

INTEGRATIVE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS IN HUMAN ACTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of institutions in integration of human activity across the levels of its hierarchical system. In the perspective of System-Activity Methodology, human activity is viewed as the only primary reality. Human activity is completely defined by standards. The main process constituting human activity is self-reproduction. The system of activity comprises four hierarchical levels ordered by relation of inclusion and defined by corresponding types of standards: (1) universe of mass activity – by universal values, (2) spheres of mass activity – by corresponding institutions, (3) organizations of collective activity – by schedules and protocols, and (4) acts, performed by individuals, – by modes of action. Enabled by their structure that mirrors the hierarchical system of activity, institutions integrate this hierarchical system of activity in a “top-down” manner. Actualization of the institutional standards proceeds in the opposite direction and integrates levels of activity in a “bottom-up” manner. The usual occurrence of deviations require supplementary remedial and sanctioning activities that penetrate all hierarchical levels and, in turn, create bottom-up pressure to change institutional standards at all levels. The two-way integration results in tight interdependence of the hierarchical levels of the activity system, necessitating consideration of the entire hierarchical context, if one is to understand and effectively act upon activity systems of any scale.

Keywords: human activity, reproduction, institutions, integration of hierarchical levels.

HIERARCHICAL SYSTEM OF HUMAN ACTIVITY

The goal of this paper is to examine the role of institutions in integration of human activity from the perspective of System-Activity Methodology, developed in 1960s by the Moscow Methodological Circle, which was organized and lead for many years by G.P. Shchedrovitsky (1929-1994).

Reproduction – the Constitutive Process of Human Activity

System-Activity Methodology views the world as human mass activity. The main process that constitutes the universe of activity is self-reproduction. Reproduction

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engages everything that we know – e.g., people, things, symbols, machines, organizations, even “nature” itself and unites them in one universal whole. Thus human activity is considered the only primary reality, or better, actuality; everything else is the product of human thought -- assumptions and conceptual constructs (Shchedrovitsky 1966, 1971). In this respect, System-Activity Methodology can be opposed to three other main philosophical approaches – phenomenology, theology, and naturalism.

Abstract Representation of Reproduction

In *abstract* terms, the reproduction of activity can be represented by two interrelated processes (Figure 1): (1) *actualization* – repetitive performance of activity, each time conforming to the same standard and (2) *transmission* – repetitive handing over of the standard from one performance to another. The relationship between the processes can be characterized as “standardizing – actualizing” (Shchedrovitsky 1966, 1975). Each of these processes has its own time dimension. While a standard is handed over in *transmission* time *simultaneously* in its structural entirety, their actualization unfolds *successively* stage-by-stage in *actual* time.

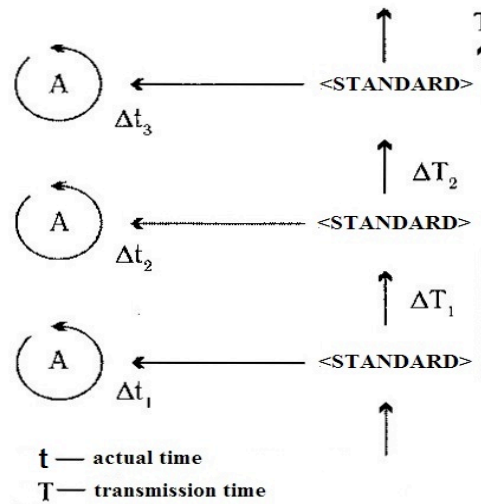


Figure 1. Mechanism of Reproduction

Structural Unit of Reproduction

Individuals acting in conformity with the standards represent the mechanism of actualization. Therefore, the simplest mechanism for transmitting standards is by direct transmission of individuals and objects, which make up situations of the actions. Sometimes the direct transmission is not possible. For example, a tool is broken, or information is outdated. In such cases, a new tool can be produced according to the model and information can be updated by this or another

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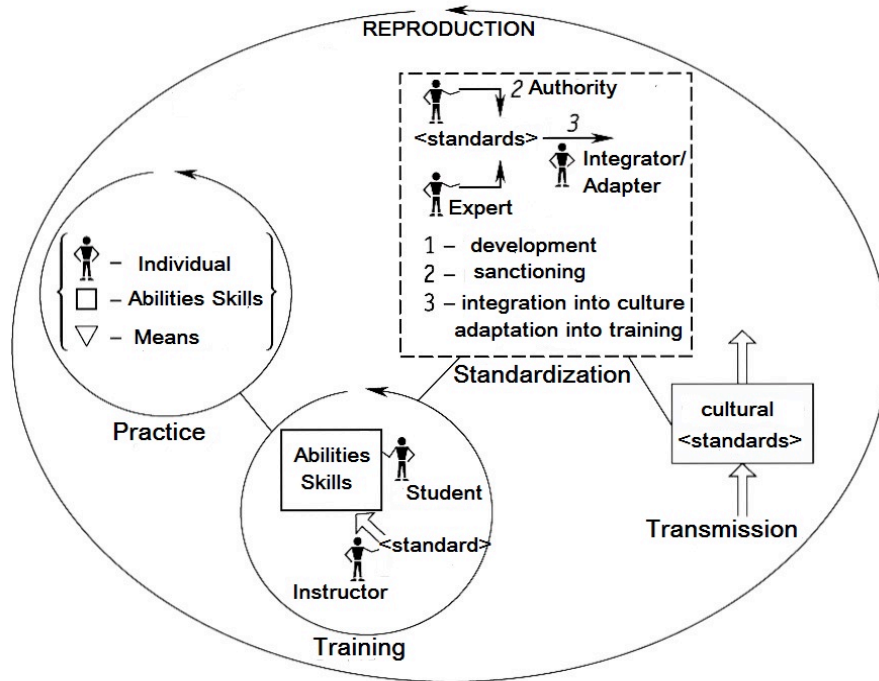
individual. If an appropriate individual is unavailable or situation has permanently changed, additional mechanisms of *training* and *standardization* become necessary.

Training is the main mechanism of standardization of activity of individuals. In the course of training, a trainee internalizes the standards and masters the means of activities, and thus acquires necessary abilities and skills. Consideration of the latter as a “transformed” form of standards permits reinterpretation of the abstract “actualization” as *practice* – concrete activity of individuals that perform actualizing their abilities and skills without a direct relationship to the transmission of standards (Lefebvre, Shchedrovitsky, and Yudin, 1965; Shchedrovitsky, 1966; 1975).

Usually, activity conditions change over time, making existing activities and their standards inadequate and necessitating their change or even replacement. New standards can be developed by special activity of purposeful *standardization* that includes three different aspects. The first aspect is *development* of new models of actions, objects, designs, research programs, etc. by *experts*. The second aspect is *sanctioning* of the newly developed standards by *authority*, which makes them obligatory. Finally, the third aspect of standardization is *integration* of the new standards into *culture* and their *adaptation* to training (Annals of MMC 1971, Shchedrovitsky, 1979). Standardization allows reinterpretation of the abstract “transmission of standards” to concrete transmission of *culture*.

Introduction of intermediary mechanisms of training and standardization and reinterpretation of actualization as practice and transmission of standards as transmission of culture permits us to replace the initial abstract representation of reproduction (Figure 1) with a concrete one (Figure 2). The latter can be viewed as a structural unit of reproduction of activity.

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**Figure 2. Structural Unit of Reproduction.
The Role of Standards**

The standards are transmitted as structural units that include *norms* – standards of appropriate activity, a standard referential set of all known types of *deviance*, coupled with standards of appropriate *sanctions*. Therefore, every particular activity actualizes some standard, either norm, or standard type of deviance (Dubrovsky 2006a). Criminal law and medical diagnostics are good examples of applications of deviance standards (Figure 3).

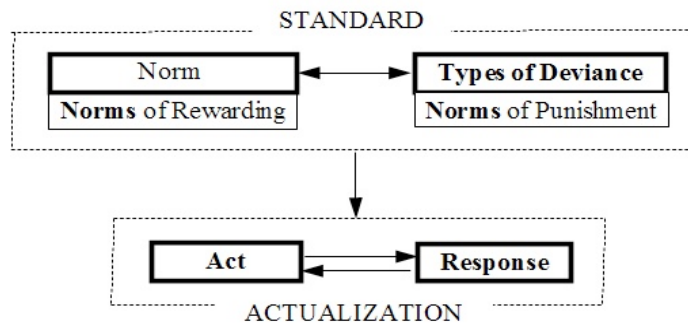


Figure 3. Structural Standard and Actualization.

In other words, the standards define human activity exclusively and exhaustively. Standards can be viewed as activity analogs of natural laws. The difference is that,

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unlike natural laws, standards may change over time, either by historical occurrence, or as a result of purposeful activity of standardization.

Hierarchical Levels of Reproduction and Corresponding Types of Standards

Human activity comprises four hierarchical levels, ordered by relation of inclusion – a unit of a higher level includes units of the lower level as components. Universe of self-reproduction of mass activity includes spheres of different types of mass activity, each particular sphere includes organizations of collective activity that, in turn, includes coordinated acts, performed by individual actors (Figure 4).

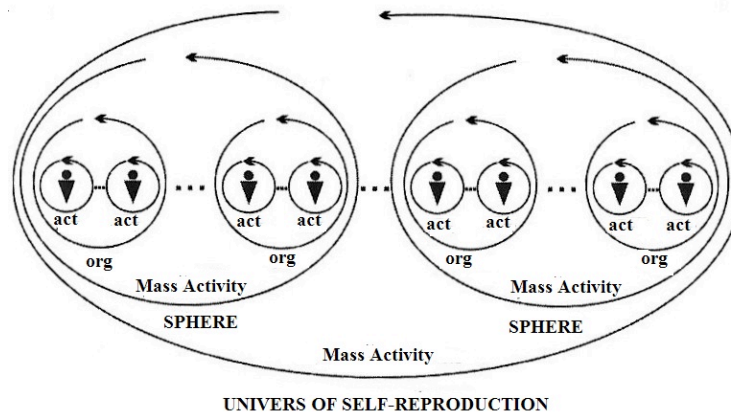


Figure 4. Simplified Hierarchical Organization of Human Activity.

Each hierarchical level of activity is defined by a particular type of standards (Table 1). *Universal values* are standards for the universe of mass activity. *Institutions* are standards for the spheres. *Schedules* and *protocols* (scripts) of coordination, subordination, and communication are standards for cooperative organizational activities. *Modes*, comprised of goals, methods, procedures, and operations, are standards for acts, performed by individual actors.

Table 1. Hierarchical Levels of Activity and Corresponding Standards.

<i>Level of Activity</i>	<i>Standard Type</i>
Universe	Universal Values
Sphere	Institutions
Organizations	Schedules and Protocols
Acts	Modes

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THE “RULE OF TYPE”

Every element of any structure comprises two logical constituents – structural *place* and *filler* (Genisaretsky 1965). The place can be characterized by set of links of a given element with other elements of the structure. The filler is a place occupying object, presumably capable to perform functions corresponding to the links (Figure 5).

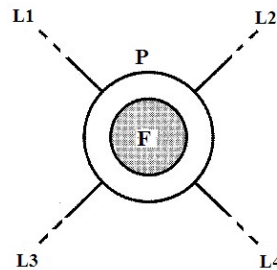


Figure 5. Element = structural place P + filling F

It should be noted that the structural place determines only the type of filler, permitting variability of individual fillers within the type limits. We will call the correspondence of a type of filler to an individual place the “rule of type”. For example, in computer programming, a variable declaration “`var MyNumber as Integer`” specifying name and type of the variable defines a place, or a “placeholder” (location and space) in computer storage. The statement “`MyNumber = 16`” inserts a filler in the variable's place by assigning to it a concrete value of the integer type. An attempt to assign a different type of value “`MyNumber = 16.5`” will elicit an error message.

In hierarchical systems, a usual filler of an element is a *structural unit* of the lower hierarchical level, so the type of the filling means the type of its unity, elements, and linkage pattern. Specifically, in the hierarchical *structure* of human activity, relationships of place and filling correspond to the relationships of inclusion in the hierarchical *organization* of the activity (Figure 4). Because activities at all levels are defined by corresponding standards (Table 1), type correspondence of the levels should be described in the terms of standards. Standards that integrate hierarchical levels top-down are usually called “institutions”. Institutions penetrate through the hierarchical levels of activity due to their hierarchical structure that mirrors the hierarchy of activity.

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THE SYSTEM-ACTIVITY CONCEPT OF INSTITUTION

Institutions and Spheres of Mass Activity

The institution introduced above is a type of standard that corresponds to the hierarchical level of spheres of activity. Institutions as standards should not be confused with activity systems that actualize institutions. Such confusion is still wide spread, not only in everyday language, but in social sciences as well (Szczepanski 1969; Novikova, 2000).

As a self-reproducing quasi-universe of mass activity, sphere includes the institution that standardizes it (Figure 6). In other words, the institution is not only a cultural standard that *corresponds* to a sphere, it *defines* the sphere as the system of activity (Shchedrovitsky 1972).

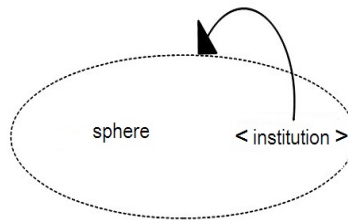


Figure 6. Institution standardizes the sphere.

Massiveness of Activity Spheres and Institutions

Unlike acts and organizations and like the universe of self-reproduction, spheres are characterized by their massiveness (Shchedrovitsky 1975). While modes standardize acts of *individuals*, schedules and protocols standardize *collective* activities in organizations, institutions standardize *mass* activity of a certain type. One may ask, how institutions reflect this massiveness.

Sphere – a Peculiar Structure of Mass Activity

To answer this question, we need to remember another important distinction between institution as a standard and its “concrete manifestations” – individual *institutional organizations* (Shchedrovitsky, 1972; Johnson 1995; Maracha 2004). Joint mass activity of institutional organizations linked in a certain way into a unity – sphere constitute *actualization* of the institution. This also means that sphere is a type of structure, peculiar to mass activity. Four main types of *spherical structures* can be identified. Thompson et. al. (1991) identified three “abstract models of coordination of social life”: *hierarchies*, *markets*, and *networks*. Based on the materials they presented, I suggest to add *governments* as the fourth type.

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The institution is often defined as a system of institutional organizations (Szczepanski 1969). This definition distinguishes between the sphere and individual organizations, however, it does not distinguish between the institution as a standard and the sphere, as its actualization. This results in logical problems and disagreement among social scientists about the relationship of “social institutions” and “social organizations” (Novikova, 2000).

“Paradigmatic—Syntagmatic” Organization of Institutions

Shchedrovitsky (1972) characterized a sphere of mass activity as open and “unfastened wholeness”. I interpret this in the spirit of Castells (1996), as a structure that permits insertion of new elements into it, as well as extraction of elements out of it without destroying its unity and stability. Shchedrovitsky (1976) also suggested that the relationship between mass activity and its standards is similar to de Saussure's (1916) relationship between speech and language. Following this suggestion and keeping in mind the “rule of type”, I propose that the institution comprises two constituents – (1) “paradigmatic” catalog of types of institutional organizations and other “construction” components of a sphere (specified below) and (2) “syntagmatic” structural patterns for insertion (or extraction) of the institutional components into (or out of) the “unfastened wholeness” of the sphere structure.

Institutions, Spheres, and Types of Activity

Every activity sphere is mass activity of a *particular type*, and every type of activity can exist only as a sphere (Shchedrovitsky 1972). In a contemporary society there are many spheres: production, consummation, distribution, government, finance, education, and many other. A sphere of a particular type of activity includes institutional organizations, specific for this type. Transitionally, the respective organizations have specific institutional types of collective activities, which comprise institutional types of individual acts, coordinated by institutional types of schedules and protocols. In other words, for a type of activity to exist, institutions must penetrate all hierarchical levels of the activity, integrating them by means of standardization, specific for the type of activity.

Sphere as a Unit of Activity

Every sphere can be considered a unit of the universe of self-reproduction. As such, it should have archetypical structure that comprises four elements – practice, training, standardization, and transmission of culture (Figure 2). Standardizing the entire sphere and at the same time being a part of it (Figure 6), the institution serves as a filler of the “culture” element. This means that the institution has to contain the standards for *all* elements of the sphere. In particular, the catalog of types of institutional organizations must include institutional types of practice, training, standardization and cultural transmission organizations.

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For example, the institution of education should include: types of practical organizations – day care centers, schools, community colleges, and universities; pedagogical organizations that train instructors of all levels; accrediting, licensing, curriculum developing, and other standardization organizations; and organizations, responsible for transmission of pedagogical culture.

Inclusion of these types of institutional organizations into sphere's structure renders endurance and stability to its self-reproduction. Below, we examine how the institutions integrate hierarchical levels of activity, providing endurance and stability for the entire system of self-reproduction.

TOP-DOWN INTEGRATION OF HIERARCHICAL LEVELS OF ACTIVITY

Universal Values Determine Type of Institutions

Formed in the course of history, universal values, such as life, freedom, love, faith, knowledge, are the type of standards that correspond to the level of the universe of activity. Association of institutions with universal values by sociologists can be traced down to Comte. For instance, Parsons (1964) associated institutions with “ultimate ends”.

In relation to institutions, universal values play the role of *value principles* that define unity of institutions. The type of unity defined by principles differs from the one represented as a circumference with system's structure inside it. As an “unfastened wholeness”, the sphere has different type of unity. Being a quasi-universe of self-reproduction of a particular type of activity, sphere cannot have a boundary and exterior in the usual sense.

The peculiar type of unity defined by principles characterizes knowledge systems. Principles as elements of knowledge systems defines unity “from within” by including only the knowledge that derives from the principles (de Condillac, 1749). In the case of institutions, a value principle, being an element of institution, defines its unity and the unity of the entire sphere. For example, the value of health determines unity of the institution and sphere of Health Care.

In conformity with the discussed above “rule of type”, value principles determine not particular institutions, but only their type. For example, the value principle of faith determines organized religion as a type of institution, not a particular religious institution, such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. This interpretation differs from the interpretation of religion as an “institution”(sphere), comprising organizations of different confessions (Novikova 2000). My interpretation corresponds to the notion of a sphere as a self-reproductive unit of mass activity. There is no single sphere that reproduces all organized religions; each religion reproduces itself, sometimes at the expense of other religions.

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Institutional Standardization of Organizational and Individual Activities

According to the “rule of type”, each particular institution contains a catalog of *types* of corresponding institutional organizations and patterns of their linkage within the sphere. Moreover, according to the same rule, each type of organization determines the type of the organizational structure – types of unity, elements, and patterns of linkage. In other words, for each type of organization in the institutional catalog, there should be defined (1) a type of organizational mission corresponding to the value principle; (2) institutional types of organizational positions and statuses; and (3) institutional types of mutual obligations of the positions.

Performance of mutual obligations assume collaboration among individuals – fillers of the positions. Institutional types of schedules and protocols of coordination, subordination, and communication serve as standards for organizing collective activity.

Organizational positions and their obligations also determine institutional types of *modes* of acts performed by the individuals. To be able to perform the acts, individuals have to possess corresponding institutionally standardised professional qualifications and competences. This means that institutions should contain catalogues of professions, standards for degrees, licences, and levels of expertise. This also means that corresponding bar, licensing, ordaining, or accrediting types of organizations should be presented in the institutional catalogues of organizational types.

Thus, possessing the described above hierarchical structure that mirrors the structure of the entire activity system, institutions integrate the hierarchical levels by penetrating them with top-down standardization. Universal values determine the types of institutions. Each specific institution determines the types of corresponding institutional organizations and patterns of their linkage within the sphere. Each type of organization has an institutional type of formal organizational structure, comprised of positions and statuses, which are interlinked by mutual obligations. Fulfillment of the obligations assumes institutional types of schedules and protocols for collaboration. The schedules and protocols determine the institutional type of modes of acts, performed by individuals, whose professional qualifications must meet the standards, determined by the institutions. This top-down integration of activity by means of cross-level institutional standardization provides additional endurance and stability to entire system of activity, including the institutions themselves.

BOTTOM-UP INTEGRATION OF HIERARCHICAL LEVELS OF ACTIVITY

While institutional standardization integrates the hierarchical levels of activity penetrating them top-down, actualization of the standards proceeds from bottom

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up. Acts performed by individuals actualize institutional modes of activity. Collective activity of individuals, occupying organizational positions and conforming with their obligations and corresponding schedules and protocols, realizes the mission of an organization. The combined activity of numerous institutional organizations constitute mass activity of a sphere. Combined mass activities of all spheres make up self-reproduction of the entire human activity.

Structural Standard Unit

It should be noted that the structural standard, depicted in Figure 3, is too abstract for adequate representation of empirical phenomena and effective practical application. The structure of a concrete standard unit, developed on the basis of the abstract one (Dubrovsky, 2006b), is depicted in Figure 7 below.

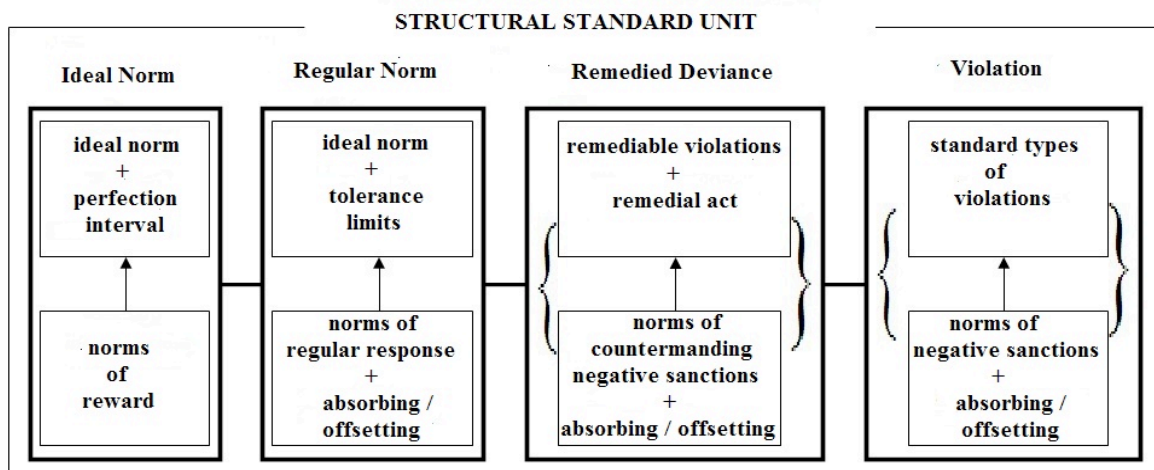


Figure 7. Structural Standard Unit.

Sales quota can be used as illustration. If a salesman significantly exceeds the quota (ideal norm), the he will receive a big bonus (reward). If he meets the quota (regular norm allowing average performance), the he will receive regular salary. If the salesman does not meet the quota (deviates beyond tolerance limits), then he may exceed the quota next period, as a remedy to countermand negative sanction. Systematic under-performance (violation) will eventually lead to the salesman being fired (punishment). In all cases of less than ideal performance, the difference is usually either absorbed by the organization (lower profits), or offset by other sales people.

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The Role of Supplementary Activities

The structural standard unit can be considered as an archetypical structure that can be applied to standards of any level of activity, including institutions. This means that the systematic occurrence of deviations and purposeful change of the standards trigger *supplementary* rewarding, sanctioning, and offsetting activities, which create bottom-up pressure to institutionalize these activities. Being institutionalized, supplementary activities in turn penetrate top-down all hierarchical levels of activity, from special types of organizations or organizational divisions down to institutional types of individual remedial acts.

Usually, the supplementary activities, and corresponding institutional agencies are formed along with main institutional constituents in the course of *institutionalization*. After they are formed, they become the main source of endurance and stability of institutions. The endurance and stability of institutions is widely considered as a distinctive or even defining characteristic of this type of standard (Parsons 1964, Shils 1972, Giddens 1984).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper examined the integrative role of institutions in human activity from the perspective of System-Activity Methodology, which views the world as human mass activity. Self-reproduction is the main process constituting universe of human activity. Self reproduction can be viewed as mass performance that actualizes the same standards again and again. The structural standards include norms – standards of appropriate activity, a standard types of all types of deviance, coupled with standards of appropriate sanctions and other responses. Therefore, every particular activity actualizes some standard, either norm, or standard type of deviation. This means that the standards completely define human activity. Unlike natural laws, standards may change over time, either by historical occurrence, or as a result of purposeful activity of standardization.

System of human activity comprises four hierarchical levels – Universe of mass activity, spheres of different types of mass activity, organizations of collective activity, and acts, performed by individual actors. Each hierarchical level of activity is characterized by a particular type of standards. Universal values are standards for mass activity of universal self-reproduction. Institutions are standards for the spheres. Schedules and protocols are standards for collective organizational activities. Modes are standards for acts performed by individual actors.

Institutions are the standards that integrate hierarchical levels top-down. Their hierarchical structures mirror the hierarchy of activity system. Universal values determine type of institution. Each specific institution determines types of corresponding institutional organizations and their linkage within the sphere. Each type of organization has an institutional type of formal organizational structure,

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comprised of positions and statuses, which are interlinked by mutual obligations, in turn, requiring corresponding qualifications of its participants. Fulfillment of obligations assume institutional types of schedules and protocols for collaboration. Schedules and protocols determine the institutional type of modes of acts, performed by qualified individuals.

Actualization of the standards proceeds in the bottom-up direction. Coordinated performance of individual acts constitutes the collective organizational performance. Joint activity of numerous institutional organizations constitute the mass activity of a sphere. Combined mass activities of all spheres make up self-reproduction of the entire human activity. The usual occurrence of deviations require supplementary remedial and sanctioning activities that penetrate all hierarchical levels, which in turn create bottom-up pressure to change the institutional standards across the levels.

The two-way – top-down and bottom-up integration of hierarchical levels of activity system results not only in its endurance and stability, but also in tight interdependence of the levels, both necessitating consideration of the entire hierarchical context, if one is to understand and effectively act upon activity systems of any scale.

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