A R T I C L E

The distinctive incorporation of sociological neoinstitutionalism into Japanese sociology and its theoretical insights for the discipline

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Abstract

Although sociological neoinstitutionalist thought has made indelible imprints across the social sciences in Japan, its incorporation into Japanese sociology at large has been relatively limited, and its broader applications to analyses of global social phenomena using World Society Theory are even less prominent. To empirically gauge the emergence, growth, content evolution, and production/consumption patterns of this scholarship, sociological neoinstitutionalist works published across the 1977–2021 period by authors affiliated with Japanese institutions were manually coded for content, marquee publications/authors cited, primary author's final degree discipline, and publication's outlet field. The article briefly introduces core ideas in sociological neoinstitutionalism and World Society Theory before delving into the survey details and results, an explanation for the literature's distinctive pattern of incorporation into Japanese sociology, and concluding thoughts on its theoretical implications for Japanese sociology and beyond. The study finds that this scholarship has been produced and consumed primarily throughout—in declining order—business-related fields, education, and sociology. As its incorporation diversified in the mid-1990s, bifurcation occurred between a growing share of "middle-of-the-road" sociological neoinstitutionalist scholarship that embraced the range of ideas that broke from the "old" institutionalisms, and a small and

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declining share that pushed the phenomenological and social constructionist thrust of the theory to its limits and/or acknowledged the perspective's global-comparative applicability. These patterns seem to track the concomitant theoretical, substantive, and methodological inclinations within the discipline in Japan. Sociological neoinstitutionalist thought holds promise for a range of research areas interested in exploring domestic and global determinants of social change.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Although sociologists are trained to think of individuals as socially embedded creatures whose realities and experiences cannot entirely be reduced to functional or rational explanations, they may disagree on what is to be deemed an institution, its content and characteristics, and its interactions and relationships with actors. To what degree are individuals, organizations, and states constitutive of the institutions in which they are embedded, and to what extent are interests and identities products of the structures around us rather than *a priori* to social experience? How much of our agency do we actually "own," and how much of it is "imagined" or constructed through taken-for-granted cultural scripts? Our ideologies and training place us somewhere along the agency–structure spectrum and sociological neoinstitutionalism lies at the structural and phenomenological end.

This article aims to (1) briefly introduce sociological neoinstitutionalism and its phenomenological global extension, World Society Theory, while highlighting two central claims made about agentic actorhood and decoupling; (2) survey Japanese social science scholarship over the 1977–2021 period to ascertain not only how and when these ideas have been produced and consumed, but also which concepts and ideas have proliferated; (3) discuss how and why sociological neoinstitutionalist thought has permeated throughout Japanese sociological scholarship in the distinctive way that it has; and (4) suggest implications these ideas have for Japanese sociology moving forward.

In this article, I follow Jepperson and Meyer (2021) in their use of the term *sociological neoinstitutionalism* to refer to the body of work that encompasses phenomenological understandings of institutions in the discipline of sociology in the modern era. Sociological neoinstitutionalism—and especially World Society Theory—problematizes the assumption that actorhood and interests are natural and *a priori* to actor identities, interests, and behaviors, and asserts that rationality and actorhood are themselves socially constructed notions reflecting cognitive scripts of a modern global culture institutionalized across history and legitimized through webs of international organizations and structures. Notably, this perspective departs from older sociological institutionalist traditions and other forms of (neo-)institutionalisms in economics and political science (Hall & Taylor, 1996; March & Olsen, 1984). Within sociological neoinstitutionalism, John W. Meyer and colleagues in the "Stanford School" and World Society scholarship push the phenomenological envelope further than DiMaggio and Powell (1983), and provide a system-level global-*cultural* theoretical alternative to World-Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 1974) while dovetailing with constructivist thought in international relations (Finnemore, 1996). This literature takes institutions seriously—not as simple background

constraints on or derivatives of actor interests, behavior, or identities—but as historical, legitimated, and exogenous cultural influences worthy of investigation in and of themselves that shape and even constitute the ontological realities of the modern actor. The constitutive and cultural-cognitive aspects of institutionalization are the *merkmal* of the more phenomenological neoinstitutionalism unique to sociology (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). While stressing ideas such as rationalized institutional structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and the cultural construction of social agency and the modern actor (Meyer et al., 1987; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000), scholars in this tradition often problematize "cultural scripts" and espouse strong imageries of social constructionism.

In the Japanese social science literature, scholars use variants of the label, *shinseidoha soshikiron* (organizational neoinstitutionalism) to generally refer to the body of literature that (1) has conceptual and theoretical roots tracing back to the influential works of Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), and Scott (2014) in organizational and educational sociology; and (2) draws on concepts such as legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and loose coupling (Weick, 1976). Sociological neoinstitutionalist thought has made imprints across Japanese social science scholarship, but its distinctive impact seems to be concentrated in various business-related disciplines and the subfield of education within sociology—though even in this subfield, Fujimura (2022) laments its surprisingly limited incorporation. Therefore, what exactly does the terrain of sociological neoinstitutionalist scholarship in the Japanese social sciences—and more specifically, Japanese sociology—look like over time, and why? First, let us begin with a brief introduction of the core ideas and assumptions of sociological neoinstitutionalism.

2 | THEORY: IDEAS PROBLEMATIZED IN SOCIOLOGICAL NEOINSTITUTIONALISM

Sociological neoinstitutionalism offers a unique theoretical imagery that turns many sociological explanations of the social world on their heads by problematizing the very foundational and often unquestioned assumptions that undergird much of modern theorization—namely, those concerning agency, actorhood, and actors and their relationship to and interactions with institutions. Additionally, the theory provides the language and conceptual toolbox to explain contradictory and seemingly "irrational" social realities that are difficult to explain with actor-centric theories. Corresponding respectively to each of these contributions, there are two ideas that are central to sociological neoinstitutionalism worth highlighting as their problematization in the phenomenological neoinstitutionalist vein is not only unique, but also insightful for both the larger institutionalist theoretical program and applications of sociological neoinstitutionalist insights to global-comparative research: (1) agentic actorhood and otherness and (2) decoupling. Both are key indicators of sociological neoinstitutionalist work and germane to this study's literature survey coding framework. Below, I elaborate on each before discussing the extension of sociological neoinstitutionalist thought to global-comparative analyses.

2.1 | Agentic actorhood and otherness

Unlike realist theories common in economics and political science, and the realist logics often present in some areas of sociology and variants of institutionalism, sociological neoinstitutionalism—especially the more phenomenological strand of John W. Meyer and colleagues—asserts that modern actors, such as individuals, organizations, and states, are not naturally hard-wired rational, self-interested, utility-maximizing, and purposive actors that are autonomous from the culture or institutions in which they are embedded (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Rather, it takes issue with the assumption that actors and their actions and

interests are *a priori* to institutionalized cultural scripts and models (Meyer et al., 1987), and posits that actors and their behaviors and identities are not only regulated by, but also legitimated, empowered, and constructed by—even constitutive of—a broader and modern (global) culture of institutionalized norms, scripts, and cognitive models. The imagery is of actors as stage actors who possess scripted identities and engage in scripted behaviors that are socially constructed, instead of actors with natural utility-maximizing and rational tendencies. Therefore, individuals themselves may think and justify that they are behaving rationally, but their definitions of what constitutes rational behavior are themselves socially constructed by a larger institutionalized culture, and their behavior is based on highly scripted notions of "proper" or virtuous (rather than "truly" and objectively successful or efficient) individual actorhood.

Many of these entities are therefore not "actors" in the same sense as the actors that are conceptualized in other variants of institutionalism, as the "action" they engage in is not necessarily conscious or purposeful. They are instead, authorized *agents* with agentic responsibilities, who enact cultural scripts on behalf of various actual and imagined interests of the self, other actors, other non-actors, and principles—often for broad collective purposes (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). In this way, these actors-as-agents are *disinterested* "others" (in the Median sense) (Meyer, 2010) who "speak for the rationalized ideals of the universal scientific truth, law, and moral order and apply these considerations to the proper interests and needs of the actors" (Meyer, 1999: 128). They are individuals and social movement organizations who are "*agents* of the collectivity" (emphasis in original) that represent collective universal goals and goods and are endowed with moral authority (Jepperson, 2002: 253).

2.2 | Decoupling

In the modern world, these "actors" go to great extremes to maintain legitimacy through the ceremonial adoption of societal—and often global—models and standards. Rather than via the narrow interests of any particular state, organization, or individual, the diffusion of these models is not coerced and occurs through theorization, or "the self-conscious development and specification of abstract categories and the formulation of patterned relationships" (Strang & Meyer, 1993: 492). These models are theorized by "theorists" such as scientists, intellectuals, policy analysts, professionals, etc. who are culturally legitimated within a particular social context and deemed authoritative. Though local contexts or individual idiosyncrasies may create variation in the degree to which (global) models or norms touch down and diffuse through national "receptor sites" to affect actor identities and behaviors (Frank et al., 2000), there is ample empirical evidence of overarching isomorphism in values, norms, policies, etc. across disparate actors (Meyer et al., 1997).

Unsuccessful, or inadequate enactment of these "cognitive and ontological models of reality that specify the nature, purposes, technology, sovereignty, control, and resources of nation-states and other actors" (Meyer et al., 1997: 149) is common in the modern world as these models are lofty and idealistic—so much so that most actors do not fully attain "proper" actorhood (Meyer, 2009). As a result, decoupling between form and behavior or policy goals and observed reality is common. The rationale behind decoupling is therefore not necessarily one of intentional deceit on the part of the actor; instead, it is often simply the result of internal inconsistencies and instabilities within actors, ritualized enactments of institutionalized scripts and models, and/or the inability to achieve the lofty normative expectations of modern actorhood despite concerted efforts. This inability keeps actors in a perpetual state of inadequacy, which leads to more posturing; the seeking of counseling from professionals who offer unselfish authoritative advice as "'disinterested' professionalized others" (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000: 115); more loose coupling; and self-reflection and mobilization for social change.

2.3 | The global-comparative extension of sociological neoinstitutionalism: World Society Theory

In this way, sociological neoinstitutionalism draws its strengths and uniqueness from its deliberate efforts to move away from functionalist and realist explanations of social phenomena; and by extending and leveraging ideas such as agentic actorhood, otherhood, and decoupling to analyses of global social phenomena, World Society Theory offers phenomenological macroinstitutionalist (Meyer, 1999) insights into how and why disparate entities *across the world* simultaneously possess unique idiosyncratic *and* overarching isomorphic characteristics. These global isomorphic patterns are difficult to explain using theoretical frameworks premised on functionalist and realist assumptions of purposive actors that pursue interests under bounded rationality. Instead, in this perspective, individuals, organizations, and states are considered to be actors influenced by a global culture of shared institutionalized norms, scripts, and cognitive models that are legitimated by the authority of a decentralized, stateless, and diffuse world polity with a unified cultural system (Boli & Thomas, 1999; Cole, 2017; Meyer et al., 1997). These agents act as carriers and enactors of this historically and culturally constructed global culture of proper modern actorhood, premised on the fundamental principles of modernity rooted in the Western and Enlightenment tenets of justice (equality) and progress, and the legitimacy of rationality, reason (science), and individualism (Boli, 2005; Meyer, 2010; Meyer et al., 1987).

3 | A SURVEY OF SOCIOLOGICAL NEOINSTITUTIONALIST SCHOLARSHIP IN JAPAN

For this study's analysis, I further specify sociological neoinstitutionalism as a theoretical program that not only includes cultural and cognitive scripts within its conceptualization of institutions, but also problematizes actorhood, agency, and rationality *as cultural constructions*. Its incorporation into the corpus of Japanese social science scholarship at large—and perhaps rather surprisingly, into Japanese sociology—seems to be quite limited. Even more limited is the application of these sociological neoinstitutionalist ideas to global-comparative analyses. In this section, I explicate the data and method used to conduct a survey of sociological neoinstitutionalist scholarship in Japan, and the results obtained.

3.1 | Data and method

To understand the emergence, growth, content evolution, and production and consumption patterns of sociological neoinstitutionalist and World Society scholarship in Japan, sociological neoinstitutionalist works published across the 1977–2021 period were examined and manually coded. The survey begins in 1977 at the "birth year" of sociological neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991: 11–12). Google Scholar was used as it searches openly available scholarship on the Internet, and can also return results based on content in electronic books as well as information archived in CiNii Research and J-Stage—two widely-used academic search engines for Japanese scholarship. Though this Google Scholar search is the primary source of data for this study, to assess and ensure its comprehensiveness, a supplementary survey was conducted that directly searched CiNii Research over the same time period using comparable search terms. Of the 191 unique publications in the combined list of works from both search platforms, 28 works (14.7%) were unique to the CiNii Research search. These works were also examined, coded, and used as supplements to the analysis in the "Substantive Examples" section below.

First, a baseline set of English and Japanese search terms ensured that only publications that both make explicit reference to sociological neoinstitutionalism and are written by scholars affiliated with Japanese institutions were reflected in the search. John W. Meyer's significant influence spanning the gamut of sociological neoinstitutionalist thought from the more phenomenologically "moderate" versions of DiMaggio and Powell to the more "extreme" phenomenological and global versions that typify World Society scholarship; Ronald L. Jepperson's contribution to theorization on institutions in the sociological neoinstitutionalist vein; and John Boli's centrality to the global application of sociological neoinstitutionalist thought, position these three scholars' works as primary staples of research in this field. Because it is difficult to imagine any sociological neoinstitutionalist work that does not reference any of their works, their names were included in the search parameters. On the other hand, the names, DiMaggio and Powell, were not included given the sheer breadth of publications outside of sociological neoinstitutionalism that draw on their works. The baseline search generated 677 items, of which 454 remained after 223 works were omitted as they were either written by scholars unaffiliated with Japanese institutions or were incomplete or non-academic. In a second round of cleaning, duplicate, inaccessible, non-research paper, and student works (145 items), as well as publications that made references to Meyer, Jepperson, and/or Boli but were referring to a different person with the same last name (146 items), were removed. The final list of works that could sufficiently be considered sociological neoinstitutionalist—at least within the parameters of this study—included 163 publications (published collectively by 126 unique authors).

These works were manually examined and coded for (1) primary author's final degree discipline; (2) publication's outlet field; (3) marquee sociological neoinstitutionalist publications and authors cited; and (4) substantive themes problematized. These themes span the core substantive and conceptual themes within the sociological neoinstitutionalist literature at large (items 1–5 below) and those that often appear distinctively in more phenomenological variants of the sociological neoinstitutionalist (items 6–7 below) and World Society (items 8–9 below) literatures: (1) organizations, (2) isomorphism, (3) rationalization, (4) decoupling, (5) cognitive (scripts), (6) agency, (7) disinterested others, (8) world society/polity/culture, and (9) globalization. "Disinterested others" was eventually dropped from the analysis because no works problematized it.

Each publication was examined to ensure that only those that substantively problematized any of these themes in a sociological neoinstitutionalist light were coded. By doing so, it was possible not only to sort works on the basis of how "deeply" they were premised on sociological neoinstitutionalist ideas, but also to analyze how and for what types of claims these ideas were drawn on to make. Although automated text mining could be less tasking, it is prone to false positives as a specific term may appear but be used in a non-sociological neoinstitutionalist vein, or there may be a passing reference to a concept without problematization. Only when authors problematized the *social construction* or *socially constructed nature* of relevant concepts were the works coded. The findings are presented below—first in terms of overall trends, and then in more substantive detail drawing on specific publications.

3.2 | Findings: Overall trends

Over the 1977–2021 period, 60.7% of the 163 sociological neoinstitutionalist works produced by scholars affiliated with Japanese institutions were written by scholars trained in economics and business-related disciplines such as marketing, accounting, commerce, and management, and it is in the outlets of these disciplines that more than half (58.3%) of all sociological neoinstitutionalist works appear (Table 1).

Although significantly smaller, the next two largest groups of scholars producing sociological neoinstitutionalist work are in education and sociology (19 works [11.7%] each). In terms of

TABLE 1 Cross-tabulation of primary author's final degree discipline and publication's outlet field (1977–2021; $N = 163$).

Publication's primary author's final degree discipline / Publication's outlet field	Sociology	Sociology of education	Education	Social welfare, humanities, and social sciences	Org. Studies	Public admin. and public policy	Political science (including IR)	Economics	Business-related fields[a]	Law	Omnibus	Other disciplines and unknown	Total	Percentage of total publications published by authors trained in each discipline
Sociology	5	1	1		3			1	3		3	2	19	11.7
Sociology of Education													0	0.0
Education	2	2	10	1				1	2		1		19	11.7
Social Welfare, Humanities, and Social Sciences				1	1							1	3	1.8
Organizational Studies													0	0.0
Public Administration and Public Policy						2							2	1.2
Political Science (including IR)							1			1		1	3	1.8
Economics				1	1			3	6		2	1	14	8.6
Business-related fields[a]				2	5			15	59		1	3	85	52.1
Law						2						2	4	2.5
Omnibus (e.g., general focus university bulletins)													0	0.0
Other Disciplines and Unknown		2	1					1	4		1	5	14	8.6
TOTAL	7	5	12	5	10	4	1	21	74	1	8	15	163	100.0
% of Total Publications Published in Each Field	4.3	3.1	7.4	3.1	6.1	2.5	0.6	12.9	45.4	0.6	4.9	9.2	100.0	

Note: To produce a cross-tabulation, outlet fields such as "Organizational Studies" and "Omnibus" are included in the left-hand column list of degree disciplines, even though no such corresponding degree disciplines exist (or are not conventional).

[a]The category "Business-related fields" includes Business, Management, MBA, Commerce, Accounting, and Marketing.

outlet fields, education scholars seem to have a stronger tendency to publish within their own field, with 12 of the 19 publications (63.2%) appearing in education or sociology of education outlets. Although sociologists do publish in sociology-related outlets (6 of 19, or 31.6%), they also submit their work broadly to general-audience outlets and specialty outlets such as those in organizational studies, economics and business-related fields, and education. With sociologists publishing widely in outlets outside of their discipline of training, and scholars trained in education being the only non-sociology-trained scholars publishing in sociology outlets, only 4.3% of all sociological neoinstitutionalist work published during this period appear in sociology outlets.

In sum, during this period, sociological neoinstitutionalist works by scholars affiliated with Japanese institutions were produced (84.1%) and consumed (73.1%) by the fields of economics and business, education, and sociology. This seems to generally mirror the intellectual and substantive interests of sociological neoinstitutionalist sociologists outside of Japan (Amenta & Ramsey, 2010), but the difference is that within Japan, the production and consumption of this scholarship seem to take place more diffusely outside of the discipline of sociology and across various other disciplines. Instead of being a theoretical program organically rooted within sociology in which its ideas are drawn piecemeal by other disciplines, its analytical utility has been directly incorporated broadly in piecemeal fashion across the social sciences by studies with phenomenological persuasions.

To delve further into the content of these works and the diverse ways in which studies have drawn on the theoretical program, Graph 1 visualizes trends in the percentage of sociological neoinstitutionalist works published each year that problematize each of the aforementioned eight themes, and Graph 2 plots cumulative counts by theme. Notwithstanding the isolated
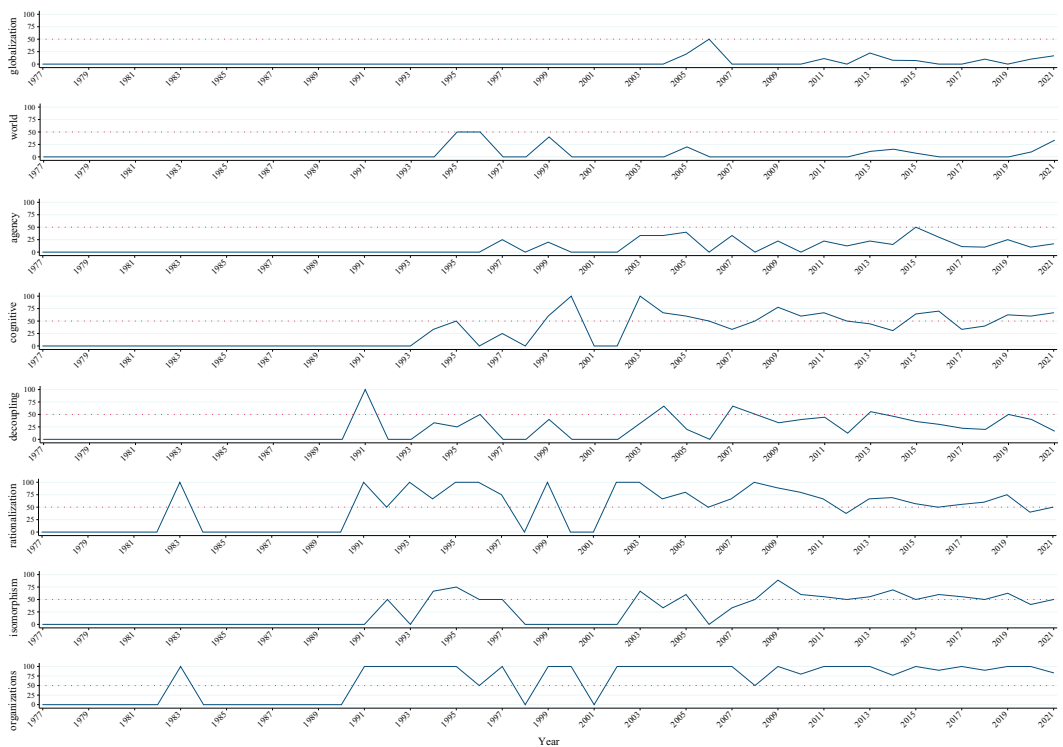

G R A P H 1   Percentage of sociological neoinstitutionalist publications each year that problematize each theme (1977–2021).

spikes in 1983 reflecting a single work that problematized both organizations and rationalization, from the beginning of the 1990s, these two themes are consistently problematized by a large proportion of articles each year (Graph 1), with the problematization of rationalization done largely in the vein of Meyer and Rowan's (1977) seminal paper on rationalized institutional structures. The moderate proportions of articles problematizing isomorphism and decoupling reflect the application of sociological neoinstitutionalist ideas to organizational scholarship. The problematization of cognitive scripts—a prime indication of phenomenological leanings (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991)—becomes fairly pronounced in the early 2000s, but the problematization of agency remains mostly under 50% throughout the same time period. The 32 publications coded as problematizing agency (Graph 2) did so primarily through discussions of the "paradox of embedded agency" (Seo & Douglas Creed, 2002) and "institutional entrepreneurship" (DiMaggio, 1988). Meyer and Jepperson's (2000: 101) article on the cultural construction of social agency among modern actors was only cited by two articles, but not to draw on the idea that "the modern 'actor' is a historical and ongoing cultural construction." In sum, these graphs suggest that the interest in the phenomenological aspects of the theoretical program is skewed toward the cognitive dimensions of institutionalization rather than *the problematization of the historical and cultural construction of social agency among modern actors*.

Furthermore, there is a notable magnitude of difference between the cumulative counts (in 2021) of works problematizing the more conventional sociological neoinstitutionalist themes such as "organizations" (154/163 [94.5%]), "isomorphism" (86/163 [52.8%]), "rationalization" (108/163 [66.3%]), "decoupling" (55/163 [33.7%]), and "cognitive (scripts)" (85/163[52.1%]), and those of works problematizing themes that tend to appear in more phenomenological and global-comparative variants of sociological neoinstitutionalist scholarship such as "agency" (32/163 [19.6%]), "world society/polity/culture" (13/163 [8.0%]), and "globalization" (10/163 [6.1%]) (Graph 2).

Graph 3 visualizes the proportions of cumulative instances (up to any given year, inclusive) in which the aforementioned eight themes were problematized by any of the 163 publications. Although the first coded publication in 1983 only problematized organizations and rationalization, as more sociological neoinstitutionalist works were published in and after 1991, the themes diversify to include decoupling (in 1991); isomorphism (in 1992); cognitive (scripts) (in 1995); world society, polity, or culture (in 1995); agency (in 1997); and globalization (in 2005). Works
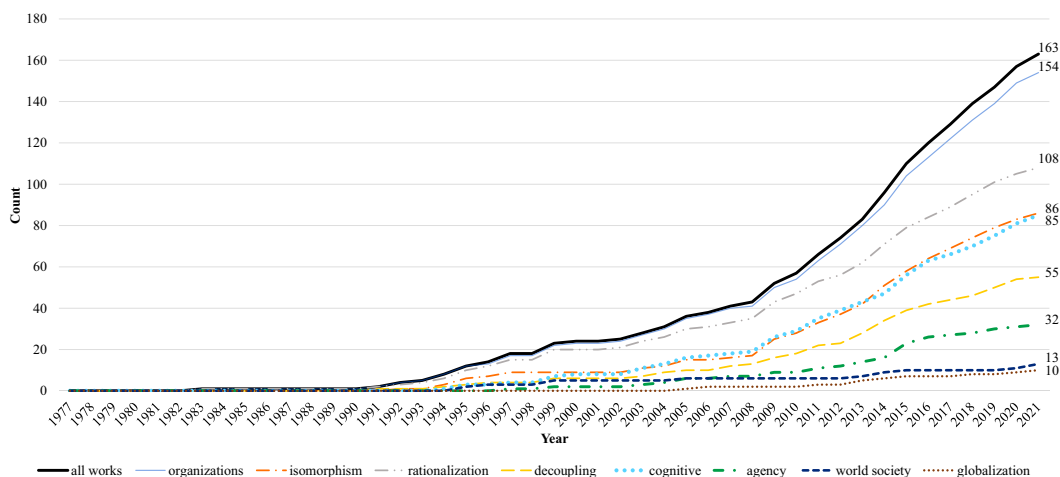
G R A P H 2 Cumulative counts of works problematizing each theme (1977–2021; N = 163).
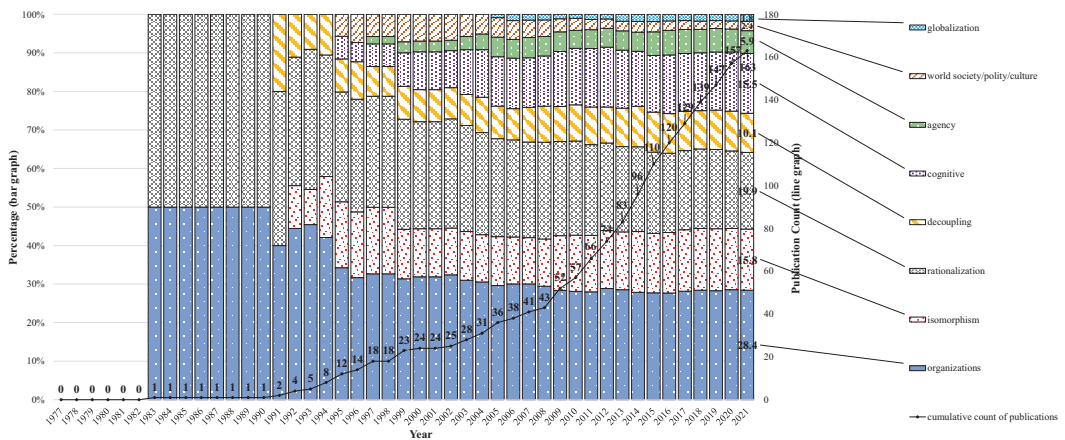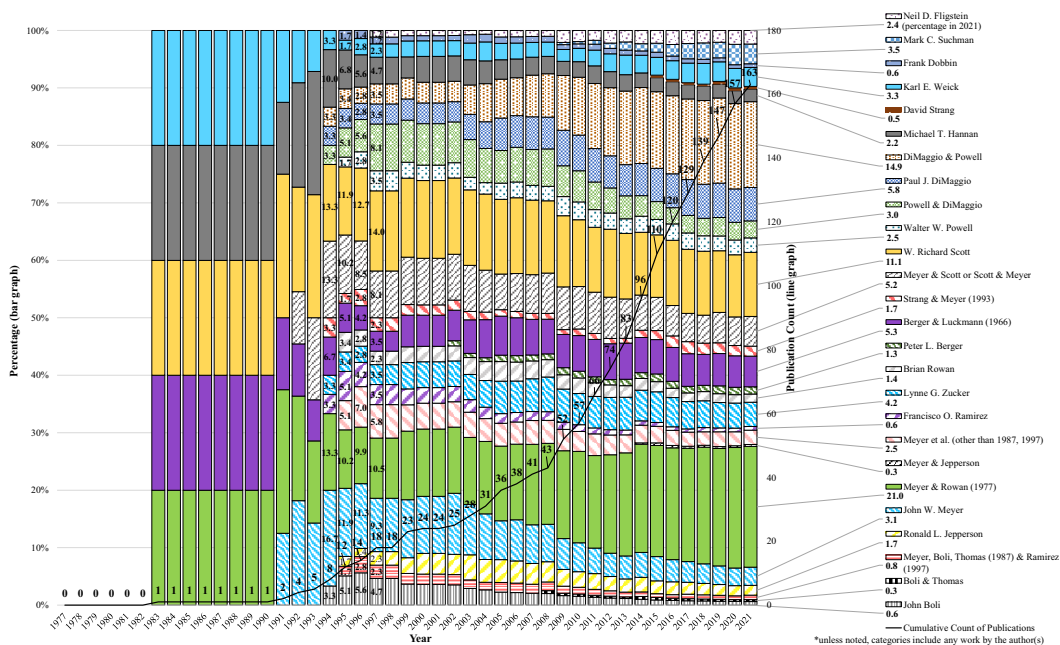
GRAPH 3 Proportions of cumulative instances of themes problematized (1977–2021; *N* = 163). Proportion of cumulative instances is calculated by dividing (a) the cumulative count of times a particular theme was problematized by any of the 163 publications up to any given year (inclusive), by (b) the cumulative count of times any of the eight themes were problematized by any of the 163 publications up to that same year (inclusive).

that discuss a world society, polity, or culture; those that problematize the social construction of agency; and those that mention the globalized spread of models referencing phenomenological sociological neoinstitutionalist logics, all enter the corpus relatively late. Reflecting the trends in Graph 1, the combined proportion of cumulative instances in which the three themes reflecting the more phenomenological and global-comparative strands of sociological neoinstitutionalism are problematized has remained quite small, peaking at 11.2% in 2006, and declining to 10.1% in 2021.

Furthermore, to explore the substantive mix of thought within the sociological neo-institutionalist theoretical program in Japanese scholarship over time, we can also look at the proportions of cumulative instances in which marquee sociological neoinstitutionalist works and scholars were cited by any given year (inclusive) (Graph 4). It seems that until about 1993, the range of marquee works and authors referenced was rather limited, but from around mid-decade, there is noticeable diversification. Between 1994 and 1997, works by Neil D. Fligstein, Frank Dobbin, Paul J. DiMaggio, and Walter W. Powell make their entry into the data. It is notable that we also start to see works that reference the sole-author works of John W. Meyer in 1991, and around 1994 and 1995, references to more phenomenological and global-comparative sociological neoinstitutionalist sole-author and collaborative works by Brian Rowan, Lynne G. Zucker, Francisco O. Ramirez, Ronald L. Jepperson, John Boli, George M. Thomas, and associates. The sole- and co-authored works by Meyer collectively had its highest share of cumulative references in 1994 (46.7%), but this declines to 34.7% in 2021, suggesting that over time, references to more "middle-of-the-road" phenomenological sociological neoinstitutionalist marquee works and authors have gradually "crowded out" references to those that are positioned closer to the phenomenological "extreme." These patterns resonate with the diversification in problematized themes evident in Graph 3, and suggest the incorporation of a substantial diversity of scholarship across the sociological neoinstitutionalist spectrum into Japanese scholarship by the mid-1990s.

Also—albeit on a very small scale—from 1994 (and peaking in 1996 at 9.8%), we see publications starting to draw on foundational works such as the first comprehensive statement of world polity theory by Meyer et al. (1987), Meyer et al.'s (1997) seminal paper, Boli and Thomas's (1999) influential book, and/or other works by John Boli and colleagues that include

GRAPH 4 Proportions of cumulative instances in which marquee works and scholars were cited (1977–2021; $N = 163$). Proportion of cumulative instances is calculated by dividing (a) the cumulative count of times a particular marquee work or author(s) is cited by any of the 163 publications up to any given year (inclusive), by (b) the cumulative count of times any of the 26 marquee works or authors were cited by any of the 163 publications up to that same year (inclusive).

core World Society Theory ideas. Over time, however, the cumulative proportion of works that draw on World Society scholarship continues to trend downward settling at 1.7% in 2021.

Next, let us turn to concrete examples of publications to examine in more detail, the "expressions" of these eight themes across sociological neoinstitutionalist works by scholars affiliated with Japanese institutions.

3.3 | Findings: Substantive examples

As Graph 4 shows, until 1993, the marquee scholars and works that were cited were Meyer and Rowan (1977), Meyer's sole-author works, co-authored works by Meyer and Scott, Berger and Luckmann (1966), and the various single-author works of W. Richard Scott, Michael T. Hannan, and Karl E. Weick. This suggests the early inertia to explore the relationships between organizations and their institutional environments and the interest in exploring phenomenological explanations for organizational behavior. According to this study's data, the first work written by a scholar affiliated with a Japanese research institution that explicitly mentions sociological neoinstitutionalism is Shinichi Murakami's article that asserts the centrality of rationalizing institutionalized organizational myths in shaping organizational culture—hence, the import of acknowledging the socially constructed nature of the realities in which management is embedded (Murakami, 1983).

The salience in the application of sociological neoinstitutionalist ideas in organizational analyses in business-related fields continues throughout the 1990s and beyond. Exemplar works identified in the survey in terms of the depth and breadth of sociological neoinstitutionalist themes employed and discussed as well as the works and authors referenced were either

published by scholars trained in business-related disciplines or published in economics or business-related field outlets. For example, trained in business administration, Noboru Matsushima has published prolifically in business-related fields, and his co-authored article with Misanori Takahashi (Matsushima & Takahashi, 2009: 13) reexamines discourses on DiMaggio and Powell's concept of "institutional entrepreneurs." In addition, within the domain of business research, Inoue's (2011) article revisits key sociological neoinstitutionalist concepts and untangles common confusions surrounding them. Finally, Yukihiro Wakuta, a neoinstitutional organizational theorist who has published extensively in business-related outlets, traces the evolution of sociological neoinstitutionalism, touching on the program's efforts (and limitations) in theorizing about organizational legitimacy and isomorphism, and institutional change, entrepreneurs, fields, and logics (Wakuta, 2015).

Education scholars have also actively contributed to sociological neoinstitutionalist scholarship in Japan. In a 1991 article that argues for the import of thinking of schools as cultural phenomena, Hidenori Fujita—who received his training in education at Stanford in the late 1970s—discusses how although there are expectations for the maintenance of ritual classifications within educational organizations, this ceremonial structure is decoupled from actual teaching activities and outcomes (Fujita, 1991). Hachiro Iwai—who was also trained at Stanford in education—published the first full-length journal article written entirely on the contributions of John W. Meyer's sociological neoinstitutionalist ideas to educational research, and introduces many of Meyer's core ideas in depth (Iwai, 1995). The tendency for articles until this point was to reference Meyer (and Rowan and coauthors) to draw on and apply the idea of rationalizing institutionalized organizational myths in shaping organizational behavior and identities to further an argument or explain a finding, but not necessarily to explicate Meyer's philosophy and repertoire of ideas. As such, Iwai's (1995) overview of institutionalized cultural and cognitive scripts, rationalized myths and individualism, isomorphism, decoupling, and the spread of global cultural scripts across the world is novel. Inoue (2007: 69) positions Iwai (1995), Fujimura (1995) (mentioned below), and Yamaguchi (2001) as core works in Japanese on Meyer's theoretical contributions to the sociology of education.

According to the survey results, several sociologists have published multiple sociological neoinstitutionalist works in a range of outlet fields (noted in parentheses): Kenji Iwahashi (business), Takenori Takase (organizational studies), Mamoru Yamada (sociology and organizational studies), and Chigen Yokoyama (omnibus). Notable is Yamada's work on institutional and organizational theory, organizational identity, and culture. Much of his work appears in sociological outlets, including the article flagged in this study in which he reviews the theoretical research program's constructivist characteristics and utility as well as limitations for organizational research (Yamada, 2003).

Additionally, the data suggests that the extension of sociological neoinstitutionalism to global-comparative research through World Society Theory in Japanese scholarship seems to occur slightly later and in a much more limited manner. In total, only six works were flagged as substantially containing World Society Theory themes per their explicit mentioning of the theory and/or reference to foundational works. According to the survey, the first discussions extending Meyer's ideas to global analyses appeared in the mid-1990s. For instance, Iwai's (1995) aforementioned work expounds on the sociological neoinstitutionalist assumption of the enactment of rationalized myths by states, organizations, and individuals, as well as how the theoretical program utilizes global data to argue for a common global culture that exists over and beyond any lower-order unit to explain isomorphism in legitimated trends across these units over time. Also in 1995, Kawano (1995: 65–69) discusses a "world institutional theory" (*sekai seidoron*) or "global system theory" (*sekai shisutemuron*) in which sociological neoinstitutionalism is extended to global analyses on the spread of mass education. In 1996, Takemoto (1996: 86–87) explicitly introduces the idea of a world society (*sekai shakai*) in which universal principles of progress and equality diffuse globally to effect isomorphism across

disparate entities. Overall, these works that mention World Society Theory are descriptive and instructive but tend not to directly and substantially engage the World Society literature nor empirically apply or test the theory's assumptions in global-comparative ways that typify works in its global canon (see Jepperson [2002: 242–243] for examples).

Finally, in addition to the works surveyed through Google Scholar, there are some notable sociological neoinstitutionalist works that appeared in the supplementary CiNii Research search or have been published as books. For instance, in sociology, Kaneko (1993) offers an early introduction to sociological neoinstitutionalism and a discussion of how it is influenced by prior institutionalist thought. In education and the sociology of education, Fujimura (1995) offers the first book-length Japanese work on John W. Meyer's contribution to educational research. Although beyond this study's survey period, Fujimura's (2022) recent book is notable as it not only offers an overview of the thrust of sociological neoinstitutionalist thought and its inter-twinings with research on higher education, but also devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of World Culture—the only exposition of this kind found in the extended scope of this study. In political science and international relations, Kohno's book, titled *Seido* (*Institutions*), provides a discussion on the concept of institutions and an overview of various institutionalisms, including sociological neoinstitutionalism (Kohno 2002). Mamoru Yamada's coauthored book with Ikuya Sato (Sato & Yamada, 2004) is a marquee work on the sociological neoinstitutionalist tradition in organizational sociology in Japan (Takenaka, 2013: 13), and Kuwada et al. (2015) offer an authoritative edited volume entirely on institutional entrepreneurship. Furthermore, in the sociology of work and occupations, Imai's (2021) book develops a sociological neo-institutionalist argument that highlights the interactive relationship between the regulative, nor-mative, *and* cognitive elements of work that undergird the industrial citizenship that informs the institutionalization of Japanese employment relations.

This survey of the literature has shown that sociological neoinstitutionalist thought has made indelible imprints across Japanese social science scholarship—especially in organizational analyses in business-related fields, education, and the sociology of education. Scholars trained at Stanford University or those directly impacted by the "Stanford School" have also played a role in this diffusion. However, its production and consumption within Japanese sociology at large seem to be relatively limited and diffuse, and its application to global-comparative ana-lyses is surprisingly scant. How can we explain these patterns of incorporation?

4 | DISCUSSION: MAKING SENSE OF THE DISTINCTIVE INCORPORATION OF SOCIOLOGICAL NEOINSTITUTIONALISM INTO JAPANESE SOCIOLOGY

Superimposing this study's findings on general longitudinal trends in Japanese sociology offers a potential explanation. In their analysis of longitudinal trends in the proportion of presenta-tions by thematic sections at the Japan Sociological Society's (JSS) annual meetings across the 1926–2012 period, Sekimizu and Iida (2016: 74) find that although the "theory" section made up 40.85% of all presentations in the late 1940s, since the late 1980s, there has been a marked and steady decline in its share to 4.01% in the early 2010s.

Western scholarship has profoundly influenced Japanese sociology (Kawai, 1990). In the subfield of education—in which the imprints of sociological neoinstitutionalism are notable—certain authors' works have been widely incorporated, but the sociology of education works by sociologists such as James S. Coleman, Margaret S. Archer, and John W. Meyer—despite their influence and impact in the field—have not been extensively translated into Japanese and their ideas may not be known widely among scholars in the field (Nakamura, 2017: 5–6). This may explain the relatively limited scope of sociological neoinstitutionalist influence in the sub-field of the sociology of education, and given the subfield's share of presentations at JSS annual

meetings oscillating between 0.3% and 3.0% since the late 1970s (Sekimizu & Iida, 2016: 70–71), the limited crossover of these ideas into the discipline's mainstream.

Containing sections on "World Society Theory" and "challenges of cross-national research," "international/area studies" newly emerged as a thematic area in JSS annual meetings in the early 1970s; its share of presentations peaked at about 6.22% in the late 1980s and has hovered above 4.0% since the mid-1990s (Sekimizu & Iida, 2016: 72–73). Furthermore, in terms of methodological trends within the field, Tarohmaru et al. (2009) argue that by around the 1980s, Japanese sociology had already actively incorporated many prominent and influential ideas from the West through translations, so the discipline shifted from explaining and digesting theory to focusing on empirical research of its own, which skewed toward case studies rather than quantitative sociological studies. This occurred amid the discipline's ideological turn away from functionalism and positivism toward postmodernist thought. Tarohmaru et al.'s (2009) suggestion that these developments might be related to the relative decline in quantitative sociology in Japan dovetails with Kawai's (1990: 37) critique of the prominence of pairwise qualitative comparisons between Japan and another country in the years leading up to 1990.

It was precisely during this period (1980s and early 1990s) that John W. Meyer and colleagues continued to expand the sociological neoinstitutionalist program in substantive, geographic, methodological, and theoretical scope, such that World Society scholarship developed into "one of the most broad-ranging 'theoretical research programs' (…) in contemporary sociology and one of the most empirically developed forms of institutional analysis," as well as "one of the most extensive lines of research on current 'globalization'" (Jepperson, 2002: 229). But much of these works that extended sociological neoinstitutionalist thought to global-comparative analyses were never translated into Japanese and were therefore not easily accessible to social science graduate students whose numbers saw an explosive increase in the 1990s (Hamanaka, 2002).

In sum, it is plausible that given sociological neoinstitutionalism's phenomenological macroinstitutionalist theoretical thrust that espouses quantitative methods, much of its unique intellectual offerings may have not resonated enough with sociologists in Japan to make its way into the mainstream. However, its theorization of cultural legitimacy, institutionalized cognitive scripts, mimetic isomorphism, and decoupling did appeal to a more limited phenomenologically-oriented audience outside of sociology in business-related fields and a segment of sociologists in the sociology of education who were interested in education as an institution or schools as carriers of culture. It is in these areas that the imprints of the program's analytical and conceptual tools shine brightest, but absent the diffusion of World Society scholarship at the critical window of adoption in the 1980s and early 1990s, sociological neoinstitutionalist scholarship in Japan has seemed to develop largely without a global-comparative dimension.

It is, however, important to note that caution is necessary not to assume causation from correlation. One of the strengths of this study's analysis is also one of its limitations. To survey and analyze sociological neoinstitutionalist works across a 45-year period in the most systematic and rigorous way possible, I chose to use a combination of web-based searches and manual coding. Though the results are supplemented with substantive explanations, a more organic and qualitative approach that deeply traces the exchange of ideas both among Japanese authors/works and between Japan and the world over time may have offered a more circumscribed yet nuanced picture of how this literature has diffused, persisted, and evolved across the larger backdrop of Japanese social science scholarship. Additionally, because few books published by authors affiliated with Japanese institutions in relevant fields are fully available electronically, this analysis largely undercounts research published in books. Although I have supplemented the analysis with the inclusion of some notable book sources, this effort is far from exhaustive. While these caveats cannot and should not be ignored, the tradeoff has allowed for a more extensive foundational survey of the literature and a tentative explanation that may inform future inquiry.

5 | CONCLUSION: SOCIOLOGICAL NEOINSTITUTIONALISM'S THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR JAPANESE SOCIOLOGY AND BEYOND

This analysis illuminated the disciplinary patterns in production and consumption as well as longitudinal trends in the emergence, diversification, and proportional composition of the various problematized themes of sociological neoinstitutionalist scholarship by scholars affiliated with Japanese institutions across the 1977–2021 period, and in doing so, highlighted a distinctive bifurcated pattern of incorporation. On the one hand, in breaking from more realist and functionalist understandings of institutions to problematize the cultural and cognitive dimensions of organizations, throughout business-related fields and education, the mid-1990s saw the relatively robust incorporation of marquee sociological neoinstitutionalist works, ideas, and concepts pertaining to the phenomenological institutional environments of organizations. Drawing on marquee sociological neoinstitutionalist authors and works on organizations, themes such as rationalization, isomorphism, decoupling, and cognitive scripts were overwhelmingly problematized by these scholars who largely produced and consumed within their own (sub)fields. On the other hand, sociologists tended to broadly output their works in outlets in and outside of sociology. Additionally, the delayed (mid-2000s) and stunted incorporation and decline over time of works that referenced or problematized the socially constructed nature of agency; world society, culture, or polity; or the global-comparative applications of sociological neoinstitutionalism are striking.

This incorporation of sociological neoinstitutionalist thought sans the more phenomenological and global-comparative ideas makes sense if we consider the larger trends in Japanese sociological scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s when Japanese sociology experienced a decline in focus on the areas of sociological theory and education; a turn away from quantitative sociology toward qualitative case studies; and a tendency for research produced within the newly emerging subfield of international comparative sociology and area studies to favor pairwise and limited-N qualitative comparative case studies. Although more research is needed to make any conclusive claims, these trends may have made for an unreceptive intellectual context for the incorporation of the expanding theoretical program outside of Japan which espoused quantitative global-comparative analyses and methods.

Japanese sociological research could greatly benefit from sociological neoinstitutionalism and World Society Theory's repertoire of theoretical and conceptual tools that help make sense of—on a global scale—the non-functional and phenomenological logics of actor behaviors, the cognitive dimensions of institutionalization, the isomorphic patterns across disparate actors, and the decoupling between form and behavior, as not all actor decisions can be explained via logics of selfish interests, competition, coercion, survival, or function. Furthermore, World Society Theory's insights into institutionalized *global* cultural scripts that constitute the identities and interests of modern agents who reach for—but are often unable to attain—the lofty ideals of "proper" modern actorhood, offer an explanation for the decoupling between global norms and domestic policy and behavior. Constituted by such agents, entire systems may gradually "drift" toward legitimated (global) models (Schofer & Hironaka, 2005: 27), displaying instances of "substance without ceremony" (Schofer et al., 2012: 64) in which social change occurs in the absence of formal acts of implementation such as the ratification of international instruments, the harmonization of domestic laws, or government acknowledgment of a particular issue.

This insight has implications for understanding the emergence, efficacy, and outcomes of social movements—a growing subfield of interest in Japanese sociology (Sekimizu & Iida 2016: 73). It offers both a potential explanation for why social change may sometimes occur unnoticeably or seemingly spontaneously, and a compelling reason to rethink and clarify what we mean by and how we choose to operationalize movement outcomes

(Cress & Snow, 2000)—or more broadly, social change itself. Is social change strictly the codification of new policies, formal government commitment to action, or simply government acknowledgment of an issue? Or is it (also) a change in public opinion, or more fundamentally, an ontological shift in what issues exist and matter? These are important distinctions, especially if social change is what is to be explained.

Issues such as the legalization of gay marriage; the rights of sexual and gender minorities; gender equality; immigration and refugee policy reform; migrant rights; hate speech legislation; and diversity in the workplace and society have received increased attention in Japan, but developments surrounding them have been difficult to discern, especially in terms of concrete policy change. But is this to say that absolutely no change has brewed beneath the policy surface? And if "latent" social changes have occurred, have they done so within a domestic vacuum? Perhaps it makes sense to question how international and global forces act upon domestic actors either competitively or institutionally (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983); whether there are non-functional or non-rational logics of social change in play; and whether globally institutionalized cognitive models may be moving society beneath the calm of a seemingly static policy surface. Sociological neoinstitutionalism and its global extension, World Society Theory, offer some important motivations as well as theoretical, conceptual, and methodological insights to peer through this surface to observe what lies underneath and problematize what other theoretical perspectives may overlook.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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