Open Call for Symposium on Institutional Grammar and Public Administration

Proposal Abstracts due 1 September 2019
Initial paper deadline 1 December 2019

Symposium Editor

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1. Focus of the Symposium

Of enduring interest to scholars of public administration and related fields is the design and impacts of institutions (e.g., laws, regulations, social norms) used to govern behaviour. Evaluating the design of institutions entails assessing their content to understand how it is structured, as well as the information it conveys about who can do what, when, and how. Evaluating the impacts of institutions involves assessing the implications of institutional design on behaviour in practice, and the implications of such on the attainment of policy goals.

Ultimately, to effectively analyze the design and impacts of institutions used in governance, scholars need robust methods for systematically discerning and evaluating key behaviourally relevant features of institutional design. Among these salient features, are: to which actors institutions apply, the array of activities that these actors are required, permitted, and forbidden to perform, and incentives they confront for institutional compliance/non-compliance. The proposed symposium will feature articles that present methodological innovations relating to one increasingly popular approach for evaluating the design of institutions, called the Institutional Grammar.

The Institutional Grammar was proposed by Sue Crawford and Elinor Ostrom in 1995. The Institutional Grammar is a theoretically informed approach for organizing the content of governing institutions along generalizable features, in relation to which behavioural outcomes can be assessed. The development of the Grammar was motivated by Crawford and Ostrom’s observation that institutions are comprised of individual behavioural directives and, further, that these directives typically convey common types of information; such as, an action; an actor associated with this action; whether this action is required, allowed, or forbidden; the temporal, spatial, and procedural parameters of the action, and; rewards or sanctions for performing or failing to perform the action as prescribed. The Institutional Grammar proposed
a linguistic syntax, where each of these types of information is designated by a unique syntactic element. Organizing the content of institutional directives in accordance with the syntax, or along syntactic elements, enables the institutional analyst to systematically collect and analyze the specific ways that institutions are intended to compel behaviour, which can then be used as a basis for evaluating behaviour in practice. When aggregated, syntactically parsed institutional data provide a comprehensive depiction of the scope of institutions.

Over the last decade, the Institutional Grammar has increasingly been applied to study the design and related impacts of institutions taking the form of public policies. Through various applications, scholars have validated the Institutional Grammar’s value in conducting systematic and comprehensive assessments of policy design for gleaning descriptive insights and as a basis for evaluating behavioral responses to institutions. Early scholarship on the Institutional Grammar also offered operational guidelines for applying the Institutional Grammar to study policy design.

A new wave of scholarship on the Institutional Grammar is developing that engages emerging analytical methods and techniques, as well as those that have traditionally been used in other fields, in the application of the Grammar to enhance its accessibility, usability, and analytical leverage. For example, utilizing artificial intelligence-based methods for automated coding of policy documents in accordance with the Institutional Grammar allows for the generation of vast amounts of micro-level policy data with substantially less effort than manual coding efforts would require. Applying the Institutional Grammar within agent based modeling allows the analyst to observe impacts on behavior emerging from current and altered institutional contexts. The articles in the proposed symposium are encouraged to cover these and other methodological innovations relating to the Institutional Grammar.

2. Contribution of Symposium to Public Administration Scholarship

The contributions of this symposium to scholarship on public administration are three-fold.

First, it reinforces the importance of institutional design within public administration, and governance broadly. Institutions, such as regulations, laws, and charters, are of the primary mechanisms through which governments seek to compel the behaviour of individuals within society toward policy goals. Thus, understanding how they are designed, and implications of this design, are fundamental to an understanding of governance.

Second, the symposium will highlight the importance of having robust methods and analytical tools to inform the study of institutions. Theoretical and practical understanding hinges on the ability to effectively describe and predict empirical realities. The focus on the Institutional Grammar in the study of institutional design is prompted by increased recognition of the promise of this approach in the evaluation of governing institutions; as indicated by the spate of recent publications applying the Grammar.
Third, the symposium highlights how emerging analytical techniques rooted in artificial intelligence, as well as techniques that have traditionally been applied in other fields (i.e., agent based modeling), can be utilized in the study of institutional design, and related questions central to public administration and governance broadly.

The articles, individually and as a corpus, are expected to contribute to the aims of Public Administration in that they address the development of an approach that can be employed by scholars of public administration, public policy, and public management interested in the design of institutions used to deal with a variety of administrative and social challenges. Further, it introduces innovations to this approach to enable rigorous research that can effectively inform theory development and the generation of useful practical insights. Having contributions from scholars from three continents indicates the broad appeal of the approach, as well as its potential application in a variety of country settings and in comparative studies.

6. Symposium Timeline

1 September 2019: Deadline for proposing papers. Paper proposals to be submitted to Saba Siddiki.

1 December 2019: Full papers proposed through open call which have been accepted due. These papers will be reviewed by Saba Siddiki. Authors of papers that pass this initial review will be notified by 1 January 2020.

15 January 15, 2020: Full papers papers should be submitted directly to Public Administration.