with the structural aspects of universities, some institutions are chartered as minority-serving universities or women's colleges, some are private, some are religious, and many additional alternatives exist. Because universities are path dependent and generally build from their past, as historical institutionalism suggest, the mission or charter of a university could narrow the range of plausible alternatives for reform. Additionally, when a university is constituted could lead to imprinting, meaning that organizations are influenced by the historical context and sequencing of their founding. With respect to human rights programs, path dependence and imprinting could have two salient effects. First, the human rights movement gained momentum after the Second World War, and

universities founded after that critical juncture might be particularly willing to adopt human rights programs. Second, some research demonstrates the universities chartered to serve minorities are more likely to offer ethnocentric courses, and these institutions also might be likely to adopt a human rights program (Cole 2006). Presented formally:

*Proposition 1:* Minority-serving universities and universities founded after the Second World War will have a positive effect on the development of human rights programs.

Expanding beyond explanations based on history and feedback dynamics within universities, diffusionist arguments draw attention to multiple types of interorganizational relationships. Building on world polity theory and historical institutionalism, many studies demonstrate that organizations are attentive to their peers and to shifts in their competitive environment, and some universities adopt programs due to proximity or other forms of interaction (Strang and Soule 1998). Viewed in this manner, universities that are geographically proximate, share resources, or belong to common associations might begin to adopt human rights programs once the reform is established within their networks. While proximity or contact provides one avenue for diffusion effects, the spread of ideas and practices does not require direct interaction. Like businesses and all other types of organizations, universities try to be aware of broader trends in the field. Some ideas are broadcast or spread widely through marketing materials, and some organizations look to elite institutions (or their Carnegie category) as a reference group. As a result, once a few key universities adopt a human rights program and establish the legitimacy of the topic in universities, further adoptions throughout the country might become common. Presented as a family or group of measures, we propose:

*Proposition 2:* The social and spatial proximity among universities (diffusion effects) will have a positive effect on the development of human rights programs.

The third and final line of argument for quantitative research emphasizes the role of culture in the world polity, particularly in relation to the legitimation of human rights beyond university walls. Much of our own prior work indicates that the global environment, and national linkages to that environment, play important roles in explaining the rise and spread of human rights education in primary and secondary education (Ramirez et al 2006; Suárez and Bromley 2012). Although the nation-state was the unit of analysis for that research, many of the same factors we have analyzed could help to explain the spread of human rights in U.S. universities. Specifically, the global growth of human rights organizations, human rights publications, human rights treaties, and human rights institutions all could facilitate the spread of human rights programs at universities. Moreover, world polity research demonstrates that citizen memberships in international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) amplify the spread of global concepts like environmental conservation (Frank et al 2000). Memberships in INGOs act as “receptor sites” for global ideas, and university chapters of organizations like Amnesty International could produce a corollary effect. Consequently we suggest that:

*Proposition 3:* The global legitimation of human rights, and university “receptor sites” for human rights, will have a positive effect on the adoption of human rights programs.

These three propositions draw attention to university histories and missions, diffusion effects, and the global legitimation of human rights. We suggest that these factors are likely to be relevant independent of other university characteristics and contextual factors, but university size, demographics, debts and expenditures, reputation, location, and political context also could

matter for the adoption of human rights programs. By including measures of this nature as controls with indicators for the propositions we identify, we could ascertain many salient factors associated with the creation of human rights programs. It is important to note that these are not mutually exclusive arguments, and all three mechanisms can operate simultaneously. Moreover, these quantitative analyses treat the outcome, human rights education in universities, as the core issue requiring explanation. The implication is that what makes the programs commensurable is their focus on human rights, but qualitative analyses could clarify the range of programs in U.S. universities and identify contextual conditions that explain diversity.

As a simple example, Southern Methodist University (SMU) created an undergraduate degree in human rights in 2011, and the program has two tracks – one on gender and human rights and the other on public policy and human rights. This degree emerged from the creation of the Embrey Human Rights Program, and the founding story highlights some details that quantitative research has difficulty capturing. According to the website, the initiation of a program began with Lauren Embrey’s travel to Polish Holocaust sites in 2005 as a student of SMU. Rick Halperin, a faculty member at the university with an extensive background in human rights work (including serving as the chair of Amnesty International), led the trip. After the visit to Poland, Lauren Embrey donated \$1 million for the creation of the Embrey Human Rights Program with a focus on gender and public policy. Since that time, she and her family foundation have committed more philanthropic support for the human rights program, enabling the creation of a minor in 2007 and now an undergraduate degree.

As a second example, the University of Washington established the Center for Human Rights in 2009, following “a decade of ambitious program-building” (University of Washington 2014). Unlike the SMU example, the University of Washington is a public university, and in this particular instance the creation of the center involved legislative action at the state level. According to the website that details the history of the center, in 2008 the Henry M. Jackson Foundation funded an endowed chair in human rights, adding momentum to efforts to institutionalize human rights in the university. The next year a state legislator introduced a bill to establish the center, and after a positive vote, Governor Christine Gregoire signed the legislation into law. The center has four programmatic areas: 1) Human Rights and the Environment, 2) Human Rights, History and Justice, 3) Human Rights and Education, and 4) Human Rights at Home. Though the University of Washington has not established a degree in human rights, it does offer an interdisciplinary minor, paralleling some of the early developments at SMU.

Scandinavian institutionalism could help to explain how the human rights degree was edited and translated into SMU and the University of Washington, particularly with extensive data on meetings, agreements, and university processes. The specifics of the cases clearly are unique, just the public-private distinction creates important distinctions. Furthermore, the two centers prioritize different issues within the context of human rights. Neither world polity theory nor historical institutionalism would deny that local circumstances and conditions shape the enactment of human rights in universities, although certainly world polity theory would highlight the fact that both universities have centers and ties to academic programs. Even within this frame of reference, though, there are many internal or “micro” aspects of the historical account that merit more elaboration. What, for instance, were the conditions in the College of Humanities and Sciences at SMU when the program was first discussed (Small 1999)? Was there some

opposition or resistance to the creation of the University of Washington Center for Human Rights, and if so, how was it overcome? Why were gender and public policy chosen as the primary tracks at SMU, and how did the University of Washington decide on its four core areas?

Answering all of these questions using Scandinavian institutionalism as a frame would provide details that situate the emergence of human rights at SMU and the University of Washington in their immediate contexts, highlighting the translation of human rights at a local level. At the same time, the level of detail necessary to document conversations and clarify how they shaped the details of the initial programs almost certainly would diminish the focus on diffusion itself. Case studies with such detail are pivotal for capturing the actions of self-interested and rational local actors. They demonstrate that universities do not adopt programs in a thoughtless manner without debate or discussion. As any scholar who has participated in the creation of any degree program knows, there are many different committees and discussions that have to take place before programs get established, and in many instances marketing and staffing plans are developed at the same time. A tradeoff in providing such specificity is the broader institutional context, precisely where historical institutionalism and world polity theory make contributions, yet the implications are clear:

*Proposition 4:* The “meaning constellations” within universities will shape the creation and focal emphases of human rights programs.

The cases of SMU and the University of Washington also raise many new comparative questions worth considering, particularly with respect to curricular content. As human rights programs become more common, does a template begin to emerge – do newer degree programs and research centers copy or build from extant programs in other universities? How were the earliest human rights programs justified or promoted, and are the same strategies applicable to newer programs? Perhaps the earliest human right programs in universities evolve following a general pattern like SMU, beginning conservatively with a research center and then adding degrees, but programs created more recently might not follow this gradual process. If the University of Washington follows the pattern of SMU, at some point the interdisciplinary minor will become an undergraduate degree. However, as the legitimacy of human rights builds in other universities, there might be less need to move from a center to a minor, and universities might opt directly for a degree program. These sorts of questions and issues attend to the local mechanisms involved in the creation of programs while considering broader evolutionary processes – blending insights from all three institutional theories.

Similarly, the earliest human rights programs may emerge in law schools and focus on legal education, but newer programs might begin as interdisciplinary programs incorporating many fields like psychology, history and sociology. The MA in International Human Rights at the University of Denver, for instance, includes courses on health, humanitarian assistance, law, and gender. As another example, in 2008 Arizona State University admitted students to its new Social Justice and Human Rights Master’s Program, offering courses in action research, critical trauma studies, and human trafficking. Did the earliest human rights programs offer courses of this nature, or are interdisciplinary course offerings novel? Are degree programs in law schools (the Master of Laws, or LL.M) multidisciplinary, or do they focus solely on legal texts and rulings, and has any trend emerged over time? Recent work on human rights education even takes notions of translation and editing down to the level of pedagogy, demonstrating that some

models emphasize global citizenship, others stress peace and coexistence, and yet others prioritize transformative action (Bajaj 2011). All of these questions offer a robust research agenda on human rights education in universities, and they also frame a final proposition that can be investigated through qualitative, comparative analysis:

*Proposition 5:* Over time the curricular content of human rights degrees will become much more standardized, expansive and multi-disciplinary.

As these five propositions demonstrate, incorporating insights from the three institutionalisms can bridge levels of analysis without trivializing global or local processes. Our research agenda acknowledges that variation and translation are important, yet it also takes seriously the notion that macro-forces in the institutional environment are salient for explaining why ideas and practices spread in the first place.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Stated simply, historical institutionalism sheds light on the long-term historical processes that generate global models, world polity theory provides a framework for understanding diffusion of these models to new settings, and Scandinavian institutionalism illustrates how external models change as they are enacted at the micro level. But integration across time and levels of analysis rests on the assumption that these lenses are equally valuable and simply provide different insights. That is, theoretical integration assumes that social phenomena are like a hermeneutic circle: The parts and the whole of social and cultural phenomenon are inseparable and we cannot fully understand one without the other.

While these three institutional views are often compatible, some exceptions apply. In some applications of historical and Scandinavian institutionalism, actors can tend towards the heroic. The world polity approach rejects this view entirely, which partly explains its unwavering focus on the macro level. On both sides of the micro-macro divide, there are sometimes strong theoretical applications claiming that either the local or global explanation is dominant. Shifting to the importance of history, world society and Scandinavian institutionalists can at times dismiss the goal of developing an explanation for why certain things become dominant. In the words of Sahlin and Wedlin (2008: 223), “it is often pointless – if not downright impossible – to find an origin...it appears to be not so much a case of ideas flowing widely because they are powerful, but rather of ideas becoming powerful as they circulate.”

These contradictions that emerge in strong theoretical formulations are also important for clarifying and advancing divergent conceptual lenses. We would not, therefore, advocate as a general position that more studies should seek to integrate or reconcile multiple theories. Theoretical integrations are best applied when the goal is to understand a particular phenomenon more fully, while parsimonious theories are more useful for generalizing. The integrative approach can be valuable for gaining a more complete understanding of a certain instance or case, as we demonstrated here in the case of human rights in higher education. Future work in this integrative vein should go further than bringing together multiple institutional theories. The fullest picture of any phenomenon likely also includes elements of power dynamics and functional rationality captured by other theories. Functional, power-driven, and institutional influences are likely to co-exist in highly contingent and variables ways depending on the context.



In-depth understanding of particular cases should not, however, be the only goal of social science research. There is a time and place for both conceptual synthesis and strong theoretical purism. Returning to our initial parable, if the goal is to understand an elephant then multiple lenses are better. But a more elemental view that, for example, situates the elephant in the animal kingdom or characterizes the similarities of animals versus plants versus rocks is equally useful. Despite the flaws of any single theory in explaining the entirety of any specific case, it is also true that stripping social phenomena down to their most essential and generalizable components, through simplifying arguments and assumptions, has generated some of the most powerful insights in the social sciences.

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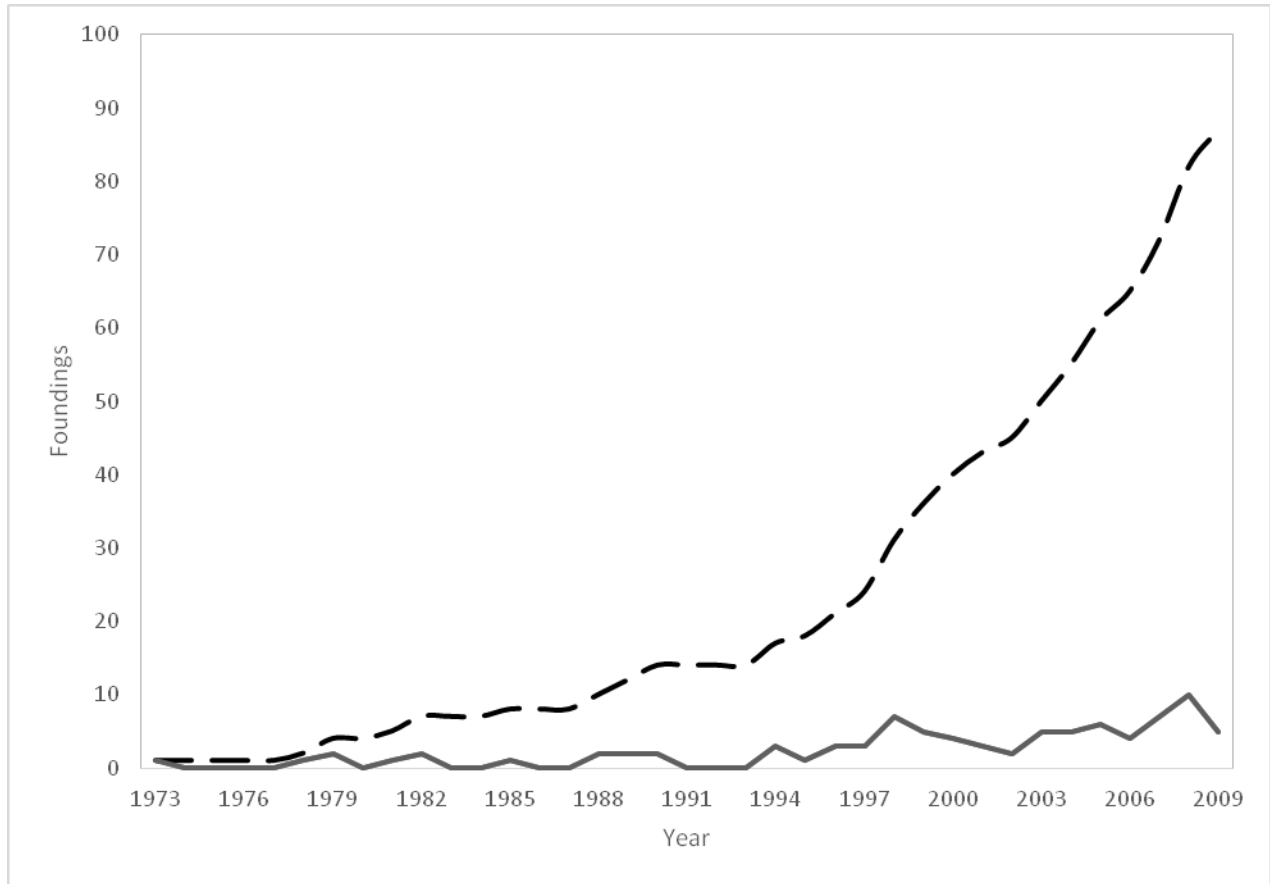


Figure 1. Yearly and Cumulative University Human Rights Programs Created, 1973-2009 (N=87)  
 Source: Data collected by authors. Sample consists of 1,488 universities that were listed as colleges or universities by the Carnegie Classification System in 1976, 1994, or 2000.