



# Putting Centrality Central in the Study of Institutional Complexity: On the relative and relational aspects of the centrality of institutional logics

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## Abstract

To understand how actors deal with institutional complexity, scholars have focused on the compatibility among different institutional logics, while paying little attention to the centrality of institutional logics: the meaning one logic has to actors relative to other logics. The degree of centrality shapes whether incompatibilities between logics are experienced, whether logics can be compartmentalized or ignored and what logics will be prioritized by powerful actors. Understanding centrality, therefore, is fundamental to the study of institutional complexity. In this article, we argue that the centrality of logics is both *relational* between a logic and actors and *relative* between different logics. We discuss the extent to which the assumptions underlying two approaches in institutional theory, the approach of inhabited institutionalism (II) and the institutional logics approach (IL), are conducive to studying the relational and relative aspects of centrality. On the basis of our theoretical analysis, we argue that the assumptions of IL are conducive to studying the relative but not the relational aspect of centrality, whereas the assumptions of II, at first sight, are conducive to studying the relational but not the relative aspect. Finally, we argue that the assumptions of II can be interpreted in such a way that II would be suitable for studying the relative aspect of centrality.

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## Keywords

institutional complexity, institutional logics, institutional theory

## Introduction

Understanding how actors cope with institutional complexity is a question that has vexed many researchers (Greenwood et al., 2011; Raynard, 2016). Various authors have aimed to solve part of this puzzle by focusing on how actors deal with the incompatibility among the various institutional logics they encounter. Their research has greatly increased our understanding of why some actors are better able to apprehend contradictions among institutional logics than others (Voronov & Yorks, 2015), how actors cope with and use contradictions between logics (Alvehus, 2018; Bévort & Suddaby, 2016; Currie & Spyridonidis, 2016; Perkmann et al., 2022; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013) and how actors combine different logics in their work (Meyer & Hammerschmidt, 2006; Pache & Santos, 2013a; Reay & Hinings, 2005).

The incompatibility among institutional logics, however, is not the only contributor to institutional complexity. Besharov and Smith (2014) argue that the centrality of institutional logics, essentially how meaningful a logic is to actors relative to other logics, has to be taken into consideration as well. Actors are not connected to one or two logics in a vacuum, but stand in relation to various logics, with some being more prominent and others playing a more peripheral role in shaping their practices (Besharov & Mitzinneck, 2020). The more central a logic is to actors, the more likely they are to engage and enact it (Pache & Santos, 2013b), attach more importance to it in decision-making (Lok, 2010; McPherson & Sauder, 2013) and become more conscious of possible contradictions between logics (Gümüşay et al., 2020). In other words, in situations of institutional complexity, even if different logics faced by actors are incompatible on paper, they would only perceive this incompatibility if the different logics they face are at least to some degree central to them (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Consequently, one

can only understand the institutional complexity faced by actors by being aware of the centrality of different logics.

Although the notion of centrality, therefore, is consequential for understanding institutional complexity, there has been little focus on it in academic theory. Most scholars studying institutional complexity only discuss how different logics of interest are conflicting to the actors under study (e.g. Alvehus, 2018; Reay & Hinings, 2009). Others explicitly acknowledge that in studying incompatibility they assume that the logics present are also central, as no incompatibility would otherwise have been present (Gümüşay et al., 2020). Yet, they offer no explanation for how such an evaluation of the centrality of different logics is reached. In part, we would argue, this is because incompatibility can be studied rather intuitively by focusing on conflict caused by the presence of multiple logics, while there is not such a straightforward approach for studying centrality.

The purpose of this article is to address this gap by discussing how the concept of centrality can be studied by determining the extent to which two approaches, institutional logics (IL) and inhabited institutionalism (II), are suitable methods for studying the centrality of logics. We contribute to the literature, first, by laying out why understanding centrality is fundamental for the study of institutional complexity. Then we argue, second, that studying centrality requires an approach that is able to account for the *relational* and the *relative* aspects of centrality; relational means that a logic is only central because it stands in relation *to an actor*, whereas relative means that a logic is only central vis-à-vis other logics present, rather than by and of itself. Third, in discussing the main assumptions underpinning IL and II, we contribute to understanding the boundaries and possibilities both approaches offer compared to one another. We show why IL is more suitable for studying the relative aspect of centrality and

II for the relational aspect. We discuss whether the assumptions of IL and II would allow for the study of centrality and conclude that this would be possible for II if scholars take three considerations into account: actors often face multiple logics; the degree of coupling between logics and actors is not the same for different logics; and the coupling between a logic and an actor can be influenced by the coupling of that actor to other logics.

Our article proceeds as follows. We will begin with a discussion of what institutional logics are, why understanding their centrality to actors is important and how the concept of centrality can be understood and studied. In the next two sections, we will illustrate what sort of approach is suitable for studying centrality by discussing the main assumptions underpinning IL and II. We show that both, at first sight, appear to be falling short of studying centrality and then discuss whether their assumptions could be expanded so as to allow for the study of centrality. Finally, we will discuss our core contributions and implications for future research.

## The Centrality of Institutional Logics

Out of the wide array of definitions available for the concept of institutional logics (e.g. Friedland & Alford, 1991; Hallett, 2010; Rao et al., 2003; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999), we opted to follow the composite definition offered by McPherson and Sauder (2013), as their definition avoids subsuming all parts of social reality (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021) but retains the core focus of institutions on norms, rules and culture (Scott, 2013). They argue that ‘logics act as “taken-for-granted social prescriptions (Battilana & Dorado, 2010, p. 1420)” that define goals and expectations, legitimate activity, and often become embodied in organizational structures and practices’ (McPherson & Sauder, 2013, p. 167). Put succinctly, logics are practical rationalities that offer guardrails to actors to frame their practices, understandings and emotions (Lounsbury et al., 2021; Sadeh & Zilber, 2019; Smith & Besharov, 2019).

In contexts in which only one logic dominates, this logic offers clear ‘guardrails’ to actors, whose practices and understandings will, often unconsciously, stay within their confines. Yet, multiple logics are present in many contexts, and such situations are challenging for actors, as the different logics present are often contradictory and cannot be easily reconciled. This is so because institutional logics are grounded in values in which actors deeply believe and towards which they are oriented (Friedland, 2013; Gehman, 2021; Lee & Lounsbury, 2015). When actors engage with multiple logics, they are in fact engaging with the values underlying them. Values themselves are always incompatible and incommensurable (Spicer, 2001), and situations of value pluralism, therefore, are inherently difficult for actors. Multiple logics, with different values underlying them, will offer different and incompatible prescriptions to actors, creating a situation of institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011).

How actors perceive institutional complexity depends on the compatibility, jurisdiction and centrality of the institutional logics that are present (Raynard, 2016). The degree of compatibility, the extent to which the rationalities offered by logics are conflicting or not, and how actors cope with incompatibility have been the focus of many insightful studies (e.g. Pache & Santos, 2013b; Reay & Hinings, 2009). Jurisdiction, or the domains in which a logic plays a part, has been addressed less explicitly, but is incorporated into almost all qualitative studies focusing on logics, with scholars describing the setting in which logics are studied and used by actors (e.g. Everitt & Levinson, 2016; März et al., 2016).

The centrality of logics, sometimes referred to as their relevance, dominance or salience (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Hesse et al., 2019), has received far less attention. Centrality can be understood as how meaningful different logics are and how often they are (re)produced and (re)interpreted by actors compared to other logics (Besharov & Smith, 2014).<sup>1</sup> The centrality of a logic is not fixed but dynamic over time,

space and actors. First, certain logics may become less central to the functioning of actors over time, such as the religious logic, which long guided healthcare and education in Western/European countries but now has ceased to take pride of place. Second, different logics may play a more central role in different spaces. Gümüşay et al. (2020), for example, show how different logics were present in different settings within the same organization, in part ensuring that logics which seemed incompatible were incorporated into that organization. Third, actors engaging with similar logics do not necessarily need to hold them central to the same degree. What logics are considered central by certain actors may be deeply consequential for other actors. Powerful actors in organizations, for example, can prioritize practices associated with the logic they hold central, regardless of whether that same logic and its practices are held central by other actors in the organization (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Or more activist actors can foreground and regenerate logics which were regarded as dead, making them central once again (Kroezen & Heugens, 2019). The examples above show that the temporal, spatial and actor-related dynamics of centrality are all interwoven, and this dynamic nature causes situations to become more or less institutionally complex. If several logics become central over time, space or actors, this creates possibilities for tensions, for cognitive stretching and for conflicts over which logic takes precedence.

Although almost all studies on institutional complexity focus on compatibility, we would argue that centrality is at least as important for understanding institutional complexity, if not more important. Some studies focusing on the incompatibility of logics do explicitly address the centrality of logics (e.g. Gümüşay et al., 2020) yet stop short of explaining why the logics under study are deemed central and how this can be established. In and by itself, the degree of centrality shapes whether actors take note of a logic and whether they are able and willing to engage, promote or ignore a logic in a context. A high degree of centrality in an organization,

for example, implies that a logic cannot be simply compartmentalized to only one part of that organization but plays a part in most of its aspects (Skelcher & Smith, 2015). To individuals, low centrality implies that it becomes cognitively easier for them to ignore or willingly go against the rationalities or practices related to a logic (Gümüşay et al., 2020).

In relation to the degree of compatibility and jurisdiction of multiple logics, it is their centrality that decides whether actors actually experience (in)compatibility and overlap in jurisdiction. Even if different logics are incompatible on paper, actors would only perceive such incompatibility if the different logics were at least to some degree central to them (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Hallett (2010), for example, studied how turmoil broke out in a school when the new principal strictly enforced practices associated with the logic of accountability, thus limiting the discretion of teachers. This is a good example of how the centrality of one logic changes in a context due to the efforts of a specific actor: a new powerful actor forced the practices of a logic that was central to her upon the other actors in the organization, making it central to them too. This situation posed two problems for these teachers. First, the practices of the logic of accountability were materialized in a prescribed and limited way, reducing their autonomy. Second, the teachers considered the practices associated with the logic of accountability counterproductive for the students' learning processes as they limited the time available for practices that, the teachers argued, were important based on a professional logic.

Before the new principal enforced the logic of accountability, there was no turmoil in the school, but this was not because the logic of accountability was not present. Hallett argues that the logic of accountability was already there in the organization, yet the practices associated with it were not actively enforced nor engaged by actors, making it low in centrality. This low centrality meant that teachers did not engage in practices associated with the logic of accountability and that they did not experience any incompatibility between the logic of their

profession and that of accountability. This example underlines that, if an institutional logic has a low degree of centrality to actors, it becomes rather irrelevant whether it is incompatible with another logic or overlapping in jurisdiction, as the actors simply do not feel strongly bound to the other logic.

### The Relational and Relative Aspects of Centrality

Hallett's example of turmoil at a school not only shows that understanding centrality is important for studying institutional complexity but also illustrates that the centrality of a logic is not a straightforward object of study. In the example, the centrality of the logic of accountability was previously low because the practices associated with it were not really followed. When these practices were enforced, however, increasing the centrality of the logic of accountability, this ensured that the teachers' relation with it materialized in a new way. As centrality is reflected in the relationship between a logic and actors engaging with that logic, studying the relations between the two sheds light on the centrality of a logic.

Yet, centrality was not only reflected in increased engagement with practices associated with one logic, but also in decreased engagement with practices associated with another one. Teachers complained that practices associated with the logic of accountability limited their teaching preparation time and that, from their professional point of view, this was not conducive to the quality of their teaching. The centrality of the professional logic and its practices, consequently, suffered because the centrality of the logic of accountability increased. The centrality of logics, therefore, was evident in the actors' relative engagement with different logics.

In other words, centrality encompasses two different aspects: a relational one and a relative one. By *relational*, we mean that actors make institutional logics more or less central to their practices. The centrality of a logic is always a function of its relation with actors, who put it

central to a greater or lesser degree by their engagement with it in their day-to-day experiences and practices. In essence, actors give logics significance. The relational aspect of centrality implies that actors play a core role in producing and reproducing logics in their day-to-day experiences and practices, which determines how central a logic becomes. Such a relational view of centrality builds on the idea that actors and logics are fully co-constitutive, and that logics differ in their centrality over time through their relations to actors.

We use the word 'relational' purposively to distinguish our view of centrality from the notion of 'adherence' to logics, which is also used by some authors (Pache & Santos, 2013a). The notion of adherence creates an image of actors who follow logics by reproducing them, which reduces the role of actors to followers of logics in their practices but does not really bring into view how and to what extent they make certain practices and understandings of logics matter. Centrality is not only about whether logics are followed and present in practices, but also about how and to what extent actors prioritize certain understandings and practices, potentially even new ones. By using the word 'relational' in studying centrality, we want to explicitly underline that actors not only reproduce logics but also dynamically engage with and reshape them by attaching meaning to them, which in turns shapes what a logic itself means. A relational view of centrality, in other words, underlines the co-constitutive relation between logics and actors.

By *relative*, we mean that the centrality of one logic is always shaped by how central other logics are within a given context. If researchers, for example, are interested in the centrality of one logic in a context of multiple logics but focus only on the engagement of actors with that one logic, it becomes rather easy for them to mistake engagement with the logic of interest for a high degree of centrality. Only by comparing the engagement of actors with the logic of interest with their engagement with other logics can it become apparent whether the logic of interest is truly central or not.

Accounting for the relational aspect of centrality would offer insights into the engagement of actors with a logic; without accounting for the relative aspect of centrality, however, one would not be able to understand how meaningful that logic truly is to actors who also engage with a number of other logics. Accounting for the relative aspect of centrality, therefore, would help us understand the different logics faced by actors. By focusing only on the relative aspect, however, scholars can only examine what logics are present in a context, but not how actors in that context relate to and (re)shape logics through their day-to-day practices and understandings.

In the rest of this paper, we will seek to illustrate what sort of approach would be conducive to studying the centrality of logics by accounting for the relational aspect of centrality while also being mindful of its relative aspect. In the next two sections, therefore, we will analyse two approaches that are used to study institutional logics: the institutional logics approach (IL) and the inhabited institutionalism approach (II), discussing their main assumptions so as to illustrate what sort of assumptions are conducive to studying the relational and relative aspects of centrality.

## Institutional Logics

The approach of IL originates in the work of Friedland and Alford (1991), with Thornton and Ocasio (1999, 2008) and Thornton et al. (2012) offering the most complete expressions of this approach. In order to understand the suitability of IL as a lens to study the centrality of logics, we will discuss below five main assumptions underlying IL.

Before we turn to discussing the assumptions of IL, however, it is important to note that there are two main views on IL, which we would call the partially constitutive and the mutually constitutive view. Both these views understand institutional logics as social facts, whose presence in the first place is the product of human thinking and interaction. Both views understand institutional logics to be constitutive

of the social reality with which actors engage, with logics offering both possibilities and constraints to actors (Thornton et al., 2012).

In the partially constitutive view, actors and contingency play only a limited role in the (re)shaping of institutional logics, which are understood to be largely fixed in a context, offering predictability and stability. Changes in the meaning of logics are mostly seen as the result of different logics coming together, creating contradictions and offering room for actors to generate change, or because of crises (Hay, 2016). Scholars taking the partially constitutive view of IL focus mainly on understanding institutional logics in a setting, how they affect actors or how actors cope with a context of multiple logics (e.g. Alvehus, 2018; Meyer & Hammerschmidt, 2006).

In the mutually constitutive view, actors and contingency play a larger role. Institutional logics are understood to be (re)shaped by actors through the understandings and practices that result from their attempts to make sense of their context. The understandings that actors develop are not fully shaped by the institutional logics they engage with but are also contingent on their experiences and environments. The reality of actors is thus constituted by institutional logics, but their own understandings also reconstitute the meaning of institutional logics (Hay, 2016). Scholars taking the mutually constitutive view of IL focus mainly on understanding the processes of re-institutionalization or de-institutionalization of logics (e.g. Cappellaro et al., 2020; Lounsbury et al., 2021; Lounsbury & Wang, 2020).

When discussing the assumptions of IL below, we follow the partially constitutive view of IL, as this view has been more prevalent in studies using IL. In the last section, we will briefly discuss the usability of the mutually constitutive view of IL to study the centrality of institutional logics.

Scholars of IL argue, first, that an inter-institutional system is present. At the level of society, there are seven main ideal-type social worlds: the state, the market, the corporation, the community, the family, the professions and

religion (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). The assumptions, beliefs and rules that are core to these social worlds shape the institutional logics ‘out there’, guide the way actors understand social reality and provide actors with the motives for action. Institutional logics are, in other words, the assumptions, beliefs and rules derived from different social worlds which enable and constrain actors in their understandings and actions. Logics in practice are not necessarily pure expressions of one of the seven social worlds adapted to a context but can also be hybrid composites from different social worlds, taking and combining elements of the main orders to form another logic (Thornton et al., 2012).

Second, IL argues that actors are embedded or nested within the inter-institutional system, adhering to prescriptions that are derived from the seven social worlds (Pache & Santos, 2013a). The idea of embedding or nesting implies that actors shape their activities within the boundaries set by institutional logics, with logics both enabling and constraining actors (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 103). Actors can be embedded in multiple logics, meaning they must adhere to different and sometimes conflicting boundaries set by logics.

Third, scholars of IL study institutional logics at different levels of analysis. Following from the inter-institutional system and the embedding of organizations and actors in that system, scholars focus on the field level in which social worlds are translated into logics, the level of organizations and the level of actors (Lounsbury et al., 2021; Thornton et al., 2012). IL, therefore, is used to study both more macro-level processes of relations between social worlds and field-level logics as well as to study more micro-level processes, such as the way actors understand and experience the presence of different logics in their context (e.g. Reay & Hinings, 2005).

Fourth, IL assumes there is a partially recursive relation between logics and actors. Institutional logics, in enabling and demarcating understandings and actions, help shape the activities of actors. Actors, in their turn, play a

part in reconfirming or challenging logics in their actions, yet within the boundaries set by the logics in which they are embedded. As Thornton and Ocasio (2008) argue: ‘individual and organizational actors have *some* hand in shaping and changing institutional logics’ (p. 100). Based on this assumption, scholars following the partially constitutive view of IL understand logics to offer predictability and stability (e.g. Skelcher & Smith, 2015). Actors have some hand in changing logics when there are crises or when multiple logics come together, creating contradictions. Such room for change, then, is largely created by factors beyond actors themselves, shaped either through the conjunction of different logics or due to external crises. In other words, actors can have a hand in reshaping the meaning of logics, but not solely based on their own interactions, experiences and practices, only within a framework of crises or multiple logics coming together.

Last, change in both the actors’ activities and routines and in the understanding of institutional logics themselves comes about through the interplay of different institutional logics or at moments of crisis. The actors studied by IL scholars grapple with a multitude of institutional logics at the same time (Thornton et al., 2012). Various authors have empirically shown that the plurality of institutional logics creates possible conflict and competition, leads to negotiation and coordination in organizations and among actors (McPherson & Sauder, 2013; Pache & Santos, 2013a) and can result in hybrid expressions of institutional logics guiding actions (Meyer & Hammerschmidt, 2006). Change in activities and routines becomes possible when actors face the conflicting demands of different institutional logics and, hence, acquire room for agency to create change. Change in the understanding of institutional logics becomes possible when actors strategically use the contradictions between logics to reinterpret their meaning (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

Table 1 presents an overview of five assumptions underlying IL. The five assumptions of IL

**Table 1.** Assumptions of IL.

	IL
Institutional logics are derived from	Inter-institutional system
Level of analysis	All possible, mainly organizational level
Macro–micro relation	Partially recursive
Positioning of an actor vis-a-vis institutional logics	Embedding/nesting
Basis of change	Ambiguity and conflict between institutional logics

are conducive to exploring the relative aspect of centrality. The very assumption of an inter-institutional system with seven social worlds already sets the stage for the presence of multiple logics at the same time. In addition, the assumption that change happens at the interface of the different logics in which actors are embedded further underlines the focus of IL on the presence of multiple logics in a context. The assumptions of IL thus actively underline that scholars should focus on the presence of multiple logics in a context. The relative aspect of centrality, therefore, which requires researchers to understand that logics are only central in relation to other logics present, can be well studied by using IL as a lens.

The relational aspect of centrality is somewhat more challenging to study. Particularly the assumptions that there is a partially recursive relationship between a logic and actors and that change only happens when there is a crisis or when multiple logics in the same context form a challenge. Core to the relational aspect of centrality is that actors make logics central in their practices, make them matter in their interactions and can change their centrality not only by increasing or decreasing their reproduction of a logic through associated practices (which would be changes in adherence), but also by altering and reshaping the practices and meaning of a logic, that is, the ways in which a logic matters to them. The reshaping of a logic is not only the consequence of factors outside actors, such as different logics coming together or crises, but also because, through their experiences and practices, actors can change their understanding of a logic. In other words, the relational aspect of centrality revolves around a

connection between logics and actors, in which logics constitutes the understandings of actors, and in which actors also make logics matter and change their understanding of logics.

The assumption of a partially recursive relationship and the assumption that change happens only when multiple logics come together or in crises means that scholars following the partially constitutive view of IL understand actors only to reinterpret and reshape logics under certain conditions: only when there are crises or contradictions between multiple logics do actors have the opportunity to reshape the meaning of logics. Actors' day-to-day experiences, practices and understandings are not seen as sources to make logics matter more or less or reshape the institutional logics they engage with. The relational aspect of centrality explicitly requires the acknowledgement that the day-to-day experiences and practices of actors help to shape and reshape both how much logics matter to actors and the meaning logics have. The assumptions of the partially constitutive view of IL, consequently, are not directly supportive for studying the relational aspect of centrality.

### Inhabited Institutionalism

The approach of II was first put forward by Hallett & Ventresca (2006), with the goal of understanding how institutions are lived and experienced by actors (Hallett, 2010; März et al., 2016). Rooted in the ideas of symbolic interactionism (Hallett et al., 2009), II explores and maps the different ways in which actors interpret, are affected by and respond to institutional logics (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016; Hallett



& Hawbaker, 2021). To understand the suitability of II as a lens to study the centrality of logics, we will discuss below five main assumptions underpinning II.

First, II argues that institutional logics are reflections of the experiences and understandings of actors who, quite literally, inhabit these institutional logics and, thereby, infuse them with meaning (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006).

[Institutional] logics are not purely top-down: real people, in real contexts, with consequential past experiences of their own, play with them, question them, combine them with institutional logics from other domains, take what they can use from them, and make them fit their needs. (Binder, 2007, p. 568)

II then implies that logics are made to matter only in connection and relation to interactions between individuals and the organizations in which these interactions take place (Everitt & Levinson, 2016). In contrast to IL, which derives institutional logics from the inter-institutional system, scholars of II would argue that the main foundations of logics can be found in the lived experiences and understandings of actors (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). This is to say neither that scholars of IL deny the importance of the meanings actors attach to logics (e.g. Lounsbury et al., 2021; Nigam & Ocasio, 2010), nor that scholars of II actively argue against the existence of an inter-institutional system, but only that the building blocks for understanding the content of institutional logics are located differently by the two approaches.

Second, II argues that in the relation between institutional logics actors can be understood through the metaphor of coupling, thereby starkly departing from other institutional approaches, which assume actors are 'embedded' or 'nested' within institutional logics (Binder, 2007; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). In contrast to nesting or embedding, the metaphor of coupling suggests that actors are not fully contained within a logic but retain some autonomy from a logic, and vice versa. Coupling implies that logics are connected to actors to a

certain extent, exerting some influence on one another, while at the same time retaining partial independence from each other. How independent they are, is reflected in the degree of coupling: a tighter coupling implies a deeper connection, with a logic being more meaningful to an actor, whereas a looser coupling means that the connection is more shallow, making a logic less meaningful to an actor (Everitt, 2013; Hallett, 2010).

Third, scholars of II study institutional logics at the level of the sensemaking of interacting actors, or what Hallett and Hawbaker (2021) call the 'supra-individual level' (p.18). Following the ideas of symbolic interactionism, II argues that the most relevant practices and understandings are shaped in the interactions between actors. How institutional logics are lived and experienced by actors then is shaped by and becomes apparent in the interactions actors have (Zilber, 2020). In studying the coupling of institutional logics, scholars of II, therefore, explicitly focus on the coupling between interacting actors and institutional logics, and the focus is on how actors cue, interpret and enact institutional logics, or rather how they make sense of the institutional logics to which they are coupled. Through their sensemaking, actors live, inhabit and experience the institutional logics they are coupled to and make them matter.

Fourth, II assumes a fully recursive relation between institutional logics and actors (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). An institutional logic shapes and bounds the sensemaking of actors just as much as the actors' sensemaking helps to shape the meaning and boundaries of an institutional logic (Everitt & Levinson, 2016). In contrast to IL, which argues that actors only have 'some hand in shaping and changing institutional logics' (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008 p. 100), II regards logics and actors as playing equal parts in shaping each other. The idea that logics and interactions are in a recursive and mutually constitutive relation is also reflected in the notions of 'inhabiting' and 'coupling'. 'Inhabiting' stresses the idea that logics cannot be meaningful without the lived experiences

**Table 2.** Assumptions of II.

	II
Institutional logics are derived from	Lived experiences
Level of analysis	Interactions connected to logics
Macro–micro relation	Recursive
Positioning of an actor vis-a-vis institutional logics	Coupling
Basis of change	Changes in degree of coupling, reinterpretations by actors and autonomy in coupling configurations

and understandings of actors. ‘Coupling’, in contrast to embedding, stresses the idea that logics do not envelop actors hierarchically, but that actors and logics are connected in a mutually constitutive relation, which may be stronger or weaker depending on the degree of coupling (Hallett, 2010).

Last, II locates the basis for change in the understanding and presence of institutional logics in the processes of recoupling and decoupling; in actors’ reinterpretations of the meaning logics have; and in the partial autonomy logics and actors have from one another in a coupling configuration (e.g. Everitt, 2017; Hallett, 2010). The degree of coupling between an institutional logic and actors is not fixed but fluctuates (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021), and this flux means that the meaningfulness of an institutional logic to actors changes over time and space. The processes of recoupling and decoupling may be gradual – as the result of reinterpretations (Everitt, 2013) – or rather sudden – as when institutional logics are being forced upon actors (Hallett, 2010). In addition to changes in the degree of coupling, actors can also reinterpret the meaning logics have for them without necessarily changing the degree of coupling. Furthermore, the coupling between a logic and actors is never absolute: a coupling can be very tight, but even the tightest of couplings leaves some room for partial autonomy, which will always offer possibilities for change in the degree of coupling and the ways in which an institutional logic is inhabited (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021).

Table 2 offers an overview of the five assumptions underpinning II. These five

assumptions are conducive to exploring the relational aspect of centrality. In doing so, it is important for an approach to account for the fact that logics are central *to actors*, that logics are made to matter to actors and that actors can make them matter more or less or change the way logics are understood. The concepts of ‘inhabiting’ and ‘coupling’ reinforce the idea that actors do not just follow logics but also make logics matter through their own experiences and practices. In other words, the two concepts confirm that there is a mutually constitutive relationship between logics and actors, which is key to studying the relational aspect of centrality. The concept of coupling stresses that logics and actors can constitute one another, but that this connection also has limits: the more actors become decoupled from a logic, the less they are influenced by it and the less they themselves influence it. If actors and a logic are decoupled, that logic may even become meaningless to them. Even if the coupling between a logic and actors is tight, however, it will never be full, leaving some autonomy for actors to have understandings and practices not shaped by this logic. This allows actors to create new understandings and, thereby, reshape a logic, even if they are ostensibly so tightly coupled to it. The focus on inhabiting and coupling, in short, means that II takes a mutually constitutive view of the relation between logics and actors, which makes II conducive to studying the relational aspect of centrality.

It is somewhat more challenging to study the relative aspect of centrality using the assumptions of II, mainly due to the assumption of coupling. To incorporate the relative aspect of

centrality, II would have to explicitly acknowledge that logics are central vis-a-vis other logics with which actors engage. The focus on couplings, however, implicitly draws attention to the relation between a logic and actors and draws attention away from other logics that actors engage with at the same time. Consequently, the notion of coupling might prime researchers to study the coupling of an actor to a logic largely in isolation from the other logics present in a context, thus overlooking the relativity of the coupling under study. Various empirical studies using II as a lens also mainly focus on the coupling of a single logic (e.g. Cobb, 2017; Hallett, 2010).

Nevertheless, some studies using II as a lens explicitly study the coupling of multiple logics in a given context (Everitt, 2017; März et al., 2016). We would also argue that II can be used for studying the presence of multiple logics and how they become central relative to one another. To do so, we believe, scholars of II should actively take three points into consideration.

First, in studying the coupling between a logic and actors, scholars should be aware that multiple logics might be present as such awareness of possible logic multiplicity would avoid overstating the role and centrality of the one logic under study. Second, II scholars should be aware that the degree of coupling between a logic and actors is not similar for all logics. If one logic is tightly coupled to actors, implying little autonomy, it does not follow that these actors have little autonomy from logics in general.

Third, if there are multiple logics present in a context, the couplings between actors and those logics are not unrelated. If one logic is tightly coupled to actors, this is bound to influence the couplings those same actors have to other logics. As logics are always incompatible with each other to some extent (Besharov & Smith, 2014), it is unlikely for actors to be stably and tightly coupled to multiple logics at the same time and in the same place. This is not to say that actors cannot be tightly coupled to more than one logic, but that their coupling to multiple logics is not likely to endure for a long time. In short, scholars of II should take into

account that one coupling is always relative to other couplings.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we have conceptualized the notion of centrality, argued for its relevance in studying institutional complexity and discussed the suitability of two streams of institutional theory for studying the centrality of logics. We have argued that, in order to understand centrality of logics, research should take into account its relational aspect, the fact that logics are central *to actors*, and its relative aspect, the fact that logics are only central to actors *compared* to other logics. In discussing the assumptions underpinning IL and II, we concluded that neither of the two approaches is wholly suited to the study of centrality as, at first glance, the assumptions of IL support studying the relative but not the relational aspect, while the assumptions of II, conversely, support studying the relational but not the relative aspect.

We argued, however, that if scholars of II take into account three considerations, they can account for the relative aspect of centrality without violating the assumptions of II. First, in determining the coupling of a logic to actors, scholars of II should be aware of the possibility of logic multiplicity in a given context to avoid the pitfall of claiming centrality without knowing the degree of coupling that other logics have to actors. Second, in studying the degree of coupling, scholars should not assume that other logics share the same degree of coupling as the logic of interest. Third, the coupling between actors and a logic does not stand by itself but is also shaped by the degree of coupling between them and other logics.

Our discussion of the centrality of logics makes several contributions to the literature. First, our conceptualization helps to clarify why the study of centrality is important for understanding institutional complexity (Besharov & Mitzinneck, 2020). Currently, most studies of institutional complexity do not even mention centrality or simply assume logics to be central. We would argue, however, that understanding

differences in the centrality of logics is core to understanding institutional complexity. The relational aspect of centrality underscores that if logics are not meaningful *to actors*, then no complexity will arise at all, for only if actors hold multiple logics central at the same time is there any potential for complexity. In addition, the relative aspect of centrality draws attention to the fact that the logic of interest to a scholar might not be at all central to the actors under study. One can only understand what logics are truly meaningful if one understands the relation between the different logics enacted by actors in a context.

In addition, our conceptualization of centrality as consisting of a relational and a relative aspect aids in the operationalization and empirical study of centrality, offering a novel lens to study how actors cope with institutional complexity. Building on this conceptualization, it becomes possible for scholars to map the degree of centrality of different logics and changes occurring over time, space and actors. Scholars could, for instance, study the stability of the centrality of one logic over time, space and actors. Or scholars could study how flexible actors are in altering the centrality of logics by engaging and enacting logics over time and space (Gümüşay et al., 2020). Or scholars could study whether different layers within an organization hold similar logics central or not and how such differences affect the shared understandings in the organization under study. If different layers hold different logics central, this could cause layers to be decoupled due to a lack of shared understandings (Weick, 1976) and, thereby, undermine the organization's potential for effective governance.

Furthermore, if scholars of II actively take into account the three considerations we proposed, this would open the door for the empirical study of both aspects of centrality using II. For the study of centrality, this means that a suitable theoretical lens is available. These three considerations highlight the fact that logics are not 'inhabited' in isolation and would allow scholars to study how the way one logic is inhabited is shaped by the other logics to which

actors are coupled. In this way, we would argue, the II approach becomes even more reflective of the empirical reality of actors inhabiting institutions – not in isolation, but always in relation to the other institutions they inhabit.

In this paper, we have only addressed what we have called a partially constitutive view of IL. Yet an increasing number of scholars of IL have shifted away from this view towards a more mutually constitutive view (e.g. Friedland, 2013; Friedland et al., 2014; Lounsbury et al., 2021; Lounsbury & Wang, 2020). Although a full discussion of the mutually constitutive view of IL is beyond the scope of this paper, we would note that this view is also likely to be suitable for studying both the relational and relative aspects of centrality. Assuming that the meaning of logics is connected to the context, interpretation and practices of actors, the mutually constitutive view of IL understands logics as far more relational, with actors being shaped by, but equally shaping and reshaping, the institutional logics around them (Friedland et al., 2014). Without actors engaging and enacting logics in their practices, in other words, there would be no logics in such a constructivist view. Consequently, such a view of IL would be suitable for studying centrality, accounting for actors putting logics central to a greater or lesser degree and, in doing so, shaping and reshaping logics over time and space.

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### **Note**

1. One could also argue that, as logics are grounded in different values (Friedland, 2013),

one should study institutional complexity not through the compatibility, jurisdiction and centrality of logics but through the compatibility, jurisdiction and centrality of values. The literature on value pluralism focuses on the compatibility and incommensurability of values, but, like the literature on institutional logics, does not actively take centrality into account (e.g. De Graaf, 2015; Spicer, 2001). Potentially, our discussion of centrality could make a valuable contribution to the study of value pluralism. Whether centrality can be incorporated into the study of value pluralism, however, depends on how assumptions of incommensurability and incompatibility are understood. Incompatibility, for example, is seen as more absolute than in the study of institutional logics, and it is open for debate whether, under such an assumption, centrality has a role to play in the study of value pluralism.

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