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Institutional Logics Versus Norm Circles: Alternative or Complementary Approaches to the Analysis of Institutions?

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ABSTRACT

The institutional logics and norm circle perspectives have emerged as two approaches to the analysis of institutions in organisations and society. This paper compares the two perspectives and asks whether they should be seen as alternative or complementary approaches. Although the two approaches rest on a shared ontological conception of institutions as objectified, or taken-for-granted, phenomena that are imbued with a strong sense of normativity, their diverging epistemological commitments and analytical emphases speak in favour of treating them as relatively distinct alternatives. This is especially the case insofar as the ‘mainstream’ approach, that has dominated research on institutional logics, is concerned. However, I also draw attention to how insights from the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives can be selectively combined and complement each other within a research approach that builds on a shared, critical realist understanding of institutions.

1 | Introduction

Over the past three decades, the institutional logics perspective has become an increasingly influential approach to the examination of institutions in organisational sociology. Emerging as a distinct strand of organisational institutionalism,¹ this perspective has evolved into an expansive research programme that seeks to explain change and heterogeneity in organisational practices as opposed to the emphasis on stability and homogeneity associated with much earlier research on the role of institutions in organisational life (Ocasio et al. 2017; Thornton et al. 2012; Wu et al. 2023). However, in recent years, several organisational scholars have raised critical voices questioning what might be seen as its increasingly hegemonic position and the ways in which this suppresses alternative ways of understanding the role of institutions in organisations and society (e.g., Alvesson et al. 2019; Alvesson and Spicer 2019; Cloutier and Langley 2013; Jackson et al. 2019; Purdy et al. 2018;

Quattrone 2015). Although not always advocating for a wholesale replacement of the institutional logics perspective, critics have drawn attention to the risk of it becoming impervious to insights from alternative or complementary perspectives. This has, in turn, prompted even the most ardent propagators of the institutional logics perspective to rethink their direction of travel and propose correctives to what they see as less fruitful paths of development (Lounsbury et al. 2021; Ocasio et al. 2016).

In the present paper, I want to stimulate further reflexivity as to whether the institutional logics perspective is the most appropriate way of examining the role of institutions in organisations and society or if alternative or complementary perspectives should be considered to this end.² In doing so, I contrast the institutional logics perspective with the notion of norm circles. Originating in critical realist thought, the notion of norm circles was initially advanced by Elder-Vass (2010) as a way of situating institutions in the groups of people who endorse and enforce

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particular norms although breaking their link to society as the primary locus of institutionalisation in much sociological research. This contrasts sharply with the institutional logics perspective, which originated in a deliberate attempt to bring society back into institutional research on organisations (Friedland and Alford 1991). Although the notions of institutional logics and norm circles rest on a shared ontological conception of institutions as objectified, or taken-for-granted, phenomena that are imbued with a strong sense of normativity, these diverging vantage points give rise to significant differences in their epistemological commitments and analytical emphases. The institutional logics perspective calls on researchers to trace the evolution of institutions back to a set of general, societal orders while increasingly compelling them to generalise how logics manifest themselves across institutional contexts. These epistemological commitments are especially notable in what has come to be seen as the ‘mainstream’ approach, dominating research on institutional logics but arguably imply a risk of reifying societal orders as analytical archetypes and decontextualising the analysis of institutions. By contrast, the norm circle perspective presents a more carefully contextualised approach that accepts that norm circles can exist at any level of analysis where social groups are being formed while nurturing a relatively open-ended mode of analysis that does not necessarily aim at generalising their effects across institutional contexts. These epistemological differences speak in favour of treating the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives as distinct alternatives to the analysis of institutions. However, I also draw attention to how insights from the two approaches can be selectively combined and complement each other within a research approach that builds on a shared, critical realist understanding of institutions.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. I start by describing the institutional logics perspective, the criticisms that have been levied at it and how some of these criticisms may be addressed from a critical realist perspective. I then outline the norm circle perspective before discussing whether the two approaches should be seen as alternative or complementary ways of examining institutions. I close the paper with some brief concluding remarks on this topic.

2 | The Institutional Logics Perspective

2.1 | Origins and Main Strands of Development

The notion of institutional logics was originally advanced by Friedland and Alford (1991) in an attempt to explain how the practices that are observable in the distinct populations of organisations, or organisational fields, that constitute the main unit of analysis in organisational institutionalism are governed by more general, societal orders that collectively constitute an inter-institutional system. Focusing on the orders dominating Western, capitalist societies, they drew attention to the persistence of markets, the bureaucratic state, democracy, the nuclear family and Christian religion as vessels of beliefs and values that shape individual cognition and identities and, as such, create shared understandings of how organisational fields should be structured. This view was posited as a corrective to the tendency to bracket the

role of society in earlier institutional research on organisations, which mainly focused on the diffusion of practices in organisational fields (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Tolbert and Zucker 1983), as well as attempts to foreground the role of human agency in the shaping of institutions that emerged as a reaction against such research (e.g., DiMaggio 1988; Oliver 1991). Although objecting to the structural determinism and emphasis on homogeneity associated with earlier institutional research on organisations, Friedland and Alford (1991) cautioned against reverting to reductionist notions of methodological individualism and overly actor-centric conceptions of rational choice in remedying this impasse. Instead, they advanced a notion of human agency and practices as conditioned by a range of rationalities, or logics, corresponding to different and often contradictory societal orders that breed heterogeneity in organisational fields. They also posited that the coexistence of contradictory orders may constitute an important source of institutional change. The prevalence of such orders, they argued, fuels political struggles over meanings which can, in turn, set processes of social transformation in motion. However, in pursuing change, human agents are not acting in an institutional vacuum but enact, or draw on, different logics that constitute alternatives to previously dominant orders and thereby contribute to the continuous structuring of organisational fields. As such, the institutional logics perspective has been heralded as the cornerstone of a ‘new structuralism’ in organisational sociology that neither denies the structural conditioning of change nor exaggerates the role of human agency in processes of social transformation (Lounsbury and Ventresca 2003).

Building on Friedland and Alford’s (1991) foundational work, the conception of institutional logics as grounded in multiple and often contradictory societal orders was further developed by especially Patricia Thornton and colleagues (Thornton 2004; Thornton and Ocasio 2008; Thornton et al. 2005, 2012) to ultimately comprise seven orders—family, community, religion, state, market, profession and corporation—that make up inter-institutional systems. Each order was, in turn, seen as made up of a number of coherent, constitutive elements, such as root metaphors, economic systems and sources of authority, legitimacy and identity, that imbue them with their distinct internal logic. For the purpose of empirical analysis, such orders are often conceived of as ideal types for identifying the logics that evolve in particular organisational fields and individual organisations within such fields (Lounsbury et al. 2021; Ocasio et al. 2016). However, propagators of the institutional logics perspective have been careful to point out that societal orders are not directly reproduced at lower levels of analysis. Instead, through complex processes of adaptation, such orders are instantiated in ways that make them assume context-specific forms (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton et al. 2012). Hence, the institutional logics that evolve in organisational fields display considerable variety in form although they can be traced to underlying orders that show a degree of commonality across fields.

Following these pioneering efforts to establish the conceptual foundations of the institutional logics perspective, logics have been defined 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 et al. 2012, 2). This definition re-affirms the anchoring of the institutional logics perspective and, indeed, organisational institutionalism more generally in social constructionist thought. However, in what has come to be seen as the 'mainstream' approach to institutional logics, scholars are often careful to point out that it allows for an element of objectification, whereby the logics that govern organisational fields assume an ontological status that is distinct from their ongoing reproduction that is manifested in the evolution of practices and symbols at different levels of analysis. In many cases, followers of Thornton et al. (2012) effectively combine a social constructionist perspective with an element of ontological realism although the philosophical rationale for doing so is not always fully articulated (Ocasio 2023; Ocasio et al. 2017). In doing so, they also tend to adopt what may be referred to as a 'top-down' view of institutionalisation, where logics originating at the societal level are reproduced to varying degrees at different levels within organisational fields.

In contrast to this realist, 'mainstream' approach to institutional logics as objectified phenomena that shape, albeit not determine, the evolution of practices and symbols in a 'top-down' manner, scholars of a stronger, social constructionist persuasion have begun to promote a 'bottom-up' view of logics as more malleable phenomena (Schildt and Kodeih 2025; Zilber 2013, 2017, 2024; Wang et al. 2019). While recognising that institutional logics can ultimately assume the status of objectified phenomena, these scholars have shifted their attention to the processes through which such objectification comes about and depart from prevailing views of logics as simply being 'pulled down' from the societal level to inform the continuous shaping of practices and symbols at lower levels of analysis. Rather, through complex processes of transformation, practices and symbols can take on new meanings which, in turn, sets a renewed sequence of institutionalisation, or objectification, in motion. Such processes may produce significant change in extant logics or give rise to essentially 'new' logics (Ansari et al. 2013; Purdy and Gray 2009; Smets et al. 2012; Zilber 2017, 2024). Also, the emergence of new logics often entails a degree of logics blending whereby elements of extant logics are combined into hybrid forms that may become more or less firmly institutionalised (Ansari et al. 2013; Christiansen and Lounsbury 2013; Polzer et al. 2017; Smets et al. 2012). Taken together, this means that institutional logics need to be seen as being implicated in an intricate, reciprocal interplay with the evolution of practices and symbols. Extant logics shape practices and symbols, but insofar as such practices and symbols change, the logics themselves might gradually be transformed. Also, such processes of transformation may unfold across different levels spanning the societal, field, organisational and even individual levels of analysis. This has led to repeated calls for cross-level analyses of how logics evolve (Ocasio 2023; Ocasio et al. 2017; Steele et al. 2020; Thornton et al. 2012). Yet, as demonstrated by Wu et al. (2023), such analyses are still rare in the literature on institutional logics.

Notwithstanding the differences in ontological starting points for the analysis of logics, the institutional logics perspective is united by a conception of culturally conditioned, symbolic meanings as largely coterminous with material practices. From the outset, the institutional logics perspective has been wedded

to a practice-based view of organisations where symbolic meanings that embody the beliefs and values that govern organisational fields are not seen as separable from material practices (Ocasio et al. 2017; Thornton et al. 2012). This implies that the practices that evolve in different institutional contexts are imbued with a strong sense of normativity. The beliefs and values that underpin institutional logics provide normative prescriptions for action, which are then translated into shared conceptions of what constitutes legitimate practices in such contexts. However, following the view of the institutional logics perspective as a remedy to earlier, institutionalist notions of structural determinism, the norms that underpin logics are not seen as a ubiquitous source of habitual, unreflective agency that inevitably lead to social reproduction. Even though institutional logics have a strong effect on individual cognition and identities, processes of reproduction and transformation can entail moments of reflexivity whereby individuals deliberate on extant and emerging logics and translate such deliberations into collective courses of action (Delbridge and Edwards 2013; Leca and Naccache 2006; Perkmann et al. 2022). As such, institutional logics need to be seen as constraining as well as enabling the possibilities of reflexive agency and change. Also, although prior research has mainly ascribed the emergence of reflexive breaks with extant logics to the occurrence of institutional jolts, such as exogenous shocks or crises (Seo and Creed 2002; Sine and David 2003), more recent advances have drawn attention to how such breaks can also occur through more mundane instances that are endogenous to institutional contexts but where the contradictions between competing logics trigger individual and collective reflections on what might constitute novel courses of action (Ocasio et al. 2016; Smets et al. 2012; Steele 2021).

2.2 | Emerging Criticisms

Although the institutional logics perspective has evolved into an expansive research programme, that has been especially valuable for shedding light on how notions of heterogeneity and institutional complexity emerge and generate change in diverse institutional contexts (Greenwood et al. 2011; Micelotta et al. 2017; Ocasio et al. 2017), it has been subject to increasing criticisms. Much of this criticism has been levied at the epistemology underpinning the institutional logics perspective and the ensuing methodological choices influencing how logics are being studied and theorised. However, as we shall see, such choices have important implications for how institutional logics are being portrayed and can thus reinforce the ontological conceptions of logics that become more or less salient as research progresses.

One line of criticism is that much research on institutional logics is guided by an epistemology that has tended to reify societal orders as ideal types, or analytical archetypes, and thereby ignore or downplay the intricate dynamics through which logics are enacted, reproduced and transformed (Cloutier and Langley 2013; Purdy et al. 2018; Quattrone 2015). This criticism has primarily been levied at the 'mainstream' approach to institutional logics and has arguably cemented an ontological conception of such logics as objectified phenomena that are reproduced across different levels of analysis in a 'top-down'

manner. The risk of reification is particularly high where researchers uncritically take societal orders, such as those proposed by Thornton et al. (2012), as a starting point for deductive analyses, or simply retrofit empirical observations to different orders in an attempt to make sense of how logics operate. At worst, the reification of institutional logics as analytical archetypes can lead to a view of such logics as relatively monolithic phenomena and an overly linear and orderly view of how they are translated into concrete practices. This led Cloutier and Langley (2013) to call for an epistemological position that pays closer attention to the 'inner workings' of institutional logics, denoting the processes through which their constitutive elements are assembled and reassembled into more or less durable and pervasive orders that shape the development of practices. Similarly, Quattrone (2015) cautioned against the prevalence of a position that portrays institutional logics as stable, predefined phenomena and demonstrated how logics are better understood as unfolding forms of rationality that are continuously evolving in specific contexts. Such criticisms led Purdy et al. (2018) to call for a replacement, or at least radical rethinking, of the institutional logics perspective by more situated and open-ended notions of how the meanings attributed to institutions are reproduced and transformed.

Criticisms such as those outlined above have been followed by scholars who see the institutional logics perspective as an increasingly hegemonic approach that is at risk of decontextualising organisational research (Alvesson et al. 2019; Alvesson and Spicer 2019; Jackson et al. 2019). Similar to the risks of reification, such criticisms also need to be understood against the backdrop of the epistemology underpinning especially the 'mainstream' version of this perspective. As one of the most recent permutations of organisational institutionalism, the institutional logics perspective is rooted in a pronounced normal science tradition that aims at continuously extending and refining theory by filling conceptual gaps and addressing anomalies in extant conceptions of institutions (Glynn and D'Annunzio 2023; Greenwood et al. 2017), while increasingly searching for generalisable patterns in how logics manifest themselves across diverse institutional contexts through comparative theorising (Greenwood et al. 2011; Micelotta et al. 2017; Thornton et al. 2012). However, according to Alvesson et al. (2019), this epistemological position reinforces hegemonic tendencies and constrains the possibilities of advancing alternative and more situated notions of institutions and institutionalisation. In a similar vein, Jackson et al. (2019) suggest that the growing efforts to advance generalisable insights that are valid across institutional contexts can easily overshadow the context-specific intricacies whereby institutional logics are translated within particular settings. Even though the institutional logics perspective was initially advanced as a way of imbuing institutional analyses with greater sensitivity to how practice variations emerge within organisational fields, Jackson et al. (2019) argue that the ambitions to theorise how such variations emerge across contexts easily result in excessively abstract portrayals of institutionalisation that detract from the context-bound, political dynamics involved in the evolution of logics. These tendencies, they argue, have been reinforced by the research methods applied in most works on institutional logics, which have often been insufficiently grounded in the day-to-day practices that evolve in

organisational fields and individual organisations within such fields. Arguably, the tendencies towards decontextualisation are especially problematic when the institutional logics perspective is applied to contexts beyond the Western, capitalist societies for which it was originally devised. As noted by Purdy et al. (2018), researchers need to exercise considerable caution when extrapolating the societal orders identified by Friedland and Alford (1991) and Thornton et al. (2012) to other contexts. This cautionary note fuelled their more general criticism that the institutional logics perspective may need to be replaced by more open-ended research approaches that take the situated nature of institutions seriously.

Propagators of the institutional logics perspective have at least partly responded to criticisms such as those raised above. In particular, in their attempt to take stock of research on institutional logics, Lounsbury et al. (2021) recognised the tendency of much of this research to treat logics as prespecified, ideal types and the subsequent risks of reification and called for closer attention to logics as complex and dynamic phenomena in their own right. To this end, they urged scholars to engage with phenomenological and ethnographic research approaches that do not use predefined logics as analytical tools but rather focus on the ongoing and often messy processes through which logics are enacted, reproduced and transformed at different levels of analysis. Such research directs our attention to the minutiae of processes of social construction and can add impetus to a 'bottom-up' view of institutional logics as relatively malleable phenomena that are in a more or less pronounced state of flux. Similar to Cloutier and Langley (2013), Lounsbury et al. (2021) also called for greater attention to the processes through which the constitutive elements that collectively make up diverse logics come to cohere and how such coherence is maintained over time. However, according to Mutch (2019a), there is an imminent risk of a one-sided focus on how the constitutive elements of logics emerge and are combined in particular institutional contexts occluding how more durable, historically persistent orders condition such processes. Responding to advocates of a social constructionist, 'bottom-up' approach to institutional logics, such as Wang et al. (2019), he concludes that '[w]e need both the focus on the local and particular that Wang et al. argue for and the construction of analytical frameworks that transcend such particularities' (Mutch 2019a, 479). Hence, going forward, a key challenge for the institutional logics perspective would seem to lie in advancing a research approach that combines a realist, 'top-down' view that affirms the relative durability of logics as objectified phenomena and a social constructionist, 'bottom-up' view that draws attention to their context-specific and continuous reproduction and transformation and guards against reification.

2.3 | A Critical Realist View of Institutional Logics

To advance an ontological position supporting the combination of a realist, 'top-down' and social constructionist, 'bottom-up' approach to institutional logics, several scholars have turned to critical realism (Delbridge and Edwards 2013; Leca and Naccache 2006; Mutch 2018, 2019b, 2020). Critical realism is well

suitable to this task as it combines a moderate form of realism with a moderate form of social constructionism within an emergentist ontology, that recognises that the social practices that are being institutionalised are an outcome of a range of interacting mechanisms with causal powers (Elder-Vass 2012; Fleetwood 2005). Such mechanisms are real in the sense that they exist a priori as objectified phenomena that, to a certain degree, are independent of human perception, while the interplay between their causal powers produces regularities, or tendencies, in human agency that subsequently feed into processes of social reproduction and transformation. This helps to preserve a strong sense of a human agency as an institutionally embedded phenomenon that is a cornerstone of organisational institutionalism (Greenwood et al. 2017; Seo and Creed 2002). However, through processes of social reproduction and transformation, the mechanisms themselves may undergo change, although this is often a slow-moving, evolutionary process that entails an intricate interplay between habitual and reflexive forms of agency (Elder-Vass 2007, 2010). This ontological position is similar to the view of institutional logics as relatively durable, real phenomena that are implicated in a reciprocal interplay with concrete practices and symbols that causes logics to be reproduced or transformed over time. However, in contrast to much research on institutional logics, critical realism arguably entails more pronounced concerns with causality and a well-developed epistemological apparatus for advancing causal explanations as to what drives processes of social reproduction and transformation (Delbridge and Edwards 2013; Leca and Naccache 2006).

The critical realist view of institutional logics is especially salient in the work of Mutch (2018, 2019b, 2020). Similar to the foundational work of Friedland and Alford (1991), Mutch (2019b) places particular emphasis on the need to trace institutional logics back to general, societal orders arguing that much research in the field has paid disproportionate attention to the manifestations of logics in organisational fields. This tendency to focus on organisational fields rather than society can be traced to the proclivity of organisational institutionalists to take the former as their main unit of analysis although ignoring wider sociological understandings of what counts as institutions. This has, in turn, had a range of unfortunate consequences, such as the omission of key institutions like law as a distinct logic (Mutch 2025), whereas other, context-specific phenomena, such as communities, are being elevated to the status of societal orders (Mutch 2021). According to Mutch (2018, 2019b), organisational institutionalists have also had a tendency of viewing institutional logics as overly malleable phenomena and underplaying their historical persistence in society. To counter such a view, Mutch (2019b) firmly locates institutions at the societal level of analysis and sees logics as a mediating mechanism that translates relatively abstract, but perennial, societal orders to concrete, context-specific practices. Consistent with critical realism, this leads to a view of institutional logics as highly durable phenomena that are, to a large extent, removed from immediate pressures for change, while exercising a varying degree of influence on practices that are in a more pronounced state of flux. According to Mutch (2018, 2020), 'practices change: logics endure'.

Mutch's (2018, 2019b) view has at least two important implications, which are relevant to consider in the light of the aforementioned criticisms of the institutional logic perspective and the ensuing discussion of norm circles. First, as a result of his view of institutional logics as highly durable phenomena, he voices considerable scepticism against overly actor-centric conceptions of how logics are mobilised that exaggerate the ability of social actors to blend their constitutive elements into 'new', context-specific logics. Echoing Friedland's (2012) critique of Thornton et al. (2012) for overemphasising the decomposability of logics, Mutch (2019b, 58) argues that such blending rests on notions of 'skilled selection of options in response to the demands of the situation, without recognising that these choices might be tightly constrained by norms built into the institutional environment'. This argument casts doubt on the viability of closer attention to the 'inner workings' of institutional logics as a remedy to the risk of reifying logics as analytical archetypes (Cloutier and Langley 2013). At the same time, Mutch (2019b) recognises the risk of reification and the need for close, empirical examinations of the evolution of practices in their historical and institutional context. Similar to Friedland (2012), he advocates for a parsimonious approach to the study of institutional logics that is less concerned with unpacking logics into their constitutive elements in order to understand processes of logics blending and more attentive to how historically persistent logics shape practices. In doing so, he also cautions against the risk of overemphasising notions of a reflexive agency as a source of change and argues that the institutional environment always conditions the possibilities of such agency.

Second, by making a strict analytical distinction between institutional logics and the practices that are shaped by such logics, Mutch (2018, 2019b) strives to strike a balance between a view of logics as general phenomena, which are reproduced with a degree of regularity across organisational fields, and the need for context sensitivity when exploring their manifestations within such fields. At one level, Mutch's (2018, 2019b) view can perhaps be seen as reinforcing a 'top-down' approach to institutional logics based on deductive derivation of analytical categories from societal orders that are not unique to specific organisational fields. For instance, in critiquing social constructionist, 'bottom-up' approaches, he has cautioned against overly inductive approaches to the identification of institutional logics that mainly build out from context-specific observations of evolving practices (Mutch 2019a). However, by carefully distinguishing institutional logics from practices, he recognises the need to contextualise the analysis of logics and that evolving practices can exert a degree of influence on the logics themselves. This is not least manifest in his emphasis on community as an important contextual factor influencing how institutional logics are translated into practices (Mutch 2021) and his repeated calls for in-depth, historical research to capture the context-specific evolution of practices and how they feed back into the development of logics (Mutch 2018, 2019b, 2020). Yet, in contrast to scholars emphasising the malleability of institutional logics, he is much more circumspect of conventional notions of institutional change and prefers to talk about institutional development as a more slow-moving, evolutionary process (Mutch 2019b).

3 | The Norm Circle Perspective

Norm circles have been defined as ‘the group[s] of people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm’ (Elder-Vass 2012, 22) and constitute a special class of social entities that produce change and stability in different contexts. Consistent with earlier advances in critical realism, such as Bhaskar’s (1979) transformational model of social activity and Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic approach to social development, the norm circle perspective rests on an ontology where social reality is seen as constituted by multiple mechanisms with causal powers that interact and thereby produce tendencies in human agency that subsequently feed into processes of social reproduction and transformation (Elder-Vass 2010, 2012). The mechanisms of main concern in this perspective are the norms around which various groups of people cohere and that become more or less objectified, or institutionalised, as templates for individual and collective agency. Norm circles can be found at any level of analysis where social groups are being formed and can take the form of small and relatively informal groups that are held together by shared norms (Blee 2013; Nichol et al. 2021) as well as larger and more formalised constellations within which there is a high degree of consensus about which norms should be followed (Baker and Modell 2019; Richardson 2020). However, in his initial articulation of the norm circle perspective, Elder-Vass (2010) explicitly distanced his view of normativity from the conception of society as the primary locus of institutionalisation that has arguably dominated sociological research. This was justified as a means of nurturing a relatively open-ended view as to where institutions originate while taking the formation of norms as a basis for explaining their effects on human agency.

The explanatory potential of norm circles must be understood against the backdrop of the emergentist ontology of critical realism (Elder-Vass 2010, 2012). Consistent with this ontology, causal effects are not reducible to the workings of individual beliefs and values but are a unique, combined outcome of the norms that result from the institutionalisation of such beliefs and values. Although the individuals who form a norm circle negotiate and gradually come to some agreement about what constitutes shared norms, the unique causal powers of norm circles derive from their emergent capacity to act back on these individuals. The enforcement of norms is not an isolated consequence of discrete, individual agency, whereby specific members of a norm circle intentionally influence or force other members to pursue particular courses of action but a result of members collectively endorsing the norms and reproducing actions that are consistent with such norms. Hence, norm circles can be thought of as imbued with a strong sense of objectified, collective intentionality that is expressed through the norms and that causes individual members to pursue particular courses of action without always being explicitly prompted to do so (Elder-Vass 2010, 2015). Yet, once shared norms are established, members of a norm circle can reinforce tendencies towards compliance by explicitly or implicitly referring to such norms in their interactions with other members of the norm circle.

The stronger the emergent effects of individual norm circles, the greater the propensity of their members to engage in practices

that may be described as institutionalised. Elder-Vass (2010) describes such processes of institutionalisation as a case of downward causation whereby a norm circle influences its members and gives rise to effects that individual members on their own would not be able to produce. However, in advancing the notion of norm circles, he was careful not to revert to any notions of structural determinism suggesting that the members of norm circles will automatically comply with particular norms and act out such norms in a law-like manner. Consistent with the ontological underpinnings of critical realism, norm circles were merely seen as inducing a propensity, or tendency, among members to act in a way that is consistent with the norms that are being endorsed and enforced. But whether such tendencies actually materialise is rarely, if ever, a consequence of only one norm circle influencing human agency. This is so as human beings are generally members of multiple norm circles, the causal powers of which can both counteract and reinforce each other. This causes norm circles to intersect and makes human agency a highly contingent and much less predictable phenomenon than what would be the case if people only followed one norm (Elder-Vass 2010, 2012). Even though people may have a disposition to mainly follow a particular norm, there can be circumstances where this disposition is reinforced as well as weakened, or even negated, by their membership of other norm circles.

What remains somewhat elusive in the literature on norm circles, however, is the question of under which contingent conditions the intersectionality between norm circles may be expected to generate deviations from particular norms and fuel institutional change. According to Elder-Vass (2010), this is an empirical question that needs to be answered in any given case in which it occurs. Yet, with the exceptions of Baker and Modell (2019) and Nichol et al. (2021), little empirical attention has been devoted to how norm circles intersect and how such intersectionality triggers diverse courses of action. Similar to organisational institutionalists (Ocasio et al. 2016; Seo and Creed 2002; Steele 2021), Elder-Vass (2010) also sees reflexive breaks with particular norms as a vital precondition for normative change to materialise although he recognises that reflexive agency is always implicated in an intricate interplay with habitual agency that may temper tendencies towards change. However, the questions of how and under which circumstances such breaks occur and lead norm circles to be transformed remain under-researched. Empirical studies using the notion of norm circles have mainly examined their effects on human agency and have rarely reversed the analytical gaze to examine how such agency affects the norms that underpin norm circles (Baker and Modell 2019; Nichol et al. 2021; Richardson 2020; Yang and Liu 2019). Only in the case of Blee’s (2013) study of the formation of grassroots’ activist groups and how they gradually came to cohere around particular norms, there is a more explicit concern with how norms are being formed and objectified over time.

Although the discussion in this section has pointed to certain ontological similarities between the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives, such as the view of institutions as objectified phenomena that are implicated in a reciprocal interplay with human agency, practices and symbols, the two approaches arguably diverge quite significantly when it comes

to their epistemological commitments. As we have seen, much research on institutional logics is underpinned by a strong normal science tradition that aims at continuously extending and refining our theoretical understanding of how logics manifest themselves while increasingly aspiring to generalise such insights across diverse institutional contexts. By contrast, the norm circle perspective has an ostensibly more modest ambition to merely foreground the institutionalised norms that hold various groups of people together while following a relatively open-ended approach in exploring the causal dynamics through which such norms are reproduced and transformed as they are translated into human agency. As such, it has the character of a context-sensitive sensitising framework for examining the process of institutionalisation rather than an elaborate theoretical model describing how institutions manifest themselves across diverse contexts (cf. Blumer 1954). At one level, this brings the norm circle perspective closer to those who have advocated for a parsimonious approach to institutional logics while emphasising the need to carefully situate the analysis of logics to understand how they shape context-specific practices (Friedland 2012; Mutch 2018, 2019b). However, as explicated below, the norm circle perspective also differs from such approaches in important respects, which are relevant to consider when pondering whether it should be seen as an alternative or a complement to the institutional logics perspective.

4 | Institutional Logics and Norm Circles as Alternative and Complementary Perspectives

4.1 | Similarities Between the Institutional Logics and Norm Circle Perspectives

The outline of the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives invites reflections on whether the two perspectives should be seen as alternative ways of understanding institutions or if they can in some ways complement each other. However, before delving into these questions, it is worth elaborating somewhat on what the two perspectives have in common. Both perspectives rest on a shared, ontological conception of institutions as objectified phenomena that are imbued with a strong sense of normativity. The institutional logics perspective sees objectification as manifested in the persistence of general, societal orders that take concrete form in organisational fields, even though it recognises that the processes through which such translations take place can fuel social transformations whereby a renewed sequence of objectification is set in motion. Similarly, the norm circle perspective recognises that institutionalisation entails a process of objectification, whereby particular norms come to be taken for granted, although the analytical focus has mainly been directed at how norms achieve such a status and how particular groups of people then enact and enforce them.

Another similarity between the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives, that is worth highlighting, is that both perspectives are multiple determination approaches that view the occurrence of social events as a consequence of diverse, interacting mechanisms and steer clear of any notions of structural determinism. In the institutional logics perspective, multiple determination is mainly ascribed to the coexistence of

competing logics that triggers human reflexivity as to what constitutes appropriate courses of action and often generates institutional change. In the norm circle perspective, similar effects are ascribed to the intersectionality between norm circles. However, in contrast to much research on institutional logics, there is a more explicit recognition that such intersectionality can generate institutional change as well as stability depending on whether it reinforces or weakens the dispositions of human beings to deviate from particular norms. Concerted efforts to explicate how institutional logics generate stability are mainly found in the work of Mutch (2018, 2019b), which shares the critical realist ontology of the norm circle perspective and, as a result, conceives of institutional logics as highly durable phenomena. However, as we have seen, this is accompanied by a strong emphasis on the need to locate the origins of institutions at the societal level. This contrasts sharply with the more open-ended view of norm circles as entities that might emerge at any level of analysis where social groups are being formed.

4.2 | The Institutional Logics and Norm Circle Perspectives as Alternative Approaches

Starting the discussion of whether the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives should be seen as alternative ways of understanding institutions, it is helpful to consider the question of whether the latter perspective may be mobilised to avoid criticisms, such as the ones that have been levied at the former. As explicated below, I answer this question in the affirmative.

First, the norm circle perspective is arguably at lesser risk of reifying notions of institutions as analytical archetypes and bracketing the processes whereby the norms that underpin such institutions are enacted, reproduced and transformed. This is in large part due to the open-ended approach to the identification of institutions that follows from the relaxation of the need to trace such institutions back to general, societal orders. Rather than taking such orders as an epistemological starting point for the analysis of normativity, the norm circle perspective grounds the study of norms in the multitude of social groups that exist in society (Elder-Vass 2010). This often takes the form of very concrete, empirical descriptions of the norms that hold particular groups of people together while close attention is being paid to the causal dynamics that are set in motion as they act back on the members of the group (Baker and Modell 2019; Blee 2013; Nichol et al. 2021; Richardson 2020). As such, the norm circle perspective responds to calls for carefully situated and open-ended approaches to the analysis of institutions as opposed to the tendency to start the analysis from a relatively limited set of predefined theoretical categories that is common in research on institutional logics (Purdy et al. 2018; Quattrone 2015). Such analyses are facilitated by the methodological procedures accompanying the norm circle perspective, which rely on a combination of retroduction and retrodiction (Elder-Vass 2010). In research on norm circles, retroduction is used to identify the potentially very broad range of norms that might affect the occurrence of particular tendencies that researchers are interested in explaining. Retrodiction is then mobilised to determine whether and how these norms interact and how this leads the causal powers of intersecting norm circles to be activated or

negated in specific empirical contexts. For instance, in their study of the institutionalisation of corporate social responsibility in a manufacturing company, Baker and Modell (2019) systematically used these twin analytical techniques to map the norm circles of potential relevance for explaining this phenomenon and analysing the processes through which it materialised. In doing so, they demonstrated how two intersecting norm circles, centred on normative management knowledge and customer demands, reinforced the institutionalisation of a narrower conception of social responsibility as a means of the achieving financial gains. By contrast, a third norm circle, centred on labour rights, was less consequential as a counterweight to this development as a result of only intersecting with other norm circles for a limited period of time.

Second, the norm circle perspective is in a strong position to counter epistemological criticisms of the analysis of institutions for being excessively concerned with generalisation and resulting in abstract, decontextualised portrayals of the process of institutionalisation. In contrast to much research on institutional logics, empirical research on norm circles tends to take its point of departure in the specific social contexts in which the phenomena of interest are situated rather than abstract theory as a basis for drawing inferences that may be generalisable across contexts (Baker and Modell 2019; Blee 2013; Nichol et al. 2021; Richardson 2020). Yet, due to its open-ended nature, the notion of norm circles is, in principle, applicable to any contexts where socially negotiated norms and the formation of groups of people who endorse and enforce such norms are implicated in generating human agency. Moreover, the norm circle perspective is not necessarily averse to cumulative theory development concerning the effects that similar norm circles might have across different contexts. However, the mode of theorising is very different from the decontextualised generalisations of societal orders that are arguably beginning to permeate research on institutional logics (Alvesson et al. 2019; Alvesson and Spicer 2019; Jackson et al. 2019). Following the critical realist postulate that causal powers have a propensity to produce similar tendencies if they are activated in a specific way (Bhaskar 1975; Lawson 1997), a norm circle may be expected to cause human agency to be reproduced with some degree of consistency and regularity under particular contextual circumstances. But as we have seen, such agency are rarely, if ever, a product of only one norm circle but a result of multiple, intersecting norm circles with causal powers that can both counteract and reinforce each other. Also, the interplay between such powers does not necessarily repeat itself in the same way across different contexts (Elder-Vass 2010). Hence, any attempts at cumulative theory development regarding the workings of norm circles need to be combined with a high degree of context sensitivity. Such research can alert researchers to the contextual boundary conditions under which the causal powers of norm circles are likely to be activated in a particular manner (see e.g., Baker and Modell 2019). As a series of consecutive, empirical studies of similar norm circles are carried out across diverse contexts, researchers can gradually expand their understanding of under which boundary conditions such norm circles are likely to generate particular tendencies. But given the contingent and, to a degree, unpredictable nature of such tendencies, such theorising can never lay claim to grand, universally valid generalisations of how norm circles operate.

The discussion above speaks in favour of viewing the norm circle perspective as a distinct alternative to the institutional logics perspective rather than a complement that can help to address shortcomings in the latter without abandoning it as a primary frame of reference. By situating the analysis of institutions in the context-specific circumstances that surround the formation of norms, the norm circle perspective offers a counterpoint to the persistent tracing of institutions to potentially reified, analytical archetypes that arguably characterises the 'mainstream' approach to institutional logics. Which of these approaches will be preferred is likely to depend on the purpose of the analysis. While the 'mainstream' approach to institutional logics may be a useful starting point for mapping similarities in societal orders across organisational fields, the norm circle perspective has the advantage of directing our attention to the minutiae of institutional processes within a variety of local contexts although it is not confined to any specific levels of analysis within such contexts. As such, the norm circle perspective has some similarities to the social constructionist, 'bottom-up' view of institutional logics and its emphasis on the processes through which extant logics give rise to 'new', blended logics. However, in contrast to this view of institutional logics, the norm circle perspective is more tightly focused on the formation and effects of the norms that hold social groups together. This, in turn, imbues the norm circle perspective with a stronger sense of emergence that is helpful in unpacking the causal dynamics that are involved in institutional processes.

To illustrate this point, it is helpful to contrast two empirical studies relying, respectively, on a social constructionist, 'bottom-up' view of institutional logics (Smets et al. 2012) and the norm circle perspective (Blee 2013). Although both studies rely on extensive, ethnographic engagements with their respective field settings, they differ considerably in their theory-building aspirations. Smets et al. (2012) examined how the evolution of practices in an international law firm, which was exposed to the diverging logics governing legal work in Germany and the UK, gave rise to a new, hybrid logic that was subsequently institutionalised in the organisational field in which such firms are embedded. This resulted in an elaborate, inductively derived model explicating how extant logics are blended as they become manifest in evolving practices and how the mechanisms involved in this process shaped the emerging logic. However, in doing so, Smets et al. (2012) treated these mechanisms as independent, interacting forces propelling the process of institutionalisation and did not articulate how each mechanism was imbued with emergent, causal powers enabling collective agency. By contrast, in her study of the formation of norms in grassroots' activist groups, Blee (2013) demonstrated how the causal powers of such norms gradually narrowed the scope of discourses and how this framed the missions of the groups and excluded alternative courses of action. Similar to other empirical studies on norm circles (Baker and Modell 2019; Nichol et al. 2021; Richardson 2020; Yang and Liu 2019), Blee (2013) kept her analysis tightly focused on how such emergent, causal powers shape human agency while recognising the need to carefully specify the contextual boundary conditions within which this takes place. This illustrates how a more parsimonious approach to theory building than the one characterising much research on institutional logics can contribute to our

understanding of causal dynamics in particular institutional settings.

4.3 | Complementarities Between the Institutional Logics and Norm Circle Perspectives

Turning to the question of whether the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives can complement each other, the discussion above suggests that it may be difficult and potentially counterproductive to attempt a wholesale integration or synthesis of the two approaches into a unified analytical framework. Given the epistemological differences between especially the ‘mainstream’ approach to institutional logics and the norm circle perspective, such syntheses could easily result in forced reconciliations that cause both perspectives to lose their distinctiveness and relative advantages. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to extend the discussion by considering how particular insights emanating from each perspective might enrich the other.

Starting with the question of what the norm circle perspective might add to the institutional logics perspective, it is helpful to address this question from a common ontological and epistemological vantage point such as that grounded in critical realism. As we have seen, a critical realist approach to institutional logics, such as that advanced by Mutch (2018, 2019b), entails an ontological conception of logics as highly durable phenomena that originate at the societal level of analysis while shaping context-specific practices that are often in a more pronounced state of flux. The norm circle perspective can complement such a view by illuminating how different logics inform the formation of concrete norms and how such norms are endorsed and enforced by a variety of social groups as they become manifest in the practices in which such groups engage. Research into the processes through which such norms take shape can provide a fine-grained view of how institutional logics are translated into context-specific practices while preserving a strong sense of a human agency as an institutionally embedded phenomenon. A critical realist approach to institutional logics would reinforce the view that the formation of norms that are specific to particular groups does not occur in an institutional vacuum, whereas the norm circle perspective directs our attention to the more malleable aspects of the process of institutionalisation. At the same time, by keeping the analysis of such processes tightly focused on the emergent properties of the norms that shape practices, the norm circle perspective can temper the temptation of researchers to unpack logics into their constitutive elements and preserve a degree of analytical parsimony along the lines suggested by Mutch (2018, 2019b).

Shifting the focus to ponder how insights from the institutional logics perspective can complement the norm circle perspective, two separate prospects stand out. First, insights from the institutional logics perspective can shed light on the questions of under which circumstances human beings deviate from particular norms and how this affects the propensity for institutional change. As we have seen, these questions have been subject to little empirical attention in research on norm circles although it recognises that intersecting norm circles can fuel processes that counteract as well as reinforce the tendency of people to comply

with particular norms. By contrast, research on institutional logics has paid ample attention to how processes of institutional change emanate from the coexistence of competing logics and how such processes are triggered by reflexive breaks with particular logics under a range of contextual circumstances (Ocasio et al. 2016; Seo and Creed 2002; Steele 2021). Continued dialogue between the institutional logics and the norm circle perspectives may thus enrich the latter by imbuing it with a systematic understanding of when reflexive breaks with particular norms are likely to occur and how this is translated into institutional change. Even though propagators of the norm circle perspective, such as Elder-Vass (2010), recognise that such breaks are a prerequisite for normative change, such an understanding is yet to be more fully developed within this perspective. Studies of how different norm circles, which may be underpinned by competing institutional logics, affect tendencies towards reflexive agency and change can also respond to Mutch's (2019b) criticism of the risk of overemphasising such agency. Rather than seeing reflexive agency as an omnipresent phenomenon, such research would recognise that the tendencies to engage in such agency are always conditioned by the norms that are endorsed and enforced in particular institutional contexts.

Second, the empirical research approaches adopted in certain studies of institutional logics can help to shed light on how norm circles evolve across different levels of analysis and stimulate deeper analyses of the cross-level dynamics involved in such processes. Even though norm circles can be found at any level of society, the question of how smaller and informal norm circles grow into larger and more formalised ones has received little attention (but see Blee 2013). Extending research in this direction is important to enhance our understanding of how particular norms gain traction and become consequential in society. The institutional logics perspective contains some exemplary studies demonstrating how such research might be conducted (e.g., Ansari et al. 2013; Smets et al. 2012; Purdy and Gray 2009). However, developing detailed cross-level analyses requires significant investments in time and access to data reflecting the interplay among a broad range of social actors, which may explain why such analyses are still rare in the literature on institutional logics (Wu et al. 2023). Also, the methodological challenges that follow from this are by no means unique to the institutional logics perspective but might also be expected to apply to empirical research on norm circles. This is especially the case if such research is also to pay attention to intersectionality, which may require researchers to engage with a broad range of actors belonging to diverse but partly overlapping norm circles.

5 | Conclusions

In this paper, I have sought to answer the question of whether the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives should be seen as alternative approaches to the analysis of institutions or if they can in some ways complement each other. On balance, my analysis leads me to the view that the two approaches are best conceived of as two relatively distinct alternatives for examining the evolution and effects of institutions. This is especially the case with respect to the ‘mainstream’ approach that has dominated research on

institutional logics. Even though the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives rest on a shared, ontological conception of institutions as objectified phenomena that are imbued with a strong sense of normativity, they often differ significantly in their epistemological commitments and analytical emphases. The institutional logics perspective originates in an explicit ambition to bring society back into the analysis of institutions. This has reinforced its commitment to tracing the evolution of institutions to general, societal orders and, insofar as the ‘mainstream’ approach is concerned, an increasing emphasis on generalising how logics manifest themselves across organisational fields. By contrast, the norm circle perspective adopts a more open-ended view as to where institutions originate and accepts that norm circles can emerge at any level of analysis where social groups are being formed. This position has led propagators of this perspective to emphasise the need to carefully ground the analysis of institutions in the groups of people who endorse and enforce particular norms rather than necessarily tracing them back to societal orders that are more or less generalisable across institutional contexts. As we have seen, this epistemological starting point makes the norm circle perspective a promising approach for avoiding emerging criticisms of the institutional logics perspective, such as its tendency to reify societal orders as analytical archetypes and decontextualising the analysis of institutions. The epistemological differences between the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives also caution against any attempts at wholesale integration, or synthesis, of the two approaches.

Having said this, I have also pointed to ways in which selective integration of insights from the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives can enhance our understanding of the role of institutions in organisations and society. This is especially the case where the two perspectives are mobilised in research resting on a shared, critical realist understanding of institutions. As we have seen, such research may preserve a view of institutional logics as highly durable phenomena while illuminating how such logics shape the norms that are endorsed and enforced by a variety of social groups and that underpin the practices in which they engage. This may, in turn, deepen our understanding of how context-specific practices evolve at different levels of analysis. I have also drawn attention to how insights from the institutional logics perspective can shed light on how norm circles are implicated in institutional change and the cross-level dynamics involved in this regard. However, to fully reap the benefits of continued dialogue between the institutional logics and norm circle perspectives, researchers may need to relax the affiliations of the former perspective to organisational institutionalism and its emphasis on organisational fields as a key unit of analysis. One way of accomplishing this is to combine the institutional logics perspective with research approaches that are not wedded to organisational institutionalism but built on other strands of sociological thought with a more versatile view as to where institutions originate and how they manifest themselves. The norm circle perspective would seem to be a natural candidate in this respect given its open-ended view regarding the origins of institutions and how they influence practices.

Notwithstanding the strengths of the norm circle perspective, there are potential barriers to establishing it as a novel approach to the analysis of institutions alongside the institutional logics

perspective. One such barrier lies in the allegedly hegemonic aspirations of the institutional logics perspective (Alvesson et al. 2019; Alvesson and Spicer 2019). Similar to earlier versions of organisational institutionalism (Carter and Spence 2019; Tolbert and Zucker 1996), the institutional logics perspective can perhaps be said to have become institutionalised in its own right as a highly influential, if not dominant, approach within this larger research programme. Hence, one useful avenue for further research might be to apply the norm circle perspective to the norm circle that makes up the community of scholars endorsing the institutional logics perspective and examine how they have enforced it as a norm for how to conduct research on institutions. Such research may shed light on how hegemonic tendencies have emerged and been reinforced and can foster further critical debate on how alternatives to the institutional logics perspective may become more widely accepted. If such debates foster a high degree of reflexivity among propagators of the institutional logics perspective, this can possibly help to loosen its affiliations to organisational institutionalism and make it more responsive to insights from other research programmes.

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Data Availability Statement

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Endnotes

¹ Organisational institutionalism can be seen as the most recent variant of a long strand of institutional thought, originating especially in the works of Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), which was previously known as new or neo-institutional theory (see Greenwood et al. [2017] and Glynn and D’Aunno [2023] for overviews of the historical development of this broader research tradition).

² In pursuing this aim, I follow a view of institutions as phenomena that provide normative prescriptions for action and, as such, mediate between social structures and human agency (Ocasio and Gai 2020; Ögütte 2021). This view of institutions applies to both institutional logics and norm circles, which are affected by a range of social structures, which themselves do not constitute institutions.

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