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# Institutional Quality from a Sociological Perspective: Contributions and Challenges

La calidad institucional desde la perspectiva sociológica:  
contribuciones y retos al estado de la cuestión

**Paula Espinosa Soriano**

University of Córdoba, Spain  
“Innovation and Knowledge Transfer” Associated Research Unit,  
University of Córdoba–CSIC, Spain  
[paula.espinosa93@gmail.com](mailto:paula.espinosa93@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides a brief overview of the question of research on institutional quality from sociological perspectives. Drawing on the conception of institution inherent to this discipline, two groups of studies have been selected that are useful for understanding how institutional features influence certain aspects of organisations or their aggregates. The first group of studies deal with the overlap of elements of social structure and culture in sectors of activity of countries or territorial areas, particularly in the sociology of development, while the second group of studies focus more on the cultural side of organisations. Although both currents share theoretical assumptions and research interests, they are poorly connected in the literature that studies institutions from the point of view of their social performance. They do, however, offer complementary empirical results. Their comparison provides an approximation of the contributions of sociology to the study of institutional quality, which in turn enables challenges for future research and collaborations with other disciplines to be identified.

**KEYWORDS:** institutional quality; sociology; organisations; institutions; sociology of development; organisational culture.

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo realiza un breve estado de la cuestión de la investigación sobre la calidad institucional desde perspectivas sociológicas. Partiendo de la concepción de institución propia de esta disciplina, se han seleccionado dos grupos de trabajos que son útiles para conocer cómo los rasgos institucionales influyen en algunos aspectos de las organizaciones o agregados de ellas. En primer lugar, los estudios que se ocupan de la confluencia de elementos de la estructura social y la cultura en sectores de actividad de países o áreas territoriales, particularmente presente en la sociología del desarrollo. En segundo lugar, los trabajos que se centran más en la faceta cultural de las organizaciones. Aunque ambas corrientes comparten asunciones teóricas e intereses de investigación, están poco conectadas en la literatura que estudia las instituciones desde el punto de vista de su rendimiento social. Sin embargo, ofrecen resultados empíricos complementarios. A partir de su comparación se obtiene una aproximación de las aportaciones de la sociología al estudio de la calidad institucional, lo que a su vez facilita identificar retos para futuras investigaciones y colaboraciones con otras disciplinas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** calidad institucional; sociología; organizaciones; instituciones; sociología del desarrollo; cultura organizacional.

## 1. Introduction

Institutions have been the subject of interest in the social sciences since classical authors. In the specific case of sociology, the dominant theories in the first half of the twentieth century, especially functionalism and structuralist approaches of Marxist origin, revolved around institutions. Although interest has partially decreased since the 1970s following the decline of major theories and the rise of microsociology, institutional aspects have maintained their relevance at the core of specialised fields of sociology that have dealt with work, religion, social welfare, education, science and many other aspects of social life.

Recently, interest in institutions has experienced a renewed impetus following the emergence of various kinds of institutionalism in related disciplines. Since the 1980s, several branches of the social sciences have undergone the so-called “institutional turn”; this is especially the case in economics, which becomes highly influential due to the prestige of authors such as D. C. North, E. Ostrom and O. E. Williamson and their contributions to the study of institutions in social and economic development. This awareness is transferred to other disciplines, such as political science and certain specialised fields such as economic policy, economic geography or area studies. Although they have many points of connection with sociology, all these currents have developed in parallel, at times poorly connected to one another, which has led to a diversity of approaches for studying institutions.

Institutions currently play a key role in the research agendas of sociology, Above all because of their importance in two areas of study: first, in the explanation of certain fundamental aspects of social welfare and economic development; and second, in the analysis of central organisations in contemporary societies and their complex “organisational fields”. In the scientific literature, a key question lies in knowing in what specific aspects and to what extent institutions are relevant in the understanding of different areas of social and economic life.

This interest has also been transferred to the so-called “institutional quality”, or the characteristics of the institutions that influence their social and economic results and condition the missions for which they have been created. Some studies try to empirically identify what this quality is, although, due to the different conceptions about the nature and functioning of institutions, there is usually considerable diversity and even conceptual dispersion.

The aim of this article is to review the main studies related to institutional quality, taking into account the contributions in the context of sociology. Two complementary emblematic groups are analysed. Although not all studies use the label of institutional quality, their input is essential to contribute to the topic at hand. The first group is more interested in macro- and meso-level structural questions and is present in the sociology of development. Other currents of more constructivist awareness are in the context of cultural studies on organisations. As an example, those studies that prove strategic for identifying each group’s contributions of interest have been selected.

It should be noted that some of these works transcend the limits of the disciplines. There is reference to the sociological perspective understood as a set of assumptions with which to situate oneself in the face of social reality and ask questions about it (Cardús et al., 2004). To this end, it uses concepts and notions specific to the discipline that function as a “toolbox” for studying social phenomena, although these concepts are also used by other specialised fields (for the explanation of the role of concepts and disciplinary assumptions in the social sciences, refer to the introduction to this *Debate*) (Fernández Esquinas, 2023).

Following on from this introduction, Section 2 provides a brief definition of the term institution from a sociological perspective and describes how it is embodied in the concept of institutional quality. Section 3 deals with the current that emphasises aspects between the meso- and macro-sociological levels in development studies. Section 4 looks at those studies on organisational culture that are developed in contexts between the meso- and micro-levels of organisations. In both, works of empirical relevance are selected that illustrate the characteristics of each current that are aligned with the aspects of institutional quality discussed in other articles of this Debate. Finally, the conclusions address the challenges and implications of the sociological perspective for the multidisciplinary study of institutional quality.

## 2. Institutions from a sociological perspective

In contemporary sociology, the role of institutions is of great significance in the studies on organisations that emerged after the Second World War. Thanks to the influence of Robert Merton around the so-called Columbia School, focus begins to turn to the distinctive aspects of certain organisations that transcend the formal character as entities designed to produce some type of good or service. They study informal issues related to power, conflict, culture, primary groups, networks and other aspects beyond design. It documents how these processes

are worked into the reality of organisations, together with their impact on formal objectives, the course of action and the effects of large sectors of organisations on society<sup>1</sup>.

Much of this work addresses the communities in which these organisations operate. One of the most influential works is that by Philip Selznick (1957)<sup>2</sup>, one of the first to start conceptually distinguishing between organisations and institutions. He considers that the latter acquire a distinctive status because they are infused with values. Thanks to institutionalisation processes, they obtain stability and are given a special meaning that transcends their merely technical activities.

Criticisms of functionalism, due to their preferences for stability and the structural explanation of behaviour, and the growing interest in cultural aspects, result in these studies being sidelined—some authors unfairly start to call them “old institutionalisms” (Selznick, 1996)—, in the face of new perspectives that favour cognitive and identity aspects. From the 1980s onwards, this cultural shift began to be transferred to the world of organisations. The most relevant authors are Meyer and Rowan (1977), Zucker (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), among others. These new works incorporate the importance of cognition and social construction processes based on the meaning in the creation and reproduction of institutions. Their contributions include the creation of other concepts that highlight the question of legitimacy and reproduction, such as “organisational fields” and “institutional isomorphism” (Powell, 1996; Ocasio and Gai, 2020).

This group of works is identified as a new sociological institutionalism. They conceive organisations as formal structures that are “densely institutionalised”, or marked by cultural and cognitive characteristics that confer legitimacy. The main focus is to understand why organisations in the same field acquire similar practices and forms. The justification lies in the processes of institutional mimicry in which the models of those that are considered socially legitimate or successful are adopted. Through these mechanisms, the formal structure of organisations reflects the myths and routine procedures of their context and integrates them as rationalised rituals (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

This new current gives rise to a variety of approaches that start to emerge as variants of sociological institutionalism, at times poorly connected to one another and to other institutionalisms of related disciplines. The main ones include the so-called concepts of institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2011), institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988; Eisenstadt, 1980) and institutional logics (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). A common element, in addition to the cited intellectual origin, is that they question the classic problems about institutional determinism, together with the excessive importance given to formal designs and structural issues that characterised the old institutionalisms. They focus their efforts on learning about the practices and processes that lead organisations to reproduce or change, or for new ones to be created. Depending on the emphasis used by each of the aforementioned approaches, institutional change or permanence is

brought about respectively by: a) actors who intentionally act on institutions with the aim of creating, maintaining or modifying them; b) organised actors with resources who see the opportunity to create new institutions or transform institutional arrangements; c) change, and subsequent situations, which may arise from the contradiction of coexisting institutional logics.

Although there are some common conceptual foundations, such as those mentioned, the new sociological institutionalisms have become a very complex field of study, with several versions in competition with one another, which cannot be dealt with here. In this article, only those studies have been selected that, under the sociological vision, have looked into the institutional characteristics that affect performance or outcome and that have connections with other studies on institutional quality developed by other disciplines. First, however, there is a brief section dedicated to specifying the meaning of the term.

## 2.1. The problem of defining institutions in contemporary sociology

Within sociology itself, the term institution has undergone modifications as knowledge has been accumulated and new currents of thought have emerged (Ocasio and Gai, 2020). Although it is difficult to agree on a definition, it is possible to point out shared aspects that can be considered metatheoretical assumptions. When sociology speaks of institutions, it usually refers to the set of socially validated expectations that enable individual action and organise collective life (Ocasio, Thornton and Lounsbury, 2017). Through them, actors (individuals or organisations) produce and reproduce social life (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999).

From this point of view, it is assumed that “institutions are in a multitude of places”. Any minimally organised entity of social life is based on these sets of expectations to which meanings are attributed and which, at times, crystallise into stable entities. Institutional aspects are necessarily present in any organisation and in many other places. Attention, however, is also drawn to the fact that institutions “are not just anything” (Ocasio and Gai, 2020). Unlike many formal organisations common today (such as small or medium-sized enterprises) and groups with a certain degree of organisation (the diversity of civil society associations, together with collectives that act as “quasi-organisations”), institutions are socially legitimised, acquire social relevance, are “taken for granted” and tend to self-reproduce, although they undergo changes. In addition, the absence of certain important institutions has consequences for the social order of countries or territories.

To adequately complement this dominant view in contemporary sociology, it is important to clarify other assumptions regarding the behaviour of actors, the nature of social facts and the processes or mechanisms to which they pay particular attention.

First of all, in terms of behaviour, people follow motivations that depend on values, shared beliefs and interests, where non-rational action gains importance. Individuals act in accordance with institutions not only because this is the most rational option for avoiding sanctions, but also because they internalise them as patterns of behaviour. People acquire them through socialisation and make them inherent in a repetitive action that is learned with skills and routines.

Second, this idea is related to how the nature of institutions is interpreted. Institutions are supra-individual realities that are mediated by actors who perceive, evaluate and constitute social reality. Thanks to conventions and routines (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991), institutions become constitutive or internal to the actors. Although social facts are always based on people and do not exist without them, they are imposed as cultural constructs when people incorporate them into their way of thinking and behaving.

Third, with regard to the mechanisms to which attention is paid, those of a *cognitive* and *regulatory* nature predominate. Institutions are mixtures of both. On one hand, they are conceived as rules that are internalised and “taken for granted”. In other words, they end up being used routinely and become frequent patterns of behaviour. On the other hand, they are conceived as configurations that take the form of systems of norms or behavioural expectations for the participants in a situation.

Finally, a common feature of the sociological perspective compared to others that should be highlighted is that aspects of the “social structure” and the “culture” and the components of each of them are analytically differentiated between. The separation is conceptual as, in reality, all these social aspects are mixed, although the distinction helps to identify their parts and functioning. Institutions are “assemblages” of both aspects; they are made up of a set of values and, in turn, rules, regulations and a repertoire of socially acquired skills. At times, institutions crystallise into social forms that are visible and identifiable as an organisation. Institutions and organisations are often conceived as two sides of the same coin. For this reason, a large part of institutional studies in sociology deal with organisations as a visible place from which to analyse structural and cultural aspects.

## 2.2. The concept of institutional quality

Institutional quality is a concept used above all by those studies that are interested in determining the features of institutions that favour their fulfilment of the objectives for which they have been created, as well as their importance in general aspects of societies, be it the economy, politics, social welfare or certain aspects of social relations or culture.

It should be noted that this concept, and some of its variants, is more widely used in certain branches of economic sciences and political sciences—as can be seen in the other two articles of this monographic Debate (Pedraza Rodríguez, 2023; Martínez-Sánchez and Gosálbez Pequeño, 2023). In the main repositories

of scientific publications there are hardly any studies in the context of sociology that use the label of “institutional quality” in the title or keywords. However, despite using other terminology, there are studies that have points in common with those mentioned previously in their explanation of certain social phenomena. They are characterised by: a) a concern for the “social or socio-economic performance” of institutions; b) a preference for empirical observation of institutional processes and their outcomes; and c) an interest in comparison, whether between groups of specific institutions, sectors or territorial areas.

In sociology, two currents coexist that have a number of connections with this conception of institutional quality. On the one hand, one of the currents focuses more on structural and cultural aspects in sectors of importance for development (they could be said to focus on the meso-macro level). On the other hand, the other current is more focused on organisations, on the construction, reproduction and change of cultural elements and their influence on organisational results (more focused on the meso-micro level). Despite being poorly connected academic communities in the literature, both share common epistemological bases in the way of understanding the institutions described above (Nebojša, 2015). The following sections cover the definitions, dimensions of institutional quality, research interests and levels of analysis of the most emblematic studies<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. The quality of institutions and socio-economic development

A first approach is found in the sociology of development. The review by Viterna and Robertson (2015) shows how sociology has made important theoretical contributions on the influence of institutions<sup>4</sup> as an explanatory factor for the difference in development between countries or regions. It is characterised by a vision of development rooted in the elements of social structure and culture. Among the authors are Evans (2004), Portes (2010), Chibber (2003) and Nee and Oppen (2012).

#### 3.1. General characteristics

Institutional quality is understood as those configurations of institutions that are considered desirable or beneficial due to the effects they have on the social progress of countries or regions. It refers to aspects such as the fulfilment of objectives and contributions to development understood in a broad sense, beyond macroeconomic indicators. Development is considered equivalent to sustained improvements in the welfare of the population, in line with modern development theories that consider the combination of multiple elements necessary (Viterna and Robertson, 2015; Sen, 1985).

Focal institutions are generally formal organisations that are key to development. The dimensions that define institutional quality are related to aspects

of social structure and culture. They include both internal aspects of the institution and its relationship with the environment. The internal elements are related to the Weberian idea of bureaucratic organisation. That is, protection against other interests that divert resources and may disrupt the achievement of the institutions' official objectives; for example, interests when recruiting or promoting personnel, accessing information or managing economic resources. External elements are related to the degree of openness, flexibility and relationships with other actors.

A reference work is that by Peter Evans (1995), *Embedded Autonomy*, on the role of states in the new information technology industries of emerging economies such as Korea, India and Brazil in the last years of the twentieth century<sup>5</sup>. The author finds out that institutions in these countries have difficulty meeting their objectives if they are not open to the outside world and collaborate with actors in their organisational field. Although they can obey the formal characteristics of Weberian bureaucracies (independence from political power, presence of qualified professionals, stability, predictability and immunity to particularist networks, among others), the key factor that leads them to be "developers" is their links with social collectives and political elites that help them direct their actions, and that at the same time oblige them and give them legitimacy.

The work on this current is characterised by placing interest on the organisational fields related to the development of several countries or geographical areas<sup>6</sup>. For this purpose, groups of mid-range institutions, usually those that lie at the heart of a country's development, tend to be selected. By means of case studies, the research strategy aims to observe the social mechanisms through which specific institutions shape different aspects of development. In larger geographical areas they are also related to work on the varieties of capitalism, which identify in the configuration of political and economic institutions the foundations that give rise to the production regimes that determine the development of groups of countries (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Hall and Gingerich, 2009; Campbell and Pedersen, 2007).

### 3.2. Contributions of interest

A group of reference works in the economic sociology of development are those by Portes and Smith (2012) and the subsequent expansion in Portes and Marques (2015). They make systematic comparisons of countries drawing on groups of strategic institutions for various facets of development. The authors' interest resides in determining how institutional quality influences the social and economic progress of Latin American countries and Portugal.

Institutional quality is interpreted as elements that facilitate a combination of institutional adequacy, that is, the fulfilment of the objectives or mission for which it was created, and contributions to development, understood in its broadest sense. To observe how institutions contribute to these results, they use a group of factors as internal and external dimensions: 1) the meritocratic re-



cruitment and promotion of workers; 2) immunity to corruption; 3) the absence of internal islands of power that can be an obstacle to the fulfilment of general objectives; 4) the ability to efficiently connect with their clients or users; 5) the openness to innovations and technological flexibility; 6) the existence of external alliances that help survival and prevent institutions from being dominated by outside interests.

The institutions selected have a systemic character in the situation that countries have achieved according to the history of their development processes: the stock exchange, tax collection agencies, the postal system, civil aviation and social service providers such as hospitals and universities. These institutions are studied in depth by means of triangulation that includes qualitative and quantitative observations. A relevant characteristic of the methodology used, compared to the works that are based on historical analyses and narrative assessments of complex evidence, is that it opts for a systematic comparison that enables causal analysis. To this end, it uses qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) (Ragin, 2008) based on a configurational logic that, through the combination of dimensions, makes it possible to explore the different ways in which institutions are socio-economically beneficial.

The results show how, in certain institutions, influences from globalisation intervene that not only have negative consequences, but also positive aspects, such as the adoption of technical and meritocratic criteria in daily functioning. External influences represent an advance with respect to the dependence of political or particularist interests on the classes that have historically dominated certain institutions in each country. It also shows the existence of structural factors that constrict the effects of institutions and prevent change, as well as the risks of certain institutions becoming islands of excellence or efficiency disconnected from their environment.

Comparative analyses using QCA make it possible to observe those combinations of factors that offer better performance. An important finding is that the causes that contribute to an institution achieving its goals are different from those that contribute to an institution aiding development. On the other hand, the most recent study by Portes and Navas (2017) suggests that the combination of the factors “immunity to corruption” and “proactivity” is usually the most effective for the observed institutions to perform well. This also means that the absence of some characteristics, which in principle are considered fundamental (for example, meritocracy in the selection of public employees), can be compensated by the presence of others that, beyond their adaptation to the formal bureaucratic model, enable barriers to be overcome. This shows that the existence of development institutions does not have to respond to a unique combination of characteristics, but rather that different configurations that are contextual to each country can also generate beneficial results.

## 4. Characteristics of the culture of organisations and its connection with institutional quality

In the 1980s, theories of organisations began to include the cultural dimension in their analyses. Empirical studies seek to operationalise the concept of culture. The main influences come from phenomenology and social constructivism, represented by the well-known work of Berger and Luckmann (1967), and its subsequent applications to the world of organisations. Afterwards, it has been complemented by research from the management, anthropology and psychology of organisations (Barney, 1986). Today, organisational culture has become one of the fundamental topics in this interdisciplinary field, and has resulted in a large number of conceptual and empirical publications. Some reference works include works on the construction of meaning in organisations led by Schein (1985), the quantified study of values presented by Hosftede et al. (1990), and works on organisational culture as a comparative advantage (Barney, 1986). Other more recent works that summarise the state of knowledge in this field are those of Alvesson (2002), Giorgi, Lockwood and Glynn (2015) and Haveman (2022). From them, a selection is made that helps illustrate the contributions to the empirical study of institutional quality.

### 4.1. General characteristics

Although they are not usually framed in the aforementioned institutionalist theories, similar epistemological foundations are found in the usual conceptions of organisational culture (Nebojša, 2015). Organisational culture is defined as those cognitive schemes, values, norms and symbols, which may or may not have explicit representation, that are shared and adopted by the members of an organisation (Schein, 1996; Haveman, 2022).

Some study the components of organisational culture and their influence on the performance of organisations. Barney (1985), for example, defines culture as “a complex set of values, beliefs, assumptions, and symbols that define the way in which a firm conducts its business” (1985, p. 656). From this point of view, the aspects that should be highlighted in connection with the quality of the institutions indicated above are the effects on the results of companies or other organisations. The vast majority of studies that analyse performance do so in economic terms of effectiveness and efficiency (the term *effectiveness* particularly stands out as the ability to achieve the desired results).

This approach received deep criticism due to the resistance of some constructivist authors to consider that culture can be conceived as an instrumental means to achieve desirable objectives, in a measurable and comparable way (Denison and Mishra, 1995), and even be classified as “good” or “bad” for the fulfilment of such aims (Alvesson, 2002). However, due to the accumulated evidence that shows the influence of cultural aspects on multiple processes and results of organisations, and the possibilities of shaping some cultural aspects, they are increasingly accepted as a tool that can be used for multiple management purposes.

The explanations used usually focus on cognitive and symbolic mechanisms specific to each organisational culture. The components of the culture that tend to be analysed are synthesised in a limited set of values and other underlying characteristics related to the degree of employee integration with the organisation's values (Denison and Mishra, 1995). For example, it is assumed that a company with a "strong and widely shared organisational culture promotes behavioural coherence and thus may improve organisational performance" (Haveman, 2022, p. 137). However, it can also hinder the introduction of innovations or modifications in changing environments, which can also be detrimental to its organisational results (Sørensen, 2002).

One of the differences between the studies on organisational culture and the new sociological institutionalism lies in the level of analysis. The former are interested in more micro aspects (values, references of meaning, narratives that are institutionalised, etc.), interactions between their members mediated by these aspects, and by the interrelationship with interest groups and relations of influence. They tend to see the organisation as a more closed social system, but do not tend to observe the links with the environment. The focus is directed at identifying the set of values and underlying cultural characteristics of the individuals and groups that make up an organisation, and observing the extent to which they influence its economic or other performance. Places of interest are very varied, although studies on organisations dedicated to specific sectors of activity such as health (Scott et al., 2003; Scott and Estabrooks, 2006) or higher education (Coman and Bonciu, 2016) stand out. In the following section, some studies have been selected that illustrate this current merging with aspects of institutional quality.

#### 4.2. Contributions of interest

There are numerous studies on the effects of organisational culture on the results of organisations. Its importance is reflected in the gradual increase of publications (Ocasio and Gai, 2020), as shown by some reviews on the topic (Giorgi, Lockwood and Glynn, 2015; Hartnell, Yi Ou and Kinicho, 2011). In this paper a group of emblematic contributions have been selected due to their influence on subsequent studies. They serve as an example for determining the general characteristics of this trend. On the other hand, studies on the new sociological institutionalism mentioned previously, for which there are several treatises and compilations, are not dealt with; it is difficult to locate practical work in them to study characteristics of the organisations that intervene in their performance, equivalent to what has previously been defined as institutional quality. Nevertheless, the approaches that observe the relationship between organisations and their community logics have quite a few similarities and progressively highlight the implications for the results of the organisations (see, for example, Georgiou and Arenas, 2023).

This article will first look at the work of Denison and Mishra (1995). This is among the precursors of models for analysing the impact of the characteristics of organisational culture on organisational performance. One of its influences is observed in the Denison Organi-

zational Culture Survey (DOCS) measurement model, widely used in this field (Denison, Nieminen and Kotrba, 2011). It is based on senior executives' perceptions of aspects such as profitability, quality, sales growth, satisfaction and overall performance. The traits of institutional quality are measured through the contrast or dichotomy between two dimensions, which gives rise to various types of organisational culture. On the one hand, there is the contrast between "internal integration in the organisation" and "external adaptation", in other words, between organisations with inward dynamics that seek to strengthen the links and participation of their members compared to open organisations with outward dynamics. On the other hand, there is the contrast between "change" and "stability", that is, flexible organisations with the capacity to include changes, as opposed to rigid and stable organisations. These two contrasts intersect to form four features of organisational culture: implication, coherence, adaptability and mission.

The methodology is based on two observation procedures: in-depth case studies of several companies to identify the four aforementioned characteristics of organisational culture, and surveys of senior executives where they are asked about their perception of these four cultural characteristics and about objective and subjective measures of performance.

These studies are recognised as important contributions. On the one hand, they empirically capture how organisational culture influences the performance of organisations, in particular, how certain characteristics of the culture are more likely to favour one type of performance over another. On the other hand, they show how the adaptable institutions involved are flexible and open to the outside world, allowing them to respond to changes in the environment. These characteristics influence their performance. For example, they are strong predictors of sales growth in companies. On the contrary, coherence and involvement are indicators of integration of workers and the organisation management, which favours profitability. Today, these characteristics have become common aspects in the study of the performance of organisations, which provides an empirical reference for connecting more general work on institutional quality with currents of management.

## 5. Conclusions

This work has presented some conceptual contributions that, from a sociological perspective, can be fruitful for the multidisciplinary study of institutional quality. For this purpose, a summary has been offered of the definitions of the concept of institution. It has been shown how this concept has been the subject of various formulations that, both inside and outside the discipline, and due to its complexity, have been a barrier to its understanding and linkage with other approaches. For sociology, institutions go beyond the formal or informal norms that govern behaviour both in the context of formal organisations and in other social aggregates. In contrast to other disciplines, it interprets them as assemblages of socially validated elements of social structure and culture that acquire representation in individuals, enable individual action and organise collective life. Individual or collective actors produce and reproduce institutions through their actions and interactions.

The studies on institutional quality that deal with this conception reveal certain fundamental aspects that may go unnoticed if conceptual foundations and methodologies that cause them to emerge are not used. Nevertheless, in addition to the heterogeneity in defining and capturing the quality of institutions, there is a problem facing this field, and that is how in the sociological discipline there are not many practical-oriented studies and, moreover, the term institutional quality is not widespread.

To illustrate this perspective, two groups of studies have been selected that address the components of institutional quality from two levels of analysis: a group interested in more structural and macro-sociological issues, close to the sociology of development; and another group with a more constructivist orientation, at a more micro level, linked to cultural studies on organisations. For each group, contributions have been used that illustrate the influence of aspects of the institutions that can be considered characteristics of their quality, insofar as they contribute to the fulfilment of their objectives.

In the review carried out, some strengths or contributions of interest can be highlighted. Organisations are strategic places of observation that reflect institutional aspects. This is an advantage for empirical analysis, as it makes them accessible and defines them in a specific space. They also focus on dimensions that are useful for operationalising elements of social life related to social structure and culture. The external and internal dimensions of the organisation that can be highlighted include the typical characteristics of Weberian bureaucracies (meritocracy and independence from outside interests), openness to the outside (flexibility, proactivity and formation of alliances with external actors), and the underlying values and characteristics of the personnel related to the degree of integration or adaptation and change or stability.

It is also possible to highlight certain weaknesses. They are poorly connected in the literature and present an important division between levels of analysis. Studies on the culture of organisations pay more attention to the underlying traits of people. It is less common to observe dimensions related to the distribution of power and hierarchies that can mediate the interaction between workers or with their managers. In studies dealing with structural elements the opposite occurs: hardly any attention is paid to shared meanings. Furthermore, neither do they pay much attention to dimensions of institutional quality related to regulatory aspects that shape interaction, such as those covered in other articles in this *Debate* section.

Another weakness lies in the division between levels of analysis. Organisations are known not to be closed units, but rather are part of aggregates such as organisational fields or sectors of activity. At the same time, internally there are sets of values and meanings of individuals that have a logic of their own. In short, the difficulties in empirically investigating institutional quality are due more to the practical possibilities for integrating both groups of work than to the advances made in the state of knowledge.

In essence, the summary in this article shows how institutions are complex entities that must be looked at beyond their formal and economic aspects or their designs. On the contrary, they are populated by people with values, norms and social bonds who ultimately determine what they produce, in positive or negative terms. The map of

the studies that analyse their quality identifies some aspects that must be taken into account in empirical studies and in action on institutions. It also points to the need for greater collaboration between streams of sociology and between sociology and other disciplines.

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## Notes

1 The Columbia School of Sociology emerged in the 1940s thanks to F. H. Giddings and became extremely important in the understanding of social reality between 1950 and 1970. Robert K. Merton was one of the leading authors. Other authors identified with this school who took an interest in institutions, focusing on the study of organisations, include P. Blau, A. W. Gouldner, S. M. Lipset, J. Coleman and P. Selznick, among others. See Cavalieri (2016).

2 Other seminal works by Selznick include *TVA and the Grass Roots* (1949) and *The Organizational Weapon* (1952).

3 It should be clarified that, within studies on institutional quality, a source of internal difference is the diversity in performance measurement based on the public, private or mixed nature of the institutions. This is partly due to the difficulty of specifying and quantifying the quality in the provision of public services. This article does not address this difference due to space constraints, although the literature review by Van Helden and Reichard (2016) exposes important performance measurement differences between them. Some of these may be applicable in public and private institutions; others, however, may be inappropriate to use in both spheres, even if they share a sector of activity (Parhizgari and Ronald Gilbert, 2004). This poses both an academic and professional debate, especially in the field of new public management, on the suitability of transferring performance models related to private management practices to public organisations (Lapuente and Van de Walle, 2020).

4 Also on the importance of social mobilisations, culture, inequality and programme evaluation (Viterna and Robertson, 2015).

5 The concept of embeddedness is one of the keys to explaining the contribution of the institutions in this sector, although it is convenient to differentiate the meaning of the term embeddedness from that used by Mark Granovetter to refer to the insertion of economic action in networks of sociability. Rather, Evans refers to proactivity in several aspects regarding the need for the institution to be in contact with the actors in its environment. An additional interpretation of the concept of embeddedness applied to public bureaucracies and laws is included in the article by Martínez Sánchez and Gosálbez Pequeño (2023) in this *Debate* section.

6 Some relevant studies are Campbell (2004), Saxenian (2017) and Block and Keller (2011).

## The author

Paula Espinosa Soriano holds a PhD in Social and Legal Sciences from the University of Córdoba and a degree in Sociology from the Pablo de Olavide University. Her line of research is the analysis of the institutional quality of the science, technology and innovation system from the principles of the sociology of development, the approach of innovation systems and the sociology of organisations. She is a member of the “Research and Knowledge Transfer” Associated Unit of the University of Córdoba and the Institute for Advanced Social Studies (IESA, CISC). She currently teaches at the University of Córdoba.