



DIALOGUE, DEBATE, AND DISCUSSION

Expanding the Scope of Institutional Logics Research

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Abstract

The institutional logics perspective provides a powerful theory that emphasizes how symbolic beliefs and material practices are intertwined in relatively enduring configurations that can profoundly shape behavior across space and time. In this article, we build upon the arguments and insights of Haveman, Joseph-Goteiner, and Li, suggesting the need for a broader research agenda on the dynamics of institutional logics in China and around the world. Building on some of our recent writings, we argue for the need to go beyond the study of how logics have effects, to understand how logics themselves cohere, endure, and co-evolve in dynamic interrelationships with other logics.

摘要

制度逻辑视角为学者提供了强大的理论工具，去研究象征性信念和物质性实践是如何交织在一起形成相对持久的形态，对人和组织的行为产生深刻的跨越时空的影响。本文在Haveman等学者(2023)一文的基础上，提出需要对中国和世界各地的制度逻辑动态进行更广泛的研究。具体而言，作者认为有必要超越过去对制度逻辑如何产生影响的关注，进而去理解这些逻辑本身是如何凝聚、持久、并在与其他逻辑的动态相互关系中共同进化发展的。

Keywords: culture; governance; institution; institutional logics; institutional theory; practice; value

关键词: 制度逻辑; 制度理论; 制度; 实践; 价值; 治理; 文化

Over the past couple of decades, the institutional logics perspective (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012/2020) has become a central theory in organizational sociology and management. And while the literature has exploded, there is much more research that is needed – especially in non-Western contexts such as China. Our aim in this paper is to complement and extend the arguments of Haveman, Joseph-Goteiner, and Li (2023) to contribute to the development of a broader research agenda on institutional logics. We draw on some recent writings (e.g., Lounsbury & Wang, 2020; Lounsbury, Steele, Wang, & Toubiana, 2021) that provide a slightly different orientation towards the conceptualization and contemporary problematics of institutional logics scholarship, and then discuss implications for research in China.

To begin, while the institutional logics perspective is profoundly cultural in its orientation, informed by the cultural turn that swept across the social sciences and humanities in the late 20th century (e.g., Friedland & Mohr, 2004), it is important to emphasize that most logics research since the seminal paper by Friedland and Alford (1991) has emphasized that logics are relatively enduring configurations of symbolic beliefs and material practices. Somewhat differently, Haveman, Joseph-Goteiner, and Li (2023) note the importance of practice, but they conceptualize logics and practice as relatively distinct, albeit interrelated. We prefer to conceptualize practices as more fundamental to the concept of logic and believe that the most powerful scholarship on institutional logics is

undergirded by a practice theoretic approach to culture (e.g., Bourdieu, 1998; Lizardo & Strand, 2010; Swidler, 1986) that accords practices a more central role in both theory and empirical analysis.

The implication of this conceptualization is that logics cannot be fully understood via traditional approaches to tracking culture such as discourse analysis but often require a deeper analysis of the sayings and doings of people *in situ* (Schatzki, 2019). Friedland (2012: 594) recently emphasized the need to focus on the ‘inner architecture’ of logics – leveraging new structuralist methods (e.g., Friedland, Mohr, Roose, & Gardinali, 2014; Lounsbury & Ventresca, 2003; Mohr, 1998; Mohr & Duquenne, 1997; Mohr et al., 2020) to identify logics as clusters of practices, meanings, and actors. This direction begins to address recent critiques of logics research about the tendency to focus on logics as reified explanatory tools as opposed to studying them as complex phenomena in their own right, embodied in people who enact, promulgate, and alter the nature of logics on the ground (Furnari, 2020; Ocasio & Gai, 2020; Ocasio, Mauskopf, & Steele, 2016; Quattrone, 2015; Toubiana, 2020).

We have argued elsewhere (Lounsbury & Wang, 2020; Lounsbury et al., 2021) that to expand the scope of logics scholarship in this direction, it is fruitful to focus on the problems of institutional logic durability and cohesion, as well as the constitutive nature of logics. This would help us develop a richer understanding of how the various elements associated with logics interlink or cluster to form a coherent and recognizable pattern that is maintained over appreciable periods of time. China, as a country having the longest continuous history in the world, provides a rare context for examining the limits of a durable state logic and how it has co-evolved over centuries alongside other important societal logics such as a robust family logic and a more recently re-emergent market logic (Ge & Micelotta, 2019). Not only does China present a noticeably different configuration of logics compared to many Western civilizations, but studying the ways through which such logics become coherent and maintained in history can also provide new insights to our understanding of logics. Echoing the arguments of Haveman and colleagues (2023), the study of logics as complex phenomena can benefit greatly from a more historical perspective (see also Lounsbury et al., 2021; Wang, Steele, & Greenwood, 2019).

Moreover, by focusing on the constitutive nature of logics, we can better explore how China offers an alternative organizing logic for a global economic and political order that might be competing with the Western liberal model of democratic capitalism (Meyer, 2010). The so-called China Model, or Beijing Consensus (as opposed to the Washington Consensus), for example, represents a viable alternative logic for many developing countries. By adopting a more pragmatic logic to achieve robust economic growth, China has become the second-largest economy after the global financial crisis, which legitimized ‘the notion of particularity as opposed to the universality of a Washington model’ (Elen, 2016). Seeking to export an alternative to the Western configuration of state, market, and corporate logics to the world through cultural and economic expansion projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, China unavoidably agitates the US and other Western regimes. However, whether China’s alternative logic and order might become recognized and durable in other societies is worth further exploration.

An additional way of studying logics as complex phenomena is to investigate the ways by which they evolve or are maintained in response to transformational societal changes. While China provides the longest continuous history of any country, it has also gone through major societal changes in the past several decades. Here, we concur with Haveman and colleagues that ‘large-scale changes in Chinese society and economy impelled dramatic changes in the logics guiding the organization and operation (indeed, the very existence) of business organizations’. Yet, in addition to studying how shifts in the logics are manifested in the strategies and behavior of Chinese firms (see also Liu, Zhang, & Jing, 2016; Wei, 2017), we believe that more research is needed on the changes in the nature of logics themselves. In particular, China’s economic transition from a command to a market economic system offers countless research opportunities for exploring the durability, elasticity, and decay of various logics. How does a powerful state logic shape and become reshaped by a rising market logic? How do the state and professional regulators co-govern a re-emerging professional logic? And how is a community logic constituted at the interstices of the state and market logics?

For example, we need more research directed towards the evolving logic of family and clan (*zongzu*). Building on Haveman et al.’s (2023) call for future research on how the family logic affects firms in

China (either in terms of R&D or corporate governance), we encourage research that also unpacks how the family logic is evolving and is maintained within an ecology of logics that varies across time and space. In a recent paper, we take a step in this direction by exploring how a strong local logic of family and clan in a coastal city in China was increasingly affected by a rising market logic by digging into the formation of political coalitions both within and between organizations (Wang & Lounsbury, 2021). We find that actors in the same generation or cohort, and who share common geographic socialization, are more likely to form allies in changing or maintaining the logics they uphold. Further research on how institutional complexity involving a multiplicity of logics plays out in different organizational contexts and communities is critically needed (see also Marquis & Raynard, 2015; Raynard, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2013)

A separate, yet equally exciting opportunity is to look into the re-emerging professional logic. As Haveman and colleagues (2023) rightly pointed out, the market transition formally severed ties between the profession and the state despite the fact that professionals are still deeply intertwined with the state. In the healthcare context, for example, public hospitals remain largely supervised and commanded by the government to uphold a social welfare logic but simultaneously receive market pressure to generate profit, whereas private hospitals are increasingly shaped by the market logic. How do state, market, and professional actors together govern the professional logic? Through a longitudinal case study, for example, Wang, Raynard, and Greenwood (2021) show that market encroachment on the medical profession has led to its stigmatization. However, more research is needed to examine how the professional logic may be governed – whether as an independent domain of institutional life or as a vassal logic to more dominant logics in China.

Last but not least, we contend that the logics perspective can help us to better understand grand challenges. Living in an age of disruption, we face the ‘new normal’, characterized by various grand challenges ranging from rising nationalism and threats to globalization to the enduring problems of climate change and social and economic inequality. China, as a key global player in combatting such grand challenges, provides important empirical settings for studying the rise and decline of societal logics. For example, Ansari, Wijen, and Gray (2013) have shown how a logic of climate change can be constructed over time by multiple actors. However, we need more research into how the various elements associated with different grand challenges cluster to form a coherent pattern that is recognizable and actionable. In sum, while we might have a slightly different approach to the study of institutional logics than suggested by Haveman et al. (2023), we believe that we are in agreement that the institutional logics perspective offers a particularly promising pathway to understand a multitude of complex societal changes that are unfolding in China and around the world – this short commentary only scratches the surface of the expanded scholarly agenda that we have in mind.

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