

# *Sociological institutionalism*

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## **Sociological institutionalism**

Sarah von Billerbeck

Sociological institutionalism has been applied to UN peacekeeping only in a limited fashion. Indeed, most peacekeeping scholarship examines the policies, practices, processes, and effects of peacekeeping, but neglects the internal institutional environment in which the UN exists and in particular the internal preferences, interests, and motivations of staff within the UN. In this way, the UN's organizational identity, preferences, and goals are often considered epiphenomenal and thus treated as contextual factors that merit only description but not analysis in their own right.

Sociological institutionalism, like other forms of 'new' institutionalism, is based upon the claim that the institutional environment in which organizations exist matters because it provides, first, material resources that enable an organization to act and, second, legitimacy that gives it the authority to do so (Weaver 2008: 4; Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Within this tradition, sociological institutionalism emphasises the role of norms, rules, and culture in not only shaping behaviour, but also constituting the identities and self-images of actors. In contrast to rational choice institutionalism, which holds that political actors respond rationally to their institutional environment and act largely as utility maximisers (Weaver 2008: 5; Saurugger 2017; Hall and Taylor 1996; Reykers 2019: chapter 3, this volume), sociological institutionalism focuses on actors as social agents whose behaviour is culturally specific and constructed around ideas of

appropriateness (March and Olsen 1998; Schmidt 2014; Lowndes and Roberts 2013). In this way, sociological institutionalism presents an endogenous account of the preferences, interests, and behaviours of political actors through an examination of discourse, myth, and ceremony *within* organizations.

In this chapter, I apply a sociological institutionalist lens to UN peacekeeping. First, I outline what sociological institutionalism is, contextualising it within other institutionalist theories, and outlining its take on how institutions delineate what is considered appropriate and feasible behaviour in organizations and how organizational change is deeply tied to socially constructed conceptions of legitimacy. Second, I discuss the limited application of sociological institutionalism to UN peacekeeping to date, which I ascribe to a general tendency to ignore the UN's own perceptions of its legitimacy and values, and I demonstrate how this leaves gaps in our understanding of UN peacekeeping. Finally, I provide an empirical discussion of how sociological institutionalism helps us to understand the form that UN peacekeeping takes through a case study of local ownership in peacekeeping, demonstrating how UN staff engage in inefficient or outright contradictory behaviours because of their own need to perceive that their actions are appropriate and legitimate.

## Sociological institutionalism

As outlined in the introduction to this volume, sociological institutionalism is one of several strands of 'new institutionalisms' or neo-institutionalism. The latter emerged in the 1970s

and 1980s to challenge the behavioural and rational choice bias in political science at the time, and it sought to clarify the role of institutions in bringing about observed political outcomes (March and Olsen 1984; Hysing and Olsson 2018: 28). Beyond this shared acceptance of the importance of institutions however, there is little convergence between the main strands of neo-institutionalism, including rational choice, historical, and sociological institutionalism.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, sociological institutionalism evolved concurrently with, but largely independently of its fellow new institutionalisms, emerging primarily out of sociology and organization studies (Hall and Taylor 1996: 946; Bevir and Rhodes 2010: 27).<sup>2</sup>

Sociological institutionalism argues for the powerful influence of social context on political actors. It focuses on the socially constructed nature of institutional structures, rules, and norms and asserts that this institutional environment shapes, constrains, and constitutes the identities and goals of actors within it (Schmidt 2006; Schmidt 2014; Schofer et al. 2012; March and Olsen 1984; Finnemore 1996; Meyer and Rowan 1997; Lowndes and Roberts 2013). More specifically, sociological institutionalism posits that the institutional environment both socialises political actors into particular roles, thus ‘constituting’ them, and also causes them to ‘internalize the norms associated with these roles,’ in turn influencing their behaviour and thus reinforcing the norms and rules of the environment (Hall and Taylor 1996: 948). In this way, institutions and

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars also add normative, discursive, and constructivist institutionalism to this list (Hysing and Olsson 2018; see also Jenson and Mérand 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, some scholars consider the term ‘neo-institutionalism’ to be not only a misnomer, but ontologically misleading, as it implies greater similarity between strands than actually exists (Bever and Rhodes 2010; Schmidt 2014; Hall and Taylor 1996).

individual actors are mutually-constituted and mutually-constituting, and institutions determine what is possible, conceivable, and meaningful in social life. The institutional environment – that is, institutional norms, rules, symbols, and images – thus both produces the identities and self-images of actors *and* delineates what actions are appropriate, imaginable, and legitimate for them by providing ‘scripts [and] templates’ that enable actors to recognise and respond to events (Hall and Taylor 1996: 948).

Within organizations, March and Olsen (1998) have depicted such behaviour – that is, behaviour guided by institutional rules and norms – as aligned with action taken according to a ‘logic of appropriateness’ as opposed to a ‘logic of expected consequences,’ where the former highlights the importance of ideas and identities and the latter stresses material factors. According to the logic of appropriateness, policy choices are most accurately seen as ‘the application of rules associated with particular identities to particular situations’ (March and Olsen 1998: 951). In this regard, efficiency is only one of many considerations when organizations adopt policies and respond to events, and social legitimacy – that is, alignment with socially-established institutional identities, norms, and rules – is often at least as, if not more important than other considerations. As Saurugger (2017) notes, ‘actors...are motivated to act appropriately, seeking legitimacy from their peers’ and ‘cognitive scripts inside institutions establish what is appropriate.’ In this way, the institutional environment delimits what is conceivable, feasible, and imaginable for staff within organizations.

Because of the limited nature of what is appropriate, several scholars have asserted that such behaviour in organizations can give rise to ‘dysfunction’ where irrational, inefficient, or

even self-defeating policy choices are made (Hall and Taylor 1996; Barnett and Finnemore 2004). However, behaviour according to a logic of appropriateness does not imply that actors are not goal-oriented or that they behave irrationally; instead sociological institutionalism holds that ‘rationality is socially constructed and culturally and historically contingent’ (Schmidt 2006: 107). Rationality is thus not conceived of as entailing efficiency and utility maximization measured against some exogenous, universal standard; instead, it is about defining goals and undertaking actions in ways that are ‘valued within a broader cultural environment’ (Hall and Taylor: 949) and are perceived to be legitimate according to the socially-constructed standards of that environment. Indeed, judgements about the legitimacy or appropriateness of actions in organizations can and usually do prioritise both alignment with norms, values, and rules *and* utility maximization, efficiency, and outputs because both are socially valued within the institutional setting; however, rationality is socially constructed in that institutional setting. Scholars have variously labelled rationality in this perspective as ‘imperfect, bounded, or “garbage can”’ (Saurugger 2017).<sup>3</sup> As Risse and Ropp (2013: 13) assert, ‘the logic of consequences and the cost-benefit calculations of utility-maximizing egoistic actors are often embedded in a more encompassing logic of appropriateness of norm-guided behavior.’

In this way, sociological institutionalism provides a particularly useful frame for understanding the contradictory and inefficient behaviour that is often observed in organizations. According to sociological institutionalism, actors are guided by both normative considerations of appropriateness *and* more utilitarian considerations of efficiency and outputs; where these clash,

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<sup>3</sup> The ‘garbage can model’ is explained in detail in the next section.

they often adopt contradictory policies or say one thing but do another in order to bring them both into alignment with the institutional environment. Brunsson (2002) has described this dynamic as ‘organizational hypocrisy,’ where organizations face conflicts between institutional norms and demands for efficiency and effectiveness, both of which constitute sources of legitimacy for the organization. Similarly, Krasner (1999: 65–6) posits that organised hypocrisy occurs when there is a conflict between the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences, and asserts that actors ‘must honor, perhaps only in talk, certain norms but at the same time act in ways that violate these norms.’

A logical consequence of a sociological institutionalist approach is that change in organizations is about augmenting social legitimacy, rather than (only) maximising efficiency. As Hall and Taylor (1996: 949) assert, ‘organizations often adopt a new institutionalist practice, not because it advances the means-ends efficiency of the organization but because it enhances the social legitimacy of the organization or its participants.’ Of course, change *could* advance means-ends efficiency, but only if it is valued within the organization’s institutional landscape, as noted, and does not simultaneously delegitimise other valued norms or standards. Similarly, Benner et al. (2011: 61–2) assert that ‘the interpretive frames and cultural norms’ of an organization – what they call organizational culture – is one of a number of elements that set the scope for organizational learning. They add that organizational culture can vary within an organization, and thus learning can become a competitive process of internal negotiation and bargaining in which actors must make convincing claims for how their proposed change is the most closely aligned with the existing norms and rules of the organization.

In addition, this further implies that change proposals that seek to shift, address, or (selectively) eliminate the norms and rules of the institutional environment, are likely to be highly contested and slow to be accepted, because those rules and norms are fundamental to the self-images of organization staff. This in turn suggests that resistance to substantive change proposals will be high, which explains the difficulties most organizations have with reform efforts: because reform may threaten the very rules and norms that constitute organizational actors and that frame their understanding of the world, those actors are likely to perceive it as an existential threat.

### Sociological institutionalism and UN peacekeeping

There is a relative paucity of sociological institutionalist analyses of UN peacekeeping. This is partly the result of a general neglect of international organizations more broadly in sociological institutionalist studies, which have focused primarily on private firms and local government agencies, and only rarely on large international, intergovernmental organizations (Benner et al. 2011: 53; von Billerbeck unpublished). In addition, as mentioned, there is a tendency to assess and analyse UN peacekeeping as policy, rather than as an institution. More specifically, most scholarship on peacekeeping examines the actors, decision-making procedures, effectiveness, and impact of peacekeeping, but neglects the institutional environment in which these exist, treating it as epiphenomenal and secondary. Indeed, the tendency to orient the study of peacekeeping towards evaluation of outcomes is one of the reasons that it is under-theorised in



general, which is, of course, a state of affairs that this volume seeks to counter.

In spite of this, there have been several attempts to use sociological institutionalism to analyse and understand UN peacekeeping, efforts that turn the lens ‘inwards’ to identify and understand the institutional characteristics that give rise to contradictory behaviour, inefficiency, failures, and the conditions for organizational learning. Among the first and best known is *Rules for the World* by Barnett and Finnemore (2004). In this seminal volume, the authors argue that international organizations frequently become overly focused on rule-making and therefore produce inefficient and even self-defeating outcomes – what they call ‘pathological’ behaviour or ‘dysfunction.’ These sub-optimal outcomes are partly a result of the institutional environment in which these organizations exist – that is, the rules that govern what is appropriate and inappropriate and thus delimit the realm of what is possible, acceptable, and legitimate for the organization. As Barnett and Finnemore (2004: 37) note, ‘[international organization] behavior might be only remotely connected to the efficient implementation of its goals and more closely coupled to legitimacy criteria that come from the cultural environment,’ an environment that they further specify is characterised by ‘often conflicting functional, normative, and legitimacy imperatives’ (2004: 37).

They illustrate their argument with the case of UN peacekeeping in Rwanda in 1994. They argue that the organization’s failure to respond to the unfolding genocide was a result not of reluctance by member states – the most commonly offered explanation for UN inaction – but instead the UN’s own peacekeeping culture, in which long-established rules of peacekeeping relating to consent and impartiality designated increased and more robust intervention

inappropriate and dangerous, both to the operation and the UN as an organization (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 142). Particular courses of action were considered a risk to the UN's identity as an organization, and thus were 'off-limits' because they did not align with the internal institutional environment of the organization. In this way, organizational culture 'shaped DPKO's understanding of appropriate responses' (2004: 142) and constrained its perceived policy options, even in the face of external circumstances that overwhelmingly spoke in favour of a more robust course of action. According to Barnett and Finnemore, this case shows that the UN's failure to respond to the Rwandan genocide demonstrates how organization staff 'tend to use the available scripts and rules to interpret information' and that they tend 'to cling to preexisting beliefs' in doing so, making change a highly contested process because it imperils fundamental elements of self-understanding (2004: 155).

Second, Lipson (2007) attempts to explain the expansion – both in terms of scope and frequency – of peacekeeping after the Cold War by applying Kingdon's adaption of Cohen, March, and Olsen's Garbage Can Model to UN peacekeeping. He stresses that this outcome was not based upon the 'rational fitting of solutions to problems' or a 'clear means to well-defined ends' (2007: 82), but instead the linking of an available solution to an existing problem by policy entrepreneurs during an open policy window.<sup>4</sup> He notes that this process of 'linkage' or 'coupling' of solutions to problems takes place according to three criteria: 'technical feasibility, consistency with the policy community's values, and judgements about what is acceptable in the larger political system' (84), which in turn are heavily influenced by organizational culture (85).

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<sup>4</sup> According to Kingdon, there are two types of windows: policy and problem (Lipson 2007: 83).

Lipson further argues that peacekeeping did not represent an entirely new choice but instead a ‘mutation and recombination’ of existing policies. This more broadly suggests that change, even seemingly dramatic change, may only consist of the reorganization and recombination of old options and their ‘assignment’ to problems to which they had not previously been assigned. In this way, change in organizations and in peacekeeping tends to be limited in scope, constrained within the institutional environment of the UN, with its particular rules, norms, and procedures. That said, Lipson concedes that the international normative environment was also shifting at the time with ‘the acceptance of liberal democracy as the standard of legitimate governance’ (89), thus recognising that the expansion of peacekeeping was perhaps as dramatic as it was due to both the garbage can process that he describes *and* the existence of a broader permissive environment.

Third, Autesserre (2010) argues how a dominant peacekeeping culture precluded particular courses of action in the UN’s peacekeeping mission in DR Congo, MONUC. Specifically, she asserts that the UN’s institutional environment is characterised by a bias towards national- and regional-level understandings and policies, and how this rendered local-level solutions inappropriate and therefore beyond consideration. However, according to Autesserre, the conflict in Congo was primarily fuelled by local-level disputes over land, resources, and power, and thus the UN’s fixation on national and regional dynamics has contributed directly to its failure to secure a durable peace in Congo. In other words, the UN’s organizational culture – its ‘ideologies, rules, rituals, assumptions, definitions, paradigms, and standard operating procedures’ (2010: 11) – created a ‘mismatch’ between the problem and the solution, similar to Lipson’s analysis, because it preemptively designated particular policy

options as inconceivable, unnatural, and inappropriate to the UN's identity.

While Barnett and Finnemore, Lipson, and Autesserre focus on questions of organizational culture, Benner et al. (2011) and Howard (2008) zero in on the question of organizational learning in UN peacekeeping, describing how this is both constrained and enabled by the institutional environment. According to Benner et al. (2011: 55), organizational learning entails 'a knowledge-based process of questioning and changing organizational rules to change organizational practice.' In the context of peacekeeping then, because rules are *prior* to practice, changes in peacekeeping practice can only come about because of a change in organizational rules, which regulate and constitute the social world within the UN (2017: 54). The authors note that temporary changes in practice can occur without changes in rules, but stress that learning – that is the institutionalization of change – only occurs when rules are amended; equally, however, they note that new rules are not always fully implemented, leading to incomplete learning.

In peacekeeping, they consider this process to be highly contested, because there are a plethora of knowledge sources within the UN, and thus there needs to be a phase of advocacy – similar to Lipson's policy entrepreneurs – in order to progress to institutionalization (2017: 55–8). They note, however, that peacekeeping learning often stalls during the advocacy and institutionalization phases, due either to weak political support or learning infrastructure. Their conclusions are not wholly negative though: they point out that successful learning can and does occur, a welcome contrast to much of the literature on organizational change, which suggests that learning is usually either a partial or failed enterprise. Still, institutional rules are the *sine qua non* of organizational learning, and those rules are limited and limiting because they exist within

‘the interpretive frames and cultural norms’ of the organization (2017: 61).

Howard (2008) also addresses learning in UN peacekeeping, though her intention is more to evaluate the drivers of success and failure in peacekeeping than organizational learning itself, and her study draws selectively upon sociological institutionalism rather than adopting the approach entirely. She divides learning into two levels: one that occurs within individual peacekeeping operations and one that occurs between operations and headquarters. Examining ten cases of multidimensional post-Cold War peacekeeping, she concludes that while there has been some first-level learning *within* missions, learning *between* missions has lagged behind. She does not characterise this as ‘full’ second-level organizational dysfunction – that is, ‘when sections of the organization work at cross-purposes with one another, important general insights from one operation are not adequately transferred to other operations, actions are at odds with the fundamental principles of the organization, and there is no systematic evaluation of problems, goals, or methods’ (2008: 330). Instead, she labels what she observes as ‘incremental adaptation,’ in which practices are transferred from one mission to another without regard for contextual specificities or any broader, holistic strategy. Like the other authors covered in this section, Howard ascribes much of the responsibility for this relative failure in learning on the UN Secretariat, rather than the more oft-blamed Security Council (2008: 340), in short, due to limited internal imagination about the potential for transfer of knowledge and adaptation of new procedures.

All of these studies stress, in various ways, the critical importance of the institutional environment of UN peacekeeping and add helpful insights into our understanding of why

peacekeeping takes the form that it does, including both why contradictory policies are adopted in practice, leading to often cataclysmic failures, and to why the UN subsequently fails to learn lasting lessons from these experiences. However, as a body of scholarship on peacekeeping, they remain remarkably disparate, and the sociological institutionalist approach has remained secondary to other approaches to the study of peacekeeping. In the next section, I apply sociological institutionalism to the concept of local ownership in peacekeeping, in a further addition to this growing literature.

### Local ownership and UN peacekeeping

In a further addition to the literature outlined in the previous section, I here use a sociological institutionalist frame to understand the UN's persistent emphasis on local ownership in peacekeeping, in spite of the fact that it is only sporadically implemented and often represents, at least in the short term, an inefficient policy option. I argue that the UN's dedication to local ownership in peacekeeping is based not upon its perceived efficiency or ability to contribute to the rapid and cost-effective achievement of stated objectives, but instead upon its alignment with the norms, principles, and self-images of UN staff. Local ownership represents an approach to peacekeeping that is appropriate to the UN's identity, and thus – whether or not it is actually implemented in practice or, where it is implemented, whether it enables the UN to more efficiently achieve its goals – it is the right policy choice. In this way, local ownership provides an excellent illustration of how policy choices are informed and bounded by the institutional

environment and self-perceptions of organizational identity and how the institutional environment can give rise to seemingly contradictory behaviour within organizations.

The term ‘local ownership’ was adopted into peacekeeping in the early 2000s from international development, where the involvement of beneficiaries had been advocated as an effective approach to aid starting in the 1980s (von Billerbeck 2016: 28–30). Since then, discourse surrounding local ownership has reached the level of orthodoxy within peacekeeping, and it is widely advocated not only as an efficient way to do peacekeeping but – more importantly – as the *right* way to do peacekeeping. In 2011, the Security Council called local ownership ‘a moral imperative,’ a sentiment echoed in a number of other documents (United Nations 2011b: 2; see also United Nations 2011a: 10). This enthusiasm is based upon the belief that peacekeeping processes that are locally owned will be more legitimate – that is, they allow the UN to remain aligned with principles and values that are key elements of its organizational identity (von Billerbeck 2016).

More specifically, peacekeeping is an endeavour that necessitates deep intrusion into national and local processes, processes that would not normally be open to external interference, in order to bring about meaningful conflict transformation. However, such intrusion directly contravenes highly valued norms relating to self-determination and non-imposition within the UN, and UN peacekeeping staff thus often face situations where they must violate their stated principles in order to achieve their stated goals. This creates an uncomfortable situation for peacekeeping staff, because they view themselves as standard bearers for principles of appropriate behaviour in the international system, principles that are enshrined in the UN Charter

and that serve as key boundaries of the organization's institutional environment.

As a result, peacekeeping staff seek out policies and approaches to peacekeeping that enable them to remain aligned with the principles and norms of their institutional environment, even if those policies and approaches are inefficient or unlikely to lead to success. Local ownership – that is, involving a variety of national actors at various stages and in various ways in peacekeeping activities – is perceived to lessen intrusion and ensure that actions are not imposed but instead jointly agreed upon, thus rendering them appropriate within the institutional bounds of the UN. As one former senior UN official asserted,

There is a deep-seated political bias in the UN that the UN stands for self-determination rather than externally-imposed, neo-imperial forms of governance. Local ownership fits that view nicely. This is an important part of the UN's self-perception.<sup>5</sup>

In this way, local ownership is considered an appropriate, correct, and legitimate approach to peace operations, one that enables the UN to reconcile the contradictions between its operational obligations and its institutional norms and rules.

Importantly, this is the case even if local ownership is inefficient in a particular context or time period, weakens the chances of peacekeeping success, or slows the delivery of outputs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Author interview with senior UN official, Oxford, October 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Local ownership can, in some circumstances, facilitate the delivery of outputs, in particular where it bestows legitimacy on or generates popular buy-in for UN-initiated activities (see von Billerbeck 2016; Whalan 2013). Still, most UN officials admit that this usually comes at a temporal or financial price, due to the often lengthy vetting



Indeed, many UN staff assert that local ownership in peacekeeping delays or even prevents efficient action by the UN because it implies that the UN will need to share responsibility for decision-making and implementation with actors that either have weak capacities or maintain illiberal, divisive, or authoritarian postures that run counter to those in the UN's mandate (von Billerbeck 2016). One senior UN official described how the involvement of local actors in its peace operation in MONUC 'slowed everything down to no end,'<sup>7</sup> and another described how a large number of local actors 'are not strong and they play a small role.'<sup>8</sup> Such assessments suggest that local ownership is not considered a particularly effective approach to peacekeeping by UN staff. Nevertheless, they continue to advocate local ownership based on its alignment with norms and rules relating self-determination and non-imposition, which are key elements of the institutional environment and of the UN's self-perception of its identity. In short, local ownership remains *the right thing to do*, even if it is not *the efficient thing to do*.

In addition, because of its alignment with institutional norms and principles, local ownership is also viewed as *universally* appropriate, and discourse surrounding local ownership reveals little effort to differentiate between contexts or thematic areas. Rarely is local ownership deemed appropriate in one mission setting but not another or in some operational areas – such as political institution building or civil society strengthening – but not others – such as security sector reform or disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs. Instead, local

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process involved in identifying effective and acceptable national partners and the cost involved in building their capacities, where necessary.

<sup>7</sup> Author interview with senior UN official, Geneva, May 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Author interview with DPO official, Kinshasa, March 2011.

ownership is portrayed as suitable everywhere and at all times. Indeed, local ownership is not simply one among many possible approaches to peace operations, but has been elevated to the status of a principle of peacekeeping in the UN. Documents ranging from the *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines*, known as the ‘Capstone Doctrine’ (UN DPKO 2008), to the *DPO/DOS Core Pre-Deployment Training Materials* (United Nations 2017) now list local ownership as a key principle of peacekeeping alongside the traditional troika of consent, impartiality, and the non-use of force. And of course, as a principle of peacekeeping, local ownership by definition cannot be only appropriate sometimes and in some places.

Critically, however, peacekeeping staff are also motivated by more utilitarian considerations of outputs and results. This is because, within the institutional environment of the UN, effective action and delivery against stated objectives is also a social good valued by staff, alongside alignment with norms and principles. Rational behaviour within this institutional setting therefore dictates that staff will attempt to both comply with norms and rules *and* realise goals and outputs. In this sense, local ownership is problematic, because it is largely considered to be inefficient by UN staff and to imperil the delivery of their stated objectives. As a result, local ownership ends up becoming primarily a discursive tool for UN staff, one that enables them to *portray* their actions as locally owned, even if in practice, they are not.

Indeed, significant amounts of research have shown that local ownership is in fact rarely implemented or is only implemented partially: while the UN persistently invokes the discourse of local ownership, it does little to coherently define local ownership, provides no guidance on how local ownership should be realised in practice, and fails to monitor whether local actors

actually feel any sense of ownership of the peacekeeping processes in their countries. Instead, it remains largely discursive – that is, local ownership constitutes, as noted above, a ‘script [or] template’ for explaining otherwise inappropriate behaviour in a way that is normatively appropriate. As one DPO official in New York explained, the UN should aim for ‘national ownership at the strategic level, but at the operation[al] and funding level, [it] must be more cautious because the [host] government doesn’t have the capacity or neutrality [for implementation],’ and the UN thus tends to slip into a ‘direct execution mentality.’<sup>9</sup> This was echoed by other officials, both in field locations and in New York. One stated that ‘we have ownership in mind, but we just do things for [local actors] sometimes because there is a pressure to deliver,’<sup>10</sup> and another noted that giving national actors ownership in peace operations can result in ‘delaying and complicating the achievement of [our] objectives.’<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, UN peacekeeping staff continue to invoke local ownership to legitimise their behaviour and demonstrate their compliance with the standards and expectations of their institutional environment, in what Lipson (2010: 274) calls decoupling, where ‘practices that are legitimized within an organizational field but are not conducive to operational performance will be maintained for their symbolic function, but decoupled from actual behavior.’ As one UN official remarked, local ownership ‘sounds politically correct’<sup>12</sup> and another noted that local

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<sup>9</sup> Author interview with DPO official, New York, December 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Author interview with DPO official, Kinshasa, March 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Author interview with senior UN official, New York, December 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Author interview with UN official, New York, November 2009.

ownership is about ‘signalling non-imposition.’<sup>13</sup> These sentiments are shared by staff in the field, who insist that it is an ‘imperative’<sup>14</sup> and granting ownership to local actors is ‘doing the right thing.’<sup>15</sup> In this way, the rhetoric and reality of local ownership do not match: the UN invokes the language of local ownership because it aligns with institutional norms and values in an activity that may contradict those norms and values, but simultaneously fails to systematically implement local ownership because of its perceived deleterious effect on results and the social legitimacy derived from delivering results. In short, local ownership illustrates both the organised hypocrisy that Krasner (1999: 65–6) describes, in which organizations use ‘talk only’ to reconcile conflicting institutional imperatives, and the contradictory behaviour often observed in organizations in which they say one thing and do another. More broadly, it illustrates, first, how peacekeeping staff are socialised by their environment to view certain policy choices as acceptable, appropriate, and natural because they align with institutional principles like self-determination and non-imposition and how they use templates and frames to explain and demonstrate how behaviour, even contradictory behaviour, aligns with that institutional identity.

## Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, sociological institutionalist approaches to the study of

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<sup>13</sup> Author interview with senior UN official, New York, December 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Author interview with UN official, New York, November 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Author interview with UN official, New York, November 2009.

peacekeeping provide key insights into the practices, policy choices, and failures of UN peacekeeping. By examining the perceptions of UN peacekeeping staff, sociological institutionalism shows how the latter are constrained by the institutional environment in which they operate, where principles and norms like consent, impartiality, and non-use of force (Barnett and Finnemore 2004) or self-determination and non-imposition (von Billerbeck 2016) inform what is considered appropriate, feasible, and right and constitute key elements of their self-images. As noted, this does not imply that peacekeeping staff are not concerned with effectiveness and delivery; on the contrary, these are highly valued within the social environment of peacekeeping. However, the maximization of efficiency and results exists within and is informed by the broader framework of the UN's institutional environment. There is thus no contradiction between more rational, material motivations and more normative ones; instead there is only a trade-off between behaviour that aligns with institutional imperatives and behaviour that does not. Because of this, UN staff use discursive templates, symbols, and scripts – like 'local ownership' – to explain, portray, and justify their behaviour.

In spite of the existing studies outlined above that have adopted this approach or elements of it, internal institutional considerations tend to be overlooked in studies of UN peacekeeping, which instead focus on evaluating outcomes and effectiveness. In so doing, they miss out on a rich layer of insight that helps to explain much of the contradictory behaviour observed in peacekeeping; the adoption of policies that are blatantly inefficient or highly likely to fail; and the slowness of or resistance to change, learning, and reform in peacekeeping. More importantly, the failure to include sociological institutionalist approaches results in a neglect of the perspectives of UN staff themselves, thereby omitting valuable 'insider' insights into

peacekeeping. Sociological institutionalism thus offers a useful addition to ongoing analyses of peacekeeping, and one that merits increased inclusion in future research into UN peacekeeping.

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