Getting Institutional Work to Work:
Generating Actionable Insights from a Practice-Approach to Institutional Ambidexterity

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Abstract

This paper develops a practice approach to institutional ambidexterity. In doing so it first explores the ‘promise’ of institutional ambidexterity as a concept to address shortcomings within the institutional theory treatment of complexity. However, we argue that this is an empty promise because ambidexterity remains an organisational level construct that neither connects to institutional level, or to the practical actions and interactions within which individuals enact institutions. We therefore suggest a practice approach that we develop into a conceptual framework for fulfilling the promise of institutional ambidexterity. The second part of the paper outlines what a practice approach is and the variation in practice-based insights into institutional ambidexterity that we might expect in contexts of novel or routine institutional complexity. Finally, the paper concludes with a research agenda that highlights the potential of practice to extend institutional theory through new research approaches to well-established institutional theory questions, interests and established-understandings.

Introduction

Paradoxically, the practice-based approach to institutions (e.g., Battilana and D'Aunno, 2009; Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen and Van de Ven, 2009; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007; Smets, Morris and Greenwood, 2012) that originally emerged as an antidote to excessively managerial notions of ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ (for reviews, see Battilana, Leca and Boxenbaum, 2009; Garud, Hardy and Maguire, 2007; Hardy and Maguire, 2008) is particularly well-positioned for generating actionable insights into the relationship of organizational and institutional life.

In directing attention to ‘how people engage in the doing of “real work”’ (Cook and Brown, 1999: 387), as well as to its institutional ramifications, practice-based approaches to institutions get institutional work to work. This is particularly relevant in institutionally complex settings, in which coexisting and potentially conflicting logics are ‘part of the ordinary, everyday nature of work, rather than exceptional phenomena’ (Jarzabkowski et al., 2009: 289). In these increasingly prevalent settings, ranging from hospitals (e.g. Heimer, 1999; Reay and Hinings, 2009) to professional partnerships (e.g. Cooper, Hinings, Greenwood and Brown, 1996; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Grey, 1998, 2003), to multinational corporations (e.g. Kostova and Zaheer, 1999), a practice-based approach to institutions is uniquely placed to generate impactful knowledge of direct managerial relevance.
Institutional ambidexterity (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micellota and Lounsbury, 2011) is institutionalists’ latest attempt to come to terms with situations of institutional ‘complexity’ or ‘pluralism’, in which incompatible expectations and prescriptions, or ‘logics’, collide (Goodrick and Reay, 2011; Kraatz and Block, 2008; Pache and Santos, 2010; Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012). Drawing on existing literature in the strategy field (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; Gupta, Smith and Shalley, 2006; March, 1991; Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996), institutional ambidexterity looks to the potential benefits of being able to operate across coexisting, contradictory logics. This perspective marks a significant departure from previous approaches that saw institutional complexity as problematic and focused on resolving conflict by keeping apart people, practices or audiences that followed contradictory logics (e.g., Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Seo and Creed, 2002; Smets et al., 2012) This problem-based focus led institutionalists to overlook the potential benefits for organisations in operating across different logics. Indeed, from healthcare to professional services to academia, there are numerous examples of organizations in which seemingly incompatible logics not only coexist, but also fruitfully complement each other. Therefore, we need to better understand how organizations can capitalize on interdependencies between logics, and not just remedy problems arising from their tensions.

The concept of institutional ambidexterity is an important step towards addressing this shortcoming in the institutional literature; albeit, one that still falls short of resolving it. The notion of ambidexterity differs from existing approaches because it acknowledges that working to different prescriptions, while difficult, has the potential to benefit organizations. From this perspective, institutional complexity is not a problem to be resolved, but a naturally occurring condition to be managed, and harnessed (Kraatz and Block, 2008). Indeed, if we see exploration and exploitation (March, 1991) as two distinct and contradictory logics of learning, then ambidexterity has, implicitly, always been looking at logics-in-action and is a useful frame for looking at institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011). Transposing organizational
ambidexterity insights into the institutional literature thus appears promising at first sight. Closer scrutiny, however, exposes this as an empty promise because, to date, ambidexterity scholars struggle to suggest practical solutions to the puzzle of integrating contradictory prescriptions. For example, relying on senior management teams to integrate separate efforts lower down the corporate hierarchy may work for exploration and exploitation (e.g., Benner and Tushman, 2003; Jansen, Tempelaar, van den Bosch and Volberda, 2009; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004; Siggelkow and Levinthal, 2003), but is a less useful insight for other logics that need to be balanced on a continuous basis by practitioners at work. Similarly, those authors suggesting that ambidexterity hinges on organizational culture, fail to specify what people in those organizations do to create such cultures, or to perform their everyday work under their influence (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). These problems arise because ambidexterity scholars have treated complexity as an organizational phenomenon, without pursuing its practical implications at the individual level or its origins at the institutional level. Hence, in order to fulfil the promise of the institutional ambidexterity concept, we need an approach that leverages institutional complexity in practice.

Developing this practice approach to institutional ambidexterity is the focus of this paper, which unfolds as follows: First, we review existing approaches to institutional complexity. Then, we visit the ambidexterity literature to gauge the promise it holds for addressing the puzzle of institutional complexity. Third, we introduce practice theory as a perspective that fruitfully connects individual, organizational and institutional levels of analysis (e.g., Barley, 2008; Bourdieu, 1990; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007; Smets et al., 2012; Whittington, 2006), building a conceptual model to illustrate our argument. Finally, drawing on the relatively few examples from the institutional theory literature, we outline the types of insights that a practice perspective on institutional ambidexterity can generate and indicate promising avenues for future research.
Institutional Complexity: The Story So Far

Since Friedland and Alford’s (1991) seminal work, institutional complexity, which is the encounter of ‘incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics’ (Greenwood et al., 2011: 317), has captured institutionalists’ interest. Such complexity arises from an overlap of institutional orders with incompatible prescriptions (Thornton et al., 2012); for example, where organizations operate across institutional spheres with contradictory prescriptions (e.g., Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Smets et al., 2012) or face different constituents with divergent demands (e.g., D'Aunno, Sutton and Price, 1991; Greenwood, Magán Diaz, Li and Céspedes Lorente, 2010; Heimer, 1999). Over time and based on the intellectual priorities in the broader field of institutional theory, this interest has taken three different guises that we outline below.

Institutional Complexity as Occasion for Change

Institutional logics are the building blocks of institutional complexity and initially rose to prominence as a means of theorizing about the heterogeneity in institutional environments (Battilana and Dorado, 2010; Seo and Creed, 2002; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012). Complexity allowed institutionalists to counter critiques of being overly focused on homogeneity and stasis (Hirsch and Lounsbury, 1997) and to theorize institutional change arising endogenously, rather than from exogenous regulatory, social, or technological shocks (Edelman, 1992; Garud, Jain and Kumaraswamy, 2002; Rao, Monin and Durand, 2003). Seo and Creed (2002) argue that institutional contradictions can function as an endogenous trigger of change, because they make actors aware of alternatives to their institutionalized, taken-for-granted ways and motivate them to pursue more favourable alternatives (e.g., Djelic and Quack, 2003; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Seo and Creed, 2002; Smets et al., 2012; Thornton, Jones and Kury, 2005). Given the predominant preoccupation with explaining institutional change, such research depicted complexity as transitory, en route to a state of relative stability in which one logic dominates over another (Marquis and Lounsbury, 2007; Reay and Hinings, 2005; Thornton, 2002; Townley, 2002).
Institutional Complexity as Contested Coexistence

More recently, however, institutional theorists have come to recognize that institutional complexity may not be transitory, but permanent (Greenwood et al., 2011; Zilber, 2011); especially for those organizations which, by their very nature, are ‘an incarnation or embodiment of multiple logics’ (Kraatz and Block, 2008: 244). In these organizations, contradictory prescriptions from different legitimating audiences systematically collide in everyday operations and institutional complexity must be managed continuously. Therefore, studies of such organizations made efforts to leave the field level and ‘get inside’ organizations to understand organizational responses to institutional complexity (e.g., Battilana and Dorado, 2010; Pache and Santos, 2010). However, they retained a focus on the incompatibilities and tensions that characterize the overlap of competing logics (Greenwood et al., 2011), as reflected in the imagery of ‘turmoil’ (Hallett, 2010: 52); ‘threat’ (Jarzabkowski et al., 2009: 306) and ‘uneasy truce’ (Reay and Hinings, 2005: 364). As a result, suggested organizational responses, building on Oliver’s (1991) seminal work, have been largely defensive. These may involve resistance to institutional pressures (Townley, 1997), use of organizational status to avoid or defy problematic stakeholders (e.g., Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Smets et al., 2012), or compartmentalization of compliance with different sets of expectations into different organizational or geographic units (e.g., Binder, 2007; Dunn and Jones, 2010; Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Lounsbury, 2007). Common to the majority of these responses is their focus on simplifying the situation and reducing the tensions of complexity by keeping apart competing logics and the practices and people that enact them. Advocating an approach of not letting the right hand know what the left hand was doing, such studies did not fully consider that organizations that are ‘dextrous with both hands’ might not only avoid tensions, but also reap distinctive benefits of their situation.

Institutional Ambidexterity as Embrace of Complexity

Most recently, institutional scholars have revisited relationships between logics in a more nuanced fashion, discovering potential for more fruitful relationships between coexisting logics
Ironically, benefits of awareness and reflexivity were already highlighted by Seo and Creed (2002); indeed, Friedland and Alford pointed out that coexisting logics ‘are interdependent and yet also contradictory’ (1991: 250; emphasis added; see also Scott, 1991). This makes intuitive sense, as there are benefits in scientific and well-managed patient-care (Dunn and Jones, 2010; Kitchener, 2002), more client-oriented or multi-disciplinary professional services (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Thornton et al., 2005), or positive feedback loops between commercialized research outputs and ideas or funding for future research (D’Este and Perkmann, 2011; Perkmann and Walsh, 2009). Institutional scholars, given their predominant focus on incompatibility and tension, have largely neglected such interdependencies. Yet, interdependence indicates that truly ambidextrous approaches to complexity, in which the left hand not only knows what the right hand does, but can skilfully complement its actions, are much more apposite to address the conundrum of institutional complexity.

Greenwood and colleagues (2011) suggest borrowing from the ambidexterity literature to provide new insights into the integration of competing logics. The basic premise of ambidexterity is the ability to simultaneously perform contradictory processes when both are critical to organizational success (March, 1991; Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996). This change in perspective is helpful for institutionalists insofar as it moves from attempting to resolve complexity to balancing its components in pursuit of distinctive outputs and identities (Goodrick and Reay, 2011; Kraatz and Block, 2008; Reay and Hinings, 2009). Based on Simsek’s (2009) distinction of ‘structural’ and ‘blended’ hybrids, two different approaches to ambidexterity have been proposed in institutional theory; neither of which, however, seems to be currently delivering on the promise of embracing institutional complexity. Structural differentiation arises from current work on compartmentalization that assigns compliance with different expectations to different organizational units. Where and how subsequent integration occurs, however, remains unclear to
date. Blended hybrids sidestep this problem by allowing different logics to pervade the organization and relying on individuals to strike an appropriate balance (Battilana and Dorado, 2010; D'Aunno et al., 1991; Smets et al., 2012). So far, this appears to be the ‘gold standard’ of institutional ambidexterity. However, several problems remain. For example, suggestions for facilitating logic blending are currently limited to recommendations of using human resource policies to create an open and receptive context (Battilana and Dorado, 2010; Smets et al., 2012). How this is to be done and what individuals inhabiting these contexts do to enact different logics, however, remains obscure. Furthermore, it is questionable that an indistinguishable blend of competing logics and the practices that enact them would always be desirable. As Battilana and Dorado (2010) foreshadow, blended hybridization may produce ‘slippage’ towards either logic. From a theoretical perspective, slippage may herald institutional change, rather than balanced complexity with distinct but coexistent logics. Empirically, failure to discriminate between, and sustain, competing logics may herald the neglect of critical standards, as experienced in the case of Enron and other corporate scandals in which commercial goals superseded professional standards (Gabbioneta, Greenwood, Mazzola and Minoja, forthcoming; Grey, 2003). Alternatives that can integrate practices governed by competing logics on an ongoing, practical basis in order to sustain them as interdependent yet separate have thus rarely been explored in the (institutional) ambidexterity literature. We consider this neglect both theoretically and empirically problematic. We now briefly visit the foundations of ambidexterity in the strategy literature, before developing a practice-theoretical variant that we consider more suitable for addressing remaining blind spots in the study of institutional complexity and the attendant concept of institutional ambidexterity.

**Ambidexterity in the Strategy Literature: A False Promise**

The ambidexterity literature suggests that successful firms are ambidextrous; ‘aligned and efficient with today’s business demands [exploitation] while simultaneously adaptive to changes in the environment [exploration]’ (March, 1991; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008: 685). As discussed above, Greenwood et al. (2011) link this concept to institutional theory through labelling
‘exploitation’ and ‘exploration’ as different logics of learning. Other scholars argue that, as ambidexterity can be used to signify an organisation’s ability to do two different (apparently conflicting) things at the same time more generally, it is applicable to logics other than exploitation and exploration (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004). Ambidexterity, the ability to excel at two contradictory things simultaneously, is posited as both possible and desirable for organizations. It is thus portrayed as an organizational resource that links to organizational performance, which is the central theoretical proposition and empirically explored relationship in the ambidexterity literature (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; He and Wong, 2004; Simsek, 2009; Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996). Achieving ambidexterity is not, however, assumed to be easy, as the simultaneous fulfilment of competing demands is filled with potential tensions and trade-offs (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008; Smith and Tushman, 2005). The literature has explored three main ways of achieving organizational ambidexterity: structure, organizational context (culture) and leadership (Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008; Simsek, 2009). Initially, structural solutions proposed that distinct organizational units should pursue either exploration or exploitation (Benner and Tushman, 2003; Burgelman, 2002; Gupta et al., 2006; O’Reilly and Tushman, 2004; Smith and Tushman, 2005; Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996). Then, contextual ambidexterity focused on an organization’s culture, suggesting that if management created a suitable context, for example by engendering trust, ambidexterity would be apparent at all levels of the organizations (Birkinshaw and Gibson, 2004). Finally, given that both these bodies of research focus on the upper echelons of management that are either the strategic integrating apex (Smith & Tushman, 2005); or responsible for creating a supportive business-unit context (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004), a large body of work has focused on leadership and leaders’ characteristics that enable organizational ambidexterity (Carmeli and Halevi, 2009; Jansen et al., 2009; Lubatkin, Simsek, Yan and Veiga, 2006; Siggelkow and Levinthal, 2003; Smith, Binns and Tushman, 2010; Smith and Tushman, 2005).
In considering the ambidexterity literature, issues emerge with its capacity to provide a theoretical foundation for managing institutional complexity and the desire to embrace interdependence and integration between divergent logics. First, there is a surprising lack of integration in the ambidexterity literature (Simsek, 2009). Indeed, ‘organizational ambidexterity’ was initially treated as ‘virtually synonymous with structurally differentiated hybrids’ (Greenwood et al., 2011: 355) and any integration that does occur is usually located at the apex of an organization rather than something that is imbued at all organizational levels (Smith & Tushman, 2005).

Second, ambidexterity remains an explicitly organizational construct, which partly explains the lack of attention to the practical doing of ambidexterity by managers. The literature lacks integrative models that span multiple levels of analysis, such as the individual and institutional levels (Gupta et al., 2006; Raisch, Birkinshaw, Probst and Tushman, 2009; Simsek, 2009). In particular, contextual and structural ambidexterities exclude a micro focus on how individuals perform ambidexterity or macro perspectives on the institutional ramifications of ambidexterity (Simsek, 2009). While the lineage of the term ‘ambidextrous’ is explicitly individual – the capacity of an individual to do two things at once – as a metaphor in organization studies, ambidexterity has not focused on the individual per se or how actors do ambidexterity (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Gupta et al., 2006). This is true even when authors argue that ambidexterity resides at the individual level, such as Gibson and Birkinshaw (2005), who propose that individuals should use their own judgement to achieve ambidexterity, but focus on the characteristics of their context rather than on how the individuals might do that. Tellingly, in painting a multi-level picture of ambidexterity, Bledow et al. (2009) include only one explicit ambidexterity citation in their summary of the individual level (Mom, Van Den Bosch and Volberda, 2007), drawing the rest of their literature from other research domains.
Bledow et al.’s (2009) model is also explicitly intra-organizational, with no discussion of the broader organizational environment, leading to our second point that the ambidexterity literature is almost exclusively internally focused on organizational capabilities. It is not concerned with legitimacy and adherence to externally imposed rules of action (Greenwood et al., 2011). When the inter-organizational environment is considered, it is a secondary focus behind intra-organizational performance and resources, such as how alliances may be a source of intra-organizational ambidexterity (Rothaermel and Deeds, 2006), or how particular characteristics of an organization’s immediate, local environment may impact the ambidexterity-performance link (Jansen, van de Bosch and Volberda, 2005; Jansen, van de Bosch and Volberda, 2006; Levinthal and March, 1993). Consequently, ambidexterity does not provide institutional theorists with the means to link the ambidextrous doing of institutional complexity at the individual level, with the organizational level and the broader institutional field. In its current conceptual state, it is a false promise for studying the problems and benefits of institutional complexity.

Fulfilling the Promise: Institutional Ambidexterity in Practice

In this section we draw together the concept of institutional ambidexterity, the shortcomings that currently prevent it from fulfilling its promise, and our suggestion of practice theory as a way to address those shortcomings in a conceptual model of our argument. Ambidexterity presents a potential solution to how organisations can reap the benefits of interdependent logics, by suggesting that they may embrace two potentially contradictory courses of action simultaneously. However, as shown in Figure 1, it is primarily an organisational level construct that does not adequately address the issues of logics in action. That is, ambidexterity neither examines the institutional logics within which potential contradictions are embedded, nor the actions that people take in coping with coexistence in more or less complementary ways. Hence, we need an underpinning theoretical approach that can flesh out institutional ambidexterity as a concept that embraces the potential benefits of institutional complexity and also examines how actors work within such complexity to perform ambidextrous associations between logics.
Practice theories span multiple levels from institutional to individual within which institutional complexity is socially accomplished. From a practice perspective, all action is situated within, produces and re-produces the dynamics of its wider social context. Thus, by looking at the actions of individuals at the nexus of different institutional logics, such as health care, educational, arts and regulated organizations, we can see how actions that are situated within multiple logics construct ambidexterity. Institutions themselves cannot be ambidextrous; rather, people do institutional ambidexterity in their everyday actions and interactions as they work within and enact multiple logics.

Practice theory (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl, 2007; Schatzki, 2001) directs attention to, “how people engage in the doing of “real work”” (Cook and Brown, 1999: 387) but also the ‘shared practical understanding’ which gives it meaning and makes it robust (Schatzki, 2001: 2). The focus is on how actors interact with, construct and draw upon the social and physical features of their context in the everyday activities that constitute practice. Practice theorists have thus sought to go beyond the dualism of institutions and action that still permeates much institutional theory (Barley, 2008; Hallett, 2010), by demonstrating that institutions are constructed by and, in turn, construct action (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Sztompka, 1991; Turner, 1994). For these theorists, the collective practice that constitutes institutional order exists only through the way that it is enacted in the mundane, practical actions of actors, as depicted by the double-headed ‘practice’ arrow in Figure 1. Practice theory thus takes actions, interactions and negotiations between multiple individuals as the core unit of analysis (Jarzabkowski et al, 2007). In these actions and interactions, actors instantiate, reproduce and modify the shared or collective practice (Schatzki, 2002) that is the focus of institutional theory (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006). A practice lens can thus provide insight into how actors perform institutional ambidexterity within their work; enacting competing understandings.
about ‘how to go on’ (Chia and Holt, 2009; Giddens, 1984) and coping with the resultant tensions in practical ways that perform the ambidexterity of working within and between multiple logics (Denis et al, 2007).

Recent developments in institutional theory show sensitivity to the practice approach. For example, a recent book exhorts institutional theorists to examine logics in action, devoting an entire paper to practices as the material enactments of institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012), while other studies explicitly propose a practice approach as a means of understanding how actors cope with and respond to institutional complexity (e.g., Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Smets et al., 2012). In contrast to existing accounts that locate institutional complexity in field-level ‘contradictions’ (Seo and Creed, 2002), such studies propose that institutional complexity is experienced as ‘part of the ordinary, everyday nature of work, rather than exceptional phenomena’ (Jarzabkowski et al., 2009: 289). Practice theoretical approaches thus address the gap in Figure 1, by showing how we may understand institutional ambidexterity at the collective practice level through a focus on people’s practical coping with institutional complexity. The majority of such studies furnish insights into practical actions in situations of novel institutional complexity, such as changes in the juxtaposition of logics within an organisation. Examples include Jarzabkowski et al’s (2009) study of a shift in the association between market and regulatory logics in a telecoms company, Smets et al’s (2012) study of German and English professional logics colliding in a law-firm merger, or Zilber’s (2002) study of the way that practices become imbued with different meanings during a transition from feminist to clinical institutional logics. However, the practice theory focus on everyday, practical coping indicates that there may also be significant value in moving beyond novelty to also examine cases of long-standing or routine institutional complexity.
Individual level: Action and interaction in doing ambidexterity

We now examine some of the main findings from such practice-oriented studies of institutional complexity, in order to develop the final section of our conceptual framework about the practical understandings through which actors perform institutional ambidexterity. ‘Practical understanding’ is a practice term that refers to the actions – the know-how and embodied repertoires – that compose a practice (Schatzki, 2002: 77-78). While practical understandings are firmly grounded in actors and their actions, they encompass the collective practice within which people tacitly understand or have a ‘feel for’ how to perform the social order (see also Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984). They thus provide a useful unit of analysis for practice-based approaches to institutional theory. While not intended to be exhaustive, this section illustrates some insights that a focus on the practical, mundane doing of institutional ambidexterity in action can provide.

First, is an expanded practice repertoire whereby individuals incorporate both traditional local practices, for example, English- and German logics of legal practice, and new hybridized practices in their work (Smets and Jarzabkowski, forthcoming). As these authors showed, German lawyers could undertake cross-border financing for international clients according to international standards, whilst also retaining those practices specific to their domestic markets, to be activated when required in local transactions. The finding of an expanded practice repertoire gives empirical credence to theories about the potential benefits of institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011) beyond suggestions that they expand individuals’ cultural tool kit (Swidler, 1986). Specifically, they show that the expanded portfolio need not be cultural, but may also be practical. We are thus motivated to think not only of ‘strategies to respond’ to complexity, but also of the generative capacity of complexity (Kraatz and Block, 2008) to expand the practical toolkit of actors.

A second, related form of practical understanding is situated improvising.’ Smets et al. (2012) show how urgency and high stakes in meeting client expectations encouraged lawyers to
experiment and respond in a localized fashion to institutional complexity. These actions were simply actors’ practical efforts to find ways around obstacles to getting the job done in an institutionally complex environment. Intriguingly, such situated improvising can unfold effects at the organizational and institutional level. It may broaden practitioners’ zone of competence and consolidate in an expanded practice repertoire (Smets & Jarzabkowski, forthcoming) or radiate to the level of the field and, under specific circumstances, re-arrange dominant field-level logics (Smets et al., 2011).

A third practical understanding is mutual adjustment (Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Lindblom, 1965), in which individuals adjust in various ways to the logics governing each other's actions, without the need for an overarching coordinating device or purpose. Jarzabkowski et al. (2009: 300) highlight mutual adjustment in a utilities company facing contradictory market and regulatory logics. In their study, actors working to different logics recognized their interdependence and therefore tried “to accommodate the other, advocating tolerance of the other’s position in relation to their own logic” (ibid, p. 300). They show that pragmatic collaboration and recognition of interdependence between activities governed by divergent logics can guide practice as individuals adjust, in various ways and to varying degrees, in relation to one another. Their practice study thus complements and extends Reay and Hinings’ (2009) inter-organizational level findings about how truces between logics are constructed.

A fourth practical understanding is switching. While the idea of switching resonates with ideas of compartmentalization (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), in so much as different logics are separated into different divisions and actors. However, it is distinct insofar as it allows a single actor to shift between logics by enacting them at different times or in different spaces, so switching between compartmentalized logics. This practical understanding draws from DiMaggio’s (1997: 268) theorization of the capacity of individuals ‘to participate in multiple [inconsistent] cultural traditions’, and Delmestri’s (2006: 1518) depiction of individuals as ‘possible bearers of multiple institutionalized identities.’ Delmestri shows the capacity of
Managers to switch between different institutionalized modes of practice according to the way that different logics underpin their roles and identities. For example, managers that were exposed to greater institutional complexity were able to maintain multiple professional modes of practice and apply them in different contexts. Zilber (2011) provides another example of how this occurs in practice, indicating how the same actors used language and situational cues to switch between logics, and participate in and promulgate different discourses, at an industry conference. Such ‘cues’ of language and meeting format connect to DiMaggio’s (1997) argument that switching is usually connected to a circumstantial trigger, such as language in Zilber’s case. In sum, this ability for an individual to switch between multiple logics, and thus participate in their associated practices, enables them to maintain what might otherwise be considered inconsistent modes of action.

**Individuals in action and interaction**

While practice theorists have always focussed on individuals through their actions and interactions (Jarzabkowski et al, 2007), institutional theory also suggests other, more cognitive and identity-based approaches to the individual that may also provide insights into institutional ambidexterity (Creed, Scully and Austin, 2002; Greenwood et al., 2011; Lok, 2010; Rao et al., 2003). Such approaches suggest that personal identity and experience-base shape how practitioners cope with institutional complexity, and that organizations can skilfully harness these personal characteristics. For instance, Delmestri (2006) identified middle managers’ personal self as a critical intervening variable in their engagement with local and foreign practices in multinational corporations. Smets et al (2012) found that international law firms preferred more ‘cosmopolitan’ recruits who were multi-lingual, had lived or studied abroad and, as they were less wedded to a particular way of ‘doing things’, appeared to be more flexible in improvising around institutional contradictions. Likewise, Battilana and Dorado (2010) show that prior experience with – and attachment to – a particular logic hampered organizational hybridization in a microfinance bank. Here, recruits that arrived as a blank sheet, rather than with a fully formed
‘commercial’ or ‘social’ professional identity were considered more likely to develop ambidextrous capabilities to support organizational hybridization. Individual characteristics and experiences are thus important in the context of institutional ambidexterity. They shape individuals’ responses to specific logics and the complexities that arise at their interstices, and thereby help or hinder organizational engagement with coexisting and potentially contradictory logics.

However, from a practice perspective such identity and experience are only antecedents to practical understandings and potential ambidextrous capacities. The individuals whose identities are being considered still have to be seen as individuals-in-interaction. To focus on them as individuals *per se*, in terms of their cognitive and person-centred characteristics, without considering how these characteristics are situated within and shape the wider collective practice would be reductionist (Schatzki, 2002; Turner, 1994), taking institutionalists back to overly individualistic, disembedded, or cognitive views of institutions and their complexities. This would not only constitute a step backwards in the evolution of institutional theory (Delbridge and Edwards, 2008; Delmestri, 2006; Hirsch and Lounsbury, 1997), but also fail to harness practice theory’s distinct ability to link individual-level action and interaction to the organizational and institutional dynamics that are critical for understanding institutional ambidexterity.

**Organizational level: Novel and routine complexity**

As shown in Figure 1, the opportunity for ambidexterity arises when contradictory logics come together in an organisational context, generating practices that enact and construct institutional complexity. However, we still know little about different characteristics or forms of such ambidexterity, and their connection to different individual practices. Pache and Santos (2010) thus outline the need for increased understanding of when particular strategies may or may not be used in response to institutional complexity. Such studies could focus on a number of triggering elements at the organisational level, such as urgency (Smets et al., 2012), the extent to which complexity is internally or externally imposed (Pache & Santos, 2010); and the level of
scrutiny (Aurini, 2006; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). However, these elements all indicate a focus on conditions of novel complexity that trigger a change in practical understanding. We argue, therefore, that there is a particular need for studies of organisational context that embody routine complexity, and comparisons with contexts of novel complexity.

The majority of the institutional literature has focused on novel complexity, including those few studies that have focused on individual practice (Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Smets and Jarzabkowski, forthcoming; Smets et al., 2012). In general, institutionalists have been alerted to institutional complexity by relatively recent clashes between commercial and professional logics. Consequently, their primary focus has been on moments of flux and crisis in which competing logics collide (e.g., Battilana and Dorado, 2010; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Reay and Hinings, 2009; Smets et al., 2012). While insightful, this may predispose a focus on urgency, contestation, crisis, and problematic understandings of complexity (Goodrick and Reay, 2011; Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2009). Instead, the call for greater attention to the day-to-day actions of individuals at work (Powell and Colyvas, 2008) can help institutional theory as a whole resist the ‘search for drama’ (March, 1981: 564). While we urge further practice studies of the novel we therefore highlight the need for a sustained focus on the routine. In settings that have been characterized by institutional complexity for a sustained period of time, solutions may become ‘settled’ into everyday, taken-for-granted practical understandings of ambidexterity, characterized by an explicit lack of struggle and noise (Smets et al., 2012). As such, institutional complexities that form a well-rehearsed part of everyday practice may become unremarkable and mundane (Chia and Holt, 2009). Nonetheless, these routine practical understandings remain effortful accomplishments (Giddens, 1984) and clashes over the appropriate enactment of different logics can still occur. However, actors in such contexts may have a different set of practical understandings through which they both enact ambidexterity and also cope with the inevitable clashes that occur. To understand institutional ambidexterity as a routinized phenomenon, we thus need to study how institutional complexity is managed on an ongoing
basis in organizations that have practiced and retained multiple, potentially competing logics over 
a long period of time. A practice approach is particularly suited for such a research agenda, 
because it is attuned to what people do when institutional complexity is settled into routinely 
enacted patterns of everyday working practice and, hence, less visible, than when they craft 
overly strategic responses to novel complexity or institutional crisis (Chia & Holt, 2009), 
demanding

Power and politics

Institutional theory has long acknowledged the importance of power and politics in 
organizational dynamics (DiMaggio, 1988; Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Kostova and Zaheer, 1999). 
Indeed the concept of institutional complexity helped researchers highlight these issues 
(Greenwood et al., 2011). Despite the somewhat sanitized picture of routinized practice described 
above, we are usefully reminded that all contexts that generate ambidexterity involve power and 
politics in determining how and when to work within and between potential contradictions. It is 
apparent that the novel furnishes greater visibility of these concepts than the routine (e.g., 
Jarzabkowski et al., 2009). Nonetheless, one role of practice studies could be to surface the 
hidden, often forgotten, sources of power and politics at play, highlighting the persistence of 
such dynamics even when they are not readily apparent. Concepts such as expanded repertoires 
and routinized practices are ‘power-laden’, even if they do not require the same degree of overt 
political negotiation as open conflict (Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips, 2006). We thus expect that 
studies of ambidexterity might focus on the way that concepts of power and politics play out at 
the practical level of individuals in action and interaction and at the organisational level.

Institutional complexity in context: Characteristics of collective practice

A practice approach to institutional complexity has the ability to connect the individual, 
organisational and institutional levels of analysis (Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007; Smets et al., 
2012). We further argue that this practice approach can illuminate the nature of institutional 
complexity in its specific context. Specifically, we suggest that the characteristics of the collective
practice in which logics come together influence how the nature of a particular institutional complexity is constructed. Smets and Jarzabkowski (forthcoming) show that actors, through their practice, can construct the same two logics and their associated practices as strange, contradictory, commensurable and complementary. A focus on practice thus transcends simplistic ideas that certain logics are compatible or contradictory per se. Rather, we argue that (in)compatibility is always conditioned by the specific situated practice in which those logics come together. For example, professional and commercial or managerial logics are likely to be more compatible in consulting or business service firms (Smets et al., 2012) than in healthcare (Reay and Hinings, 2009; Ruef and Scott, 1998). Similarly, professional and commercial logics are easier to hybridize within the freedom of practice inherent in private educational contexts (Aurini, 2006) than in the more restrictive and regulated practice of public education contexts (Hallett, 2010). In other examples, medical practitioners may have established practices and experiences that provide cost-effective social good, so that actors can affiliate with and move between the multiple logics that govern their organisation. By contrast, a microfinance organization interested in blending commercial and community logics might need to employ practitioners with no prior affiliation with either logic (Battilana and Dorado, 2010). Hence, logics such as ‘community’, ‘commercial’, and ‘professional’ are not absolute in being either conflicting or complementary. Rather, they are interdependent in particular ways or constellations according to the particular collective and situated practice in which they are enacted.

**Conclusion**

This paper has outlined a practice research agenda for studying institutional ambidexterity that links the individual, organizational and institutional levels within which ambidexterity is enacted. We have developed Figure 1 as a conceptual model of our argument that is grounded in institutional theory, the literature on ambidexterity, and the benefits of a practice approach in fulfilling the promise of institutional ambidexterity. In particular, we suggest that scholars should focus on individuals in action and interaction, as they develop practical understandings about
how to cope with institutional ambidexterity. Furthermore, we highlight the benefits of comparing and contrasting contexts of novel and routinized organizational ambidexterity; in particular proposing that routinized ambidexterity provides a fertile avenue for future practice research. Finally, we propose that the collective practice that constitutes institutional complexity is particular to its specific context, as logics may be more or less contradictory or interdependent. Hence, actors will generate varying practices according to their particular contexts, in order to cope with and construct institutional ambidexterity in ways that go beyond our existing insights into institutional complexity. We therefore highlight the practice approach as a rich avenue for future research that can fulfil the promise of institutional ambidexterity as a solution to the problems, and enabler of the benefits, of institutional complexity.

Future research is unlikely to discover much novel insight if it continues to do ‘more of the same’. Given the shift in focus that comes with a practice approach to institutional ambidexterity, commensurate methodological adjustments should be made so that a new research agenda is accompanied by a new methodological agenda. Recent practice-theoretical insights into institutional dynamics have already been derived from an increasing focus on micro-dynamics and the use of qualitative and ethnographic methods (Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Smets et al., 2012; Zilber, 2002, 2011). We expect this trend to continue and intensify, making in-depth cases studies and real time ethnographies the methods of choice for the research agenda laid out here. As institutional theory is also concerned with embedded and long-standing patterns of social order, these real-time studies may need to be considered as critical incidents for drilling deep into institutional phenomena in action, even as they are, ideally, combined with more mainstream, large-scale institutional methods (Dunn and Jones, 2010; Greenwood et al., 2010; Ruef and Scott, 1998; Thornton, 2002). This combination holds the promise of providing the kind of multi-level data that is needed to bring a practice approach to institutional ambidexterity into its own by linking individual, organizational and institutional levels of analysis (e.g., Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007; Smets et al., 2012).
Further potential lies in the refinement of qualitative methods to make them more acutely sensitive to different aspects of practice. Promising avenues include a greater focus on the minutiae of practical actions and interactions, as advocated by micro ethnographers (Streeck and Mehus, 2005) or video ethnographers (LeBaron, 2005; LeBaron, 2008; LeBaron and Streeck, 1997). If the practices by which logics are enacted, rather than the logics themselves take the foreground, then the embodied interactions within which identities are formed and institutional divides bridged yield pertinent data (LeBaron, Glenn and Thompson, 2009; Streeck, Goodwin and LeBaron, 2011). Further, the contexts in which practices unfold are not only institutional but also mundanely material. People do things with ‘things’ in different places and spaces. While the role of boundary objects in bridging organisational divides has long been recognized (Carlile, 2002) and the affordances of technologies and materials has been recognized in practice studies (Leonardi, 2011; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Orlikowski, 2010), materials and spaces, their impact on interaction, and on the instantiation of different logics has so far not been studied from an institutional perspective. Methodologies that look beyond the allocation of spaces (e.g., Kellogg, 2009) to consider their features and impacts on human interaction hold great promise for advancing a practice approach to institutional ambidexterity.

Finally, the new research agenda not only opens opportunities for new methodologies, but also holds a new challenge. Studying established complexities and ‘settled’ responses is predicated on the researcher’s ability to observe the nexus of divergent logics as they come together in practice. Finding that ‘nexus’ – that point in an organization, or in time – at which the routinized coming together of contradictory logics can be studied in real time will be a critical methodological challenge. Especially where organizational responses to institutional complexity are settled and routinized, no ‘drama’ will signal a complexity of note that may appear worthy of study. By its routinized nature, it will be less visible and less immediately interesting and yet it is in precisely such everyday, settled enactment that we may gain the deepest insights into how actors perform institutional ambidexterity. It is thus vital that scholars generate the in-depth
knowledge of an empirical context and the openness and interest to explore whatever ‘goes on’ quietly at the nexus of institutional logics if they are to uncover how institutional ambidexterity is accomplished in practice, particularly in contexts of routine complexity.

References

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Figure 1: A practice approach to institutional ambidexterity