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Cognitive micro-foundations at work: how organizations resist change in work practice

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the essence that is, the nature of organizational responses to efficiently resist enforced change in institutionalized work practice destined to address poor organizational performance. The micro-foundations of the cognitive logic that are activated when organizations face change are hereby conceptualized.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a case study design, the study focusses on narratives of a failure to implement a regulatory enforced change in work practice at a military academy established in the 1600s. The interviews are complemented by secondary data.

Findings – The analysis reveals a cognitive framework by which the members of the organization shaped their responses. By building on micro-foundations for mobilizing resistance (i.e. the essential substance at a micro level), this study shows how the cognitive logic is activated to respond to change. To show how the cognitive logic is used to mitigate and compensate for incongruences with the regulatory logic, this study outlines a set of strategic resistance maneuvers and cognitive resistance forces that restrict regulatory influence on change in work practice. This study thus provides insights into maneuvers and resistance forces that members may activate to resist change efficiently.

Originality/value – To the author's knowledge, this is the first study to attempt to conceptualize the essence of the cognitive logic activated to resist organizational change.

Keywords Organizational change, Qualitative research, Management challenges

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

How members of an organization carry out work practices reflects established or institutionalized organizational behavior. Institutionalized work practice is defined as conventions, ways of doing things, and the way things are (Scott, 2001). The institutionalization of such behavior is in many ways a product of how an organization conducts learning and training (Flores *et al.*, 2012). Thus, work practice in training and learning situations will support the professional institutionalization of organizational behavior and guide members of the organization in how to practice their professions (Dessler, 1994; Lounsbury and Pollack, 2001), and is consequently essential for an organization to advance in its course to achieve its goals.

Most institutionalized work practice is organized and regulated by socially produced and reproduced logics. A logic entails the formal and informal social principles that specify to a greater or lesser extent “who should do what, when, where, and how, and in relation to whom” (Machado and Burns, 1998, p. 359); in other words, logics are the “rules of action, interaction, and interpretation that guide and constrain” the practices of an organization's members (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). Such logics orient and guide socially acceptable and appropriate behavior and provide meaning to organizational behavior (Scott and Davis, 2007).

Change in organizational behavior, that is, in institutionalized work practice, is often surrounded by difficulties in the form of organizational resistance to change, and a

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stream of recent work within institutional theory seeks to explore how practices are changed (e.g. Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby *et al.*, 2007). Institutional change is the process by which the discontinuing of one practice marks the beginning of another practice. Through this process, institutionalized work practice weakens and disappears (Scott, 2001), and new institutional work practice may become established.

Previous research has provided important insights into organizational behavior by showing that institutional change may be triggered by a variety of factors, including the organization's inability to deliver satisfying results (Oliver, 1992; Shinkle, 2012). Studies have shown diversity in accomplishing change and that implementing change often proves difficult to achieve (Dessler, 1994). In addition, research has revealed that a variety of obstacles must be overcome for institutional change to succeed (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002; Suddaby *et al.*, 2007).

Recent conceptual advances in the literature on institutional logics have stressed the importance of looking at the content, or essence, of the cognitive logic; that is, the collective cognitions and beliefs and the ways of thinking that may be activated to rationalize the responses members undertake. It has been argued that members may resist change because of cognitions such as cognitive rigidity, conflicting schemas, and low openness to change (Ford *et al.*, 2008; Piderit, 2000). Although highly institutionalized work practice combined with performance dissatisfaction may explain why members might feel conflicted when considering change, it does not explain the circumstances that cause them to respond the way they do. Despite the fact that the cognitive logic represents a fundamental part of institutional change, its micro-foundations (i.e. the response mechanisms and their motives on deeper levels that construct the aggregate concept of cognitive logic) have been understudied and have been elaborated at most at a conceptual level. Thus, one prominent gap in the field is the lack of scholarly attention to what motivates the responses that organizations undertake when facing changes in institutionalized work practices that affect the organization's socialized values. Consequently, there is a need to understand the influence of the cognitive logic on organizational responses to change in order to advance understanding of impediments to achieving an organization's rational goals. In particular, illuminating how cognitions shape such responses is essential (Marquis and Lounsbury, 2007). Previous studies, however, have not explicated the micro-foundations of organizational responses to resist change, which could provide details about how resistance may be effectuated and justified. This is a significant lacuna because such detailing could sharpen existing insights about resistance, help researchers to develop testable hypotheses about resistance in a variety of settings, and deepen the understanding of how this organizational phenomenon emerges. Understanding the micro-foundations of resistance in detail is important for unpacking the internal functioning of responses. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the essence, that is, the nature of organizational responses to efficiently resist enforced change in institutionalized work practice destined to address poor organizational performance. The micro-foundations of the cognitive logic that are activated when organizations face change are hereby conceptualized.

Through studying an institutionalized organization's failure to change its work practice when facing a discontinuous environmental shift, this study provides insight into previously under-examined micro-foundations of the cognitive logic to which members of organizations may resort to resist change. This qualitative study followed an institutional change initiative undertaken at a Swedish military academy, a school established in the 1600s with highly institutionalized work practices. The focus of this

study was on the adaption and use of a new pedagogy in learning and training situations. The Swedish armed forces faced performance challenges when members' abilities did not align with abilities needed to deal with environmental changes, which caused the supreme commander to order implementation of new work practices. The inductive approach ultimately guided the understanding of these micro-foundations through the research on institutional theory and work addressing organizational resistance to change. The military academy's institutional change failed because the change efforts were efficiently hindered by cognitive micro-foundations embedded in institutionalized practices – an insight that moves beyond simpler arguments based on resistance to change. Hence, the study's main contribution is to chisel out micro-foundations of the cognitive logic that illuminate the essence, that is, the nature of resistance to institutional change, which ultimately provides relatively detailed insight into resistance to change. This study hereby shows how the cognitive logic may be used to deal with contradictory institutional logics and their aligned tensions, incongruences, and potential conflicts. As such, this study reveals the shapes and forces of the cognitive logic at work to rationalize responses, to convince oneself and other members that particular responses are appropriate, or, conversely, to criticize and delegitimize certain responses and members. This paper addresses a significant theme within institutional theory by showing how members become motivated and enabled to hinder change within institutions despite continuing on a failing or questionable course.

Additionally, the emergent insights contribute by adding some empirical substance to conceptual work on institutional logics. Specifically, this study empirically details the micro-foundations of the cognitive logic and demonstrates how the cognitive logic can be efficiently activated to rationalize organizational responses that are counterproductive to implementing changes in practice. Empirical studies of institutional change are rare (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002), despite the fact that the study of institutional change in existing work practices is essential for understanding change or the failure to adopt change.

Institutional theory and institutional logics

According to institutional theorists, institutional logics exert pressures on social behavior (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011), which lead to characteristic patterns in behavior that are considered appropriate (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Thus, a logic specifies members' roles and defines their rights and obligations, including rules of command and obedience (Lounsbury, 2008). The work practices are collectively valued based on established beliefs and thus on the cognitive logic created by the members and their cognitions (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Scott and Davis, 2007; Suddaby *et al.*, 2007). The cognitive logic provides principles of interpretation that assist members to make sense of their circumstances and to understand reality in common ways. Members refer to the principles when rationalizing or criticizing "what is being done, or not done, in arguing for what should or should not be done, and also who should be blamed for performance failures, or credited with success" (Machado and Burns, 1998, p. 359). Previous research on institutional logics has also shown that work practices are shaped by logics and has linked logics with a wide range of work practices (Lounsbury, 2008; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999), including educational pedagogy (Lounsbury and Pollack, 2001). Institutional theory thus offers possibilities for understanding how institutional logics underpin organizational responses that facilitate or hinder the implementation of changes in work practice (Oliver, 1992; Scott and Davis, 2007).

A large body of research has pinpointed that the taken-for-grantedness of institutions promotes stability, makes organizations highly resistant to change, and

facilitates the rationalizing of organizational responses to changes in work practices (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). However, a growing body of literature posits that institutional logics are typically non-aligned and incongruent; they create tensions and conflicts in change situations that members respond to, and dominating logics may hinder or facilitate institutional change in work practice (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011; Lawrence *et al.*, 2011). For instance, studies have revealed that a new policy or regulation may conflict with established beliefs regarding how work practice should be carried out (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Tilcsik, 2010). These studies suggest that, under conditions of conflicting logics, organizations are likely to resort to resistance as a way to respond (Pache and Santos, 2013). The following section reviews these responses and resistance forces in more detail and probes their applicability to the specific context of organizational change in work practice.

Institutional change in work practice

A stream of studies has emerged within institutional theory that seeks to explore how practices are changed (e.g. Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). Institutional change has been outlined as a process (Suddaby *et al.*, 2007) where the initial stage has been argued to be central for change to succeed (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002; Philips *et al.*, 2004).

The institutional change is successful when changes in work practice are set and new belief structures guide work practices (Zilber, 2006).

Another stream of research shows that institutional change can be triggered by a variety of factors, including the inability of existing work practices to deliver satisfying results or changes in values and regulatory forces (Oliver, 1992; Shinkle, 2012). Despite the recognized need for change, studies have shown that the implementation of changes in organizations has diverse outcomes in terms of success and failure. Concerning failure, the literature has indicated that organizations with highly institutionalized work practices often fail to recognize alternatives other than the established work practices (Porac and Thomas, 1990), are exposed to normative pressure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), and have members whose interests align with established work practices (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). Oliver (1992) identifies responses that organizations may enact to resist change, which vary in degree of active resistance from passive conformity to proactive manipulation. Previous research has likewise produced inconclusive findings about the effectiveness of managers' strategies to reduce resistance to organizational change among organization members (Bartunek *et al.*, 2011; Furst and Cable, 2008). For example, the strategic activity of including subordinates in the planning of a change has been found both to increase subordinates' support for change (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2000) and to reduce support for change (e.g. Bruhn *et al.*, 2001). Likewise, strategic activities to force members to support a change by using sanctions and edicts have proven effective in some studies (Poole *et al.*, 1989) and ineffective in others (Nutt, 1986). Accordingly, recent literature on resistance to change has noted a need to delve into the essence of resistance to further understand members' responses to an institutional change (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Tilcsik, 2010).

According to prior studies, members often react with resistance when faced with situations perceived as threatening, such as a change situation (Tilcsik, 2010). Dessler (1994) maintains that resistance to change often relates to people's values and needs and that a change is often perceived as a threat to the philosophy that people have built, which indicates the cognitive logic as a substantive resistance force to change. Similarly, Piderit (2000) proposes that resistance to a change is represented by the set of

negative responses that link to the cognitive logic. Tilcsik (2010) also implies that cognition is part of the phenomenon of resistance and describes this force as that employed when members develop counterarguments by building rationales for the old work practice which serve as a form of immunization against change. Greenwood *et al.* (2002) suggest that obstacles that must be overcome for change to occur relate to a process of negotiating reframing the professional identities. Hence, cognitions have been conceptualized as a resistance force that prevents full institutionalization until the adoption of new practices has cognitive legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and the practices themselves become taken-for-granted as the natural and appropriate arrangement. All of this outlines the cognitive logic as an essential resistance force.

However, much is still unclear regarding the resistance forces that may be activated to resist change. A few studies have shown that increasing commitment to a failing or questionable course of action in an organization might be driven by the fact that actors-in-charge are in general those who have been part of building and developing the established course of action. Such actors may be unwilling to change course due to cognitive dissonance or self-justification behavior (Westphal and Zajac, 2001), unwilling to accept a problem as a threat (Gilbert, 2006), or exhibit an inability to learn (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Such responses have been linked to cognitions such as cognitive rigidity, conflicting schemas, and low openness to change (Ford *et al.*, 2008; Piderit, 2000).

When work practices are to be changed, areas of incongruence and tension at the interfaces of old and new work practices will likely exist. This study aims to build on the small but growing field that takes resistance forces into account where members' success in resisting change has been conceptually related to change that challenges their established beliefs (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Tilcsik, 2010), that is, their cognitive logic. Although, the cognitive logic represents a fundamental part of institutional change, its micro-foundations have been understudied and have been elaborated at most only at a conceptual level. Previous studies have not explicated details of the cognitive micro-foundations through which resistance to change is rationalized. There is a lack of deeper insights into the nature of resistance and how resistance may be rationalized and become accepted and supported, a gap that this research study addresses. Accordingly, this study addresses the research question:

RQ1. What are the micro-foundations of the cognitive logic that are activated when organizational members face changes in work practice?

The present study provides conceptual development and new insights into such resistance during the process of implementing new work practice. By outlining how the cognitive logic underpins resistance to change, this study shows the micro-foundations of the cognitive logic. The present research suggests that, within the phenomenon of implementing new work practice, the members of organizations shape their responses on the basis of the cognitive logic. They do so by building on micro-foundations related to sense-making. Interestingly, while support for the key proposition of the cognitive logic was observed, the present study could identify the essence of resistance at the micro level in more detail than what is commonly subscribed to in this theory.

Research methodology

Design and sampling

This study explored resistance to institutional change in work practices by examining the adoption and use of a new pedagogy in learning and training situations. This study set out to conceptualize micro-foundations of the cognitive logic. Therefore, a

purposeful sampling approach was employed to find a theoretically suitable case that reflected the conceptual background on which the study rests (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). This method was adopted for several reasons.

First, this study’s context, the implementation of a new work practice in education and training, was ideal for understanding organizational responses to change in institutionalized behavior. Since its establishment in the 1600s, the Swedish military academy has had centuries to form established work practices in education. Second, the implementation work at the academy was carried out in conjunction with the overall implementation of the new work practice, that is, a new pedagogy and new regulations in the Swedish armed forces. Third, the implementation process offered a unique opportunity for data access. Fourth, the military academy is at the center of the Swedish armed forces because all the branches are present at the school. Future officers are intensively exposed to the institutionalization of education formats, which spills over into units country-wide. The academy’s educational practice thus sets a standard for future work practice at the units. Fifth, the failure at the military academy reflects the implementation failure in the Swedish armed forces as a whole.

Sixth, regulatory enforced change was identified. Pressure for change caused the supreme commander to order a change in work practice through implementation of the *Basics of Pedagogy* regulation in the Swedish armed forces (hereafter referred to as the “new pedagogy”). The pressure originated from three identified sources which highlighted the need for change to address poor organizational performance (Table I). The first source, acknowledged by the Swedish armed forces, revealed that recruits need to perceive military education as attractive in comparison with competitive alternatives in the labor and educational markets if the Swedish armed forces are to succeed in contracting competent and high-potential recruits. The second source, expressed by subordinates, recruits, and society, posited a change from a fostering and authoritarian pedagogy in military education to a modern pedagogy in

Table I.
Identified sources
for change in work
practice to address
poor organizational
performance

Perspective	Pressure for change	Performance challenge to solve	Data source
Swedish armed forces	Need to contract competent and high-potential recruits	To attract high-potential recruits, the recruits need to perceive the military education as attractive in comparison with competitive alternatives in the labor and educational markets	Försvarsmakten (2006, p. 217) Statens offentliga utredningar (Official Swedish Government Reports) (2000, p. 302 ff)
Subordinates, recruits, and society	Societal change	For the education to be accepted by recruits, the pedagogy in military education needs to change from a fostering and authoritarian to a modern pedagogy in line with the pedagogy used in society in general	Statens offentliga utredningar (Official Swedish Government Reports) (2000, p. 302 ff) Värnpliktsrådets Program (2009) (Conscript Council Program)
Swedish armed forces	Future needed abilities	To build the abilities needed in the military in the future, the pedagogy needs to change to foster creativity, independence, imagination, courage, and willingness, which the established pedagogy is acknowledged as failing to generate	Statens offentliga utredningar (Official Swedish Government Reports) (2000, p. 302 ff) Försvarsmakten, ledningsstaben (2008) Försvarsmakten (2006, p. 217)

line with the pedagogy used in society in general for the education to be attractive. The third source, expressed by the supreme command staff, highlighted that the new pedagogy was considered a central strategic move to address the gap between the soldiers' and officers' current abilities and the future needed abilities. These pressure sources were acknowledged by the supreme command staff to have consequences for educational practice aligning with the new pedagogy's intentions, that is, the new work practice.

Data collection

This study relied on several data sources, with much of the data collected through semi-structured interviews focussing on the implementation and its outcome during a fall semester at the military academy. In total, 12 interviews in total were conducted with six respondents involved in the implementation work at the academy, resulting in 20 hours of interviews that were recorded and transcribed. The initial six interviews were held to obtain information about the established forms of work practice and about the new work practice as well as to gain insight into what initiated the change process at the beginning of the semester 2009. The second round of interviews was held at the end of the semester, early 2010, to capture the essence of the process (see the Appendix for interview protocol). Three of the respondents, Ralf, Hans, and Lars, were teachers at the military academy[1]. Ralf was the Manager of one of the faculty departments, the leadership department, and Lars and Hans were teachers in that department. The other three respondents, Richard, Michel, and Greg, were pedagogic experts in the Swedish armed forces who informed and educated the faculty and management at the school of the new practices. They had worked with the development, implementation, and evaluations of the new pedagogy. Richard was also the Project Leader and Editor of the regulation that established the new pedagogy. The mix of respondents, including those working operationally with the implementation within the organization and those hired to support the process, helped to provide a rich view of organizational responses to new work practices.

This study's sample size relied on studies such as that by Guest *et al.* (2006), who propose that, although around 12 interviews may be needed to achieve informational saturation, around six interviews may be sufficient for the identification of metathemes (Kwong *et al.*, 2012). The interviews were also complemented by secondary data including: a student survey at the academy conducted by the military academy for evaluation purposes carried out during the implementation; the regulation and book about the new pedagogy, *Basics of Pedagogy* (Försvarsmakten, 2006); archival data, such as syllabuses and program plans for the particular education program; official Swedish government reports (Statens offentliga utredningar (Official Swedish Government Reports), 2000) and documentation of the Swedish armed forces; and reporting of the Conscript Council Program.

The multiple data sources allowed the triangulation of data, which crystallized and enriched the picture of organizational responses and cross-validated the data sources and analysis techniques (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Such triangulation strengthens confidence in the accuracy of emergent theory. This approach allowed for identifying and unfolding the nature of organizational responses and institutional logics that are activated to resist change and theoretically conceptualize the micro-foundations of institutional logics at work to resist change. This approach can provide in-depth knowledge of explicit and implicit aspects of organizational responses to resist change.

Data analysis

As recommended in the methodological literature on qualitative research, the study involved content analysis of the data collected. The content analysis allowed revealing of how regulatory enforced change in work practices is approached or looked upon and how socially constructed institutions may enable resistance to change in work practices. The notion is that socially constructed institutions are produced and made real through social interactions. Accordingly, the purpose of content analysis was to allow for capturing a range of organizational responses to a new regulation and the aligned changes in work practice. An established three-step procedure was used to guide this work.

To begin, statements in the syllabuses were used to pinpoint the regulatory requirements to implement the new pedagogy. Second, the regulation entitled *Basics of Pedagogy* was coded, resulting in the conceptualization of the new pedagogy. The coding was inspired by a micro-analysis strategy suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), in which the accounts and phrases in the regulation were scanned. The classification was inductively elicited and not based on a priori hypotheses. This work led to the identification of seven indicators of the new pedagogy, that is, the new work practice. Third, this conceptualization was validated through discussions with the three pedagogic experts, Richard, Michel, and Greg, to ensure proper coding of the regulation. This was necessary for gaining information about implementation results of the new work practice in contrast to the old work practice.

After completing these steps, the interviews were conducted and coded to match the indicators of the new pedagogy with the actual work practice used during the semester. This step involved the identification of old and new work practices, what happened when, clashes between old and new work practices, and the actions aligned with the implementation. The student survey was used to triangulate these findings and finally establish that the implementation as a whole failed. Students' expressions of frustration about the absence of the new pedagogy, the interviews specifying the absence of implementation of the new pedagogy, and the managers' orders to cut off the implementation underpinned the failure.

Next, a process was undertaken to conceptualize the organizational response to the change in work practice. The first-order conceptualization included three sub-steps. As outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990), a micro-analysis recommendation was followed by engaging in a line-by-line examination of text, with the purpose of generating central themes, the relationship among the central themes, and an understanding of the phenomenon studied. Doing so involved scanning and searching for statements associated with a set of guiding questions, such as: what happened over time with the use of the new pedagogy? What were the rationales for acting? And what were the main arguments in the educational setting regarding the pedagogy? Such questions enabled a balance between richness and direction (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Second, as the coding proceeded, a table was used to categorize the identified concepts into organizational responses. This approach aimed to address reliability when performing the analysis of the data (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Third, a student survey that reflected the students' perceptions of the implementation of the new pedagogy was used to crystallize the respondents' narratives of the implementation work. The results of this survey were relevant to show another perspective about actual change or absence of change in work practice.

The second-order conceptualization consisted of reviewing patterns, grouping the coding into categories, and identifying overarching themes. Doing so revealed that the content could be understood by institutional theory (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011) and

dominance of the cognitive logic became clear. The reviewing of patterns included a search for relationships. It became evident that the cognitive logic had multiple shapes and driving forces, which were used to seek the discrimination of patterns and to reveal distinct relationships suitable for theorizing. Table II presents the coding, the coding structure, and the resulting categories.

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Second order	First order	Representative statement
Cognitive strategic resistance maneuvers to resist change efficiently	Power-decreasing maneuvers	<p>"First they delegated the task to implement the new pedagogy to us. But when we needed support from the managers, who in reality were the ones to carry out the implementation, they did not support us"</p> <p>"We expected support from the managers. But we were wrong. They wanted to stop the implementation"</p> <p>"Getting the managers' support in this implementation was not easy"</p>
	Smokescreen maneuvers	<p>"The new pedagogy is nothing new; we have always done this"</p> <p>"The pretended use of the pedagogy was really bullying of cadets"</p> <p>"Everything was staged, and the students saw through the acting quickly"</p> <p>"I informed the manager of the school that the implementation was cut off, not continued as he officially communicated. He responded that 'it's possible that you are correct, but I will be retired when that is discovered'"</p> <p>"They claimed to work according to the new pedagogy, but in reality they continued as they had always worked"</p>
Cognitive forces activated to resist change	Work honor rationale	<p>"We need to save the education. The poor exam results are proof enough that the new pedagogy is no good"</p> <p>"I cannot just stand by and watch my students fail; I have my professional pride"</p> <p>"We have an ethical responsibility to take into account"</p>
	Self-centered orientation	<p>"We need to make students pass exams because we will be evaluated on their performance"</p> <p>"If we only ensure that the students pass their exams and compulsory assignments, we will be assessed and approved as good managers"</p> <p>"Many teachers continued using the traditional pedagogy to avoid the risk of poor evaluations"</p> <p>"I used the new pedagogy, and I was punished with poor evaluations, which made others scared to try it and gave them arguments to not use it"</p> <p>"I would like to educate according to the new pedagogy. I believe in it, but I have ambitions to reach higher positions myself, and I don't want to risk my own promotion"</p>
	Role identity restriction	<p>"We in our role as teachers need to [...]"</p> <p>"We know best what our students need [...]"</p> <p>"Our role is to provide a high-quality education which is equal to making sure students pass the exams"</p> <p>"Who are we, if we as the teachers do not tell the students what they need to learn?"</p>

Table II.
Micro-foundations of
the cognitive logic

Further, the narratives associated with the cognitive logic were coded and two strategic resistance maneuvers – power-decreasing maneuvers and smokescreen maneuvers – and three resistance forces encapsulating the essence of the cognitive logic – the work honor rationale, self-centered orientation, and role identity restriction were identified. As such, this exploration allowed for the identification of critical incidents, and key elements in institutional change that affect the outcome and illuminate how the members could efficiently resist changes in work practices. The findings based on this coding and analysis revealed that the failure to implement a change in work practice was a consequence of the dominant resistance of the cognitive logic. The emergent theoretical framework was also compared with extant literature to refine construct definitions, abstraction levels, and theoretical relationships (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Extant literature was especially useful in sharpening the underlying logical arguments. The findings were also validated through feedback from the respondents. Iterations between inductive conceptualization and the literature allowed for the sharpening of construct definitions and patterns between the identified categories (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Regulatory pressure for change in practice and failure to achieve change

Forceful regulatory statements were used nationwide to push for the new pedagogic practice. Upon the launch of the new regulation, *Basics of Pedagogy*, extensive information was communicated within the Swedish armed forces, including a personal letter to each individual employee in the Swedish armed forces with the order to contribute to the implementation of the new pedagogy. The armed forces also conducted training programs on the new pedagogy. At the military academy, the managers ordered the implementation of the new pedagogy and the personnel were educated in the new pedagogy. The syllabus for the officer education program states that “the educational regulation for the Swedish armed forces, ‘Basics of Pedagogy,’ [...] shall be applied and practiced.” Nevertheless, narratives describing the use of the new pedagogy and students’ evaluations specified that the implementation at the military academy as a whole failed. While the dominant portion of the new pedagogy triggered massive resistance, some minor limited parts of the new pedagogy were possible to implement; these were parts that were in line with established practice. The following section conceptualizes the micro-foundations of the cognitive logic that enabled the organizational members to respond with resistance to change.

How organizations efficiently resist change

Cognitive strategic resistance maneuvers to resist change efficiently

The implementation of the new pedagogic practice at the military academy provides insights into cognitive responses to resist the regulatory enforcement of changes in work practice. The tacit resistance became explicit when the members realized what the change meant for their daily work. The cognitive logic appeared to have several shapes and driving forces that allowed it to dominate the regulatory logic to resist the implementation of changed work practices. The cognitive logic was found to serve as a way for members to find solutions and justifications to resist change. First, two strategic resistance maneuvers as responses to the regulatory orders to implement changes in work practice that efficiently supported resistance to change were found.

The first strategic resistance maneuver is called engaging in power-decreasing maneuvers. This involves side-locating responsibility for accomplishing the change by delegating it to peripheral actors who lack the formal power to carry out the change

while the managers stay passive in the implementation process, which proves that this strategic resistance maneuver is effective in resisting change. Such action disentangles the formal responsibility to commit to change from undertaking the implementation. Central to power-decreasing maneuvers is that managers explicitly avoid engaging in the implementation while simultaneously acting according to the coercive order to implement the change, enabling them to claim to have made change efforts.

At the military academy, engagement in power-decreasing maneuvers occurred when responsibility for working for change was delegated to peripheral actors with a lack of formal power to carry out the change. When the managers announced at the beginning of the educational year that the new pedagogy was to be implemented in the officers' education in line with the supreme commander's order, they also stated that one faculty department, the leadership department, was delegated the task of implementing the new pedagogy. Lars maintained that it was never clear what mandate they had to carry out the implementation. Ralf reasoned that "the implementation should have been led by the managers since they had the formal authority and the resources for it and therefore had the opportunity to succeed." Hans agreed and further added that there was a lack of resources to carry out the implementation and that he perceived a lack of guidelines from the managers for how the implementation work should be carried out.

Lars stated that the managers' support for legitimating the implementation of the new pedagogy was undermined by the managers' passivity. The managers took no action to stimulate new pedagogic behavior among the faculty but rather worked against the implementation by avoiding incorporating new pedagogy initiatives and dismissing all initiatives of the leadership teachers for conforming educational practices to the new pedagogy. Hans stated that this proved that they never had a mandate to carry out the implementation. Ralf, Lars, and Hans testified that the managers' actions even contradicted the implementation, such as their decision to return to the traditional pedagogy, a decision communicated as an order at the end of the fall semester. This led the faculty to conclude that the new pedagogy was no longer mandatory to practice in learning and training. The setbacks made the leadership teachers feel cheated by their managers. Rolf said, "First they delegated the task to implement the new pedagogy. But when we needed support from the managers, who in reality were the ones to carry out the implementation, they did not support us." It is clear that the power-decreasing maneuvers proved highly efficient in resisting the change in work practice.

Second, a strategic resistance maneuver that is labeled a smokescreen maneuver involves externally projecting a fake implementation of change while cognitively convincing oneself and other members internally that the change has already been implemented. By shaping the meaning of the change through a reinterpretation process, an alternative social perception of the meaning of the change is produced that serves the purpose of resisting the implementation. Interpretations of what the change actually means are developed between the members and filtered through what is considered acceptable practice. Modifying or reinterpreting the change's meaning into a socially embedded and accepted misunderstanding enables managers to actively resist the implementation of the change in work practice.

Overall, the formation of a smokescreen maneuver was important for resisting change in the institutionalized practice because it offered an alternative interpretation of the regulatory logic to fit the cognitive logic. This led to reinterpretations of the regulatory order to implement the new pedagogy to fit the established work practice,

hence leading to implementation of what was already established work practice. This was done by shining a light on the parts of the change that fit with the established work practice and placing the parts of the change that contradicted or conflicted with the established work practice in the shadows. The parts that were not in line with the traditional pedagogy raised substantial resistance and were not implemented. This strategic resistance maneuver allowed for redirecting attention from the lack of implementation by indicating that the required change had already been implemented. Thus, an organization may preserve the established practice but enact symbolic activities to signal their commitment to the new work practice and direct external attention to these signals.

For example, at the military academy, the friction and clashes between the traditional pedagogy and the new pedagogy soon became evident, and the new pedagogy was increasingly questioned. Hans stated that the horizontal view of the new pedagogy to carry out education was perceived as very controversial among the faculty, who traditionally used pedagogy built on a vertical view. From a vertical view, the teacher pre-thinks the students' educational needs and plans the educational process. In contrast, a horizontal view means that the teacher and students explore educational objectives together, create a shared image of what is to be achieved, and interactively construct how knowledge should be acquired (Försvarsmakten, 2006). The diametrically opposed views between the established pedagogic practice and the new pedagogic practice caused tension in the implementation, which in turn caused resistance to change in practice.

The students complained that the attempts to implement the horizontal view were not real and led to merely apparent democracy, and the results of the student evaluation survey of the officer program supported this view. According to the evaluation, 47 percent of the students did not consider that the school applied the Swedish armed forces' *Basics of Pedagogy* as a base in education at all. This was in sharp contrast to the syllabus of the officer education program, where it was stated that the new pedagogy should be applied. In their comments on the evaluation, the students expressed frustration regarding the faculty's failure to act fully according to the new pedagogy. Some of the students urged the faculty to use the new pedagogy. For instance, one student said, "If the new pedagogy should be used, then use it; walk the talk." Another student said, "Managers of the officer program should read 'Basics of Pedagogy' and actually embrace it." Others noted the pretense of using the pedagogy and were critical of the faculty's actions. One student said, "The use of the new pedagogy is to play to the gallery"; another student said, "In the officer program, 'Basics of Pedagogy' is applied by teachers whenever it suits them – if it does not suit them, they return to the traditional pedagogy"; and yet another student said, "So far, no teacher has used 'Basics of Pedagogy'; the more we learn about the new pedagogy, the worse this education appears."

Despite the resistance to implementation, the managers officially claimed that the military academy had come a long way in implementing the new pedagogy. The managers communicated that the implementation of the new pedagogy had proceeded, even though it had been cut off. The implementation order was left to be freely interpreted, and the need for actual changes in the pedagogic practice became free-flowing. Lars said that, "among the managers and faculty, the meaning of the new pedagogy was modified and altered and finally turned into an established view that 'the new pedagogy is nothing new; we have always done this.'" Richard, Michel, and Greg all confirmed that managers pretended to implement the new pedagogy by

producing an image of using it, but in reality very little had changed. This shows that members may activate responses by using a smokescreen maneuver to resist change by merely appearing to have implemented a change in practice. This further shows that members may take actions to maintain external legitimacy rather than for practical operational reasons. Thus, the smokescreen maneuver proves to be efficient in resisting a change in work practice. Next, the resistance forces of the cognitive logic are conceptualized to further unfold the essence of resistance to change.

Cognitive forces to resist institutional change in work practice

Three resistance forces of the cognitive logic are identified to efficiently resist institutional changes in work practice. The first resistance force is labeled the work honor rationale. Central to engaging in the work honor rationale is that members view the institutionalized work practice as functioning well, while collectively evaluating the new work practice on the basis of the established beliefs and culture created by the members and their cognitions. A general lack of conviction that a new work practice is morally correct seems to work effectively to prevent a change. This appears to happen when members do not question the organization's established practices. Instead, they are thought of as unproblematic and good, and therefore not questionable. This provides the members with evidence that the new work practice is not functioning well.

By building on "noble" causes, the work honor rationale may be used to resist change by marginalizing the overall pressure of the regulatory logic. For example, at the military academy, the managers and faculty reasoned that it was their obligation to "save the education" when proof of students' poor exam results was associated with use of the new pedagogy. For example, when the first exam was conducted, half of the students failed. Many of the faculty members expressed statements such as "I cannot just stand by and watch my students fail; I have my professional pride" and "We have an ethical responsibility to take into account." Several teachers argued that learning became less efficient, that learning goals were at risk, and that the risk of failure on examinations increased due to the new pedagogy. Many teachers expressed that the traditional pedagogy provided satisfactory results and that many of the parts of the new pedagogy impeded students' knowledge development. Hans said that the managers saw the students' examination failure as a reason to return to using the traditional pedagogy. The work honor rationale resistance force helped managers and faculty to detach from the pressure of the regulatory logic, the institutional setting, and societal pressures by shining a light on the importance of saving the education and thus seeing themselves as immune to external pressure on the basis of moral grounds.

The second resistance force consists of what is categorized as a self-centered orientation. An institutionalized value system does not support the implementation of a change in a work practice if there is a mismatch with the cognitively valued work practices, and sanctions will be enforced when behavior does not conform to the value system. The institutionalized value system automatically punishes those who violate the system, which causes members to avoid being associated with a change in work practice when it involves a severe risk of clashing with the system. Although an institutionalized value system appears important, it does not fully explain organizational resistance to change. When guided by the institutionalized value system, a self-centered orientation efficiently supports resistance to change. Central to engaging in a self-centered orientation is future work prospects in the organization. When the character of managers or teachers is being assessed for potential promotions, the institutionalized value system guides the assessment and selection processes for recruitment and promotion.

Accordingly, acting against the institutionalized value system leads to poorer assessment results. A self-centered orientation becomes evident when members refer to their own career advancement as a rationale for resisting change.

For example, the prevailing institutionalized value system in the military academy was that the teachers' and managers' abilities as leaders were evaluated on the basis of the students' educational results, and the assessments of the teachers' abilities affected their possibilities to advance in future promotions. In parallel, the willingness to implement the new pedagogy did not exist among managers, and the value system expressed that practicing the traditional pedagogy in education was sufficient for being assessed as a successful manager or teacher. Ralf, Lars, and Hans stated that the teachers focussed on ensuring that students passed exams rather than on the students' learning. Statements such as "We need to make students pass exams because we will be evaluated on their performance" and "If we only ensure that the students pass their exams and compulsory assignments, we will be assessed and approved as good managers" show the institutionalized value system and a self-centered orientation conflicted with the new work practice. Hans, for instance, said, "Many teachers continued using the traditional pedagogy to avoid the risk of poor evaluations." Richard also reported a fear of engaging in the new pedagogy against the organization's overall will. Michel and Greg added that they repeatedly heard teachers make statements like: "I would like to educate according to the new pedagogy. I believe in it, but I have ambitions to reach higher positions myself, and I don't want to risk my own promotion." Relying on a self-centered orientation hence motivates and helps members to cultivate their careers and subordinate them to socially acceptable forms of work practice. Therefore, a self-centered orientation may work as an efficient deterrent to change, and it may be particularly efficient in an organization with a high level of institutionalization of work practice supported by deeply rooted traditions transferred through professional socialization.

A third resistance force is called role identity restriction, which refers to cognitive association with the work position as such. The members' own social identity, created by the members and their cognitions, is central to identifying and orienting themselves to what work practices can and cannot be performed. Guided by their social identity, the members may thus resist a change in a work practice by referring to their professional roles. At the military academy, the members' own social identities (e.g. being governmental representatives, teachers at a military academy, and the roles that come with such positions) and the formulation of what is called a role identity restriction guided the view of the change in work practice according to their own taken-for-granted values of what was possible to implement in education. Their roles as governmental actors, their professional roles, and their codes of conduct seem to have been of significance in resisting implementation work. By using a role identity restriction, the managers and faculty discussed what they could or could not do in education and how they were expected to act in accordance with these roles, and it was clear that this significantly guided organizational responses to resist the change in work practice.

With the deeply anchored social identity came a strong commitment to the identity that signaled appropriate educational behavior and guided managers' and teachers' actions. The managers and faculty continually committed to the traditional pedagogy, by rationalizing their actions with statements such as "We in our role as teachers need to [...]" "We know best what our students need [...]" "Our role is to provide a high-quality education which is equal to making sure students pass the exams," and

"Who are we, if we as the teachers do not tell the students what they need to learn?" For example, Hans said that the exercises in teaching were encircled by long traditions and by many locked-in notions that made them difficult to change. Greg stated that "the attitude among faculty was that 'for an education to be good, the teacher should focus on designing and carrying out fun and cool exercises that the students appreciate'." Ralf said that the faculty had difficulty imagining themselves in the new teacher roles. Teachers were traditionally viewed as the class authority, and the new pedagogy meant a power transfer from the teacher to the students whereby the authoritarian teacher was replaced by a non-authoritarian supervisor. Lars and Ralf stated that many teachers became insecure in their role when the power over what and how students should learn was reduced and transferred to the students. Richard and Michel also confirmed this to be a general response in the Swedish armed forces. A general misalignment between the established social identity and the new teacher role hindered the adoption of the new practice, so the role identity restriction effectively worked to resist change. This resistance force helped the managers and faculty to rationalize continuing with their established roles and codes of conduct. It motivated and helped members to subordinate their roles to socially acceptable forms of management and "teachership."

By building resistance on micro-foundations of the implementation of a change, viewed through the institutionalized lens of proper behavior in work practice, members activated these three resistance forces (i.e. work honor rationale, self-centered orientation, and role identity restriction) to resist changes in work practices. These resistance forces illustrate the dominance of the cognitive logic in resisting institutional change. The cognitive logic provides a basis for understanding organizational responses and failure to accomplish change in work practice. The findings also indicate that the cognitive logic may lead to interpretations of regulations that cause alteration of the regulation's intentions to fit existing institutionalized work practice.

Discussion – cognitive logic at work

This study shows that organizational responses to change in institutionalized work practice may operate according to their own particular rationality, and it is clear that, when studying failure to change a work practice from the perspective of the cognitive logic, the nature of organizational responses to change becomes apparent and understandable. This research suggests that, in the process of institutional change in a work practice, the members shape their responses by activating and building on micro-foundations of the cognitive logic. As such, this study shows how the cognitive logic is activated to efficiently deal with tensions between contrasting and, in many ways, contradictory institutional logics and thus to respond to and parry a required change (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011; Lawrence *et al.*, 2011; Marquis and Lounsbury, 2007). This study specifically demonstrates that organizational responses to change in a work practice include actions "to 'justify' an activity, or to convince others that particular actions are 'right and proper,' or conversely criticize and delegitimize particular actions and actors" (Machado and Burns, 1998, p. 359) by resorting to the cognitive logic. Although this may protect the members from the frictions provoked by a change in practice, it can trap members into dysfunctional patterns of thinking and acting.

As illustrated in this research, changing a work practice may involve conscious or subconscious modifications or misunderstandings to alter or misinterpret external pressure and regulatory enforced change in practice in such a way that old work practices continue to live on. Thus, this study adds to the literature on institutional resistance to change by showing how the cognitive logic may create impermeability, and

it demonstrates that even powerful and legitimate actors may be unable to achieve institutional change because the cognitive logic may make organizations impermeable to change (cf. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Huy *et al.*, 2014). This research shows that when organizational work practice is institutionalized with a long history of deeply rooted work practices supported by the cognitive logic, it can survive across generations and be uncritically accepted as the definitive way of performing work practice (cf. Greenwood *et al.*, 2002), despite the questionable effectiveness of such work practices. As such, this research adds to previous studies on institutional change failures that have referred to the possible role of latent contradictions. Such latent contradictions explored in this study are cognitive shapes and forces that contradict regulatory enforced change despite the fact that sustaining the institutional status quo of the organization's work practice may be counterproductive to the organization's goals.

Cognitive shapes and forces underpin an inability and an unwillingness to conform to external pressure for change by supporting "locked-in" behavior and thought (Seo and Creed, 2002). The inability or unwillingness to engage in a change suggests that cognitions are channeled to resist the change (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). As such, the conditions under which members are willing and able to conform appear to be bounded by the cognitive logic, and the cognitive logic may limit the willingness and ability of members to conform to institutional change. Such cognitive boundaries on the willingness and ability of members to conform appear to drive resistance to change.

This research specifically contributes to the conversation on the micro-foundations activated to resist institutional change (e.g. Oliver, 1992; Suddaby *et al.*, 2007). This research is novel in the sense that it conceptualizes organizational responses activated to mitigate and compensate for incongruent forms of institutional logics and thereby resist change. As such, a set of cognitive micro-foundations is defined. First, two strategic resistance maneuvers supporting the organization in resisting change are defined: power-decreasing maneuvers and smokescreen maneuvers. Second, a set of cognitive resistance forces encapsulating the cognitive logic are defined. The first resistance force, work honor rationale, was achieved by showing how the organization members enacted resistance to the new work practice by building on "noble" justifications. The second cognitive resistance force, self-centered orientation, was defined, which reveals how members by focussing agency may diminish the value of using the new work practice for the sake of the members' own careers. Finally, the third cognitive resistance force of role identity restriction was defined as the activation of mismatching beliefs about the role function in contrast to the new work practice.

While a few studies have explicitly considered cognitive forces in resisting institutional change, for instance, in the literature on institutional logics (Suddaby *et al.*, 2007), little is known about how the micro-foundations of the cognitive logic may be activated and affect institutional change. This research thus adds to institutional theory by expanding our understanding of resistance to change. More specifically, this study contributes to institutional theory by addressing problems arising from conflicting institutional logics about the meaning of a change that cause cognitive resistance to institutional change. Specifically, this study contributes to institutional theory by developing new conceptualizations – the two strategic resistance maneuvers and the three cognitive forces. The findings and emergent theorizing hereby add some empirical substance to the conceptual work of the cognitive logic by detailing the micro-foundations that underlie resistance and organizational responses to change and help to determine the rise of resistance to change. The findings suggest that the resistance forces of the cognitive logic undermined the implementation efforts of the new work practice

and hindered the institutional change. Additionally, the findings reveal previously under-recognized micro-foundations of the cognitive logic that manifested themselves in members' efforts to preserve the old work practices. This study shows how the micro-foundations can lead to an escalation of commitment that enforces resistance to change.

This research has a set of practical contributions. In learning about resistance to institutional change as reported here, proactive managers can learn how to understand and parry organizational resistance to change by being attentive to the cognitive shapes and forces of the members. Although there are obvious restrictions on generalizing, the potential dominance of the cognitive logic suggests that managers should ensure that members not only understand the need for the change but also perceive that the change appeals to their cognitive logic. If managers fail to break the members' cognitive boundaries, the no-longer-appropriate cognitive understandings may prevent the organization from efficiently carrying out tasks and achieving goals. This may severely impede the members' abilities to sense problems and reach acceptable performance levels. For changes in pedagogic situations at large, this research suggests that traditional and deeply rooted views in learning situations may cause resistance to new pedagogic practice despite potential inefficiency of the traditional pedagogy in, for instance, management education.

This work has several limitations which can serve both as qualifiers for the emergent theory and as warrants for further research. First, the focus on one case of an institutional change (i.e. implementation of a new work practice in a military academy) might limit the generalization of the findings. However, the specific findings acquired are applicable to institutional change in work practices in different organizations that are attempting to address poor organizational performance. Furthermore, the major concepts of the micro-foundations of the cognitive logic are relevant to all types of change processes. Future studies that use larger samples of institutional change processes are encouraged test the current findings. Such studies will help assess the reliability and validity of the presented results and further extend the knowledge of organizational responses in institutional frameworks. The field needs more explorative studies that include institutional theory concerning the circumstances of changes in work practice. While the present study was conducted with a limited number of organizational responses to change in practice, the hope is that future researchers will be encouraged to expand on this topic. Institutional logics are not static; they are adaptable social systems and typically evolve over time. Therefore, future studies should consider evolution through longitudinal studies over longer time horizons than the present study has presented.

Note

1. Fake names are used for all six respondents to enable the respondents to remain anonymous.

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Appendix. Interview protocol

The interview protocol will be used to discuss your experiences of the change in work practice.

First round of interview

Tell me about (1) the established way of conducting education at the school, (2) each part of *Basics of Pedagogy* that will be implemented (all seven indicators of the new pedagogy).

How were you informed about the change in pedagogy?

How will you work with the implementation, and what are you involved in?

What are the main arguments in the educational setting for the use of the new pedagogy?

What is your view of the change? How do you perceive others (colleagues, managers, and students) as viewing the change?

Second round of interview

Tell me about what happened from the beginning of the semester and forward when the change in work practice was initiated? What happened over time with the use of the new pedagogy (all seven indicators of the new pedagogy)? What were the main arguments in the educational setting for the use of the pedagogy?

What implementation actions were pursued? Tell me about key turning points in this process and what happened? What were the rationales for acting?

How did you react, and what did you do at these points? How did others (colleagues, managers, and students) react, and what did they do? What influenced you to react and act the way you did?

Tell me about each part of the *Basics of Pedagogy* that were being implemented and what happened during the process.

To what extent were you involved in the implementation work and why? Why did you choose to work with the implementation the way you did?

How did you perceive that you and others were managed and supported to implement the changes? What supported the implementation, and what undermined the implementation, and in what way did it support/undermine?

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