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How do sharing organisations create and disrupt institutions? Towards a framework for institutional work in the sharing economy

Lucie Zvolska*, Yuliya Voytenko Palgan, Oksana Mont

International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics (IIIEE), Lund University, P.O. Box 196, 22100, Lund, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The sharing economy is a new form of resource distribution that is affecting traditional markets, cities and individuals, and challenging the prevalent regulatory frameworks, social norms and belief systems. While studies have examined some of its disruptive effects on institutional actors, there has been less focus on the ways in which sharing economy organisations work to create new or disrupt prevalent institutions. This study aims to fill this gap by 1) applying a framework for institutional work by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) to help understand, map out and classify a variety of mechanisms for urban sharing organisations to engage in institutional creation and disruption, and by 2) testing and adjusting the framework to the context of the sharing economy. The analysis builds on empirical data from case studies, field observations and almost 70 interviews with representatives of urban sharing organisations and actors in their organisational field.

1. Introduction

In order to transition towards a sustainable, low-carbon and equitable cities, changes are needed, among others, in the design of mainstream business models dominated by linear product life cycles (Edbring et al., 2016). McCormick et al. (2016) identified the following alternative consumption models: extending the lives of products, access based consumption, and collaborative consumption. An example of an alternative consumption model is the concept of the sharing economy, which has seen rapid growth in the past decade. It conflates new forms of distributing resources among strangers, enabled by information and communication technologies (Schor, 2016). Sharing economy organisations are most prominent in urban areas, where the concentration of people and resources in close geographical proximity offers favourable conditions for growth (Davidson and Infranca, 2015; Mclaren and Agyeman, 2015). Therefore, we refer to them as urban sharing organisations (USOs).

USOs allow users to borrow or rent, rather than buy resources. Therefore, they have been heralded as catalysts of a sustainable change that decentralises economic growth, provides access to goods and services for marginalised groups, and is less environmentally detrimental than traditional consumption practices (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Mclaren and Agyeman, 2015). However, claims that consumption patterns pioneered by USOs result in a decrease of industrial production and the related negative human-induced impact on the environment have been questioned (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2017; Plepys and Singh, 2019). Furthermore, some USOs have been criticised by urban citizens, incumbent market actors, city-level policymakers and academia for disrupting product and service markets traditionally ingrained in urban environments, which might also have negative consequences for economic and social sustainability in cities (Katz, 2015; Martin, 2016; Williams and Horodnic, 2017). This disruption of prevailing institutions can be demonstrated with a case from the urban mobility sector: car sharing and ride sharing organisations such as Drivy or Uber are shown to be disrupting private car ownership, but also public transportation systems (Martin and Shaheen, 2011; Meyer and Shaheen, 2017). Bike sharing could, in its own ways, also transform the urban mobility mix in the future (Ciari and Becker, 2017). Thus, the sharing economy is a catalyst for an institutional change in which USOs play a major role. To date, academic studies have mainly discussed the disruption of accommodation and mobility sectors by the for-profit multinational organisations Airbnb and Uber. Other sectors and USOs, especially those that are small-scale and non-profit, have not been explored (Michelini et al.,

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: lucie.zvolska@iiiee.lu.se (L. Zvolska).

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2018). In addition, USOs not only disrupt prevailing institutions, but they also create new ones (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). This form of institutional work has not been studied by scholars of the sharing economy.

In this study, we address the gaps in knowledge by 1) applying a framework for institutional work by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) to help understand, map out and classify a variety of mechanisms for USOs to change (*disrupt* and *create*) institutions, and by 2) testing and adjusting the framework to the context of the sharing economy. We do so by exploring the diversity of mechanisms of the institutional work practised by different USOs in their everyday activities. We depart from neo-institutionalism and the study of institutional work, which refers to “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining[1] and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006: p. 215). To examine the institutional work of USOs, we utilise an analytical framework developed by institutional scholars Lawrence and Suddaby (2006). The framework was originally developed by synthesising an extensive collection of publications on how organisations create, maintain and disrupt institutions, so it can be used to map and classify a variety of mechanisms by which USOs engage in institutional work. We evaluate the applicability of the institutional work framework to the urban sharing field, and revise it for the work of USOs.

The intended audience for this paper is primarily researchers and experts on the sharing economy. Institutional scholars might also find value in our testing of the institutional work framework. Furthermore, USOs might use this publication as a toolbox for institutionalising their sharing practices.

We draw on empirical data collected through interviews with representatives of USOs (founders, top management and operations representatives), city governments, municipal organisations, and third-party organisations and networks that form the organisational field of urban sharing in three European cities: Berlin, London and Malmö. We did not interview representatives of the incumbent sectors that are being disrupted by the sharing economy so we cannot comment on how they work to maintain institutions, however, this could be explored in a later study. The interview material (recordings, transcripts and notes) was analysed, focusing on the *purposive actions* of sharing organisations that guided their institutional work. Specifically, we were looking for records that shed light on the political activities of sharing organisations, their reactions to rules and regulations, their strategic development directions and plans, and descriptions of actors influencing their work, both in enabling and constraining ways. We conducted almost 70 semi-structured interviews: in London, twelve interviews were conducted in person and eleven via phone, in Berlin, eighteen interviews were conducted in person and fifteen via phone, and in Malmö, eleven interviews were conducted in person and one via phone. The interviews lasted between 30 min and 2 h and were recorded and thematically transcribed.

The article proceeds as follows: section 2 explains the concepts of *institutional change* and *institutional work*. Section 3 presents an analysis of our empirical material collected in the urban sharing field with a focus on how sharing organisations create institutions. Section 4 analyses how sharing organisations disrupt institutions. In section 5, we evaluate the suitability of the analytical framework for studying institutional work of USOs, and suggest revisions. Conclusions are drawn in section 6, followed by a discussion of possible directions for future research.

[1] We exclude strategies for *maintaining* existing institutions from our analysis. There is little evidence that USOs seek to maintain current institutions, since they first and foremost challenge the established ways of organising urban resource distribution and use. Therefore, this paper focuses only on the creation and disruption of institutions.

2. Institutional change and institutional work

The institutional environment is understood as the "rules and requirements to which individual organizations must conform in order to receive legitimacy and support" (Scott, 1995 p.132). Scott (1995) distinguishes three types of institutions – regulative (laws and regulations), normative (norms, values, beliefs and assumptions) and cultural-cognitive (knowledge and skills) – that directly impact organisations. Sharing organisations, such as Obike, Peerby, Airbnb or Drivy, and the sharing activities they represent, i.e. bike, tool, accommodation and car sharing respectively, are also impacted by institutions rooted in a society (Grinevich et al., 2017). For example, car-sharing organisations are constrained by national and local mobility regulations, the institution of car ownership, or the social status associated with owning a car (Mont, 2004).

Unlike traditional organisations, USOs operate locally, on a city level, and are therefore also subject to institutional pressures unique to the city in which they operate, in addition to national rules and constraints. A USO setting up a bike-sharing scheme will face different institutional pressures in Copenhagen than in London. While the mobility mix in Copenhagen is dominated by a strong cycling culture, supported by high-quality infrastructure (Lindholm, 2018), London is dominated by private cars, taxis and public transportation, and the cycling culture is much less mainstreamed (Mayor of London, 2017).

In addition to organisations being influenced by their institutional environments, they can also shape, construct, or disrupt institutions (Thornton et al., 2012). The efforts of actors and organisations to “cope with, keep up with, shore up, tear down, tinker with, transform, or create anew the institutional structures within which they live, work, and play, and which give them their roles, relationships, resources, and routines” is a process called institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2011 p.53). Actors who engage in institutional work are often powerful and have strategic resources or skills, whether they be individuals who act as leaders or take on the form of a collective (Lawrence et al., 2013). However, it is difficult to change regulative, normative and socio-cognitive institutions even for powerful actors. Institutional work is associated with a reflective purposefulness with which they work to create, maintain and disrupt institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). The unit of analysis is micro-institutional practices of actors (Zilber, 2013), which allows us to examine the role of their intentions in institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2009).

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) describe institutional work as phases of conflict and cooperation between actors who represent old and new institutions, where the outcome typically reflects the values and interests of dominant actors. The central questions asked in studies of institutional work are: *who* engages in institutional work, *how* does it occur and *what* does it constitute (Lawrence et al., 2013), as well as *why, how, when* and *where* actors engage in it (Lawrence et al., 2011).

In this paper, we turn to the institutional work of USOs, exploring different mechanisms for how sharing practices[2] become institutionalised in cities. There are two ways to study this process:

[2] Our unit of analysis is sharing practices, rather than USOs, because even if the USOs that normalised the sharing practices cease to exist, the practices they have helped institutionalise are likely to be picked up by other organisations, and prevail. This is evidenced by the many copycats in various sharing sectors, e.g. LoveHomeSwap offers fundamentally the same service that was pioneered by Intervac International and upscaled online by HomeExchange; Lyft by Uber, GoMore by BlaBlaCar; LeftoverSwap by Foodsharing; Fat Lama by Peerby, etc.

(a) retrospectively, by linking *actual* institutional change to action; or (b) by focusing on the contemporary institutional work of USOs, not knowing whether it will result in changing institutional order (Lawrence et al., 2013; Zilber, 2013). According to Lawrence et al. (2013), institutional work should focus on the "messy day-to-day practices", regardless of the actual outcomes of that work. Consequently, this paper does not seek to find a definitive answer to how USOs have changed institutions; instead, it focuses on the current work, unfolding in everyday practices of USOs, and their purposeful activities in creating and disrupting institutions.

3. How do urban sharing organisations create institutions?

The creation of institutions is a lengthy process rooted in cultural and historical contexts, in which diverse actors and mechanisms play a role (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Actors can influence this process with their action when the existing institutions do not provide the regulatory, normative or socio-cognitive support they need (Battilana et al., 2009). There are three types of institutional work actors could undertake: (a) political work, by working to change regulatory institutions; (b) reconfiguration of actors' belief systems, to modify normative institutions; and (c) change of boundaries of meaning systems, by altering cognitive institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006).

The framework for institutional work developed by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), which will be used in our analysis, is summarised below. Each description of a mechanism of institutional work is followed by our findings.

The first group of institutional work, **political work,** consists of advocacy, defining and vesting. The three mechanisms work in a reinforcing loop, in which advocacy is a prerequisite for defining rules. This provides a foundation for the vesting work, which in turn increases or reduces the actors' power to advocate. It has been suggested that political work often results in revolutionary changes in institutions, as opposed to evolutionary changes (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996).

Advocacy refers to the mobilisation of regulatory and political support through direct techniques of persuasion. It can determine which norms are followed and which may be breached. Actors may propose, oppose or challenge legislation, or they may lobby to put their interests forward and set new agendas. Suchman (1995) identified three forms of advocacy: lobbying, advertising and litigation, and demonstrated how they are used by less powerful actors to achieve cognitive legitimacy.

Contrary to Suchman's (1995) finding, we only found examples of powerful, for-profit USOs with abundant resources engaging in advocacy. They do this by litigating and by lobbying, or otherwise discussing with the city government bodies. Litigation was used by Uber when it appealed the decision of a government body responsible for the transport system in London called Transport for London (TfL) that it had to employ its drivers (O'Connor, 2017). Similarly, Airbnb filed a lawsuit against San Francisco in the hope of avoiding stricter regulation (Benner, 2017). Lobbying was more prevalent among USOs in London, where a number of them joined *Sharing Economy UK (SEUK)*, a trade body lobbying the government and policymakers to protect the interests of USOs.

In light of tightening regulations relating to the sharing economy, lobbying has become essential for many USOs to secure favourable conditions in the cities in which they operate. In London, a business-to-consumer car sharing company spends considerable resources on communicating with city-level policymakers, especially with the Mayor of London's Office, which sets the agenda for TfL. Engaging with the municipal government is an important step in institutionalising car sharing in London:

> *A lot of what we think will make car sharing a real mainstream mode is under the control of TfL. So, we work a lot with them (…). We think that working with cities and city authorities is absolutely essential to what we do.*

The aim of lobbying the local government is to ensure that car sharing is included in TfL's strategy, to make TfL to integrate car sharing into public transport, and to promote car sharing as a sustainable mode of transport in London. The company also works with each of London's 33 boroughs to gain access to parking spaces and in doing so, further institutionalising car sharing in the city.

Often, USOs demonstrate to municipal officials how the city can benefit from their sharing model, and highlight their environmental, social or economic benefits for the citizens. An interviewee from a free-floating car sharing organisation in Berlin stated:

> *We approach them [local government officials] on an undemanding level: (…) we would like to function within the legal system. We are one of the (only) companies that can really support the case of reducing car use in the city. So far it has been really positive.*

For-profit bike sharing USOs based in London are facing critiques of "littering" the streets with bikes (Dickinson, 2018). In hopes of maintaining their operations in the city, one of the organisations is highlighting their positive impact on people's health, and communicating their positive environmental impact to the municipality:

> *The London Mayor used air quality as one of the cornerstones of his election strategy. We get asked about this by the municipality, and we can show them how much carbon we've saved.*

Similarly, an accommodation sharing organisation in Berlin is trying to appeal to the city's agenda:

> *Our goal is to support city challenges and make home sharing responsible.*

As city governments often do not have the judicial power to regulate online-based sharing organisations operating on their premises, advocacy and lobbying work of USOs is experiencing a shift from city to supranational level as evidenced by the emergence of the European Collaborative Forum (EUCoLab). The organisation lobbies on behalf of USOs and their users with the aim to facilitate and promote the collaborative economy in Europe. It brings together collaborative economy companies and European policymakers to discuss the current and future regulatory landscape of the sharing and collaborative economy (EUCoLab, 2016).

Defining allows actors to construct rule systems that grant status or identity or that define boundaries of membership or practice standards (e.g. accreditation or certification of actors within a field) (Lawrence, 1999). Defining is a prerequisite for advocacy, as the attempts of USOs to define themselves and their place in the sharing economy aids them in lobbying and litigation.

Many sharing organisations are involved in defining, as this is critical work that influences the survival and prosperity of many USOs. Defining is contingent to the organisational field to which they belong, as this determines whether existing or upcoming legislation applies to them. For example, to avoid being regulated as a taxi service, Uber claimed that it should not be seen as a mobility, taxi or ride-sharing organisation, but as a tech-company. However, the European Court ruled that Uber should be classified as a transportation service and consequently be regulated as one.

Definitional work also takes place at an intra-organisational level. While some would like to see only 'pure', non-profit sharing organisations included, others invite anyone to be a part of the sharing economy. For example, the founder of The People Who Share said:

> [The sharing economy] includes everything. Non-profits and for-profits are both part of it.

We have observed that for-profit USOs embraced their place in the sharing economy discourse and use it for marketing purposes or for distinguishing themselves from traditional organisations. On the other hand, many non-profit USOs are very clear about distinguishing themselves from for-profits, portraying themselves as 'the true sharers', and at the same time, presenting others as 'the hijackers of the sharing economy'. Furthermore, some non-profits do not view themselves as part of the sharing economy at all. The president of a non-profit accommodation-sharing platform stated:

We are not part of the sharing economy because there is no money involved.

The non-profit USOs that shy away from being associated with the sharing economy do so because they want to distance themselves from some of the negative images and impacts associated with for-profit USOs. Conversely, some incumbent companies with traditional business models try to freeride on the positive connotation associated with the notion of sharing (John, 2017).

Vesting refers to government agencies changing the rules of the market or to the negotiation process (the 'regulative bargains') between the state or another coercive institution and an actor. In the latter case, vesting results in an agreement where the government, in exchange for granting an economic monopoly over a specific activity or market, solicits support to its cause – to construct democratic, formal decision-making machinery (Vedung, 1997).

While we did not find government agencies directly offering grants or subsidies in exchange for a sharing service, we found examples of other types of government support towards USOs. For example, the local governments in London, Berlin and Malmö designate parking spaces to support car sharing. They might also become customers of existing sharing organisations, or initiate sharing practices themselves. Malmö City supports the operations of a tool pool, where all equipment is donated by the citizens of Malmö and is made available to others for free:

> *Malmö municipality supports us with the premises and has provided a starting budget, furniture, containers, transportation, materials, computers and other (…). They don't just support us, but they own the project.*

Vesting is a mechanism of institutional work that is done by governmental agencies. For the purpose of this paper, where we explore how USOs conduct institutional work, we find this mechanism to be misplaced. It is much better positioned under premises of governance theory that provides suitable analytical constructs for assessing the engagement of government agencies or municipalities in the sharing economy. We analysed this approach in another paper (Zvolska et al., 2018).

The second group of institutional work, **reconfiguration of actors' belief systems**, consists of three mechanisms: constructing identities, changing normative associations and constructing normative networks. The aim is to change the roles, values and norms that underpin normative institutions. However, the work differs in the contextual relationships that define the normative structure of institutions. While 'constructing identities' redefines relationships between an actor and the field, 'changing normative associations' refers to the relationship between norms and the institutional field in which they are created. Finally, 'constructing normative networks' changes the relationship between actors in a field by altering the normative assumptions that connect them (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). These three types of interactions provide the foundation for the formation of new institutions.

Constructing identities describes how actors develop new identities in an institutional field. Identities are constructed by actors both inside and outside an organisational field. An essential aspect of the construction of new identities is a collective effort.

While 'defining' refers to how the sharing economy is defined in general and where boundaries are drawn by actors in the organisational field of the sharing economy, 'constructing identities' refers to the efforts of individual organisations to create their own image and profile, and to how they utilise it to compete in the market. We found that identities created by USOs are influenced by the diversity of organisational forms. Our interviewees range from for-profit to non-profit, from peer-to-peer (P2P) to business-to-consumer (B2C), and from local to global organisations.

For-profit, B2C USOs often adopt the role of forward-thinkers that take advantage of and disseminate technological advances in urban contexts. When communicating their business models, they use terms such as 'smart', 'sustainable', or 'new technology'. The country manager of a B2C car-sharing USO in Berlin stated:

> *We [want to be] a platform for sustainable mobility which provides smart (…), convenient and sustainable ways to get out of the city.*

In contrast, a for-profit P2P USO identified itself with pro-social values:

> *We put people first. We do community activities. Also, what can be a better addition [to] the technical side? Our product is not the website itself; it is people. The magic happens when we are not present at all.*

Non-profit USOs tend to lag behind state-of-the-art technological advancements and instead focus on projecting their positive social impacts on communities. According to the Chair of the Board of an asset-sharing organisation in London:

> *Non-profit sharing offers different types of value, such as making friends. Our volunteers have different motivations – social justice, environment, community building, because they want to change the world to their own image.*

What connects all the USOs in their identity construction is their desire to be seen as catalysts for social, economic and environmental innovation, and a better alternative to the incumbent economic sectors.

Changing normative associations refers to the reformulation or reconfiguration of the relations between practices and their cultural and moral foundations. The adoption of for-profit norms in traditionally non-profit public domains is one such example. Changing normative institutions typically leads to a creation of parallel institutions that do not disrupt the prevailing ones.

Traditionally, sharing has been understood as "the oldest form of mutual distribution (…) among family, friends and neighbours" (Belk, 2017). However, according to John (2017), its meaning is being altered by for-profit sharing organisations that are capitalising on the positive connotations of the traditional narrative of 'sharing' associated with openness, honesty, empathy, mutuality, equality, and trust.

The nature of 'sharing' that for-profit sharing organisations embody is believed to be different because it does not necessarily lead to stronger personal connections (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Celata, Hendrickson, and Sanna (2017) demonstrate that, as sharing economy platforms scale up, they often lose the community and ethical values on which they were initially built. Conversely, sharing that is pioneered by non-profit sharing organisations is more likely to foster social cohesion, as it enhances a sense of belonging to a community (Belk, 2010; Rosen et al., 2011) or advances social justice and inclusion by providing free access to assets for all. It seems to be more closely related to the traditional meaning of sharing, which is evident in a number of USOs in Malmö, e.g. the tool library Garaget, the repair shop Bicycle Kitchen and the leisure equipment pool Fritidsbanken. At the same time, even members of such USOs might have different motives, as the chair of a sharing economy lobby group observed:

> *There is a tension between the members – some are interested just in products, others in genuine sharing.*

Consequently, ‘sharing’ can be understood as an institution that is being redefined by USOs.

USOs are also changing the normative associations people have towards private ownership. In capitalist societies, urban dwellers would traditionally have exclusive ownership of their assets, but they are now viewed as resources to be capitalised on. Conversely, users also forego ownership of, for example, cars and tools, because they can now borrow or rent them from strangers.

Our interviewee from a tool pool in Malmö explains how sharing business models are perpetually changing consumption patterns:

> *For example, a tool pool or [using] second-hand [goods] (…) [exemplify] that one finds more interesting things (...). So I don't think it will be a short-term trend (…). We get more examples that it is actually possible to earn money on this (…) and then people (…) get it better in their lives. And (…) against all the odds there are more [people] who started realising that it's actually quite realistic. So that's why I think it will grow.*

An interesting case of challenging normative associations comes from the Malmö-based book and tool library, which has had to convince local politicians, journalists and the citizens of Malmö that libraries do not just have to be for books:

> *We were used as a bad example in DN [Swedish newspaper] that had an article [asking] ‘Why do they lend you tools, why do they do this and that?’ We had to respond to it. There is so much complexity: what the people expect us to be, what we are and what the politicians want us to be.*

Constructing normative networks is concerned with the formation of inter-organisational connections. This often results in the creation of a peer entity that takes on the role of normative monitoring, compliance and sanctioning, often in parallel with existing institutions, activities and structures.

USOs in both London and Berlin are becoming organised through various industry associations and other networks, but this form of institutional work is more prominent in London than in Berlin and takes place in both inter-industrial and intra-industrial fields, i.e. in the mobility or accommodation sectors or across the sectors. We have not found examples of such work in Malmö.

An example of an intra-industrial collaborative network is the non-profit NGO Carplus and its subsidiary Bikeplus. They represent and promote car sharing and bike sharing as sustainable transport options in London, collect data that they share with their members, and foster strategic networks between USOs in the mobility sector. They also serve as the accreditation body of car sharing and bike sharing organisations in London.

An example of an inter-industrial peer group is the lobby group SEUK, which aims to promote the sharing economy in the UK and set standards for USOs. Its members vary across industries and include accommodation, car, bike, time, or food sharing USOs. Some members of SEUK are also members of Carplus or Bikeplus. Another example of an inter-industrial peer group is the already mentioned lobby organisation EuCoLab, which represents the interests of USOs on an EU level. Non-profit organisations also form networks through third-party organisations such as The People Who Share (London) and Oui Share (Berlin and London).

We found that USOs are more likely to form peer groups when these groups are organised by an outside institution, such as an independent trade body or an NGO. Some USOs showed signs of collaborating without third-party involvement, both on an intra-industrial and inter-industrial level, but were far less successful.

The third group of institutional work, **altering boundaries of meaning systems**, consists of mimicry, theorising and educating. These mechanisms focus on the beliefs, assumptions and frames that inform action. Mimicry draws on existing patterns of behaviour in order to legitimate new practices and behaviours, theorising develops new beliefs and concepts that support new institutions, and educating provides knowledge to actors to help them engage in new practices.

Mimicry is a form of institutional work that allows actors to leverage existing taken-for-granted rules, practices or technologies when introducing new ones. By associating new practices with old, novel ideas and structures are more likely to be adopted or achieve legitimacy, as they are more understandable or accessible.

Illustrations of mimicry from the sharing economy field are plentiful. USOs are leveraging not only the existing taken-for-granted practices, technologies and rules of traditional organisations – they also imitate each other's practices that have proven successful.

USOs mimic institutionalised practices of traditional organisations when they organise around industry associations in their endeavours to deal with prevailing institutions and rules (as discussed in ‘constructing normative networks’). They, therefore, mimic the practices of traditional industries in gaining and exercising power. We also found evidence that they are adopting business practices similar to incumbent companies. For example, the accommodation sharing organisation Wimdu is mimicking standardised hotel rooms. Many of their listings are accompanied by similar, professional photographs featuring pillows and towels with the Wimdu logo. This gives their listings a standardised look, akin to hotel rooms, arguably lowering the levels of uncertainty for potential guests and increasing trust. Similarly to other large companies, Airbnb has established a sustainability advisory board. It also followed other online giants such as Google and Apple when it chose Dublin as their European headquarters, to benefit from the low corporate tax (Worstall, 2013).

An example of mimicking each others' practices is the USOs' response to regulatory pressures by lobbying and engaging in discussions with local government officials. As this form of advocacy has proved to be successful for larger USOs, it has been picked up by the others. Now, it is no longer unusual for a for-profit USO to employ public policy advisors or hire professional officers.

Many new USOs also copy the business models of other USOs. After the success of Airbnb, a number of copycats have emerged (e.g. Wimdu, 9keys or FlipKey). It must be noted, however, that Airbnb was not the first P2P holiday rental website – VRBO was established three years prior. Non-profit forms of sharing are also multiplying, as evidenced by the increased popularity of tool pools, book sharing or food sharing initiatives in cities around the globe.

Theorising refers to actors developing new names, categories, ideologies and concepts in order to ease their introduction and acceptance as belonging to the "cognitive map of the field" (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006).

To communicate their novel business models, USOs have coined new terminology by adopting the names of the two vanguards of the sharing economy, Airbnb and Uber. For example, the CEO of a P2P carsharing organisation introduced their business model as an 'Airbnb for cars'. Similarly, a P2P car parking organisation claimed to be an 'Airbnb for car parking'. Additionally, 'Airbnb' and 'Uber' were used by our interviewees from across sectors as verbs and nouns, for example: 'to uber', 'to uberise', 'to airbnb', or 'we are airbnbing'. The creation of these concepts demonstrates a high level of institutionalisation of Airbnb and Uber.

Interestingly, while the two companies have gained a high level of cognitive legitimacy, the term 'sharing economy' remains contested. Our interviewees have used alternative terms, such as the collaborative economy, circular economy, and gig economy, and some expressed confusion over the right term for the phenomenon.

Another example of theorising is linked with the creation of new monetary values. In London, the time banking initiative Economy of Hours created a new currency called Echo – for every hour their member donates, they get one Echo, which can then be exchanged for an hour of learning skills or knowledge from another member. A similar case was established by the clothes swapping organisation Swop Shop in Malmö. For every donated piece of clothing, members get a green heart, which can be exchanged for a new piece of clothing. However, the USO ran into difficulties with the tax authorities:

> *When I started, I wanted to have a fair system, that's why I have the hearts. The Tax Office had a hard time helping me because it was a new way of consuming. After a while, they put me in [a special tax group] and now, after four years, they want me to do the accounting for the green hearts.*

This shows that creating alternative monetary constructs is difficult even for sharing organisations which are said to have the power of disrupting institutionalised ways of distributing resources.

Educating is associated with the provision of knowledge that is necessary to understand new practices and structures. Educating can take the form of study visits, creation of platforms for knowledge learning, organisation of workshops, training sessions and other activities where actors gain knowledge about the new practice, structure or institution, and learn how to support it.

Both non-profit and for-profit USOs engage in educating, but for-profits are more likely to educate/lobby in order to avoid regulation and keep their organisation in operation. The home swapping USO HomeExchange teaches their members how to interact with home associations in the US to obtain permission to use the platform and take part in short-term home exchanges with people around the world. Similarly, Airbnb organises member meetups where it teaches its members to lobby local councils. In the light of increased regulations towards Uber, the company is asking its members to mobilise in the name of technological progress (Sundararajan, 2014a).

Non-profits educate about sustainability issues and how their users can help tackle them. For example, the owner of Swop Shop in Malmö sees awareness raising and education of the public as an obligation to spur future change in society. Furthermore in Malmö, a book and tool library is educating children about leisure-time activities:

> *We work a lot with kids on participation (…). We want to challenge their perception of the world.*

Klädoteket, a currently closed clothes library in Malmö, claims:

> *[the organisation] … was used to make people aware of sustainability issues. Why throw away clothes, if you can share them. (…) But we try to include recycled materials, try to teach kids to reuse. That is where we engage teachers.*

In London, the bike sharing USO Obike is educating people and councils about health benefits associated with cycling.

4. How do urban sharing organisations disrupt institutions?

Actors disrupt institutions when the existing institutional order does not provide sufficient support for them to carry out their activities. Often, actors working to create new institutions may inadvertently disrupt existing rules, practices and technologies (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), so institutional creation is strongly linked with institutional disruption. For example, Laurell and Sandström (2016) demonstrate on a case study of Uber that sharing economy platforms are perceived as an institutional disruption because they have managed to diffuse established markets. Other authors have also discussed the market disruption (Cohen & Sundararajan, 2015; Martin et al., 2015; Wosskow, 2014), as well as the disruption of employment caused by USOs (Drahokoupil and Fabo, 2016; Sundararajan, 2016). The disruption has been accredited to a variety of technological and socio-economic factors, such as the rise of ICT and mobile phone ownership or the economic downturn, which has led people to accept new forms of income and employment (Murillo et al., 2017).

We argue that the rise of the sharing economy disrupts not only markets and employment relationships, but also the taken-for-granted practices associated with the traditional redistribution of resources. The disruption is not shaped by USOs alone, but by a number of institutional actors, including the users, entrepreneurs, municipal, regional and national policy planners and policymakers, and scholars (Meyer and Shaheen, 2017).

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) distinguish three types of mechanisms of institutional disruption.

Disconnecting sanctions/rewards refers to the (re)definition of well-established concepts and ideas through the coercive action of powerful actors that could lead to 'revolutionary' institutional change. This type of institutional work occurs through the judiciary, which allows state and non-state actors to directly remove rewards and sanctions from institutionalised practices, technologies and rules. Actors can also disrupt institutions indirectly by "undermining the technical definitions and assumptions on which they were founded" (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 236).

Some urban sharing organisations are working actively to remove benefits that established companies and institutions enjoy and to remove sanctions imposed on the sharing organisations. Airbnb worked with the local government in London against housing regulations that initially prohibited short-term accommodation rentals. The organisation managed to change the regulation to allow entire home lettings for 90 days a year.

A B2C car-sharing organisation in London is actively lobbying for shared mobility and green cars in London and seeks to dismantle the rewards enjoyed by car owners:

> *We want the city to be really bold and say: 'the only way we're going to meet the [sustainability] challenges is if we redefine what the car and the city look like.' That means discouraging private car*

initiatives because it's a very inefficient model in a city and encouraging car sharing. It's a mixture of carrots and sticks that we're looking for: taxing private cars, whether it be congestion charges, road pricing, and encouraging behaviour change towards more sustainable modes such as car sharing, walking and cycling.

The efforts of the USOs have been successful because they are aligned with London's sustainability strategy, which identified air pollution as a major environmental problem for the city, and because the local government is open to banning cars from the city centre. Therefore, USOs are more likely to change institutional structures through regulatory work if their aims are aligned with existing normative and socio-cognitive institutions.

Other for-profit companies are also trying to mobilise their members to support their cause, but with varying degrees of success. For example, Uber has failed to dismantle the taxi industry in London, and instead, the taxi industry managed to force out Uber from many cities through regulation and by developing a similar level of IT-enabled services for-profits can offer their users.

Disassociating moral foundations gradually disrupts normative foundations from institutionalised practices, rules or technologies. The normative foundations are most commonly disrupted by elite and powerful actors, but their activities are usually not directly aimed at attacking them.

The many examples of organisations that are working to disassociate moral foundations of extant practices come from our interviews with USOs that are questioning the institution of ownership as a prerequisite for an appropriate way of consumption. Practically all USOs base their business models on undermining the need for ownership, instead advocating access to goods, services and skills as an alternative, modern and more democratic way to consume.

Many USOs and third-party organisations are explicitly working on de-institutionalising ownership on moral grounds by promoting the utilisation of idling resources as more sustainable consumption alternatives: Why own when you can rent from the neighbours? Why throw away when you can give it to someone else? The London-based USO Freegle explicitly encourages people: ‘Don't throw it away, give it away!’ (Freegle, 2018).

USOs are also indirectly disrupting prevalent normative institutions by encouraging and enabling sets of practices that undermine rather than directly attack the foundations of the established institutions. This work is affected by other institutional factors that shape the institutionalisation of ownerless consumption, such as the economic downturn and the growing disparity between rich and poor, which altogether lead to increasing acceptance for more frugal types of living, sharing and second-hand consumption. A few years ago, buying second-hand clothes or furniture was frowned upon, while now it is being framed as a modern way of living. Some sharing economy entrepreneurs are questioning the fact that the majority of shopping malls are selling new products:

There is nothing bad about a shopping mall. The only bad thing is that they have newly produced stuff.

Undermining assumptions and beliefs takes place when actors remove some of the transaction costs associated with prevailing taken-for-granted practices, technologies and rules, thereby stimulating innovation and reducing risks associated with differentiation. Actors can undermine assumptions and beliefs by creating an innovation that breaks extant institutional settings, or by gradually undermining institutions through contrary practice.

A technology-supported innovation of referral and feedback mechanisms in online USOs helps replace existing behavioural templates and facilitates new ways of building trust among strangers. The technology is undermining cultural-cognitive assumptions about hosting strangers in one's home or sharing belongings with strangers. It reduces risks associated with the new practice and lowers transaction costs by employing ICT solutions. Another assumption that is undermined by this innovation is the typical role of the state as a policing organisation; in online platforms, a new system of peer policing and reviews has been developed.

Another mechanism of undermining assumptions and beliefs refers to a gradual undermining of established cognitive assumptions through contrary practice. The practice of giving feedback to peers on online platforms is gradually changing peoples' assumptions about doing business with strangers. Before the emergence of the sharing economy, renting a room in a family house or lending tools to a stranger was uncommon, but new cognitive institutions are now being formed and normalised, and people are gradually accepting these practices. The more people employ these practices in their everyday lives, the more normalised and embedded the underlying cognitive institutions will become.

5. Towards a revised framework for institutional work of urban sharing organisations

We found the framework by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) to be useful for unpacking the mechanisms of institutionalising urban sharing. The division of mechanisms corresponding to regulatory, normative and cognitive institutions also provides a useful categorisation. However, some of the mechanisms, especially those related to normative and cognitive institutions, were at times difficult to distinguish from one another. This triggered us to adjust the framework for USOs, also following the suggestion by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) that the mechanisms they had outlined should not be treated as definitive.

The adjusted framework for how USOs are working to create new institutions is presented in Table 1. Table 2 presents a framework for how USOs are disrupting institutions. The main changes to the original framework are explained after these tables.

The key changes we made to the framework can be summarised in four steps. First, while building upon the three institutional pillars by Scott (1995), the original framework by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) does not explicitly include them. We find it useful to think about the mechanisms of institutional work in connection to regulatory, normative and cultural-cognitive institutions, and have therefore added these categories to our framework.

Second, we removed ‘vesting’ from the framework for creating institutions. We observe that ‘vesting’, and to some extent, ‘mimicry’ refer to institutional complexity, i.e. how institutions affect actors, rather than to institutional work. ‘Vesting’ by definition is studied primarily through the practices of government officials rather than USOs. When it comes to the analysis of the actions by local governments that support or hinder institutionalisation of sharing practices, we find that governance theory is more helpful, and we discuss this in another paper (Zvolska et al., 2018).

Third, we split two mechanisms into two new categories. 1) The ‘changing normative associations’ mechanism was divided into ‘challenging traditional meanings’ and ‘creating new norms’. We find that changing the traditional meaning of sharing from being a non-profit activity that is mostly practised among family and friends to the commercialised forms of the sharing economy exercised between strangers is principally different from the instances when sharing practices question the norms of ownership and consuming new goods. 2) We split ‘mimicry’, into ‘isomorphic

Table 1
Mechanisms of institutional work to create institutions.

Form of work to create institutions	Definition
REGULATORY WORK	
Lobbying and litigation	Engagement of USOs in the shaping of policies and/or regulations
Delimiting organisational fields	Setting the boundaries and delimiting membership in the organisational field for political, ideological or regulatory purposes
NORMATIVE WORK	
Self-identification	Creating identities that reflect organisational values, and constructing images that appeal to other actors in the organisational field
Changing traditional meanings	Altering the traditional meaning of sharing
Creating new norms	Creating new norms around consumption practices and resource distribution
Organising	Forming intra- and inter-field networks to create a united voice, entity and common identity and to develop collective codes of conduct
CULTURAL-COGNITIVE WORK	
Isomorphic mimicry	Associating new sharing models with existing sets of taken-for-granted practices, technologies and regulations to ease adoption, improve acceptance and ensure long-term survival
Imitation	Imitation of other USOs' business models leading to a multiplication of USOs in the field
Constructing new meaning systems	Creating new constructs to support legitimacy building for the sharing economy
Educating	Educating actors in the organisational field of the sharing economy and beyond

Table 2
Mechanisms of institutional work to disrupt institutions.

Form of work to disrupt institutions	Definition
REGULATORY WORK	
Removing privileges	Lobbying and litigation to remove privileges, preferential treatment, subsidies or rewards from established or competing practices, technologies or actors
NORMATIVE WORK	
Undermining moral grounds	Undermining moral grounds of consumptive lifestyles, ownership and not using idling resources
CULTURAL-COGNITIVE WORK	
Undermining assumptions and beliefs	Removing transaction costs and undermining established cognitive assumptions

mimicry' and 'imitation' depending on whether USOs imitate incumbent organisations (isomorphic mimicry) or each other (imitation).

Fourth, to the best of our knowledge[3] the majority of political work employed by USOs falls within 'lobbying' and 'litigating'. Therefore, we renamed 'advocacy' to 'lobbying and litigating,' omitting 'advertising' (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006).

6. Conclusions and future research

The aim of this study was two-fold. First, we sought to understand, map out and classify a variety of mechanisms for USOs to engage in institutional creation and disruption. Second, we tested and adjusted the framework for institutional work to the context of the sharing economy. Many USOs engage in purposeful institutional work with a clear goal to disrupt or create institutions. On the other hand, their institutional work also takes place as a result of less purposeful actions, which are more of a side effect or an unintended consequence of their practices. We have also observed that many USOs engage in more than one form of institutional work. For-profit and non-profit USOs employ different portfolios of institutional work mechanisms and follow different pathways of institutionalisation, which are context-dependent. For-profits have more resources to engage in advocacy practices through lobbying (e.g. SEUK in London, a car sharing association in Berlin) or litigation (e.g. Uber). They often mimic practices or structures of their incumbent counterparts in order to gain legitimacy. Non-profits, on the other hand, often gain legitimacy by being distinctly different from the mainstream companies, but lack the power or resources to engage in political work.

USOs aiming to gain legitimacy can learn from each other's institutional work. This knowledge can be transferred between for-profit and non-profit USOs. We found that one way to gain political legitimacy is to speak the language of powerful institutional actors, such as local governments. In line with Sundararajan's (2014b) study on what Uber can learn from Airbnb about culture, we argue that Airbnb, which actively engages in lobbying, educating and forming normative frameworks, has been more successful in gaining the support of local governments than Uber.

Furthermore, USOs found it easier to engage in discussion with local governments if they could demonstrate common sustainability goals. The ability to demonstrate positive social, environmental and economic impact of USOs aids the institutionalisation of sharing practices. However, the sustainability claims made by USOs should be substantiated with studies, which are at present largely missing.

We hope that the revised framework with its subsequent application to study the institutional work of USOs in multiple geographical contexts will contribute to our ultimate goal of understanding how urban sharing becomes institutionalised in diverse urban settings. At the same time, we see a number of unexplored areas.

Our data indicate that there is a spectrum of USOs, some of which appear to be rather mainstreamed, while others represent niche practices. There is a hypothesis shared by some of our interviewees that the sharing economy concept is not yet mainstreamed/institutionalised. Future studies could focus on developing indicators for measuring the degrees of institutionalisation of urban sharing in a particular geographical context.

Another possible area of exploration is how USOs operating illegally or in a grey regulatory area can still become institutionalised. For example, Uber has gained cognitive legitimacy in the eyes of its users all over the world; however, it lacks socio-political legitimacy in the eyes of local authorities in a number of cities.

[3] Our knowledge is based on extensive empirical work by our research team in four case cities: London, Berlin, San Francisco and Malmö, and additional pilot work done in Copenhagen, Manila and Amsterdam.

Gaining these two legitimacy components is described by neo-institutional scholars Aldrich and Fiol (1994) as key prerequisites for an activity or a venture to become institutionalised. Does this still hold for the urban sharing phenomenon?

The 'vesting' mechanism, which we removed from the framework, is worth exploring further in studies focusing on the role of city governments in institutionalising urban sharing. In particular, the mechanisms of their engagement are still unclear. Future studies could explore whether local governments contribute to the institutionalisation of sharing when they provide sharing services to their employees (e.g. municipal bike and carpools in Malmö), or to the citizens in collaboration with USOs (e.g. municipal bike-sharing schemes in London, Berlin, Malmö and many other cities).

Our empirics show that not only do USOs imitate incumbent businesses, but sharing newcomers also imitate other more successful USOs. In addition, incumbents sometimes imitate USOs (e.g. taxi companies in London have created mobile phone apps MyTaxi and GetTaxi, which are very similar to the Uber app, thereby imitating Uber's value proposition of convenience and speed). Incumbent businesses, therefore, appear to play an important role in the institutionalisation of urban sharing, but their role is not captured in this paper. We suggest that future research expands to the study of more actors and explores what incumbent businesses do to maintain their legitimacy. Studies on institutional legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) could form the basis of this research.

Where to place the role of individuals in the success of the institutional work performed by USOs remains unclear. For example, the success of the Berlin-based USOs Velogistics and BikeSurf is very much dependent on individuals who volunteer their time to the organisations. Similarly, the success of Swop Shop in Malmö can almost exclusively be attributed to the willpower and persistence of the founder. The contribution to the institutionalisation of urban sharing by charismatic figures could be explored through the lens of institutional entrepreneurship, as this stream of literature grants more agency to individuals. The role of charismatic individuals and their actions is important because they often advocate for a certain vision of the sharing economy as a whole.

Finally, urban sharing is a rather new phenomenon, and it is too early to talk about permanent institutional change. However, longitudinal studies would be very useful to distil the evolutionary pathways for the institutionalisation of urban sharing.

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