


Are Logics Enough? Framing as an Alternative Tool for Understanding Institutional Meaning Making

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Abstract

Understanding institutions requires attending both to their social fact qualities and to the bidirectional nature of institutional processes as they influence and are influenced by actors. We advocate for frames and framing as tools to elucidate meaning making activities, and to explain whether and how meanings subsequently spread, scale up, and perhaps become widely institutionalized. Frames as cognitive structures provide resources for actors and shape what they see as possible, while framing as an interaction process is a source of agency that is embedded in the everyday activities of individuals, groups, and organizations. In making the case for the framing approach, we consider how the extensive use of the logics approach in organization theory research has created confusion about what logics are and how they accommodate both structure and agency. We conclude with a discussion of the phenomenological and ontological potential of frames and framing.

Keywords

institutional theory, communication, cognitive perspectives

While the burgeoning literature on institutional logics has been helpful to understanding how clusters of meanings and practices are shared and transmitted among organizations, studies tend to characterize logics as fully formed and stable social facts that are either imposed by higher orders of social organization or “pulled down” by organizational members to interpret events or effect change at the local level. This has yielded a wealth of insights about how institutions influence actors from the top down, but has fostered relatively little understanding of the bottom-up microprocesses of institutionalization that influence institutional persistence or change. When logics are depicted as being creatively used by actors, they are portrayed as tools to be retrieved and “activated in the right situation” (Voronov, De Clercq, & Hinings, 2013, p. 1565). This overly static view of meaning making does not attend to the interactions and processes through which meanings and practices are not just used or recombined but also initiated, reconstituted, or instantiated at multiple levels of social organization. Several fundamental questions about meaning making and institutionalization remain, including “Where do institutionalized meanings originate?” “How do meanings scale up so that they eventually endure in a cultural repertoire?” “Are institutionalized meanings entities, processes or both?” Our purpose in this essay is to offer an approach to understanding institutions and institutionalization based on frames and framing that acknowledges the conditioning influence of institutions on actors

(Mutch, 2017) while recognizing agency through which actors can influence institutions.

Understanding institutions requires attending to both their social fact qualities and the bidirectional and recursive nature of institutional processes at multiple levels. The logics perspective, while attempting to counter the isomorphic imperative of new institutionalism, instead may perpetuate the view that institutionalized patterns can be reduced to a few dominant logics that exist a priori and that pervade and control organizational life. Logics “refer to the belief systems and related practices that predominate in an organizational field” (Scott, 2001, p. 139). Early definitions of institutional logics portrayed them as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activity, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences” (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). While this definition stresses the endogenous, socially constructed

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nature of logics, Friedland and Alford (1991) characterize logics as exogenous to fields and actors, and Lounsbury, Ventresca, and Hirsch (2003) claim they are “analytically removed from the more active struggles over meaning and resources” (p. 72). A more recent definition of institutional logics defines them as “frames of reference that condition actors’ choices for sensemaking, the vocabulary they use to motivate action and their sense of self and identity” (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012, p. 2). While this definition emphasizes individual sensemaking and actor agency more than previous definitions, it doesn’t make clear how meanings that eventually become logics originate or come to have determinative properties. Logics may be more variegated, ambiguous, and shifting than their definition suggests (Currie & Spyridonidis, 2016), leading to calls for more attention to “meaning making,” or the construction of the meanings that guide social actors and inform prospective action (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015; Mitnick & Ryan, 2015; Zilber, 2016). In response, we propose framing theory as a valuable lens for articulating how meanings are constructed.

Theoretical lenses that bring bottom-up and interactional dynamics of meaning making into sharper focus can foster deeper understanding of how institutional realms that appear on the surface to be isomorphic may actually be unsettled or contested (Meyer & Höllerer, 2010; Purdy & Gray, 2009). In these contexts, actors actively struggle to shape meaning, which yields ongoing tension, persistence, and/or change in institutionalized meanings such as logics as well as in individual and collective identities (Reay, Goodrick, Waldorff, & Casebeer, 2017). In this essay, we argue that frames (extant interpretation schemes) and framing (interactional meaning making processes) are ideally equipped to study and account for the “communicative constitution, maintenance, and transformation of institutions” (Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015, p. 14). Communication and discourse are foundational to cultural-cognitive alignment and institutionalization (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Fine & Hallett, 2014), and the framing lens offers a recursive perspective where institutions are produced and reproduced through the everyday activities of individuals. In this way, frames and framing theory are better suited than logics to capture and explain the construction and negotiation of meanings through interactions. Although Thornton and her colleagues (2012) acknowledge that approaches to meaning making such as frames, schemas, and narratives are connected to field-level logics, they subsume these within the logics perspective and suggest they are an important means by which institutional logics at the societal level get translated to the field level. This positioning tends to emphasize how field-level logics shape frames, schemas, and narratives (a top-down approach) while failing to recognize that frames, schemas, and narratives can also *originate* through bottom-up processes that may aggregate and “amplify” to challenge

and reshape extant logics. As Barley and Tolbert (1991) noted, “through choice and action, individuals and organizations can deliberately modify, and even eliminate institutions” (p. 94). We argue here for the utility of frames and framing to elucidate meaning making activities at various levels of social organization, and to explain whether and how meanings subsequently spread, scale up, become dominant, and perhaps become widely institutionalized, for example, as field frames or master frames.

To frame is to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).¹ Framing processes also operate recursively. When viewed as basic cognitive structures, frames guide the perception and representation of social reality (Bateson, 1972), shaping the perspectives through which individuals interpret the world. A second perspective on framing adopts a more interactive perspective on meaning making by arguing that frames are generated in a bottom-up process during an interaction to make sense of what is going on during it (Goffman, 1974). These frames are then available to be replicated in subsequent interactions and potentially to “condition enduring framing processes” (Hunt, Benford, & Snow, 1994, p. 192) through top-down mechanisms, if they achieve higher order status as field frames and master frames. Nonetheless, even at this level, they remain “endogenous to a field of actors and subject to modification and change” (Lounsbury et al., 2003, p. 72).

The bidirectional nature of framing is well-established among interactional communication scholars and offers a powerful way to connect top-down and bottom-up processes of meaning making. For example, an interactive approach to framing argues that

the symbolic aspects of meaning are continually being negotiated through ongoing interactions . . . Frames not only exist a priori to be named and invoked from wider cultural repertoires but involve active struggles and negotiations over meaning before a frame can solidify and become institutionalized. (Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2015, p. 116)

These interactive frames can then amplify in scope through diffusion, regularity of use, and/or increased emotional intensity—all of which can lead to their eventual institutionalization at an organization, field, or societal level.

Three Examples of Framing in Action

In this section, we introduce three examples that illustrate the value of a framing approach for understanding institutions and institutionalization processes. We attend in particular to contexts that yield opportunities for meaning making, such as the emergence of new technology, the interpretation of scientific information, and the development of a new role. In

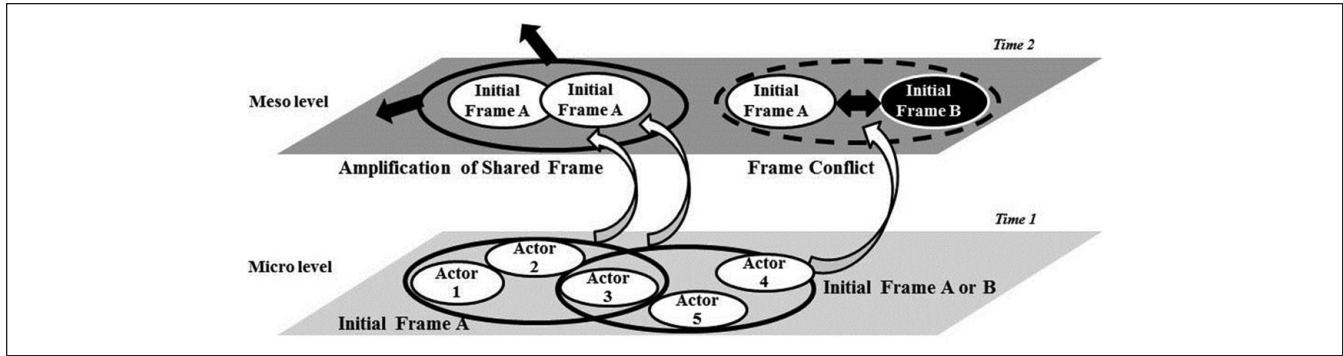


Figure 1. Amplification of frames and frame conflict.

each case, a framing lens enables analysis of bottom-up processes that can reveal both how and why collective meanings formed and proliferated.

The Rise of Short Message Service (SMS) Communication

To illustrate how frames emerge out of particular social circumstances rather than simply being diffused or imposed in a top-down fashion, we consider the origins and diffusion of texting (sending and receiving short messages on a mobile phone). Texting amplified into a highly institutionalized practice representing an important shift in the way people communicated with one another (Ansari & Phillips, 2011). Initially, mobile telecommunication firms viewed SMS communications as a substitute for pagers to be used for sending messages to the mobile phones of engineers working on-site. While they did not envisage SMS communications as having much consumer relevance, teenagers made use of several technical features of the service as they began to text without the industry's awareness, and firms only later began charging for it. Texting allowed these teenagers to enjoy multiple benefits that calling could not offer. They could save and reread messages as needed, choose when to attend to messages, and control the timing of composition, editing, and response while interacting in a silent, discrete, and unobtrusive manner in the presence of elders or in public.

This example reveals how a technological innovation (texting) evokes the need for new understandings about the innovation itself and also how it will change the behavior of those adopting it. The framing lens offers explanatory and analytical tools to explain the emergence and proliferation of a practice and its associated meanings. The notion of texting originated among a group of teenagers who quickly identified the benefits of having more private communication methods with greater freedom to control message timing. Once conceived, to amplify the frame of communicating by text not only needed to convey what it meant technologically "to text" (i.e., how do you do it), but it had to convey the advantages of doing so despite texting's short format, more

limited communication cues such as vocal tone, and the potential for delayed response (Ansari & Phillips, 2011). Despite these limitations of the new practice of texting, the texting frame spread rapidly among potential users so that the notion of communicating by text has amplified to become commonplace. As illustrated in Figure 1, frame amplification occurs when a frame is adopted by a wider and wider network of interactants and develops rituals associated with its use (Gray et al., 2015). Texting has overtaken communicating by telephone; thus, the texting frame has achieved status both as an endogenously created field frame in telecommunications and as a new cultural convention. While a number of theoretical lenses could be used to analyze this example, the strength of the framing lens is in its ability to account for the emergence and development of the new frame into a coherent, transmittable cluster of meaning and practice, and to explain the mechanism by which the frame gained widespread adherence.

The Emergence of Global Warming

Like texting, global warming is both an objective phenomenon and a set of meanings that we label a frame. The idea of global warming emerged from a preponderance of scientific research indicating that human-created climate change was causing significant global effects that were accelerating. Compared with the previous example, the global warming frame evolved more slowly, first taking root among meteorologists and then gradually amplifying to win over some political adherents while arousing a vocal contingent of naysayers who continue to reject the global warming frame. Amplification of frames can be impeded when other groups operate with a different frame that directly challenges the one advanced by the initial proponents. In such cases, frame conflict may result (see Figure 1). If additional reinterpretation and frame accommodations are not offered, the conflict itself can amplify to generate framing contests among groups, organizations, and societies. In such cases, both competing frames can amplify as they gain new adherents, creating either stalemate on issues or more overt conflicts.

Social movement organizations, for example, commonly advance an alternative frame to one prevailing in society (Benford & Snow, 2000), and, if they gain sufficient adherents to publicly challenge the extant frame, can provoke organizational or societal change (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). In the case of global warming, despite resistance, the frame has continued to amplify while spurring numerous framing conflicts among key actors on the world stage along the way (Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013). Nonetheless, global warming has become widely acknowledged and recently has been codified within the Paris Agreement of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change.

Renegotiation of a Managerial Identity

This example examines the experiences of the first group of Indian women to become corporate managers in South Africa (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). These women descended from a group of “passenger Indians” brought to South Africa from India in the 1690s. Females in this cultural group had historically served as housewives who did not work outside the home, traditions that have continued to the present day. They also were born and raised during the apartheid era so understood their place as minorities in South African society and the consequences of stepping outside it. However, in 1998, revisions made to the employment rules redressed the inequalities perpetuated on Indians (and other minorities) during apartheid. This opened the door for Indian women to become managers alongside White males, but with the expectation that they would conform to the strong prevailing frame for what constituted managerial performance. This included being assertive, overtly managing conflict, and working closely with males—behaviors grounded in patriarchal practices associated with White, Western males.

The women found it difficult to assume this masculine “frame” on managing because it directly conflicted with cultural traditions about who they were and how they were to behave that had been instilled over years of strong gender restrictions within their Indian communities and powerful racial prohibitions under apartheid. For example, assertiveness was not something Indians were permitted to display during apartheid without fear of repression. Consequently, the women framed their own version of appropriate managerial behavior that enabled them to navigate between workplace and home community expectations, balancing assertiveness and submissiveness depending on the context in which they were functioning.

In this example, the Indian women managers’ behavior depicts a frame break. The women managers concluded that the extant managerial frame in its entirety was untenable for them. Through the process that Goffman (1974) referred to as keying, these women modified the managerial frame in a subtle or nuanced way.

The women did not fully embrace the managerial identities prescribed in their workplaces nor did they retain all aspects of the cultural imprints imposed by their families and communities . . . Instead, they tried to construct hybrid identities in both spaces (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016, p. 272).

For example, they would affiliate with the men when needed for accomplishing work tasks, but when there were social engagements at work, they remained with women only. Although the managerial frame was available to the women managers, they did not interpret the larger context as conducive to adopting this frame completely. Amplification of the managerial frame was impeded by the women managers’ rekeying. The only way for this frame to amplify to a wider audience was to incorporate the modification within the meaning of managerial identity. Instead, two different frames about managerial identity existed side-by-side—one for men and the other for Indian women.

These examples highlight the flexibility of the framing approach to interpret multiple aspects of institutionalization and to provide a foundation for mechanism-based theorizing that can expand our knowledge of institutions and meaning making. In evaluating the need for and potential of the framing approach, we next consider how the extensive use of the logics approach in organization theory research has created confusion about what logics are and how they accommodate both structure and agency. We follow this with a discussion of the phenomenological and ontological horizons that may be expanded by use of a framing approach.

Consequences of Overusing the Logics Approach

In leveraging the construct of logics to “bring society back in,” the discourse of organization institutionalism has proposed a limited number of core societal logics while giving little attention to how a logic may achieve core status or who gets to anoint it as such. A few different frameworks of institutional logics have been offered, initially by Friedland and Alford (1991) who linked them to five core institutions of Western society: bureaucracy, capitalism, families, democracy, and religion. Subsequently, Thornton (2004) reframed this typology to identify six sectors of society that held distinct logics: markets, corporations, professions, states, families, and religions. This list was later expanded to include “community” as a seventh institutional order (Thornton et al., 2012), acknowledging that community influences on organizational meaning making are profound. While the elevation of community to core logic status was described as “a correction” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 71), an important unanswered question is how and when new meanings may become sufficiently institutionalized to acquire the status of societal logics. In contrast to these relatively fixed frameworks of logics at the societal level, scholars have argued that at the

micro level, actors combine, reconfigure, and manipulate logics to balance multiple and/or conflicting institutional and organizational demands (McPherson & Sauder, 2013; Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012) and collectively renegotiate the guiding constellation of logics to enable change in practices (Currie & Spyridonidis, 2016) and role identity (Reay et al., 2017).

The juxtaposition of these two issues (fixed logics and malleable logics) reveals lingering uncertainty about how logics can be both constraining and enabling at the same time. On one hand, prevailing institutional logics are “extra-individual” categories constraining the interests, values, and strategies of actors within fields and professions (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Seo & Creed, 2002). On the other hand, logics are malleable “strategic resources” that actors can use to influence decisions, justify activities, or promote change (Dalpiaz, Rindova, & Ravasi, 2016; Durand, Szostak, Jourdan, & Thornton, 2013). Viewing the core logics as open to revision when novel meanings and practices arise on the ground is consistent with a core tenet of institutional theory (Zilber, 2008), which is to understand “the tendency for social structures and processes to acquire meaning and stability in their own right” (Greenwood, 2010, citing Lincoln, 1995, p. 1147). But we lack theoretical reasoning for why conceptualizations of logics should depend so heavily on the level of analysis under consideration. Logics at the societal and field levels tend to be treated as constraining, but at the individual and organizational levels (and sometimes at the field level as well), the same logics are treated as malleable, negotiable, and differentially interpretable by individuals (Reay et al., 2017; Thornton et al., 2012). Research studies rooted in institutional logics vary so widely in their assumptions about the nature of logics that one might wonder if the logics lens becomes all things to all people.

A related problem is that the recognition of multiple logics at the individual, organizational, and field levels has led to numerous studies of conflicting logics, resulting in a proliferation of field-level logics that often remain unspecified or underspecified with respect to their relationship with the six or seven primary societal-level logics. For example, several studies offer well-developed accounts of logics emerging at the field level such as an “editorial logic” in publishing (Thornton, 2004), an “aesthetic logic” in arts (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005), a “financial logic” in banking (Almandoz, 2012), a “social welfare logic” in social enterprise, and “care and science logics” in medical education (Dunn & Jones, 2010). Other logics have also been proffered that emerged at the interactional level in day-to-day organizational activity such as the distinct logics of “criminal punishment,” “rehabilitation,” “community accountability,” and “efficiency” in the context of drug courts (McPherson & Sauder, 2013). However, the relationship of these logics to the core societal-level logics in the interinstitutional system (i.e., market, state, religion, family, corporate, professions,

and community) from which they are presumably derived is rarely specified—leaving their origins and status as logics in question. The flourishing literature on institutional logics has generated uncertainty about what logics are while generating an abundance of field and organizational logics that create confusion about whether and how logics might span levels of social order.

Any approach to understanding the simultaneous constraining and enabling nature of institutions must account for the multiplicity and complexity of institutional forces that are routinely encountered within and across layers of social order (Barley & Tolbert, 1991). Institutional processes are “doubly institutional, in the sense of renewing/maintaining institutions and, critically, in the sense of relying on the established socially available role structures, agency forms and cultural understandings that engender institutional renewal or maintenance” (Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, & Kallinikos, 2017, p. 26). One attempt to resolve this confusion is to interpret field- and organizational-level logics as different “hybrids” and blends of societal-level logics. While this conceptualization is useful in some ways, it also holds liabilities for theorizing (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013).

First, forcing a link between organizational, field, and societal logics may be reductionist—placing unnecessary constraints on theorizing at these lower levels of analysis because such theorization implies that all field-level interpretations are derivatives of “canonistic” societal logics. While field- and organizational-level logics may emerge through the local decomposition, interpretation, and translation of societal logics in a top-down process, not all new field-level logics necessarily are derived from societal-level logics (as the emergence of a community logic illustrated). Instead, they may arise through bottom-up interpretive processes associated with interactions, discourse, or practices that cannot readily be linked back to canonical societal-level logics, as we observed in the case of the South African Indian women managers. For instance, the “commons logic” (Ansari et al., 2013) can be seen as a hybrid of multiple societal logics—market, state, science, and community. However, emphasizing its roots in these logics ignores the bottom-up processes—different frame shifts among the key actors holding divergent stances on climate change—through which this commons logic was constructed to avoid the “tragedy of the commons.”

Similarly, the “green” or environmental” logic cannot be seen simply as a derivative of the community logic nor as a hybrid of multiple logics, yet a strong case can be made that such a logic exists and that it has emerged gradually over many years dating back at least to Rachel Carson’s publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 and the introduction of the deep ecology movement in 1972.² While a community logic emphasizes and privileges social connections among humans, an environmental logic highlights ecological connections between humans and the natural environment

(Ansari et al., 2013; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) and, in its most extreme form, deemphasizes anthropomorphism. Environmentalism has widely acknowledged meanings that influence much organizational sensemaking and practice, and the environmental logic has shifted the meaning of the market logic (Daily & Ellison, 2002; Emerson, 2003).

One can make similar arguments about other “logic wannabes” waiting to achieve core logic status such as the “development logic” (e.g., Battilana & Dorado, 2010) which has been conceptualized as a derivative of the community logic although this linkage fails to recognize that the development logic includes notions of rights, justice, and power not present in the community logic. And Friedland, Mohr, Roose, and Gardinali (2014) talk about the “logic of love,” organized through talk, physical intimacies, and moral and affective investment, and arguably with global manifestations, but this logic also does not appear in the interinstitutional system of logics. Is the logic of love a societal- or a field-level logic? A framing perspective does not force derivative connections between organizational- or field-level logics and a fixed set of societal logics. Instead, it accurately captures actors’ meanings in situ as they emerge and provides a deeper understanding of the micro-level processes through which novel and/or multiple meanings emerge or existing meanings change and stabilize over time. This is especially important because interpreters themselves are not necessarily making such links to higher order logics during their interactions, which challenges (problematizes) the need for having a fixed number of core societal logics in the first place.

Opportunities to Advance Institutional Theory Through Framing

We suggest that bottom-up approaches such as interactional framing can explain the emergence of an idea from its early instantiation through periods of contest to the eventual formation of new organizations, industries, and cultural practices, and finally to a level of durability to deserve the status of being a robust “cultural register” (Weber, 2005) or a logic. Here, we outline four ways in which framing offers new opportunities for scholarly inquiry that can address current gaps in our understanding of institutions and institutionalization.

First, the distinctiveness and growth of logics linked to the environment or development demonstrate that a robust theory of bottom-up processes is needed to account for the convergence or accretion of emergent meanings over time as they become more taken-for-granted, crystallized into norms, and translated into habitualized templates for thought and action sufficient to achieve logic status. The framing perspective already includes higher order constructs such as field frames (Lounsbury et al., 2003) and master frames (Snow & Benford, 1992) to account for the bidirectional process and to theorize how micro-level meanings endogenous

to a group can influence higher order levels of meaning and activity that, at the same time, recursively influence localized meaning making during interactions. Importantly, there is no finite number of these higher order constructs so that bottom-up meaning making is not confined to these constructs or their combinations, and can even lead to the emergence of new constructs that may or may not become institutionalized. This overcomes a limitation of the current focus of hybrid logics, which, drawing upon the biological origins of the term, assumes that two distinct parent logics are in play within an organization, and implies a certain rigidity and stability in both the parent logics and the composite offspring (e.g., a “family business” as a hybrid logic drawing both from a market logic and a family logic). Many complex and nuanced outcomes can emerge when multiple frames come into conflict. Framing allows for a more robust and sophisticated approach that reflects a wider array of multiple and overlapping cultural-cognitive templates to capture how new meanings can evolve.

Second, a framing approach also allows us to investigate the specific interpretive processes at work in fields where multiple meanings clash and/or find ways to coexist while maintaining their differences. For example, in a study of patenting at the science-commercial boundary, Murray (2010) shows “hybrids can be produced through the pursuit of differentiation, rather than by blending, and are maintained in productive tension rather than through easy coexistence” (p. 346). This description is descriptive of the idea of frame conflicts that we introduced earlier, which has a rich body of research associated with it. Long ago, Goffman (1974) explained how frame conflicts can emerge from keyings, and others have shown how frame conflicts can persist (Kaplan, 2008; Lewicki, Gray, & Elliott, 2003), become entrenched (Gray, 2003), and morph through communication (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Dewulf & Bouwen, 2012).

Third, the framing approach overcomes cultural bias embedded in frameworks that base logics on dominant Western meaning systems. Friedland and Alford (1991) acknowledge that their approach to bringing society back in is based on the institutions associated with Western civilization. Other systems for organizing societal-level logics, such as the interinstitutional system of ideal types proposed by Thornton et al. (2012), share a similar viewpoint that may limit our ability as scholars to make sense of institutions and social organizing across global contexts. For example, an institutional framework that distinguishes religion from state may not adequately reflect societal contexts where these institutions are unified, nor might the distinction between family and profession apply in some contexts where these are closely intertwined. Rather than labelling this as institutional complexity, we suggest that a framing approach offers conceptual and analytical tools that allow researchers to adopt an emic perspective that more accurately captures meanings in use.

Fourth, frames and framing can provide a more powerful account of the bidirectional, recursive, and both top-down and bottom-up processes of institutionalization than logics can. While it has been recently argued that a logics approach needs to “look two ways at once,” (Zilber, 2016)—to capture both their microfoundations or constitutive processes and their macro-level influence that are mutually constitutive, there is lack of a vocabulary for conceptualizing the micro-level processes within the logics framework (e.g., how does one “logic” as a verb?). But more importantly, the framing perspective views framing not as a static entity—a fully formed, arrived-at state of being—but as an unfolding process of ongoing change, adaptation, and learning through which local meaning making may or may not amplify into widely shared, taken-for-granted, and more enduring meaning systems. It highlights the bottom-up mechanisms (e.g. keyings, frame conflicts, amplification) through which frames move from moments of individual sensemaking to more widely shared and solidified organizational- and field-level frames.

To further advance our understanding of institutions, we need to move beyond a heavy reliance on institutional logics and an emphasis on top-down and structural explanations to productively explore bottom-up approaches that view institutions as inhabited and also socially negotiated (Zilber, 2016). As a recent critique notes, institutional theorists in organization studies have emphasized the field level of analysis while paying less attention to the organizational level and, in particular, have neglected to account for how organizations are structured and managed (Greenwood, Hinings, & Whetten, 2014). Concepts uncovered through the lens of logics such as institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011) and hybridity (Battilana & Dorado, 2010) cannot be deeply understood without bringing to bear analytical lenses that recognize a fundamental argument: that these phenomena observed at higher order levels of analysis such as fields and organizations emerge from the collective interpretations of humans in everyday interactions at the micro level. The motives, mechanisms, and effects of these moments of collective interpretation and meaning making remain relatively opaque to institutional theorists, although a few recent attempts have been made to explore the microfoundations of institutional impact (Gehman, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2016; Zilber, 2016).

Inroads have been made in studying agency and actors' influence on institutions through “bottom-up” lenses such as institutional work (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009), the practice lens (Smets et al., 2012), sensemaking (Weber & Glynn, 2006), communication (Lammers, 2011), vocabularies of practice (Ocasio, Loewenstein, & Nigam, 2015), and social movements (Davis, Morrill, Rao, & Soule, 2008). Yet the popularity of the logics approach has generated a cascade of research that primarily emphasizes top-down processes, or tends to treat logics as fully formed and readily available (if

malleable) resources for actors to leverage. The hegemony of one perspective in a field of study, while a predictable phenomenon (Kuhn, 1970), does not increase the reflexivity among a community of scholars that is required to advance knowledge (Suddaby, 2014). Fortunately, we do not need to undergo a scientific revolution to accommodate a shift to more micro and bottom-up approaches. What is required is a shift in the social dynamics of the research community to expand the domain of interest (Bitektine & Miller, 2015).

The Phenomenological and Ontological Value of the Framing Approach

The framing approach offers a more dynamic view of institutions as socially constructed, stressing how individuals and organizations serve as meaning entrepreneurs and initiators of patterns that may eventually become institutionalized. It recognizes that institution building is not necessarily purposeful effort to build institutions, but rather part and parcel of everyday organizational interactions, where people not only engage with, differentially interpret, and creatively leverage meanings to guide their actions, but also construct or remold these meanings in subsequent interactions.

Phenomenological Potential

We assert that a framing perspective affords greater utility than logics for understanding at least four broad phenomena: new technological inventions, major shifts in organizational or societal behavior, the evolution of societal conflicts, and the emergence of societal institutions. We briefly explain our rationale for this assertion.

New technological innovations. Framing offers a promising theoretical lens for understanding how new meanings and practices associated with new/emerging material artifacts come to be defined, accepted, gain traction, and may potentially even force revisions in extant logics. For example, when new technological inventions are conceived, researchers engage in an enactment process (Weick, 1990) to bring them into being. “Researchers must create and believe in their own realities in order to make progress” and must persuade others, including other scientists, financial backers, and marketers to adopt their frames about their ideas and inventions (Garud & Rappa, 1994, p. 345). The framing processes introduce and position the novel product so that it will catch the attention of others. Among scientists, this involves “constant negotiation and renegotiation among and between groups” that are shaping the new technology (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1987, p. 7). As we showed in the texting example earlier, if the framing catches on and gains adherents, the novel meanings they put forward may eventually crystallize into enduring logics that can then shape future institutional processes in a top-down fashion. A similar process will need

to occur with the release of new antiaging drugs designed to reduce one's biological age. To be successful, the inventors will need to convince consumers that they hold more promise than hoax.

Major shifts in organizational or societal behavior. When major change occurs within an organization or within a society, a framing lens can also provide insight, particularly into the processes that initiated the change and propelled its amplification. For example, new frames about an organization's vision may be brought in by new management, candidates can usher in a reframing of the political agenda by giving voice to latent frames among dissatisfied constituents, and social movements can "focus and punctuate" new realities for potential adherents (Hunt et al., 1994, p. 190)—putting issues on the public agenda that had garnered little attention previously.

Evolution of social conflicts. A framing perspective also helps to explain how organizational or social conflicts can unfold and how they can become intractable over time (Lewicki et al., 2003). Beginning with a frame break, a conflict can escalate as each frame finds additional adherents. Without a forum for resolving the conflict, it can fester indeterminately. A case in point is gun control legislation in the United States.

The right to bear arms is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and likely rooted in a "state" logic. However, the debate is characterized by a plurality of interpretations and contests over meaning that are not easily connected to or limited to specific logics in the interinstitutional system. At the field level, it is difficult to trace how competing interpretations are rooted in core societal logics but easier to make sense out of divergent interpretations in the field by viewing them as competing frames. For example, proponents of gun control may adopt individualist frames (e.g., the firearm is the ultimate emblem of individual sovereignty where power is centered in the citizenry), whereas opponents may argue from collectivist frames (e.g., firearms are a danger to civil society and governments alone are vested with responsibility for the use of force). While each of these frames captures differing interpretations of the state and its associated state logic including its roots in the U.S. constitution, to appreciate the basis for the conflict, it is necessary to drill down to the more nuanced differences in framing. These frames may be related to but are not entirely explained by the state, market, or the community logics. In addition, the frame "guns don't kill people, people kill people" reflects distinctions in meaning that are difficult to trace back to societal- or field-level logics. Finally, frames can embody multiple interpretations with different ends, as in the frame of self-defense, which can be used to justify owning guns (to defend myself and my family), or serve as a compelling reason to argue against gun proliferation (fewer guns means my family and I am safer). It is difficult and unnecessary to force a link between self-defense or gun proliferation

risk frames and the core societal logics to understand these differences in meanings.

Framing allowing more subtle nuances in meaning to be tracked as the dispute unfolds through ongoing interactions among the primary players or as new ones (such as mothers) enter the debate. Furthermore, the constellation of frames can continually shift as the debate proceeds and different meanings gain ascendancy. For example, new frames about gun control emerged in Australia in the aftermath of a shootout in 1996 that, through sweeping gun control reforms, removed self-defense as a sufficient justification for receiving a license to own a gun. This example also illustrates the importance of local context in shaping how a frame conflict unfolds and may be resolved in different ways in different locales. While Zilber (2016) has argued that many logics persist over time but are not "frozen" in time and are "detached from the very process of institutionalization," we contend that conceptualizing these shifting interpretations as frames rather than logics enhances our ability to interactionally account for their diversity and malleability.

Research focusing on the emergence of societal institutions. If a system such as the interinstitutional system is treated as the source of all logics (Thornton et al., 2012), then how can we explain other institutions that are not reflected in its seven core logics? These alternative institutions might include education, international development, agriculture, marriage, and environment. Beyond accounting for these, we believe the framing perspective has utility for researchers who want to study the evolution of institutions over time. Consider the evolution of two prominent religious logics, Christianity and Buddhism. Both fall under the logic of religion, but differences between and within these overarching religious logics are many. Explaining how these shifts emerged over time requires understanding local influences and conflicts that shaped the evolution of each religion recursively over time. For example, a core logic of Zen Buddhism in Japan was education of young men as monks—a practice that is now waning in Japan but has been replaced by a growing community of lay practitioners in the United States. This reframing can only be understood by accounting for the bottom-up interactions in which actors in both Japan and the United States are reframing and reshaping these core religious logics over time.

Understanding reflexivity and the role of visionaries. A fifth context in which framing may shed new insights is with respect to the role of visionaries within organizations and societies. Visionaries generally have the capacity to understand and frame organizational problems and issues in novel and compelling ways that others fail to appreciate. For example, in the formation of multisector partnerships to solve complex social problems, visionaries (often called conveners) are able to see past barriers that other actors perceive to propose constructive

paths forward. Utilizing a framing lens to understand how and why visionaries frame problems and mobilize action, and how they attract adherents to their framing of the issue could provide new insights into their role in promoting change in organizational and interorganizational contexts. In this regard, framing may be connected to the capacity to be reflexive—that is, “to go beyond the scope of technicalities to define problems and issues, translating ultimately into some form of engagement toward action” (Suddaby, Viale, & Gendron, 2016, p. 17).

Ontological Potential

In addition to expanding the range of institutional phenomena and contexts that can be richly understood with the use of a framing approach, framing expands the range of objectives that scholars can pursue by accommodating different ontological stances that can address black box problems in research and can spark new theory development.

Bottom-up processes. We’ve repeatedly noted the importance of bottom-up dynamics, both in explaining the emergence of institutions while attending to both structure and agency, and in capturing the microdynamics from which higher order social organization is constructed. Framing holds great possibilities for generating new understanding of cross-level dynamics and addressing meso-level theory development, which are each underdeveloped in the institutional theory literature. Framing also supports a more culturally neutral approach to institutional research that draws from the meanings of actors rather than imposing a predetermined framework, as is befitting for scholars in a joined-up world where knowledge production is a global endeavor.

Meaning making in social organizations. The framing approach offers theoretical and analytical tools for understanding the nuance of how meanings unfold, including the ideas of amplification, keying, and frame conflict that we’ve described. It allows us to reinvigorate institutional research by drawing upon theories of communication and interaction, each of which has a rich intellectual history that can add to our vocabulary and inventory of mechanisms that offer explanatory power. The ability of framing theory to span levels of analysis from the individual to the societal may also increase the attractiveness and usefulness of organizational research to practitioners, particularly if scholars can identify new mechanisms (e.g., beyond social movements) by which individual and collective actors can understand and influence institutional dynamics and expectations.

Longitudinal and process studies. For scholars interested in understanding how institutions undergo stasis and change over time, framing supports a process view that is sophisticated and nuanced. As amplification occurs and frames

become more widely accepted at the field level, or earn the status of what social movement theorists call master frames (generic frames that can be activated across a variety of fields and contexts), it seems plausible that some of them could move to the level of institutionalization that categorizes them as societal logics. While we have emphasized using the framing approach as a tool for understanding bottom-up institutional building, it can also be used to understand how the institutions transmit and impose meaning from the top down. Framing could be used to trace the emergence of new institutional meanings through widespread acceptance and subsequent cycles of institutional maintenance and change. Such research would help us answer the big questions we have posed in this essay, such as where institutions come from, and how the determinative and agentic aspects of institutions interact.

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Notes

1. We adopt an interactional view of “framing” that differs in the degree of agency and ideological intention attributed to actors from the more deliberate and strategic framing used by some collective action theorists (Hunt, Benford, & Snow, 1994) and also differs from mass communication scholars’ use of the term to denote the bounding of messages.
2. Of course, earlier purveyors of these ideas include many indigenous communities, Henry David Thoreau, and conservationists like John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Gifford Pinchot.

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