

The Impact of Institutional Actors' Moral Capacities on their Symbolic Compliance with Reforms: A Theoretical Explanation

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Abstract

This paper provides a theoretical explanation as to why compliance with certain external pressures like reforms takes a symbolic form in organisations that are characterised by a high level of moral obligation. A theoretical explication is presented for the quality assurance system (QAS) reform introduced into a sector that has strong moral foundations and high moral obligations, namely, the higher educational sector. In doing so, this paper integrates the Neo-institutional Theory, the Institutional Work Theory and the theoretical framework of the Moral Maturation and Moral Conation Capacity into a single framework. Based on this theoretical framework, the paper argues that the symbolic compliance (SC) of actors working in higher educational institutes with QAS is ignited by the tension between their ideologies, coupled with their desire to safeguard traditional practices, and the compulsion for them to implement QAS to gain legitimacy (to gain resources, reputation and stability). Weak enforcement of QAS is another cause of SC. Nonetheless, the moral capacities of actors significantly influence the relationship between these causes and SC. Actors with low moral capacities give into causes and conditions that induce SC. On the contrary, actors with high moral capacities would not resort to SC, even though the aforesaid causes and conditions that generally trigger SC prevail. In doing so, this paper brings novel insights to the literature in the area through an explanation of the manner in which institutional actors engage in SC with reforms, from a moral perspective.

Keywords: Actors' moral capacities, Institutional work, Neo-Institutional theory, Quality assurance in higher education, Reforms, Symbolic compliance.

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