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MEANS VERSUS ENDS IN OPAQUE INSTITUTIONAL FIELDS: TRADING OFF COMPLIANCE AND ACHIEVEMENT IN SUSTAINABILITY STANDARD ADOPTION

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The long-standing discussion on decoupling has recently moved from adopters not implementing the agreed-upon policies to compliant adopters not achieving the goals intended by institutional entrepreneurs. This "means-ends decoupling" prevails especially in highly opaque fields, where practices, causality, and performance are hard to understand and chart. I conceptualize the conditions under which the adoption of institutions in relatively opaque fields leads to the achievement of the envisaged goals. Voluntary sustainability standards governing socioenvironmental issues illustrate these arguments. I argue that the lack of field transparency drives institutional entrepreneurs to create and maintain concrete and uniform rules, apply strong incentives, and disseminate "best practices" to ensure substantive adopter compliance. However, such rigid institutions are ill-equipped to deal with the causal complexity and practice multiplicity underlying opacity while they smother adopter agency. The ensuing tension between substantive compliance and goal achievement leads to an inherent trade-off: institutional entrepreneurs who remedy the policy-practice decoupling may enhance the disparity between means and ends, and vice versa. While sustainability standards and other institutions in highly opaque fields can, therefore, not fully achieve the envisaged goals, the trade-off can be reduced through systemically designed institutions that promote goal internalization and contain niche institutions.

After studying the decoupling of policies and practices for decades, institutional scholars have recently addressed inconsistencies between practices and outcomes. The seminal contribution by Meyer and Rowan (1977) on the prevalence of externally induced rule adoption that does not match the internal needs of organizations, often leading to isomorphic structures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), has inspired numerous scholars to study the conditions and extent of deviations between actual practices and official policies in different types of organizations (for overviews see Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008, and Bromley & Powell, 2012). While a close understanding of the mismatch between policies and practices is important from both an organizational and a societal perspective, the overwhelming scholarly attention to this type of decoupling has obscured our understanding of another and potentially even more important kind of decoupling, the one between practices and outcomes. As Bromley and Powell (2012) powerfully argue, organizations that actually comply with their formal policies may not, or may barely, achieve the very objectives that developers and implementers of these policies envisage. While coupling policies and practices, compliant organizations may not achieve the intended results because the adopted policies are inappropriate. This "means-ends decoupling" prevails especially in highly opaque—as opposed to transparent—fields. Opacity exists when observers have difficulty identifying the characteristics of prevailing practices, establishing causal relationships between policies and outcomes, and measuring the exact results of policy implementation (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Jiang & Bansal, 2003).

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One burgeoning field in which means may be decoupled from ends is socioenvironmental governance. Different societal actors (companies, nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], and/or governments) in this field design and implement regulation to obtain favorable socioenvironmental outcomes (Delmas & Young, 2009; Espinosa & Walker, 2011). These actors function as institutional entrepreneurs—resourceful individuals or groups who purposefully create new or change existing institutions (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2008). Institutional entrepreneurs are interested actors who use their social and political skills to make others accept novel or different institutional practices, using tactics such as framing issues, creating incentives, and building bridges (Fligstein, 1997; Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004). Voluntary sustainability standards are governance mechanisms that have recently taken off to achieve a positive impact of corporate actions on social actors and/or the natural environment (Auld, Balboa, Bernstein, & Cashore, 2009). These standards are often developed and maintained by private actors (i.e., firms and NGOs) and have been massively adopted by firms in a variety of sectors (Tamm Hallström & Boström, 2010; Vogel, 2008), ranging from ecolabeled lumber (Bartley, 2007; Zietsma & McKnight, 2009), wine (Delmas & Grant, in press), and sea fish (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2011; Visseren-Hamakers, Arts, & Glasbergen, 2007) to fairtrade coffee (Reinecke, Manning, & Von Hagen, 2012), flowers (Prado, 2013; Riisgaard, 2009), and clothing (O'Rourke, 2007). Sustainability standards are voluntary, predefined rules and methods to systematically assess and communicate the social and environmental behavior and/or performance of firms (Gilbert, Rasche, & Waddock, 2011). In particular, they flag to customers and other stakeholders that producers or traders who adopt sustainability standards show a higher socioenvironmental performance than their uncertified counterparts (King & Toffel, 2009).

The field of socioenvironmental governance is highly opaque because the relation between corporate activities and socioenvironmental outcomes is hard to fully understand, causally attribute, and precisely measure (Jiang & Bansal, 2003; Sharma, 2000). This opacity may explain why scholarly evidence on the socioenvironmental outcomes of sustainability standards has remained inconclusive: some scholars have reported a positive impact (e.g., Dasgupta, Hettige, & Wheeler, 2000; Potoski & Prakash, 2005), whereas others have found only a modest correlation (Gulbrandsen, 2010), none at all, or even a negative correlation (e.g., Christmann & Taylor, 2012; King, Lenox, & Terlaak, 2005). Sustainability standards are salient for theorizing about those institutions whose means may be decoupled from ends, because they are societally important, embedded in highly opaque fields, formally prescribe adopter behavior, and specify intended goals. Therefore, I use these standards to illustrate the conceptual arguments on institutional goal achievement in more opaque fields.

This article's central research question is "Under what conditions does the adoption of institutions in relatively opaque fields lead to the achievement of the goals set by their developers?" I explore this question in the context of voluntary sustainability standards and draw on the institutional literature. This strand offers a sharp analytical lens to explain the opportunities and constraints that durable collective agreements offer to field actors, consisting of a diversity of individuals and organizations that interact relatively frequently with one another in specific issue areas (Scott, 2001; Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). Sustainability standards are institutions: they constitute rules of the game serving to define social practices, assign roles, and guide interactions (Young, 1994). These standards are relatively lasting arrangements that enable and restrict a variety of corporate and civic actors at different stages of the supply chain (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010), thereby lending themselves to the use of an institutional perspective. Previous institutional work on sustainability standard adoption has shed light on issues of symbolic adoption (Christmann & Taylor, 2006; Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2010) and standard enforcement (Aravind & Christmann, 2011; King, Prado, & Rivera, 2012). I draw on these insights but also develop novel arguments around an important dimension of standard adoption that has received only scant attention in the extant literature.

Building on and extending the insights by Bromley and Powell (2012), I argue that high field opacity renders the optimal design and implementation of institutions such as sustainability standards impossible. On the one hand, the risk of noncompliance (i.e., purely symbolic adop-

tion) is high in relatively opaque fields owing to the causal complexity of focal issues, the diversity of adopted practices, and the difficulty of observing opportunistic adopters. This enhances the need for concrete and uniform rules, strong incentives, and transfer of "best practices" to ensure substantive compliance by adopters. On the other hand, complexity and diversity call for holistic and context-contingent approaches, which are at odds with the nature of compliance-oriented institutions. While the antipodal nature of the breeding grounds of compliance and achievement leads to the impossibility of designing and upholding optimal institutions in highly opaque fields, the trade-off can be reduced by designing key rules with a systemic mindset, stimulating adopters to internalize an institution's goals, and developing "niche institutions" to accommodate context specificity.

The article contributes to the institutional literature by identifying and explaining the tension that exists in relatively opaque fields between compliance with an institution's rules ("the letter") and achievement of the goals for which those rules were defined ("the spirit"), as well as offering remedies to mitigate this tension. The conceptual insight that solving the problem of symbolic adoption can aggravate the problem of not achieving the intended goals (i.e., means oppose ends) is novel to the institutional literature. In addition, the article contributes to the literature on social and environmental governance by conceptualizing the conditions under which voluntary sustainability standards induce corporate adopters with divergent motivations and resources to (partially) achieve the socioenvironmental goals of a standard. The article has practical relevance for designers and adopters of sustainability standards and other institutions in highly opaque fields by teasing out the conditions under which their standards are more conducive to achieving the very goals they are meant to serve.

Below I describe the evolution, rationales, types, and process of creating and adopting sustainability standards. I then recap the discussion in the institutional literature about symbolic versus substantive adoption, including remedies to symbolic adoption. I next introduce the compliance-achievement trade-off, arguing when and why substantive adoption does not equate with goal achievement and suggesting how the tension between both can be reduced. Finally, I discuss the implications of this trade-off for future conceptual and empirical work on sustainability standards and other institutions in relatively opaque fields.

SUSTAINABILITY STANDARDS CHARACTERIZED

Within the past three decades, voluntary sustainability standards have developed from nonexistent to hundreds of standards in a wide variety of sectors, increasingly attaining both high absolute volumes and significant market shares. For example, the Marine Stewardship Council label for marine fish has a worldwide market share of 7 percent (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2011), and certified products even dominate in certain national markets—with shares of around 50 percent for sustainably logged wood and fair-trade bananas in the United Kingdom (Archer & Fritsch, 2010; McNicol, 2006). Certain standards are firm specific, whereas others are applicable to all companies in one sector or even extend across industries (Gilbert et al., 2011). Furthermore, they can be developed by one type of (corporate or civic) actor (Zietsma & McKnight, 2009) or multiple (private and/or public) stakeholders (Tamm Hallström & Boström, 2010). They can refer to process improvements, such as ISO 14000 (Prakash & Potoski, 2006) and ISO 26000 (Helms, Oliver, & Webb, 2012), or they can specify absolute performance requirements, like the Forest Stewardship Council (McNicol, 2006) and the Marine Stewardship Council (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2011).

An essential function of voluntary sustainability standards is their signaling that the socioenvironmental outcomes related to certified products or processes—typically not observable to prospective customers and other stakeholders—are more positive than those of their uncertified counterparts (King & Toffel, 2009).[1] This signaling function is critical because the pro-

[1] Signaling a positive impact does not necessarily imply that the actual socioenvironmental performance of sustainability standards is higher. Scholars have argued that these standards may legitimize unethical business practices (Howard, Nash, & Ehrenfeld, 2000), lead to adverse selection of poor performers (Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2010; Terlaak, 2007), and be dominated by powerful actors (Bitzer, Francken, & Glasbergen, 2008; Glasbergen, 2012).

duction of goods or services creates socioenvironmental effects that are not embodied in the products, thereby precluding external stakeholders from properly assessing products and firms (Terlaak, 2007). For example, it is unclear whether the production and trade of unlabeled fruits and vegetables in supermarkets have involved environmental pollution and labor exploitation or have occurred under "responsible" conditions. Sustainability standards signal that the products or firms carrying labels have a relatively positive socioenvironmental performance.[2] The voluntary nature of participation creates a distinction between adopters and nonadopters. The former are in a different category, whose collective identity of "responsibility" confers legitimacy or other benefits (Navis & Glynn, 2010).

Sustainability standards are most likely to proliferate in (developing) countries and (transnational) sectors where other governance forms—in particular, collective action, legislation, and donation—have fallen short. Social movements, which have improved the wages and working conditions of many workers in developed countries (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008), may be unable to form a countervailing power against influential, footloose (foreign) investors (Van Tulder & Van der Zwart, 2006), especially in developing countries (Graham & Woods, 2007). Alternatively, government intervention has led to social emancipation (e.g., through legislation regarding minimum wages and affirmative action) and to environmental protection (with instruments such as environmental permits and levies on industrial waste releases) in many industrialized countries (Braithwaite & Drahos, 2000), but may lead to poor legislation and policies in (developing) countries struck by widespread corruption, lack of enforcement capacity, and low policy priority to socioenvironmental protection (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2007; López, 2007). Finally, while negative socioenvironmental outcomes may be addressed through the institution of philanthropy (List, 2011), with citizens, companies, and governments donating money or contributing in kind to offset low incomes or halt negative health effects (Berger, Cunningham, & Drumwright, 2004; Visser, 2008), prospective donors may refrain from charity when they believe that donations only abate symptoms and not their root causes (Easterly, 2006). In the absence of well-functioning alternative institutional arrangements, a governance void exists that renders the development of sustainability standards particularly relevant. It should be stressed, though, that these standards are not mere substitutes for other institutions; in fact, their performance is higher when complemented by alternative arrangements, such as legislation (Amengual, 2010; Gulbrandsen, 2010; Kim, 2013; Lee, 2009; Vogel, 2008).

The very presence of governance voids does not imply that sustainability standards will emerge and flourish. Since these standards are voluntary, prospective developers or adopters only embrace standards when perceiving them to be sufficiently salient (Ocasio, 1997) to be developed or adopted. Three types of motivation induce NGOs and firms to embrace sustainability standards: instrumental, relational, and moral drivers (cf. Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Bansal & Roth, 2000). Instrumentally motivated actors seek to advance their material self-interests. Firms may consider sustainability standards a means to enhance their competitiveness through differentiation (with more "equitable" and "clean" products) and to raise their profitability through a price premium (Bartley, 2007; Henson, Masakure, & Cranfield, 2011; King et al., 2012). NGOs may require corporate donations in return for their endorsement and advice (Berger et al., 2004; Yaziji & Doh, 2009). Relationally driven actors aim to obtain legitimacy or recognition. Firms scrutinized by social and environmental "watchdogs" (Campbell, 2007; Teegen, Doh, & Vachani, 2004) may create or adopt sustainability standards to show they are responsible corporate citizens (cf. Okhmatovskiy & David, 2012; Sine, David, & Mitsuhashi, 2007). NGOs, also increasingly under societal scrutiny (Burger & Owens, 2010; Lyon, 2010), may try to enhance their legitimacy by (co)developing sustainability standards. Finally, morally induced actors seek to create or join "ethically correct" institutions (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Reinecke et al., 2012). The personal influence of top managers or the wider corporate identity may drive firms to pursue higher-

[2] Codes of conduct resemble sustainability standards, since both seek to specify and implement socially and environmentally benign business practices. Codes, however, do not involve labels communicating such practices (Van Tulder & Van der Zwart, 2006).

order values (Aguilera et al., 2007; Bansal, 2003). Normative convictions typically motivate NGOs to change societal norms and values (Lyon, 2010; Yaziji & Doh, 2009).

NGOs and firms sufficiently motivated to (jointly) develop sustainability standards establish rules, incentives, and support structures that stimulate adopters to achieve the defined goals.[3] Standard developers focus on the most salient socioenvironmental issues, because the voluntary nature of these institutions gives them the discretion to do so, the number of potentially relevant issues is large, their resources are constrained, and an objective basis for assessing criteria is lacking (cf. Ocasio, 1997). NGOs and firms may have shared interests but are also likely to privilege different aspects (Bartley, 2007; Helms et al., 2012). They manage to get their preferred substance and form accepted in accordance with their bargaining power (Glasbergen, 2012; Reinecke et al., 2012; Tamm Hallström & Boström, 2010). Once developed, sustainability standards need to be widely adopted by incumbent firms to leverage their impact. Since adoption is a voluntary decision that involves certification and adaptation costs, incumbents will only proceed to adoption when they expect the associated benefits to outweigh these costs (Schuler & Christmann, 2011). While adopters commit themselves to adhering to the goals and rules of the selected standards, firms may be tempted to reap the benefits without bearing the costs of adoption (Graffin & Ward, 2010; King et al., 2012). When firms adopt sustainability standards only symbolically, institutional entrepreneurs do not achieve their envisaged goals. Therefore, sustainability standards need to be designed and implemented in such a way that adopters will substantively comply with standard requirements (Baron & Lyon, 2012; Campbell, 2007; King et al., 2012), a topic to which I now turn.

[3] Multistakeholder standards involving NGOs and firms are very common for the reasons outlined above. Sustainability standards may also be single stakeholder (i.e., developed by only corporate or civic actors) or may consist of partnerships by firms, governments, and NGOs (Gilbert et al., 2011; Tamm Hallström & Boström, 2010). In all cases the same arguments hold to the extent that these standards are voluntary in nature.

COUPLING ADOPTION AND COMPLIANCE

Compliance Barriers

Actors operating in highly opaque (i.e., nontransparent) fields face difficulties in fully understanding the nature of field practices, causally relating actor behavior and field outcomes, and correctly measuring the exact field impact of actor behavior (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012; Jiang & Bansal, 2003). Ipso facto, it is hard to chart whether adopters of institutions such as sustainability standards substantively comply in relatively opaque fields. I now argue that the presence of complex causal patterns and the concurrence of heterogeneous practices underlie the difficulty of causally relating behavior and outcomes, while the invisibility of actor behavior entails measurement challenges. Opacity thus leads to uncertainty and ambiguity among field actors. An important consequence is that three major compliance barriers exist in more opaque fields: the lack of attention, the lack of motivation, and the lack of knowledge.[4]

Causal complexity. The presence of a multitude of heterogeneous actors and factors that are interconnected in multiple, nonlinear ways leads to complexity (Espinosa & Walker, 2011; Levy & Lichtenstein, 2012). Different types of uncertainty are the result of this complexity. Cognitively bounded actors encounter difficulties in adequately understanding complex fields, leading not only to state uncertainty or ignorance about the exact nature of a field but also to effect uncertainty or ignorance about cause-effect relations (Milliken, 1987). The existence of numerous, heterogeneous, direct, and indirect effects leads to "causal indeterminacy" (Orton & Weick, 1990), which undermines the ability of field actors to be cognizant of all relevant causes and to disentangle causes and consequences (Davis, Eisenhardt, & Bingham, 2009; Lindblom, 1959). Causal complexity is further enhanced when outcomes feed back into their causes, thus blurring the distinction between causes and consequences (Levy & Lichtenstein, 2012; Sterman, 2000). Relatedly, adopters may face response uncertainty—the inability to assess the impact of their behavior (Milliken, 1987).

[4] These barriers are directly related to field opacity, although adopters may also face other barriers, such as the lack of material resources.

These types of uncertainty may induce adopters to be unaware of—and thus not to pay due attention to—critical drivers of compliant behavior (Ocasio, 1997). Adopters who learn experientially by discovering through trial-and-error experimentation and organizational search (Baum, Li, & Usher, 2000; Levitt & March, 1988) may not comply because the large number of relevant factors and interactions renders the discovery of feasible solutions highly challenging. The uncertainty that stems from causal complexity thus leads to a lack of attention and knowledge, which thwarts the ability of cognitively bounded adopters to comply through experiential learning.

Practice multiplicity. The difficulty of engaging in compliant behavior is further compounded when adopters observe practice diversity among other adopters. Institutional fields may host a multitude of divergent practices, especially when actors are spread across different geographic regions, cultural contexts, sociopolitical systems, and economic situations. Cognitively bounded actors experience difficulties making sense of practice multiplicity or the concurrence of many heterogeneous routines (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009; Young, 2012). The higher the number of divergent practices encountered in a field, the more difficult it is for adopters to exhaustively understand and compare the merits and limitations of different practices. Ambiguity may be the result, especially when different practices are incompatible (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Pache & Santos, 2010), making adopters wonder which of the many coexisting practices lead(s) to compliant behavior. Adopters who learn vicariously by observing and (selectively) imitating other actors (Baum et al., 2000; Terlaak & Gong, 2008) may thus fail to comply because they choose to copy the "wrong" practices. The ambiguity resulting from the concurrence of multiple heterogeneous practices thus entails a lack of attention and knowledge, leading vicariously learning adopters not to comply because they ignore relevant solutions and imitate counterproductive practices.[5]

[5] Causal complexity and practice multiplicity share the outcome that adopters lack the attention and knowledge to comply, albeit the former is mainly driven by uncertainty and the latter more by ambiguity.

Behavioral invisibility. The inability to readily observe and assess the behavior of actors is another driver of opacity (Jiang & Bansal, 2003). Behavioral invisibility is more common when actors operate in remote places (O'Rourke, 2007), are relatively low profile (Spar & La Mure, 2003), or are otherwise shielded from external control (Howard et al., 2000). For example, the socioenvironmental consequences of corporate behavior typically are not embodied in physical product characteristics, hence rendering them invisible to external stakeholders (King & Toffel, 2009). Consequently, actors may "fly under the radar" and merely pretend to substantively comply. When adopters have a self-interest not to comply (e.g., to avoid costly adaptations to their production methods), behavioral invisibility enables them to disguise their noncompliance and to avoid sanctions, such as loss of legitimacy (Aravind & Christmann, 2011). Behavioral invisibility thus undermines compliance to the extent that instrumentally and relationally driven adopters lack the motivation to comply. To recap, institutional entrepreneurs who want to ensure adopter compliance need to overcome the attention, knowledge, and motivation barriers that prevail in relatively opaque fields.

Compliance Inducements

While institutional entrepreneurs may need to induce adopters to comply in any type of institutional field, the necessity of doing so is high in relatively opaque fields, given the significance of the attention, motivation, and knowledge challenges. Therefore, institutional entrepreneurs in more opaque fields have to design and apply clear rules, strong incentives, and best practice transfer to ensure adopter compliance.

Setting rules. The causal complexity that reigns in relatively opaque fields is exemplified by socioenvironmental governance. Social issues cover a diversity of aspects, ranging from ethnicity, social class, workplace democracy, and age to wages, working hours, safety, and workload (Carroll, 2008). Environmental issues encompass aspects as wide ranging as (nonrenewable and renewable) natural resource stocks, toxicity, biodiversity, desertification, and climate change (Rockström et al., 2009). The sheer number and multifaceted nature of these issues render a full understanding challenging for sustainability experts (Atkinson, Dietz, &

Neumayer, 2007), let alone for firms whose business is to do business. Cognitively bounded companies are more than likely not to be fully aware of, and thus not to pay due attention to, many of these socioenvironmental issues (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994) unless they are induced to consider them. Institutions such as performance-based sustainability standards that identify and specify relevant socioenvironmental aspects will, therefore, stimulate adopters to duly consider these issues.

Practice multiplicity and vague, elusive wording, such as "promoting social equity and environmental protection," fail to provide direction. They lead to ambiguity and ignorance among adopters, who may not pay due attention to relevant aspects or may opt for inappropriate practices (Okhmatovskiy & David, 2012). Therefore, the more detailed and explicitly sustainability standards formulate the socioenvironmental rules to be met, the more likely adopters will be to follow those rules. Detailed codification offers clear guidance and limits the room for divergent interpretation, thereby reducing ambiguity and uncertainty (Terlaak, 2007). For example, socially relevant rules specified by Fairtrade International for hired labor include

> training opportunities, non discriminatory employment practices, no child labour, no forced labour, access to collective bargaining processes and freedom of association of the workforce, condition of employment exceeding legal minimum requirements, adequate occupational safety and health conditions and sufficient facilities for the workforce to manage the Fairtrade Premium (2013a).

Adopters of Fairtrade's standards are thus sensitized toward offering training, promoting equal opportunities, banning child labor, avoiding forced labor, negotiating with worker representatives, and so on. In sum, the concrete and unambiguous specification of universal (socioenvironmental) rules remedies the attention problem and fosters (standard) compliance.

Devising incentives. The behavioral invisibility of opportunistic adopters undermines the effectiveness of institutions such as sustainability standards. Firms have a "natural interest" in exploiting human and natural resources (through low wages, pollution, etc.) because such practices may raise their (short-run) profits and are not (fully) observable to external stakeholders (King & Toffel, 2009), especially when goods are produced in remote locations and are traded internationally through multiple actors (Levy, 2008). To overcome this motivation barrier, institutions such as sustainability standards signal that labeled products and firms are a separate category (Navis & Glynn, 2010) associated with responsible practices (King et al., 2005), such as paying "fair prices" to smallholders and avoiding the use of pesticides. Standards turn disincentives into incentives because they offer adopters material benefits, such as price premiums and selective supply chains (Henson et al., 2011; King et al., 2012), legitimacy in the eyes of their stakeholders (Sine et al., 2007; Yaziji & Doh, 2009), and the possibility to live up to their norms of responsible corporate citizens (Aguilera et al., 2007; Bansal & Roth, 2000; Reinecke et al., 2012). These benefits are confined to "club members" (Potoski & Prakash, 2005) meeting the criteria specified by the adopted standards. For instance, African fishermen who adopted the GlobalGAP label enjoyed significantly higher export revenues than their uncertified counterparts (Henson et al., 2011).

The more attractive institutions such as sustainability standards are, however, the more they run the risk of symbolic adoption. Socially and environmentally poor performers, especially those adopting under external pressure, may wish to reap a standard's benefits without bearing the associated costs (King et al., 2012; Sandholtz, 2012). In highly opaque fields plagued by low behavioral visibility, such adopters may pretend to comply yet implement only symbolically in order to avoid the costs of "upgrading" their socially and environmentally relevant behavior (Christmann & Taylor, 2006; Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2010). Therefore, compliance mechanisms, such as stringent monitoring and social pressure, need to be in place (Barrett, 2003; Dietz, Ostrom, & Stern, 2003) so that the rules established by institutional entrepreneurs are actually maintained (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). Indeed, credible enforcement is a prerequisite for successful self-regulation (Barnett & King, 2008; King et al., 2012). Independent, third-party monitoring is instrumental in enforcing compliance, even though auditing processes often show such flaws as lack of expertise, predictability of inspections, and conflicts of interests (Aravind & Christmann, 2011; Boiral, 2012). Institutions such as sustainability standards that manage to

overcome these auditing challenges are more likely to reveal noncompliance and can exert material sanctions, including the withdrawal of the right to carry a sustainability label, when defection is detected (Baron & Lyon, 2012; King et al., 2012). For instance, the Fair Labor Association is more likely to unveil lack of compliance because it practices unexpected field visits by external auditors (including local NGOs) to relatively large, high-risk certified apparel and footwear producers (O'Rourke, 2007). To recap, the existence of strong incentives (i.e., significant material, relational, and/or normative benefits of joining institutions in conjunction with the active enforcement of these institutions) addresses the motivation problem and leads adopters in highly opaque fields to substantively comply with the rules specified by their initiators.

Transferring practices. A third challenge to ensuring substantive compliance in more opaque fields is the lack of relevant knowledge. The causal complexity and practice multiplicity of, for instance, socioenvironmental governance may be such that corporate adopters simply ignore how to comply with the rules set by the initiators of sustainability standards. In particular, small firms in developing countries, such as smallholders, may not have the technical and organizational capabilities to produce and trade in socially and environmentally responsible ways (Perez-Aleman & Sandilands, 2008). Institutions that offer implementation options are, therefore, instrumental in clearing this compliance barrier. Many process-oriented sustainability standards offer adopters the possibility to "build capacity" by transferring knowledge of best practices (Perez-Aleman, 2011). For instance, the UTZ Certified standard offers technical advice to farmers on how to increase their productivity and upgrade the quality of their coffee beans (Bitzer et al., 2008; UTZ Certified, 2013).

Sustainability standards and other institutions in highly opaque fields that extensively transfer universal best practices are more likely to elicit adopter compliance than those leaving the implementation mode up to the discretion of adopters (Terlaak, 2007). First, rolling out best practices universally facilitates monitoring. Second, the practices advocated by standard developers are aligned with the rules of their institutions. Relatedly, standardized capacity building reduces practice multiplicity and induces adopters to think and act along the lines proposed by institutional entrepreneurs. Especially when combined with specific rules and strong incentives, capacity building promotes substantive compliance with institutional requirements. For instance, Fairtrade International accredits only smallholders who have organized themselves through cooperatives to boost their bargaining power (Reinecke et al., 2012). Capacity building through the transfer of best practices thus mitigates the knowledge problem and leads to compliant adopter behavior. Figure 1 shows that the causal complexity, practice multiplicity, and behavioral invisibility that drive field opacity create the need for devising and implementing concrete and uniform rules, strong incentives, and best practice transfer to ensure adopter compliance. The ideas outlined above can be formalized as follows.

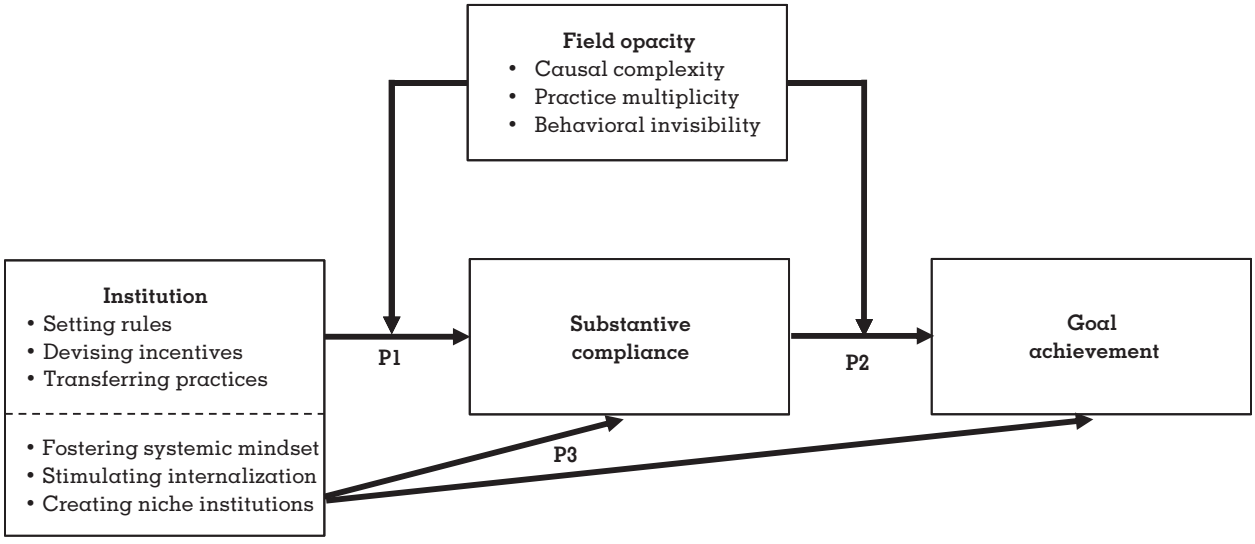
> *Proposition 1: The higher the degree of field opacity, the less likely that institutions without concrete and uniform rules, strong incentives, and active transfer of best practices will elicit substantive adopter compliance.*

THE COMPLIANCE-ACHIEVEMENT TRADE-OFF

Rationale for the Trade-off

The importance that institutional entrepreneurs attribute to substantive compliance is driven by the idea that compliant adopters contribute to the achievement of an institution's (socioenvironmental) goals. Building on recent work by Bromley and Powell (2012), I now argue that this idea may be mistaken because substantive compliance may not lead to the accomplishment of the envisaged goals and may even be counterproductive in highly opaque fields. Bromley and Powell distinguish between "policy-practice decoupling" (i.e., the classical form of decoupling, where adopters do not substantively implement their formally embraced policies) and "means-ends decoupling" (i.e., complying with formal policies but not achieving their intended goals). They argue that the latter type of decoupling has been neglected despite its importance, especially in areas where an obscure relation exists between means and ends. I concur with this view and further develop it by advancing the idea that a trade-off exists when

FIGURE 1
Institutional Adoption and Compliance-Achievement Trade-offs in Opaque Fields



remedying both types of decoupling in highly opaque fields.[6] The main reasons are that causal complexity and practice multiplicity undermine the ability of compliance-oriented institutions to achieve the envisaged goals and that a strong compliance orientation constrains the agency of adopters.

Causal complexity. As argued above, relatively opaque fields are typically complex in nature: they drive and are driven by a multitude of actors and factors. Socioenvironmental governance exemplifies this complexity because focal issues are caught in causal webs, implying that they cannot be fully understood without simultaneously considering the numerous and heterogeneous actors and factors to which they are directly and indirectly related, often in nonlinear ways (Atkinson et al., 2007; Carson, 1962; Levy & Lichtenstein, 2012). For instance, poverty is a "wicked problem" (Rittel & Webber, 1973) that has numerous interrelated causes and consequences, not only economic but also social, political, and historical, and poor people can be caught in poverty traps because of the concurrence of multiple forces (Banerjee & Duflo, 2007; Easterly, 2006). The same counts for such environmental problems as climate change, soil degradation, and biodiversity reduction (Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2005; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Board, 2005). One implication is the systemic nature of more opaque fields: multiple factors need to be considered in conjunction in order to adequately understand and govern focal (socioenvironmental) issues (Adger, 2007; Bitzer et al., 2008; Young, 2012). Focusing only on direct, bilateral relations would thus lead to an incomplete, or even wrong, understanding and regulation of the issues at hand.

Causal complexity raises the need for clarity, which compliance-oriented institutions offer. However, the nature of such institutions hampers adopters in effectively responding to focal issues. Concrete and uniform rules stimulate compliance because they stipulate desired behavior and facilitate monitoring (Bromley & Powell, 2012), thereby reducing adopter uncertainty and ambiguity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Terlaak, 2007). Institutions such as sustainability standards that are conducive to compliance prescribe and incentivize adherence to clear rules. However, the narrow focus on such rules easily distracts attention from the wider context in which focal (socioenvironmental) issues are embedded and may have a "waterbed effect"—that is, the solution of one problem but the creation of another (Dasgupta, 2000; Frey, Homberg, & Osterloh, 2013; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010).

[6] To be sure, I do not argue that there is a trade-off between both types of decoupling as such, but I do contend that an inverse relation exists between *remedying* policy-practice decoupling and *remedying* means-ends decoupling.

For instance, many sustainability standards categorically ban child labor. This looks like a reasonable means to avoid the exploitation of a vulnerable group. However, this ban can have unintended side-effects, such as (further) impoverishment (Khan, Munir, & Willmott, 2007). As critics of Fairtrade indicate, "Many small farmers mentioned that child labor prohibition enforcement carried a risk of reducing the families' income and consequently the chances of the families' children of going to school" (Forum for African Investigative Reporters [FAIR], 2012: 16). Another illustration is the prescription of cooperatives as a means of workplace democracy and egalitarian income distribution. "By insisting that small farmers join cooperatives, FAIRTRADE inadvertently aggravates existing problems of exploitation and abuse by traditional cocoa bosses" (FAIR, 2012: 11). These outcomes are clearly at odds with Fairtrade's mission to "connect disadvantaged producers and consumers, promote fairer trading conditions and empower producers to combat poverty, strengthen their position and take more control over their lives" (Fairtrade International, 2013b). Both examples illustrate that categorical bans on child labor and organizational forms other than cooperatives are well-intended rules that may address only a part of the bigger problem and that may lead to ill-understood cause-consequence relations, thereby shifting or aggravating the very (socioenvironmental) problems that institutions such as sustainability standards are meant to solve or alleviate.

Practice multiplicity. As explained earlier, practice multiplicity renders a full understanding and comparison of the merits and limitations of divergent practices more challenging. However, it is important to realize that practices may be divergent because the contexts in which they are embedded are dissimilar. Practices need to match the "requisite variety" (Ashby, 1956) of the (heterogeneous) contexts in which they are embedded. In other words, the effectiveness of practices is context contingent (Donaldson, 2001). Socioenvironmental governance is a case in point, because relevant issues are statically and dynamically context dependent, calling for tailored solutions (McElroy & Van Engelen, 2012). Causes of and solutions to social and environmental problems vary by geographic region, cultural setting, sociopolitical system, and economic situation (Adger, 2007; Ostrom, 2012). This is related to local differences in soil structure, atmospheric conditions, actor preferences, social relations, and economic development. Irrigation needs and possibilities are different in subtropical areas from those in arid regions with poor soil quality (Von Weizsäcker, Hargroves, Smith, Desha, & Stasinopoulos, 2009). Certain producers and workers may prefer to accumulate material wealth, whereas others may prioritize a safe and democratic work environment. Large power differences are common and productive in certain cultures but not in others (Hofstede, 2001). And demand and supply characteristics in subsistence economies, where producers seek to be self-sufficient with modest resources, are different from those in emerging markets, where firms are more munificent and globally oriented (Perez-Aleman, 2011; Perez-Aleman & Sandilands, 2008). Furthermore, biophysical and social systems may evolve, implying that today's (local) solutions to (context-specific) problems may be outdated tomorrow and calling for the development of "adaptive capacity" (Young, 2012: 87). According to Dietz et al.:

> Fixed rules are likely to fail because they place too much confidence in the current state of knowledge, whereas systems that guard against the low probability, high consequence possibilities and allow for change may be suboptimal in the short run but prove wiser in the long run (2003: 1909).

For instance, standards with fixed quotas for fish stocks may be counterproductive because fish populations frequently migrate.

Many institutions such as sustainability standards promote substantive compliance through uniform rules, incentives, and practices to reduce ambiguity among adopters and to block escape routes that (prospective) low performers may envision by proposing deviant practices (Gilbert et al., 2011). However, such uniform institutions are at odds with the (static and dynamic) context contingency of the focal (socioenvironmental) issues (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). An illustration is Fairtrade's categorical ban on child labor, referred to above, which may only be feasible for producers with medium incomes, who can "afford" to exempt their children from working (Khan et al., 2007). Also, it should be observed that the involvement of children in economic activities may be regarded differently in (certain) African cultures than in Western

countries. According to a Cameroonian farmer, child labor "is considered as part of the household chores children do to help their parents. I do not consider this child abuse" (FAIR, 2012: 16). As these examples show, compliance-oriented institutions such as sustainability standards that apply universal rules, incentives, and practices, irrespective of the specific geographic, cultural, sociopolitical, and economic conditions that adopters face, will easily fail to achieve their envisaged objectives.

Constrained agency. Causal complexity and context contingency both call for flexible solutions to achieve envisaged goals. While the existence of numerous interrelated ties among and between actors and factors hampers a comprehensive understanding and assessment of complex systems, the upside is that these multiple connections offer the opportunity to design and implement multiple solutions. In other words, different means can be used to achieve the same ends. Applying this principle of "equifinality" (Fiss, 2011; Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings, 1993) to the field of socioenvironmental governance implies that firms can use different combinations of productive factors and methods to achieve corporate sustainability (Starik & Rands, 1995) or "resilient" socioenvironmental systems (Adger, 2007). Context contingency requires flexibility because solutions need to be tailored to the variety of relevant contexts (Ashby, 1956). Different combinations of geographic, cultural, sociopolitical, and economic variables lead to a large number of possible contexts. The diversity of contexts that adopters face thus calls for the application of multiple solutions. As Gilbert et al. argue, "What counts as appropriate behavior in the light of *universal* standards can differ from context to context" (2011: 38).

The problem with many compliance-oriented institutions such as sustainability standards is their heavy bias toward exploitation: they circumscribe, incentivize, and monitor rules and practices in very specific and unambiguous ways, leaving little room for interpretation (Gilbert et al., 2011; Terlaak, 2007). Exploitation crowds out exploration (Benner & Tushman, 2002), so these "cast iron" rules, incentives, and practices suffocate the creativity of adopters seeking to achieve an institution's goals (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). For instance, firms may come up with but not be allowed to implement creative solutions, unimagined by institutional entrepreneurs, that would achieve the goals of institutions such as sustainability standards better than the best practices prescribed by their initiators (Terlaak, 2007; cf. Colvin & Boswell, 2007, and Ostrom, 2012). Likewise, adopters with an intimate understanding of feasible solutions tailored to local (socioenvironmental) challenges may be kept from implementing them when standardized solutions are imposed (Perez-Aleman & Sandilands, 2008). Compliance-oriented institutions in highly opaque fields that apply uniform rules, incentives, and practices may thus "hit the target and miss the point" (Frey et al., 2013: 957). These institutions may thwart the achievement of the intended goals because they do not stimulate, or even forbid, creative adopter solutions contributing to goal achievement. The arguments developed in this section can be recapped as follows.

> *Proposition 2: The higher the degree of field opacity, the less likely the adoption of institutions that are highly compliance oriented will lead to the achievement of the goals formulated by their initiators.*

Reducing the Trade-off

The discussion above has demonstrated that institutional entrepreneurs in more opaque fields face a real dilemma. If they are to avoid purely symbolic adoption by opportunistic firms wishing to reap the benefits without bearing the costs or by well-intended adopters ignoring how to comply, these institutions must have specific and uniform adoption requirements: a clear reward structure, the strict enforcement of measurable rules, and the transfer of universal best practices. Institutions designed and implemented in this way offer the direction, motivation, and support to warrant compliant behavior by their adopters. While compliance-oriented institutions reduce some field opacity, especially by making adopter behavior more visible, their rigidity easily leads to overshooting the envisaged mark because of the causal complexity and context contingency of focal issues, as well as the discouragement of creative solutions by adopters. Goal achievement in highly opaque fields calls for flexibility in the application of a standard's rules, incentives, and practice trans-

fer, since complex problems call for a more integrative judgment of relevant criteria while divergent contexts require the application of tailored and evolving solutions.

Institutional entrepreneurs in relatively opaque fields thus face a trade-off: privileging rigidity to ensure substantive compliance may compromise the achievement of the intended goals, while favoring flexibility to warrant goal attainment may enhance the risk of symbolic adoption. In other words, institutions in more opaque fields are threatened by two types of decoupling (policy-practice and means-ends), and remedying one kind of decoupling may undermine the ability to address the other. How can this trade-off between compliance and achievement be solved, or at least reduced? The antipodal nature of the breeding grounds of compliance and achievement leads to the impossibility to design and uphold optimal institutions in highly opaque fields. However, the trade-off can be reduced by designing key rules with a systemic mindset, encouraging adopters to internalize an institution's goals, and developing "niche institutions" to accommodate context specificity.

Fostering a systemic mindset. Institutional entrepreneurs can reduce the causal-complexity-driven trade-off between compliance and achievement by prescribing and incentivizing only rules and practices that do not have side-effects significantly undermining a standard's own goals. While the focus on specific highly visible or otherwise salient issues is understandable against the backdrop of pleasing constituencies (Kerr, 1975), a systemic mindset is instrumental in coming to grips with the lateral and multilevel complexity that reigns in relatively opaque fields, such as socioenvironmental governance (Levy & Lichtenstein, 2012; Starik & Rands, 1995; Van Marrewijk & Werre, 2003). A systemic mindset is an attitude of comprehensively considering how specific actions will affect other actors and factors that are interrelated across space and/or time (Espinosa & Walker, 2011; Sterman, 2000). Holistic thinking (i.e., considering aggregate direct and indirect implications of specific actions) and reflexivity (i.e., anticipating expected outcomes of envisaged actions) are key principles of a systemic mindset that preclude, or at least limit, undesired outcomes that result from partial solutions (Bitzer et al., 2008; Meadows et al., 2005; Young, 2012).

Holistic thinking can be practiced by charting interconnections among and between actors and factors around a particular (socioenvironmental) issue in a specific setting (such as a geographic region) and running simulations or crafting scenarios that capture the direct and indirect effects of envisaged rules, incentives, and practices (Young, 2012). These techniques enable a systematic comparison of different policy options, including an assessment of their opportunity costs (i.e., the benefits forgone by policy adopters). They might reveal, for example, that a sustainability standard that limits working hours and tasks to be carried out by children in combination with the employer's obligation to offer a minimum amount and quality of schooling is a better solution in a region struck by abject poverty than a categorical ban on child labor. These tools might also demonstrate that certification and monitoring costs should be deliberately kept to a minimum so as to avoid situations where standards inadvertently exclude small, resource-poor producers (Ponte, 2008).[7] Running simulations and constructing scenarios also provide insights into distinguishing between minor (positive or negative) effects from intended policy measures and those that would lead to crossing thresholds and tipping actions toward highly favorable or undesired outcomes (Young, 2012). The compliance-achievement trade-off that stems from causal complexity can thus be reduced when institutional entrepreneurs comprehensively chart the effects of intended policy measures and attune the latter to the overall impact of both direct and indirect consequences.

Stimulating internalization. Entrepreneurs who stimulate adopters to internalize the goals of focal institutions can mitigate the tension that results from behavioral invisibility. As argued above, actors may adopt institutions for both external reasons (such as economic opportunities and societal legitimacy) and internal motives (particularly normative conviction). Externally induced adopters, such as smallholders who have to adopt multiple sustainability standards to enter or pursue business transactions with different customers (Reinecke et al., 2012),

[7] Recent advances in information technology enable stringent monitoring (e.g., through visual "real-time" control of standard adopters via satellites and webcams) at modest costs.

are the ones most likely to either decouple policies and practices or blindly follow the rules because they consider institutions such as sustainability standards merely means to their own economic or relational ends (Sandholtz, 2012). The divergence between the objectives of a principal (i.e., the institutional entrepreneur) and those of an agent (i.e., the institutional adopter) drives undesired agent behavior (Dalton, Hitt, Certo, & Dalton, 2007).

This agency problem can be addressed by applying rigorous selection procedures for prospective adopters and by making socialization part and parcel of the "adoption package" (Frey et al., 2013; Kerr, 1975). Carefully examining whether applicants endorse the institution's goals, regularly training adopters about these goals, and encouraging adopters to share their experiences with other adopters are measures conducive to goal internalization (Gottschalg & Zollo, 2007; Nonaka, 1994). For instance, several sustainability standards use farmers' clubs as effective tools for peer learning and social bonding.[8] While it would be naive to think that purely instrumental adopters will turn into intrinsic believers, socialization programs enhance the probability that adopters will progressively internalize the aims and act in accordance with both the letter and the spirit of the focal institution (Kerr, 1975).[9] Goal internalization has the additional advantage of enabling rule simplicity, because fewer and less specific rules are required to elicit adopter compliance.[10] A related benefit is that adopters can be given more discretion to roll out innovative practices that are unforeseen by an institution but in line with its goals, thereby going beyond expectations (Colvin & Boswell, 2007; Sandholtz, 2012). Institutional entrepreneurs who encourage adopters to internalize an institution's goals can thus mitigate the trade-off resulting from behavioral invisibility by externally motivated adopters.

Creating niche institutions. Entrepreneurs can better manage the tension that results from context-diversity-driven practice multiplicity by having a "master institution" with certain "hypernorms" (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994) or universal rules with core principles (such as a systematic management approach and warranting worker safety for sustainability standards) for all adopters, supplemented by (evolving) "niche institutions" that are tailored to specific contextual variables, such as geographic environments, social groups, and economic systems (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010).[11] Institutional entrepreneurs should both define "untouchable" principles that apply for all adopters and specify the conditions under which contexts are sufficiently different to develop new or adjust existing niche institutions (Young, 2012). One example of large context variety is the case of small, data-deficient fisheries in developing countries, calling for a different niche sustainability standard than the large, data-munificent cooperatives that the Marine Stewardship Council presently certifies (Ponte, 2008). Some standards, such as GlobalGAP ("good agricultural practices"), offer customized niche standards that reflect the divergent contexts in which adopters operate (GlobalGAP, 2013).[12]

Niche institutions cover the middle ground between individualized agreements and universal institutions, diverse enough to differentiate between heterogeneous contexts but convergent enough to cover settings with considerable common ground (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). They strike a balance between adaptation requirements (to accommodate context idiosyncrasies) and uniformity imperatives (to offer clarity to adopters and manageability to institutional entrepreneurs). Niche institutions may emerge

[8] Author communication with the global sustainable sourcing director of a large company codeveloping and adopting multiple sustainability standards.

[9] Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2008) and Bromley and Powell (2012) argue that symbolic adoption tends to evolve into substantive adoption, supporting the view that regular exposure to an institution's goals progressively leads to goal internalization. For instance, Boxenbaum and Jonsson reported that "decoupling also became infrequent when the ethics code was already integrated into daily activities through ethics code training programmes" (2008: 88).

[10] Scholars have stressed the importance of designing simple rules to effectively operate in complex and dynamic contexts (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Davis et al., 2009; Eisenhardt & Bhatia, 2002).

[11] This idea resonates with Donaldson and Dunfee's (1994) combination of "macrosocial contracts" with basic norms for all and "microsocial contracts" that are adapted to relevant contexts.

[12] In a related vein, the True Sustainability Index (Center for Sustainable Organizations, 2013) exemplifies the idea of evaluating corporate socioenvironmental performance against the backdrop of the (social and biophysical) contexts in which firms operate.

from participatory approaches (Dasgupta, 2000) and field experiments that lead to the discovery of locally feasible solutions. For instance, Conservation International and Starbuck's CAFE sustainability standard was based on field experiments in targeted developing countries, which led to the discovery of locally fruitful agricultural practices—a result that a standard "imposed from the top, or that focuses on immediate outcomes based on advanced country conditions" would not have generated (Perez-Aleman & Sandilands, 2008: 40). Institutional entrepreneurs who combine master and niche institutions can thus mitigate the trade-off that ensues from practice multiplicity in response to context diversity. The three options to reduce the compliance-achievement trade-off discussed in this section can be restated as follows.

> *Proposition 3: In relatively opaque fields, institutions that encourage their adopters to develop a systemic mindset and internalize goals and that contain niche institutions reduce the existing trade-off between enforcing compliance and achieving goals.*

TOWARD A CLOSER UNDERSTANDING OF MEANS-ENDS RELATIONS

Discussion

The number of institutions seeking to regulate relatively opaque fields in order to reduce the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in such fields has mushroomed over the past few decades (Bromley & Powell, 2012). In this article I have sought to tease out the conditions under which the adoption of institutions in more opaque fields leads to the achievement of the envisaged goals. Voluntary sustainability standards, addressing specific socioenvironmental issues, exemplify such institutions. In previous institutional work on sustainability standards, researchers have identified a number of contingencies that account for the failure or imperfect achievement of standards' goals, including the lack of specific rules (Okhmatovskiy & David, 2012) and the deficiency of standard enforcement mechanisms (King et al., 2012). As a result of these contingencies, adopters have the opportunity to decouple official policies from actual practices (Hirsch & Bermiss, 2009; Sandholtz, 2012) and merely engage in symbolic adoption (Christmann & Taylor, 2006; Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2010; Zajac & Westphal, 1995), thereby paying only lip service to these policies or confining their efforts to highly visible yet materially insignificant actions (Kerr, 1975).

These policy-practice decoupling arguments are, indeed, important accounts of why many institutions in highly opaque fields do not or only partially lead to the results intended by their initiators. However, the extant literature has largely ignored another and potentially more significant account. Building on recent work by Bromley and Powell (2012), who propose means-ends decoupling as an alternative explanation of why policy adopters in more opaque fields fail to achieve the envisaged goals, I have argued that causal complexity and practice multiplicity obscure the impact of an institution's design and implementation parameters. In such settings institutional theory would benefit from "importing" insights offered by complexity theory (Levy & Lichtenstein, 2012; Young, 2012) to acknowledge systemic, often nonlinear interrelations among and between relevant actors and factors at different levels. These insights enable the development of viable institutions, whose built-in adaptive capacity to coevolve with their contexts renders such institutions more responsive and robust (Espinosa & Walker, 2011). Otherwise, institutions seeking to fix the policy-practice compliance gap by formulating specific and uniform rules, devising strong incentives, and transferring universal best practices may create or widen the means-ends gap. Compliance-oriented institutions not only fail to sufficiently account for causal complexity and practice multiplicity but also smother innovative practices by adopters. Therefore, the harder institutional entrepreneurs such as standard setters try to make adopters comply with their requirements, the more their institutions may fail to achieve the envisaged goals. In other words, a trade-off exists between the rigidity required to enforce compliance and the flexibility needed to achieve goals. Options to mitigate this trade-off include adopting a systemic mindset when devising institutions, stimulating adopters to internalize a standard's goals, and supplementing universal core principles and arrangements with dedicated niche institutions.

A limitation of this article is its confinement to fields that are relatively opaque. The trade-off

between compliance and achievement is less likely to occur in more transparent fields, where relevant interrelations are easier to identify and measure, thus barely facing problems of causal complexity, practice multiplicity, and behavioral invisibility. Field transparency reduces the need for institutional entrepreneurs to specify rules, incentives, and practices while substantive compliance and goal achievement can be better aligned. For instance, athletic competition is a relatively transparent field in which limited rules suffice and stringent anti-doping tests need not undermine the achievement of the "fair play" goal.

Another limitation is the article's focus on one specific dimension of the adoption of institutions. I did not consider—or only marginally considered—other relevant factors that account for the conditions and extent of goal achievement, including the number of adopters (Schuler & Christmann, 2011), the diffusion process (Fiss & Zajac, 2004; Lawrence, Winn, & Jennings, 2001; Weber, Davis, & Lounsbury, 2009), the stage of adoption (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010; Kennedy & Fiss, 2009), the degree of interest alignment within adopting firms (Crilly, Zollo, & Hansen, 2012; Gottschalg & Zollo, 2007; Pache & Santos, 2010), the extent of information asymmetry between firms and their stakeholders (Crilly et al., 2012), the nature of (global) supply chains (Levy, 2008; O'Rourke, 2007), the role of reinforcing institutions such as legislation (Amengual, 2010; Gulbrandsen, 2010; Kim, 2013; Lee, 2009; Vogel, 2008), the influence of competing or complementary standards (Reinecke et al., 2012), the role of the media and confrontational NGOs (Yaziji & Doh, 2009), and the involvement of consumers (Schuler & Christmann, 2011). While recognizing the importance of these factors, I deliberately focused on highlighting the role of one major understudied dimension of adoption that significantly impairs the performance of institutions in relatively opaque fields.

Contributions

Early institutional work (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) showed that organizational adopters of institutions often do not achieve the goals envisaged by their developers. Especially when adoption is induced under external pressure, organizations may decouple their practices from their policies, in which case they "symbolically endorse practices prescribed by one logic while actually implementing practices promoted by another logic" (Pache & Santos, 2013: 974). This symbolic support typically consists of formally adopting the same practices as similar organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). I have argued that adopters may not achieve the intended goals for a very different reason. In essence, adopters may not attain their goals *despite* substantive compliance. I have built on Bromley and Powell's (2012) idea that substantively adopted practices may not be effective means to achieve the envisaged goals, especially when the relation between both is more opaque. This article goes beyond their insights by developing the novel argument of a negative relationship, rather than the absence of a connection: a *trade-off* exists when addressing both types of decoupling in highly opaque fields. While opacity enhances the need for developing and maintaining "strong" (i.e., compliance-oriented) institutions, the latter are ill-equipped to cope with the challenges encountered in more opaque fields. In this article I have conceptualized why and how remedying policy-practice decoupling often leads to the creation or exacerbation of means-ends decoupling, and vice versa.

I have applied my arguments to the field of socioenvironmental governance, but these relations are also likely to hold in other highly opaque institutional fields, where goal achievement is hard to measure and to causally relate to means deployed and where context variety calls for divergent practices. Other relatively opaque fields include health care (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010), management consultancy (David, Sine, & Haveman, 2013), global geopolitics (Levy, 2008), climate change mitigation (Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013), financial stability (Fligstein & Goldstein, 2010), traffic security (Braithwaite & Drahos, 2000), public service (Frey et al., 2013), and academia. In these fields concrete, uniform rules (standard operating procedures, blueprints, examinations, etc.), strong incentives (such as financial benefits, legitimacy, and fines), and best practice dissemination (through formal training, Internet sites, conferences, etc.) are widely used to induce field participants to comply substantively, even though the rigorous implementation of such behavior-homogenizing institutions, often on a global scale (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997), may not lead to the achievement of the intended goals. For exam-

ple, are accredited universities the ones offering superior teaching and research, or do they know better how to please accreditation bodies (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Trank & Washington, 2009)? Are students scoring high grades for exams brighter than their counterparts with more modest grades, or are they the ones who best know how to "play the examination game," without necessarily being better prepared for their professional futures (Boiral, 2012; Kerr, 1975)? And do frequently cited articles published in top-ranked academic journals reveal more rigorous and relevant research (Baum, 2011; Gans & Shepherd, 1994; Starbuck, 2005)? Since the article's insights apply to a variety of relatively opaque institutional fields, a first contribution is to the institutional literature, by identifying and explaining the tension between compliance with an institution's rules ("the letter") and achievement of the goals for which those rules were defined ("the spirit"), as well as offering partial remedies. I have established a conceptual framework for studying the importance of this trade-off in a variety of institutional fields that are characterized by high opacity. Empirical work could establish the extent to which and the (additional) conditions under which the theorized trade-off exists in different opaque fields.[13]

Much research into sustainability standards has focused on ways to deter opportunistic adoption by legitimacy seekers or market seekers (e.g., Christmann & Taylor, 2006; Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2010; King et al., 2012), advocating stringent, selective standards that may solve the compliance problem but inadvertently overshoot the standard's mark. I have recognized both problems and argued that the latter problem needs more attention to adequately address socioenvironmental challenges. The ideas presented resonate with earlier calls to balance rigidity and flexibility in (sustainability) standards (Gilbert et al., 2011; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010) and extend insights into socioenvironmental governance by articulating the reasons why and ways in which such a delicate balance can be achieved. Therefore, a second contribution is to the socioenvironmental governance literature, by specifying conditions under which sustainability standards are more likely to reasonably achieve their goals. Future studies could test whether the ideas presented hold for different socioenvironmental institutions.

Inspired by the maxim "nothing is as practical as a good theory," and responding to recent calls for more practically relevant theory around important contemporary societal topics (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Suddaby, 2012), I have sought to advance conceptual ideas that can benefit practitioners by deconstructing why institutional entrepreneurs in relatively opaque fields face inherent tensions when trying to achieve both adopter compliance and goal achievement and by indicating how entrepreneurs can reduce some of these tensions. I applied these conceptual insights to one practically relevant field, socioenvironmental governance, although the insights can be applied to a variety of institutional fields with high opacity. While the upsurge of corporate compliance officers (O'Rourke, 2007) over the past decade is a logical corporate response to societal pressure to address socioenvironmental underperformance (Gilbert et al., 2011), I have shown that such compliance efforts often fail to bear fruit, especially when the complexity and specificities of socioenvironmental issues are ignored and docile adopter behavior is enforced. A third contribution is thus to practitioners, by presenting a conceptual diagnosis of a major practical problem. The real-life examples and concrete guidance offered (such as simulating to practice systemic thinking, setting up adopter clubs to encourage internalization, and developing niche institutions to reflect variety) can be useful for policy makers in firms, NGOs, and governmental bodies who need to conceive and implement effective and manageable solutions in relatively opaque fields.

Conclusion

While it is a truism to say that complex, wicked problems do not have easy solutions, it is remarkable that scholars and practitioners have paid so little attention to the means-ends

[13] Field studies could draw on the following methods: system dynamic modeling (Repenning, 2002; Sterman, 2000) to capture direct and indirect, linear and nonlinear relations; game scenarios to chart the effect of incentive structures and other actors (Barrett, 2003; Boschetti, 2011); configurational approaches to account for factor combinations and context dependence (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 1987); and qualitative approaches to provide in-depth insights into the motivation and behavior of heterogeneous actors (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009).

gap, which arguably undermines the performance of institutions in highly opaque fields. In particular, the focus on eliciting substantive compliance has distracted our attention from ensuring that the envisaged goals are achieved. Enforcing compliance can even undermine goal achievement. Institutional entrepreneurs seeking to govern more opaque fields thus face a real dilemma. Opacity creates a need for concrete and uniform rules, strong incentives, and best practice dissemination to ensure substantive compliance by adopters, but the rigidity of compliance-oriented institutions inadvertently erodes their capacity to address the complexity and diversity challenges inherent in such fields. In contrast, institutions that privilege outcomes may suffer from mere symbolic adoption by cognitively bounded and extrinsically motivated adopters.

In conclusion, there are no conditions under which the adoption of institutions in highly opaque fields can lead to the full achievement of the intended goals because of an inherent trade-off between remedying policy-practice decoupling and addressing means-ends decoupling, although institutional entrepreneurs can reduce this compliance-achievement trade-off. Systemically designed institutions that promote goal internalization and duly consider context contingencies offer the potential to strike a balance between rigidity and flexibility, thereby laying a solid foundation for the adoption of institutions that are reasonably impactful in terms of achieving the goals envisaged by the entrepreneurs who champion them. The institution of sustainability standards in the field of socioenvironmental governance has illustrated the arguments developed, although the article's conceptual insights are likely to hold in a variety of other highly opaque fields. In this respect, academics can seize two opportunities. The first concerns self-reflection on the assessment and regulation of teaching and research performance. The second consists of conducting further (empirical) research on the nexus between substantive compliance and goal achievement, the outcomes of which will enable other practitioners in relatively opaque fields to develop practices that are reasonably effective in addressing both types of challenges. The desire to warrant substantive compliance amid opacity has led many institutional entrepreneurs to increasingly invert Machiavelli's adage that the ends justify the means. Time for a balanced reorientation.

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