Organizational Decoupling: A Systematic Literature Review and Directions for Future Research

Abstract
Institutional scholars have thoroughly studied the phenomenon of policy-practice decoupling, leading to valuable insights about isomorphic structures and different kinds of organizational responses to institutional pressures. More recently, another form of decoupling, relevant to the discrepancies between organizational means and ends, has gained attention as a research subject. Given the increased rationalization and fragmentation of the institutional environment in which contemporary organizations are rooted, adopters felt compelled to devote more efforts into implementing their symbolically adopted policies. However, despite deploying significant resources and following a clear set of inducements, many organizations nowadays fail to achieve the envisaged goals for adopted institutions. As such the phenomenon of means-ends decoupling provides an alternative explanation to this frequent imperfect goal achievement among adopters, thereby complementing the seminal contributions of the extant policy-practice decoupling research in unraveling the larger phenomenon of institutional decoupling. This paper aims at reviewing the existing literature to understand the current state of the filed, its current shortcomings, and potential avenues for future research. In so doing, we advance the conceptual idea that a set of lower-level mechanisms lead through their interplay and in their combination to the manifestation of the higher-level phenomenon of means-ends decoupling. We apply these conceptual insights to one practically relevant institutional field, publicly funded cooperative R&D projects, which we argue it fits the definition of opaque fields as described by early institutional work. Finally, we discuss the contributions of these conceptual insights to the extant decoupling research and to resolving some of the prevalent governance issues for contemporary organizations.

Keywords
Means-ends decoupling, substantive compliance, goal achievement, opaque fields, publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects.
1. Introduction

The quantity and quality of decoupling research has increased noticeably throughout the last decades. Decoupling studies, today, are becoming some of the most widely cited research in the management discipline, with leading scholars devoted to the study of this phenomenon and well-recognized conferences dedicated to its exploration. The methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks employed to investigate decoupling today are consistent with mainstream management research. However, early research on decoupling can still be considered as almost exclusively focused on one single form of the phenomenon; policy-practice decoupling. The exploration of another form of the phenomenon, means-ends decoupling remains highly limited. Means-ends decoupling provides an alternative explanation to the frequent failure of organizational adopters to achieve the intended goals for adopted institutions. In particular, little is known about the inherent factors and institutionally embedded causes relevant to the emergence of a gap between organizational practices and intended outcomes following the implementation of adopted institutions.

Early research on decoupling (e.g.; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Thompson, 1967) suggests that organizational responses to external pressures, such as legislation, public policy, and social activism, often resulted in internal buffering of daily practices from outside control and inspection. Such actions were implemented to decouple formal policies from firms’ internal technical core and daily work routines (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Therefore, organizations adopted policies as a response to external pressures regarding formally stated legislation and regulation, while kept their actual internal practices unchanged (Scott, 2008). Institutional scholars provide different possible explanations to justify this mismatch between formal policies and daily practices. In some instances, decoupling is an unintentional course of action (Selznick, 1949); in others, buffering of internal activities is a strategic action to preserve internal practices from outside control and monitoring; while in some other cases, the misalignment is due to the difficulty to meet the required standards and regulations (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973).

The level of external pressures faced by organizations has dramatically increased over the last decades, triggering a subsequent number of studies that describe this significant change in the world societies as ‘audit culture’ (Strathern, 2000) or ‘audit society’ (Power, 1994). This increasing focus on accountability, assessment, and monitoring in contemporary societies, has driven organizations to devote more effort into conforming to adopted policies and aligning these latter with internal practices and daily activities. These organizations act like ‘corporate citizens’ (Meyer & Bromley, 2012), that are expected to display proper behaviors especially in those fields such as corporate social responsibility, of which the ends might be significantly
different from or even contradictory to the core goals of these organizations (Brunsson, 1989). These fundamental changes in the environment in which contemporary organizations are rooted is described as ‘the rationalization of the institutional environment’ (Boli, 2006; Zucker, 1987; Frank & Meyer, 2002). Following this increased level of control, monitoring, and evaluation, organizations felt compelled to devote more efforts into implementing policies which were initially adopted in symbolic fashions. However, despite these policy implementation efforts, organizations are still faced with imperfect achievement of the envisaged goals. As such, recent institutional work (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014) has brought our attention to the decoupling at the level of means and ends, as an alternative possible explanation to the lack of goal achievement among organizational adopters.

Given these significant changes in the institutional environment in which contemporary organizations operate, there is a need for a reexamination of traditional conceptions of decoupling and a deeper understanding of the circumstances under which this phenomenon occurs, as well as its corresponding causes and consequences (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Toward fulfilling this end, this article aims at reviewing the extant literature on decoupling clarifying the distinction between the two primary forms of the phenomenon; namely, policy-practice decoupling and means-ends decoupling. We focus on the emergence of means-ends decoupling as a new form that provides an alternative conception of decoupling relevant to the increased rationalization and fragmentation of the institutional environment in which contemporary organizations are rooted. As argued by Bromley and Powell (2012) and Wijen (2014) the lack of alignment between adopted policies and internal practices may be less common in modern organizations, while the gap between organizational means and ends is more likely to prevail in more rationalized environments.

We build on Bromley and Powell’s (2012), and Wijen’s (2014) seminal work which argues that substantive implementation of adopted policies may not result in goal achievement, despite of deploying necessary means and following a clear set of inducements. We go beyond their work by advancing the idea that a set of lower-level mechanisms lead through their interplay and in their combination to the manifestation of the higher-level phenomenon of means-ends decoupling. Further, reviewing the extant decoupling literature has brought my attention to the need for exploring the nascent phenomenon of means-ends decoupling in contexts beyond sustainability and socio-environmental standards, which have largely dominated early decoupling research. In this regard, we advance the idea that one institutional field that fits the criteria of an opaque field as defined by early institutional work (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Jiang & Bansal, 2003; Wijen, 2014) is the field of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects. We demonstrate through subsequent argumentation how this institutional field is characterized by a set of barriers to compliance (Wijen, 2014), which in
turn are attenuated by a set of inducements that ensure substantive compliance and maximize goal achievement. We argue that field opacity in the context of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects renders goal attainment difficult to assess and to causally link to the deployed means. We show how R&D projects’ designers act as institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2008), which attempt to minimize field opacity and create ideal conditions for substantive compliance and achievement of intended outcomes among organizational adopters.

This study contributes to the institutional research as it sheds light on one of the most prevailing questions relevant to the frequent failure of organizations in opaque field to attain the envisaged goals for adopted institutions. Further, this article contributes to the extant work on opaque fields. While most of early research on decoupling is situated in contexts dealing with sustainability and socio-environmental standards, we take a different direction by focusing on an alternative setting for studying the phenomenon of means-ends decoupling. We present the institutional field of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects as a proper environment for means-ends decoupling to prevail and demonstrate how it fits the criteria of an opaque field as described by early institutional work. Finally, a third contribution is to the cooperative R&D projects literature by surfacing the conditions under which organizational means and ends maintain distinct trajectories following the implementation of R&D projects practices. Unraveling the discrepancies between organizational practices and envisaged outcomes in the context of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects can help provide a plausible explanation to one of the unanswered questions relevant to cooperative R&D projects lack of effectiveness and accomplishment.

Inspired by the premise of practicality of good theory and responding to the need for practically relevant theory around important contemporary topics (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Suddaby, 2012). In this paper, we attempt to advance conceptual ideas that can help solve important governance issues for contemporary organizations through dissimilating the inherent tensions faced by R&D projects’ designers who act as institutional entrepreneurs to attenuate the compliance barriers and ensure substantive compliance. We apply these conceptual insights to one practically relevant institutional field, that we argue it fits the definition of opaque fields where means-ends decoupling is more likely to prevail. Despite the focus on publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects, the conceptual arguments we advance in relevance to the manifestation of means-ends decoupling can also apply to other opaque fields including management consultancy (David, Sine, & Haveman, 2013), academia (Sauder & Espeland, 2009), climate change mitigation (Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013), financial stability (Fligstein & Goldstein, 2010), global geopolitics (Levy, 2008), traffic security (Braithwaite & Drahos, 2000), health care (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010), and public service (Frey et al., 2013).
This article is structured as follows. First, we review the extant literature on decoupling, delineating the fundamental tenets of the two forms of the phenomenon. Second, we shed light on the means-ends decoupling dialogue initiated by Haack and Schoenebom (2015), who surface the challenges faced by institutional scholars when attempting to integrate different theoretical paradigms (e.g.; Wijen, 2014), which are based on distinct theoretical traditions and underlying assumptions, to the institutional theory. Then after, we present potential avenues for future research and advance a set of conceptual insights relevant to the manifestation of means-ends decoupling. Fourth, we present publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects as an alternative setting to investigating the discrepancies between organizational means and ends. In so doing, we demonstrate how this overlooked institutional field fits the criteria of an opaque field and constitutes a proper environment for the means-ends decoupling phenomenon to prevail. Finally, we discuss the contributions of these conceptual insights to the current research and their role in framing potential solutions for contemporary governance issues.

2. Current state of decoupling research

What is the current state of decoupling research? High-quality journals have arguably the most influential impact on different academic disciplines (Judge, Cable, Colbert, & Rynes, 2007). Nevertheless, there is limited consensus on which journals should be listed as high-quality journals (Bruton, Ahlstrom, Li, 2009; Bruton, Ahlstrom, Oblój, 2008). The Financial Times, for instance, uses a list of 50 top business journals, in its ranking of business schools (FT, 2017). Thirteen of these journals are related to management domains, several of which have dedicated substantial attention to the topic of decoupling (e.g.; Academy of Management Review, Academy of Management Journal, and Administrative Science Quarterly).

The University of Texas, Dallas has a widely cited ranking system of global business schools based on research productivity, using 24 journals of which six are related to management (UTD, 2017). In their study of high-quality journals in management, Trieschmann, Dennis, Northcraft, and Nieme (2000), were even more conservative and employed only five top journals related to management including Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly, Journal of International Business Studies, and Strategic Management Journal.

These five journals reside as top management journals on all of the world leading ranking lists in the management field including the Association of Business Schools (ABS), The University of Texas, Dallas (UTD), and The Financial Times (FT) lists. According to the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), these five journals have comparably similar impact factors, indicating a very well-citing rate in the management domains. Accordingly, and following previous research (e.g.; Bruton et al, 2009; Bruton et al, 2008; Judge et al, 2007; Trieschmann...
et al, 2000), we use these five journals as a foundation for reviewing the literature on
decoupling. We add to this primary list, three other world leading journals relevant to
management research including: 1) Organization Science, as it appears as a leading journal in
the three lists; 2) Journal of Management Studies, as it appears as a top management journal in
ABS list; as well as two other leading journals from highly relevant disciplines to decoupling:
3) Business Ethics Quarterly from the corporate social responsibility (CSR) field and 4)
American Journal of Sociology from the field of sociology. Table 1 summarizes the rationale
for the selected journals. All journals marked with the symbol ‘X’ were considered as ‘top-
journal’ in the corresponding ranking lists. They all have impact factors above or near 2.0
which is a recognized signal of journal quality in management domains (Bruton et al, 2009).

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Table 1: Initially examined journals and views on their quality
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The initially selected journals were reviewed for articles relevant to decoupling research for
the period between 2000 and 2017. In reviewing these journals, the aim was to identify all the
articles that were published in these journals on the topic of decoupling over the chosen period.
It is important to note that authors use generally slightly different terms to frame their
theoretical foundations. Accordingly, the first step of this examination was to run a broad
search in the electronic search engine Business Source Complete (EBSCO) and Science Direct
database using several key terms relevant to decoupling such as impression management,
symbolic management, policy-practice decoupling, means-ends decoupling, corporate social
responsibility standards, and institutional pressures. These terms were introduced to different
searches interchangeably. The examined journals were reviewed for the period between 2000
and 2017.

The initial search led to a total of 178 articles. This initial search of articles was
purposively broad. This first pool of articles was examined to determine their relevance to
decoupling research. The first screening process (phase 1) was based on an in-depth
examination of the articles’ abstracts. This first phase led to eliminating 84 articles that were
deemed not relevant to the topic of decoupling. Thus, 94 articles were maintained from phase
1 of the examination process. All the articles from phase 1 (n=94), were reviewed through an
in-depth examination of the full text. In this second phase of the screening process, the full
texts of the articles were reviewed for employing theoretical frameworks that were primarily
relevant to decoupling research. This phase 2 suggested that a large number of authors
discussed decoupling superficially but did not rely on any decoupling framework in their
works. Accordingly, out of the 94 articles 52 were dropped for not being primarily based on
decoupling theory. Table 2 summarizes the examination process and the different screening phases that led to the final sample of articles.

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**Table 2: Description of the examination process**

The in-depth examination of the final sample (n=42), has directed my attention to a number of influential studies that were repeatedly cited in these articles. These seminal studies were referred to as fundamental sources in decoupling research (e.g.; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Power, 1994; Weber, 1992; Westphal & Zajac, 1998), but they were not included in the initial sample as they were either published before the examined period or published in other quality journals from relevant disciplines to decoupling. The latter sources included 22 books, 17 articles from 11 journals including The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, American Sociological Review, American Behavioral Scientist, American Journal of Political Science, and 3 papers presented in widely cited conferences in management including The Academy of Management Annals and The American Sociological Association Meetings. After adding these additional articles (n=28), the final sample of sources increased to a total of 70 articles and 22 books. Table 3 summarizes the additional journals and conferences examined including the additional identified articles.

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**Table 3: A summary of the additional journals and conferences examined**

To ensure that we have identified all the articles that have primarily employed a decoupling theoretical foundation, two colleagues that are knowledgeable researchers in the field have been solicited to go over the final sample and try to identify any important articles that might not have been included in this sample. No additional articles were identified. Notwithstanding to the merits of any relevant articles that might have been missed in this review, we contend that the impact of such overlooked articles would be minimal and that the current state of research on decoupling has been comprehensively assessed in this review. This review has resulted in identifying important gaps in the decoupling literature, namely in relevance to the nascent phenomenon of means-ends decoupling. As such, we present in what follows a synthesis of the extant decoupling research, tackle the identified gaps, and advance a set of conceptual insights relevant to the manifestation of means-ends decoupling in opaque fields.

### 2.1 Central Tenets of Institutional Decoupling

Weber (1930 [1992]) refers to bureaucracy as the result of relations between politics and
markets. This view suggests that organizational practices are to be closely linked to daily work activities and that organizational elements should result from formal policies. However, Weber’s view faced important criticism following various observations where problems faced by organizations were loosely linked to proposed solutions (March & Olsen, 1976), and where linkages among formal structures were tenuously coupled (Weick, 1976). The term ‘loose coupling’ was first used by Weick (1976, p.3) in the field of educational organization. He argued that loose coupling was caused by the fact that formal policies were an ‘ideal theory’ of organizational action, and that real actions were contingent of specific resources and contexts. In Weick’s account, loose coupling can also benefit organizations through the creation of new units with little or no disruption to daily operations.

Using a deeper institutional view of decoupling, Meyer and Rowan (1977) came to extend these initial organizational research (e.g.; Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; March & Olsen, 1976; Thompson, 1967; Weick, 1976). Claiming that external environments highly impact organizations, they provided a phenomenological interpretation to the mismatch between formally adopted policies and internal daily practices. Meyer and Rowan viewed modern organizations as a depiction of societal beliefs rather than rational agents of instrumental exchange. They claimed that widely shared perceptions of social reality led to isomorphic organizations, which consequently practiced institutional decoupling. Accordingly, they perceived organizations’ formal elements as an enactment of their external environments.

In Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) account, formal elements of organizations result from rationalizing pressures in the external environment, rather than follow from internal goals and needs of production. The authors distinguished between two facets of rationalizing pressures. The first one refers to seeking legitimacy, where organizations adopt policies that are legitimated by the socially constructed norms and beliefs, irrespective of their actual impact on the technical core. The second form of rationalizing pressures refers to the incorporation of formal policies to escape control, monitoring, and sanctions. Meyer and colleagues extended these studies introducing the contemporary institutionalized rules that impact organizations (e.g.; Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2006). According to this view, organizations are expected to implement theories of production that are rooted in social beliefs and legitimated by professional, educational, legal, and political bodies. Policies become, thus, loosely coupled with day-to-day activities.

The phenomenon of decoupling has been explored in different non-profit and public realms including courts (Hagan, Hewitt, & Alwin, 1979), prisons (Thomas, 1984), hospitals (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1983), and schools (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976). Organizations in such settings are faced with various internal and external pressures such as
ineffective workforce and insufficient resources, which explain why these organizations need to preserve their internal operations and practices. A more recent conceptualization of decoupling suggests that a larger number of organizations are confronted with different and even more competing institutional pressures (Bromley & Powell, 2012). This is mainly due to the fact that more domains of the external environment have become rationalized. In this view, organizations are compelled to enlarge their formal structures in new ways; particularly, regarding issues such as employment equality, workforce diversity, corporate social responsibility, accountability, and transparency. The institutional environment becomes more fragmented as the number of actors with whom organizations deal increases. External pressures caused by such environmental fragmentation often follow from formal rules and regulations in domains such as auditing and accounting standards, labor regulations, and natural environment. However, external pressures also result from ‘soft’ laws such as rankings, ratings, and standards (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Moerth, 2006). This environmental fragmentation impacts most of the organizations operating in the contemporary world, as they became more compelled to implement their symbolically adopted policies. This general trend has triggered a subsequent number of studies that explore organizational responses to a multitude of institutional pressures (Lounsbury, 2002, 2007; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005; Scott, Ruef, Mendel, & Caronna, 2000; Thornton, 2004). Within the same vein, Bromley and Powell (2012) suggest that these rationalization and fragmentation of the environment led organizations to implement their symbolically adopted policies. However, despite these implementation efforts, the authors explain that firms still frequently fail to achieve the intended goals for adopted policies. As such, Bromley and Powell (2012) present means-ends decoupling as a new form of decoupling that takes place at the level of implementation and achievement.

2.2 Forms of Institutional Decoupling

Early research on decoupling has distinguished between two different forms of the phenomenon; policy-practice decoupling and means-ends decoupling. This distinction has helped institutional researchers gain a better understanding of the inherent consequences and conditions of decoupling in the contemporary world (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014), although some scholars remain skeptical to the validity of such a categorization (Haack & Schoenebom, 2015), a criticism mainly inspired by the premise of inappropriateness of theory rapprochement and combination. Policy-practice decoupling takes place when formal policies are not implemented and/or regularly violated. Instead, means-ends decoupling occurs when formal policies are implemented, but that they are tenuously linked to the intended outcomes. There is a growing attention for studying this latter form of decoupling. It is claimed to be increasingly prevalent in the contemporary world and to have a significant impact on
organizations given the continuing fragmentation and rationalization of the institutional environment (Bromley & Powell, 2012). In the following section, we review the literature on the two forms of the phenomenon, emphasizing the main distinctions between the two, and proposing potential avenues for future research. Table 4 illustrate the main differences and distinctions between the two forms of decoupling.

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Table 4: Policy-practice versus means-ends decoupling

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2.2.1 Policy-practice decoupling

Although it is just a single form of the phenomenon, the mismatch between formal policy and internal practice is traditionally associated with the term ‘decoupling’. This form of the phenomenon refers to instances where policies that have been adopted by the firm in a ceremonial fashion, were tenuously monitored, evaluated, and implemented, having little or no impact on the firm’s daily activities. Early research on policy-practice decoupling suggests that adopted policies are often a weak predictor of daily work routines (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Meyer and Rowan’s line of reasoning triggered an important body of research relevant to policy-practice decoupling. In their examination of medical schools, Bussigel, Barzansky, and Grenholm (1986) suggested the existence of inconsistent and incompatible organizational ends among which the link is ambiguously articulated. The authors argued that organizations that decouple policy from practice adopt diverse and often conflicting policies, with little or no significant impact on daily operations.

Policy–practice decoupling allows an organization to adopt multiple, or even competing, policies in response to external pressures, without disrupting daily operations. Westphal, Zajac, and colleagues demonstrate that organizations adopt initiatives such as stock repurchase programs, total quality management programs, and long-term incentive plans for CEOs in response to institutional pressures, but that the implementation of these programs varies noticeably (Fiss & Zajac, 2004, 2006; Westphal, Gulati, & Shortell, 1997; Westphal & Zajac, 1994, 2001; Zajac & Westphal, 2004). The notion that policies are routinely adopted to cope with external pressures and gain legitimacy has been often faced with the criticism that institutional adoption is mainly ceremonial and inconsequential (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Hannan & Freeman, 1989); A rational response to this criticism has been to argue that legitimacy can lead to survival and success through helping organizations gain the necessary resources and preserve their technical core from external pressures. Accordingly, legitimacy has an actual impact even if formal policies are not implemented. For example, Westphal and Zajac (1998) argued that stock markets react positively to the adoption of certain governance
programs, even if these programs are not fully implemented. Further, Zott and Nguyen Huy (2007) showed that managers who symbolically signal the quality of their network, personal credibility, professional skills, and organizational achievement are more likely to secure resources for their new ventures than those who do not. When environmental pressures are seen as morally more important than an organization’s technical core, symbolic adoption is more likely to be perceived negatively by organizational stakeholders. For instance, many non-governmental agencies accused petroleum corporations of engaging in ceremonial environmental actions to draw attention away from their harmful exploitation activities (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Moreover, Short and Toffel (2010) demonstrate that industrial facilities tend to implement their symbolically adopted voluntary environmental programs when they are subject to heavy regulatory surveillance.

Integrating agency theory into neo-institutional research, some scholars argue that individual interests and actions are key determinants of policy-practice decoupling. Different studies in this stream demonstrate that institutional pressures are interpreted and are dealt with at the level of the individual. For example, Westphal and Zajac suggest that the gap between policy and practice is more likely to take place when top executives have a strong impact over their boards, when an organization is connected to other organizations that apply similar decoupling practices, and when an organization has engaged in decoupling practices in the past (Westphal & Zajac, 1994, 2001; Zajac & Westphal, 2004). In other terms, decoupling between policy and practice is more likely to occur when it satisfies the interests of powerful executives and leaders. The latter findings support the existence of a network of decoupling, in which top managers and organizations that are connected to each other become skilled at symbolic adoption and manipulation (Bromley & Powell, 2012).

Purely symbolic policies can become fully implemented due to shifts in internal lines of authority (Tilcsik, 2010). Tilcsik’s findings explain how adopted policies that were intended to be purely ceremonial, have become fully implemented due to changes in internal power dynamics. This phenomenon is referred to as ‘recoupling’, or in other terms, the process through which formal policies and daily work routines move from being disconnected to becoming closely linked (Espeland, 1998). For instance, Kelly and Dobbin (1998) argue that increase in federal oversight causes firms to start implementing policies that were symbolically adopted in order to avoid external sanctions. Although early research on decoupling suggests that, in some instances, policies and practices can become more linked over time, it is important to emphasize that this phenomenon can also be guided by various institutional changes rather than top–down implementation of policies (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; March and Olsen, 1976).
This body of research reflects a host of arguments regarding the conditions under which policy-practice decoupling is more likely to occur. Bromley and Powell (2012) summarizes these conditions as follows. They state that policies are more likely to be decoupled from practices when: 1) adoption of policies is driven by legitimacy rather than technical demands; 2) the policy is at an advanced stage of the adoption process; 3) internal stakeholders do not reinforce external pressures; 4) adopted policies conflict with the interests of internal parties; 5) top-executives learn of non-compliance practices in other organizations or have engaged in policy-practice decoupling in the past; 6) there is a lack of external reinforcement; and when 7) internal constituencies are more powerful than external ones and can cope with external pressures. Table 5 provides a sample of studies from the extant literature on policy-practice decoupling. In the next section, we review the literature on means-ends decoupling and provide potential avenues for future research on this nascent area of research.

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| Table 5: Sample of studies from the extant literature on policy-practice decoupling. |

2.2.2 Means-ends decoupling

Most of early research on institutional decoupling has shed light on the gap between formal policies and internal practices. While some institutional scholars suggest that this form of decoupling is empirically less frequent than what suggested by the extent literature (Bromley et al., 2009; Coburn, 2004), others see it as a temporary phenomenon (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008; Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012). These interpretations arise perhaps because decoupling might have been defined narrowly by early institutional research. In fact, decoupling can also happen at the level of means and ends, particularly if adopted policies or practices have a tenuous link to organizational outcomes (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014).

Means-ends decoupling is more likely to occur in organizational settings where formal structures have concrete organizational consequences, where policies are implemented and evaluated, where work activities are altered, but where little or no evidence supports that the latter activities are linked to organizational outcomes and effectiveness (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014). Internal constituencies are often confronted with significant structural pressures. Accordingly, they may pursue certain practices, although they recognize that these practices are of limited utility and have a tenuous link to internal outcomes. For example, certain organizational activities are implemented not because they have an evident link with organizational effectiveness, but rather because they are driven by operational systems such as evaluation and accounting, that themselves may have an unclear connection to the
organizational core goals. While policy-practice decoupling can be explained as symbolic adoption, means-ends decoupling can be described as symbolic implementation. As such, this latter form of decoupling helps to answer the question of ‘why organizations implement policies that are tenuously linked to organizational outcomes?’

The extant literature on means-ends decoupling suggests that this phenomenon has significant consequences on organizations (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014). First, means-ends decoupling increases ‘internal complexity’. Power (1997) studied financial auditing and introduced the concept of ‘expectations gap’, which refers to tenuous coupling between accounts of potential and operational capability. Power explains that firms create organizational sub-units (e.g.; audit officers, internal auditors, and audit committees) to cope with external auditing, which increases internal complexity. Similarly, Edelman (1992) investigated equal employment opportunity/affirmative action legislation and found that this legislation motivated firms to make changes as they tried to comply with the law. However, little effort was devoted to verifying whether these changes had eventually improved the status of minorities in organizations. A parallel case could be made with the field of anti-pollution; the causal mechanism linking the means of sustainability programs with the ends of most chemical companies is unclear. As such, decoupling implementation of practices from achievement of outcomes includes instances where organizational sub-units are created although their link to organizational outcomes remains unclear, which lead in turn to increased complexity within organizations.

In addition to increasing internal complexity, decoupling practice implementation from outcome achievement can also cause ‘endemic reforms’. The extant literature distinguishes between two different types of reforms that can result from means-ends decoupling. The first refers to a situation when periods of stability are disrupted by scandals and revelations of failure or misconduct, followed by large movements of transformation and reform, whereas the second type of reforms is rather incremental and progressive. For example, Power (1997) described reforms and transformations in the field of auditing as triggered by intense and repetitive failures and misconducts. While reforms in fields of monitoring and evaluation such as accounting have been proven often radical and abrupt (Power, 1997), reforms in fields such as education have been rather described as incremental and gradual (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Finally, means-ends decoupling can also cause ‘diversion of resources’, causing attention to be driven away from core activities. In their examination of law schools, Sauder and Espeland (2009) describe how the system of law school rankings caused dramatic changes at different levels including status definition, decision making, and sharing of resources. Given that ranking reports shape the opinions of important stakeholders, higher education institutions
devote substantial resources toward strategies that help meet the required standards for ranking, although these standards are largely unlinked to the real goals of these institutions. As such, decoupling the means from the ends result in diverting resources from the actual goals of organizations toward goals that are driven by various institutional pressures.

Building on Bromley and Powell’s (2012) work, Wijen (2014) summarizes the conditions under which the adoption of practices, standards, and institutions may lead to the achievement of the initially intended goals in relatively opaque fields. Using the case of voluntary sustainability standards, he argues that the lack of field transparency, which is caused by the compliance barriers of ‘causal complexity’, ‘behavioral invisibility’, and ‘practice multiplicity’ leads institutions’ designers to elaborate a set of compliance inducements to ensure substantive compliance among organizational adopters. However, the causal complexity and practice multiplicity, which characterize opaque fields, hinder the implementation of rigid institutional regimes, as they imply a trade-off between substantive compliance and goal achievement. Complementing the compliance barriers, Wijen (2014) suggests that ‘setting rules’, ‘devising incentives’, and ‘transferring practices’ constitute three compliance inducements for adopters. The presence of the attention, knowledge, and motivation barriers in relatively opaque fields compels designers to elaborate institutions in ways that incentivize adopters’ compliant behavior. These three compliance inducements enable institutional entrepreneurs to define a set of organizational measures which facilitate the achievement of intended goals.

Bromley and Powell’s (2012) and Wijen’s (2014) seminal work on means-ends decoupling has enlightened our understanding of this nascent phenomenon. In their view, the highly increasing fragmentation and rationalization of the institutional environment in which contemporary organizations are rooted create conditions that are more favorable for means-ends decoupling to prevail. They argue that modern organizations that operate in such rationalized and fragmented environments will be less confronted with policy-practice decoupling; a practice that will be more likely replace by decoupling at the level of means and ends. Given these increased levels of accountability and monitoring faced by organizations that operate in the contemporary world, means-ends decoupling provides an alternative explanation to the frequent failure of organizational adopters to attain the envisaged outcomes for adopted policies, despite deploying significant resources and following clear inducements. Table 6 provides a summary of studies from the extant literature on means-ends decoupling, including the current debate around the phenomenon initiated by Haack and Schoenebom (2015).

Table 6: Summary of studies from the extant literature on Means-ends decoupling.
2.3 The Means-ends decoupling dialogue

Notwithstanding to the valid contribution of Bromley and Powell (2012) and Wijen (2014) to the decoupling research, it is important to note that their work has been faced with important criticism from other scholars who view the phenomenon of decoupling from a different theoretical tradition and based on different underlying assumptions. In this regard, Haack and Schoenebom (2015) initiated a dialogue to comment on the work accomplished by Wijen (2014). Their first critique concerns the choice of the term ‘means-ends decoupling’. Haack and Schoenebom argue that the term ‘means-ends decoupling’ confuses the classical notion of decoupling, as the symbolic adoption of policies, with the effectiveness of the means that actors adopt for the intended ends. In their account, through employing the term ‘means-ends decoupling’, Wijen advances the idea that two concepts that rest on distinct theoretical paradigms can be incorporated under the large decoupling umbrella. As such, Wijen is criticized for not examining whether these notions and assumptions are sufficiently compatible to an extent that legitimizes their incorporation (Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011).

Indeed, Haack and Schoenebom (2015) contend that policy-practice decoupling and means-ends decoupling originate in different theoretical traditions, of which the underlying assumptions are incompatible. On the one hand, early conceptions of policy-practice decoupling by Meyer and Rowan (1977) are grounded in the interpretive parading and the phenomenological social constructionist tradition of Berger and Luckmann (1967). On the other hand, means-ends decoupling rests on the functionalist paradigm, which incorporates a positivist epistemology (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Haack and Schoenebom further argue that ends are not objective facts from a social constructionist lens; thus, ends cannot serve as a fixed reference point from which means can be decoupled. Instead, the authors view the ends as ‘moving targets’ that are often determined on the basis of existing means (Joas, 1996).

The second critique that Haack and Schoenebom (2015) address in Wijen’s (2014) work regards the missing dynamics of decoupling. The authors argue that even if they can make their piece with the theoretical infusion of policy-practice and means-ends decoupling, the advancement of a ‘trade-off’ between remedying these two types of decoupling is developed on a static perspective of social reality, overlooking the significant impact of ideational dynamics and the transitory nature of the decoupling phenomenon (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013; Haack, Schoenebom, & Wickert, 2012; Tilcsik, 2010).

In his response to Haack and Schoenebom’s remarks, Wijen (2015) considers uncertainty and ambiguity as instrumental in theorizing around the knowledge frontiers. In so doing, Wijen (2015) welcomes these critiques and attempts to provide a comprehensive response to the authors’ concerns. Regarding the authors’ first concern, Wijen (2015) contends that the integration of relevant insights from different perspectives expands the knowledge frontiers, as
a single perspective does not fully capture a complex social reality. emphasizing that both functionalist and social constructionist paradigms are not incompatible. In support, Okhuysen and Bonardi (2011) explain that the infusion of different theoretical perspectives can help connect silos of knowledge across and within disciplines.

Wijen further argues that scholars should aim for theoretical rapprochement and infusion (Suddaby, 2014), noting the contribution of integrative studies in achieving a better understanding of institutional phenomena. He provides examples of instances where institutional theory has benefited from the integration of other disciplines such as the resource dependence theory (Oliver, 1991) or theories economics (Zajac & Westphal, 2004).

In his response, Wijen (2015) concurs to Haack and Schoenebom’s remarks regarding the dynamic and transitory nature of the decoupling phenomenon, emphasizing that the evolution of institutional arrangements is not the main focus of his article (Wijen, 2014). Wijen further replies that symbolically adopted policies may indeed become implemented and that means and ends interpretations by adopters and designers may also converge through recurrent interactions. In his account, the practice multiplicity and causal complexity that characterize opaque fields lead to various possible interpretations of institutional arrangements, that different actors will tend to attribute dissimilar meanings to means and ends (Dobbin, 2009).

Initiating passionate dialogues among scholars within a discipline is essential to theorizing around the knowledge boundaries, challenging the validity of novel ideas, and strengthening theory development. We agree with Haack and Schoeneborn (2015) that institutional scholars need to pay thorough attention to the integration of other theoretical paradigms to the institutional theory, that not ‘anything goes’ (p.307, 2015), and that more effort should be devoted by scholars to ensuring that the use of an institutional perspective is appropriate when attempting theory combination or infusion. Further, we strongly concur to Wijen’s (2015) view that institutional research should be open to potentially rich contributions from other disciplines as it has been the case in early institutional research (e.g.; Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008; Hodgson, 2004). We also adhere to the view that institutional theory with its social constructionist view can be compatible with the functionalist view and its notions of effectiveness and performance, enabling novel theory development and integration between the two paradigms. Moreover, such theoretical integration can have significant impact on resolving prevailing practitioner’s questions and complex governance issues for contemporary organizations. While we strongly acknowledge that Haack and Schoeneborn have made very critical remarks that can help guide the advancement of future research on means-ends decoupling, we concur to Wijen’s view that institutional theory should not be deprived from engagement with complementary perspectives and resolving practitioners prevailing challenges.
2.4 Potential Avenues for Future Research

In today’s decoupling research, little is known about the inherent causes and underlying factors for the frequent failure of organisations to achieve the intended goals for adopted institutions, even though they followed a coherent set of inducements and allocated the required resources for policy implementation (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014). Consequently, it is crucial to gain more, empirically grounded insights into the institutionally embedded micro-mechanisms for the frequent discrepancies between practices and outcomes within contemporary organizations. Specifically, we call for exploring questions such as, ‘why do compliant adopters fail frequently to achieve the intended goals for adopted institutions?’; ‘How can We explain the gap between institutional implementation and goal achievement for contemporary organizations?’; ‘What are the inherent reasons for not achieving the envisaged goals of adopted institutions?’ Investigating these questions is important as it seeks to identify some of the inherent, institutionally embedded causes and underlying factors, which consequently lead to the occurrence of means-ends decoupling in opaque fields.

We build on the work accomplished by Bromley and Powell (2012) and Wijen (2014) and add to this body of research through advancing the idea that a set of micro-mechanisms lead through their interplay and in their combination to the occurrence of means-ends decoupling within organizations that operate in more rationalized environments. We focus on the notion of micro-mechanisms (Abell, Felin, & Foss, 2008; Foss, 2011; Felin & Foss, 2006) as a systematic set of inferences of how different lower-level entities, and how individual and group actions and interactions within an institutional context link together and become salient in the higher-level phenomena of means-ends decoupling. As such these micro-level mechanisms undergird the macro-level decisions and practices of organizations and organizational actors in causing the means-ends gap. The explanatory mechanisms of higher-level organizational phenomena consist of bundles of individual actions and interactions (Abell, Felin, & Foss, 2008). Accordingly, the fine-grained investigation of micro-level mechanisms improves substantially the understanding of macro-level decisions and behaviours (Foss, 2011; Felin & Foss 2006).

We rely on this conceptual definition of the ‘micro-mechanisms’ term to strengthen the argument for unravelling the institutionally embedded causes and underlying factors for the frequent failure of organizations to couple implementation of policies and achievement of intended outcomes. In this regard, the compliance barriers and compliance inducements provide in turn the central categories in which these micro-mechanisms surface and unfold to result in means-ends decoupling work on the collective level of the adopted institution. In investigating these questions, future research can explore whether these micro-level mechanisms work in isolation, or instead lead in combination to the emergence of the means-
ends gap. We call for uncovering and delineating these lower-level mechanisms for the further understanding of how the phenomenon of means-ends decoupling becomes manifest. Through allocating the inherent, institutionally embedded causes and underlying factors to the respective key dimensions in the aggregate level of compliance barriers and inducements, future research can substantiate how discrete combinations of reflections and decisions at the level of organisational actors lead to the manifestation of the higher-level phenomenon of means-ends decoupling.

Uncovering this nascent area of research can contribute to institutional theory by delineating how the combination of several micro-mechanisms results in the occurrence of means-ends decoupling within organisations that operate in opaque fields. As such, future research can add understanding to how the interplay of these mechanisms influence the successive evolution of discrepancies between organisational practices and outcomes in the corresponding institutional field, thereby opening the black box of the nascent phenomenon of means-ends decoupling. Future studies can further investigate the respective linkages of the micro-mechanisms to the, theoretically informed, aggregate levels of the compliance barriers and inducements for organisations within the current state of theory on means-ends decoupling.

Given that different opaque fields might comprise substantially different conditions and factors, which might in turn lead to variations in the mechanisms of means-ends decoupling, and in alternate manifestations of the phenomenon. It is important to tackle the question of validity, generalizability, and transferability of eventual findings across and within various opaque fields. For instance, the specific micro-mechanisms that may provide a plausible explanation for the occurrence of means-ends decoupling in socioenvironmental contexts (Wijen, 2014) might be different from those that explain the evolving of the phenomenon within the opaque fields of management consultancy (David, Sine, & Haveman, 2013), health care (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010), or academia (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Finally, future decoupling research might investigate whether and under what conditions these micro-mechanisms of means-ends decoupling interrelate among each other, as well as the temporal unfolding of the diverse micro-mechanisms in the materialisation of the phenomenon.

Empirical investigations relevant to the failure of organizations to achieve their intended institutional goals can provide an empirically grounded basis to further validate and complement the nascent theory of means-ends decoupling in opaque fields. As such, we call for empirical examinations that can provide plausible explanations to the frequent failure of contemporary organizations to achieve their intended goals for adopted institutions, although they deploy the necessary means for policy implementation and follow a clear set of compliance inducements.
2.5 Alternative Settings for Studying Means-ends Decoupling

Opacity exists in fields where observers have difficulty determining the specificities of prevailing practices, identifying causal relationships between adopted policies and organizational outcomes, and assessing the precise outcomes of policy implementation (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Jiang & Bansal, 2003; Wijen, 2014). Resultantly, it is challenging to observe whether adopters of institutions, which are situated in opaque fields, achieve a substantive level of compliance. Wijen (2014) specifies that the existence of complex causal patterns, heterogeneous practices, and hardly visible behaviours result in three distinct compliance barriers; namely, causal complexity, behavioural invisibility, and practice multiplicity. The presence of such compliance barriers in opaque fields compels designers to elaborate institutions in ways that incentivise adopters’ compliant behavior. In the other side of the spectrum, Wijen (2014) suggests three compliance inducements to attenuate the compliance challenges that actors face when they operate in non-transparent fields.

After accomplishing a thorough review of research on means-ends decoupling, we reached the conclusion that there is a need to explore this emergent phenomenon in alternative settings. While it is not the only type of institutional fields where opacity can be observed and where the means-ends decoupling phenomenon can prevail, the research setting of the large majority of studies on decoupling is to date situated in contexts dealing with sustainability and socio-environmental standards (e.g.; Crilly, Zollo, & Hansen, 2012; Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012; King & Lenox, 2000; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Wijen, 2014). In the scarcity of research that explores discrepancies between means and ends within settings beyond realms of social corporate responsibility standards, we highlight the importance of investigating this phenomenon within other opaque fields. Other opaque fields include public service (Frey et al., 2013), traffic security (Braithwaite & Drahos, 2000), financial stability (Fligstein & Goldstein, 2010), health care (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010), climate change mitigation (Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013), global geopolitics (Levy, 2008), management consultancy (David, Sine, & Haveman, 2013), and academia (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). In this regard, we argue in this paper that one institutional field in which opacity renders goal achievement difficult for observers to measure and connect to deployed means, and where practice multiplicity makes it hard for implementers to identify prevailing practices, thereby creating favourable conditions for means-ends decoupling to evolve, is the field of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects. We theorize that this particular setting, which has not yet received scholarly attention from institutional scholars, meets the criteria of an opaque field as defined by early decoupling research (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Jiang & Bansal, 2003; Wijen, 2014). By examining discrepancies between means and ends in a substantive different field that provides an interesting alternative context to study this phenomenon, future research can
complement and broaden the theoretical scope for research on means-ends decoupling.

In the following section, we illustrate how the field of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects meets the criteria of an opaque field. In so doing, we detail the specificities of the field that result in opacity. We also describe the compliance barriers that characterize the field, and the set of inducements established by the field’s institutional entrepreneurs to overcome these barriers and ensure compliant behavior among adopters.

Societal actors such as firms, NGOs, and institutions’ developers in opaque fields design and implement policies to achieve desirable societal outcomes (Delmas & Young, 2009; Espinosa & Walker, 2011). These societal actors operate as institutional entrepreneurs who resourcefully develop new institutions or transform the existing ones (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2008). These individuals or groups purposefully employ their social and political capabilities to facilitate the acceptance of novel or new institutional practices, through techniques such as framing “issues, devising incentives, and establishing bridges (Fligstein, 1997; Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004).

In the context of public funding schemes, selecting cooperative R&D projects is a particularly challenging task for evaluators (Santamaría et al., 2010; Takalo & Tanayama, 2010). Governmental agencies generally favour investments in research areas that can lead to achieving solid competitive advantages over time. Funding for such projects is often granted within the context of calls for projects across public research programs. Accordingly, governmental agencies thoroughly determine specific selection criteria that can help identify projects that meet the requirements of respective programs (Blanes & Busom, 2004). All information regarding the selection guidelines and criteria is available to R&D partners prior to the submission of their proposals. Given that the partners must comply with the strict requirements of R&D projects to qualify for funding, evaluators may be confronted with isomorphic proposals. As they have strong incentives to meet or even exceed the expectations of the constituencies involved in fund allocation, R&D partners may submit proposals that may not reflect their actual capabilities. This strict selection process enforces guidelines and criteria that cause substantial pressures on R&D partners to conform. While such requirements aim to facilitate the selection process for evaluators, they risk leading to isomorphic and untruthful proposals, based on misleading intentions by the partners.

As such, the project designers may set objectives for the project that conflict with partnering institutions’ core goals and that cannot be achieved by the partners given their real resources and capabilities. For example, a recent guideline for a national call for projects, which funds cooperative R&D projects in France, requires participating firms to display evidence of
substantive market potential for new products or services. While R&D partners might conform
to the requirement to provide market evidence by reporting large growth potential for future
markets, their company’s core goals focus on targeting smaller markets that better fit their
actual capabilities (Yang & Su, 2014). Leaning toward preserving the activities that lead to the
achievements of their core goals, these firms may unintentionally jeopardize the
implementation of the cooperative R&D project practices and the achievement of its
subsequent objectives. The latter example represents an instance of means-ends decoupling
where organizations adopt new ends that are not directly related to their core goals, and
subsequently fall in the trap of symbolic implementation. As argued by Bromley and Powell
(2012) and Wijen (2014), institutional fields in which organisations adopt policies and
implement practices that are loosely linked to their core goals, are favourable for means-ends
decoupling to prevail. Accordingly, we argue that publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects
is a favourable institutional field for means-ends decoupling to evolve.

WE complement my argument by contending that the field of publicly funded, cooperative
R&D projects is highly opaque because the relation between corporate activities and adopted
policies is hard to fully understand, causally attribute, and precisely measure (Jiang & Bansal,
2003; Sharma, 2000; Wijen, 2014). In so doing, we show how this particular institutional
environment fits the specificities of an opaque field, where barriers to compliance renders
substantive compliance a challenging task for project partners, and where a set of compliance
inducements are in turn established by the field’s institutional entrepreneurs to attenuate the
compliance challenges and maximize goal achievement.

First, the compliance barrier of ‘causal complexity’ evolves in environments in which
multiple heterogeneous actors, factors, and effects interact (Espinosa & Walker, 2011; Levy &
Lichtenstein, 2012). Causal complexity leads in consequence to uncertainty and ignorance
about cause-effect relations and the precise nature of an institutional field (Davis, Eisenhardt,
& Bingham, 2009; Lindblom, 1959; Milliken, 1987; Orton & Weick, 1990). The uncertainty
and ignorance, which causal complexity provokes, result in turn in a lack of attention and
knowledge about key drivers of substantive compliance (Ocasio, 1997). This causal complexity
which reins in opaque fields is exemplified by publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects. A
multitude of different actors constitutes R&D project consortia. This diversity stems from
the need to engage highly experienced actors in hyper-narrowed specializations. R&D projects
often integrate actors from various disciplines such as specialized start-ups in particular state-
of-the-art technologies or leading research institutions in specific realms of knowledge. The
diverse and multifaceted nature of these actors renders the full understanding of the cooperative
R&D practices challenging for involved actors. In the case of publicly funded, cooperative
R&D projects, the ‘technical annex’ which is developed for each specific project, provides
guidance and remedies improvisation for implementers. As such, the detailed codifications and explicitly formulated rules, which constitute the ‘technical annex’ operate as a compliance inducement that limits the room for ambiguity, ignorance, and uncertainty, and fosters compliant behavior among the project partners. R&D projects’ designers act as institutional entrepreneurs, which develop specific ‘technical annexes’ that fit the expectations of the multiple heterogeneous partnering organizations. The specific guidelines that constitute these annexes help minimize ambiguity and establish the link between corporate action and adopted policies for involved actors.

Second, the compliance barrier of ‘behavioral invisibility’ allows actors to conceal their non-compliant behavior and escape eventual sanctions (Aravind & Christmann, 2011). It characterizes institutional fields in which actors maintain a low profile (Spar & La Mure, 2003), refrain from accepting external control (Howard et al., 2000), or locate in remote areas (O’Rourke, 2007). Behavioral invisibility, thus, leads to a lack of motivation for adopters to comply (Wijen, 2014). To overcome this motivation barrier the developers of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects signal that compliant partners can receive material benefits such as being selected for future projects and capturing value from the achieved innovations. Such signals serve as compliance inducements to minimize the behavioral invisibility barrier and overcome the lack of motivation among implementers. As such, R&D projects’ developers operate as institutional entrepreneurs, which create ideal conditions for partnering organizations to comply, maximize goal achievement, and maintain visible profile.

Third, the compliance barrier of ‘practice multiplicity’ characterizes institutional fields where actors are faced with a multitude of divergent practices and heterogeneous routines. As such, the multiplicity of practices makes it difficult for adopters to engage in compliant behaviour (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009; Young, 2012), as it leads to ambiguity and lack of knowledge about which one of the various coexisting practices results in substantive compliance and goal achievement. To overcome this barrier to compliance, the developers of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects offer implementation options through enabling transfer of best practices among project partners. R&D projects are designed in ways that promote collaborative work and knowledge sharing among R&D partners, which in turn enable capacity building and acquisition of necessary competencies for policy implementation. Such inducements reduce ambiguity and uncertainty that stem from the multiple heterogeneous practices and routines and outstand the best practices that maximize the chances for compliant behaviour and goal achievement.

In sum, given that the field of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects is characterized by difficulty of observers to identify the characteristics of prevailing practices, establish causal
links between adopted policies and organizational outcomes, and measure the precise results of policy implementation, designers of such institutions create a set of inducements to attenuate the compliance barriers of causal complexity, behavioral invisibility, and practice multiplicity. These compliance inducements include setting specific rules through developing comprehensive ‘technical annexes’, devising incentives such as being selected for future projects and capturing value from achieved innovations, and enabling transfer of best practices among partners through collaborative work, knowledge sharing, capacity building, and acquisition of competencies. As such, the field of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects meets the definition of opaque fields in coherence with early institutional work (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Jiang & Bansal, 2003; Wijen, 2014). Following this line of argumentation, We call for devoting more effort into studying means-ends discrepancies in the alternative setting of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects. Shedding light on such an overlooked opaque field can help achieve a better understanding of the institutionally embedded causes and underlying factors relevant to the imperfect achievement of the envisaged goals for adopted institutions. Particularly, as the specificities and inherent conditions of this institutional field may involve a specific set of micro-level mechanisms that shape the manifestation of the macro-level phenomenon of means-ends decoupling.

3. Discussion

The number of organizations that devote more effort into implementing their policies, which were initially adopted symbolically, have dramatically increased due to the continuing rationalization and fragmentation of the institutional environment and growing levels of monitoring, control, and evaluation applied by various societal, governmental, and political bodies (Bromley & Powell, 2012). In this article, we have sought to identify important gaps in the decoupling literature relevant to these fundamental changes. In so doing, we reviewed the existing literature and tried to develop a conceptual framework that tackles some of the prevailing questions of the field. We built on the seminal work by Bromley and Powell (2012) and Wijen (2014), which propose the phenomenon of means-ends decoupling as an alternative explanation to the frequent failure of contemporary organizations in highly opaque fields to achieve the intended goals of their adopted policies. We add to this research by surfacing the institutionally embedded causes, underlying factors, as well as individual and group actions and interactions, which result through their interplay and in their combination in the emergence of a gap between organizational means and ends. As such, we theorized that a set of lower-level mechanisms lead collectively to the manifestation of the higher-level phenomenon of means-ends decoupling. We emphasize the importance of uncovering these micro-mechanisms to reach a plausible explanation relevant to the recurrent discrepancies between organizational
practices and outcomes in more rationalized environments. We further argue that these sets of micro-mechanisms might be different from one institutional field to another given the specificities and the variant conditions that characterize each particular opaque field.

Moreover, the accomplished review of the decoupling research has revealed that while institutional scholars’ consent on the significant association between means-ends decoupling and opaque fields, most of the institutional work that tackles the discrepancies between means and ends is yet situated in contexts dealing with sustainability and socio-environmental standards. In this regard, We attempted to provide an alternative setting, which meets the criteria of an opaque field, as a potentially alternative context for investigating the phenomenon of means-ends decoupling. In so doing, We theorized that the field of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects constitutes an appropriate environment in which means-ends decoupling can prevail. As such, we develop a set of conceptual arguments and theoretical reflections, which explain how this institutional field is characterized by the compliance barriers of causal complexity, behavioral invisibility, and practice multiplicity (Wijen, 2014). We further complement this analysis by demonstrating how R&D projects’ designers act as institutional entrepreneurs to provide a clear set of compliance inducements including setting rules, devising incentives, and ensuring transfer of best practices, thereby creating ideal conditions for policy implementation and goal achievement for R&D partners. Accordingly, we called for empirical investigations to further validate my conceptual framework. It is important for future research on means-ends decoupling to empirically unravel the means-ends micro-mechanisms, in relevance to the aggregate dimensions of compliance barriers and inducements, and how these lower-level mechanisms explain in their combination the manifestation of the higher-level phenomenon of means-ends decoupling.

In such empirical investigations, institutional scholars need to pay due attention to the theoretical combination and infusion of institutional theory and other theoretical paradigms (Haack & Schoenebom (2015)). While the theoretical integration of social constructionism and functionalism can benefit institutional theory and help solve prevalent governance issues for contemporary organizations (Wijen, 2015), such paradigms rapprochement should be thoroughly thought and reflected in future integrative studies on means-ends decoupling. It is crucial for future conceptual research to pursue the dialogue initiated by Haack and Schoenebom (2015), as challenging the robustness and validity of novel ideas remain essential to a sustainable theory development and knowledge boundaries expansion.

4. Contributions and Implications

Classical conceptions of decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) suggest that adopters of institutions often fail to achieve the goals of these institutions as envisaged by their designers.
Adopters which are faced by intensified external pressures may decouple adopted policies from internal practices and daily routines, thereby falling in the trap of symbolic adoption (Pache & Santos, 2013). Bromley and Powell (2012) and Wijen (2014) provide an alternative explanation for why adopters may not achieve the intended goals for adopted institutions. In their account, organizational adopters may fail to attain envisaged goals although they couple formal policies and internal practices and demonstrate substantive compliance. The authors stipulate that a substantive implementation of adopted policies may not lead to goal achievement, despite of deploying necessary means and following a clear set of inducements, leading to a gap between organizational means and institutional ends.

This article goes beyond Bromley and Powell’s (2012), and Wijen’s (2014) work by tackling the institutionally embedded causes and underlying factors for not achieving the envisaged outcomes. In so doing, we advance the idea that a set of micro-mechanisms, which are field dependent, lead through their interplay and in their combination to the manifestation of the means-ends decoupling phenomenon. Thereby, a first contribution of this article is to the institutional research, as it sheds light on one of the most prevailing questions relevant to the frequent failure of organizations in opaque fields to attain the envisaged goals for adopted institutions.

A second contribution of this article is to the work on opaque fields. Reviewing early decoupling research has revealed the need for exploring the nascent phenomenon of means-ends decoupling in contexts beyond sustainability and socio-environmental standards, which have largely dominated early decoupling research (e.g.; Crilly, Zollo, & Hansen, 2012; Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012; King & Lenox, 2000; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Wijen, 2014). We have taken a different direction by focusing on an alternative setting for studying the phenomenon of means-ends decoupling. In this regard, we advance the idea that one institutional field that can match the definition of an opaque field as described by early institutional work (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Jiang & Bansal, 2003; Wijen, 2014) is the field of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects. We demonstrate through subsequent argumentation how this institutional field is characterized by a set of barriers to compliance, which in turn are attenuated by a set of inducements that ensure substantive compliance and maximize goal achievement. We argued that field opacity in the context of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects renders goal attainment difficult to assess and to causally link to the deployed means.

Finally, a third contribution of this paper is to the cooperative R&D projects literature. By surfacing the conditions under which organizational means and institutional ends maintain distinct trajectories following the implementation of such institutions. Unraveling the
discrepancies between organizational practices and outcomes in the context of publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects can help provide a plausible explanation to one of the persisting questions faced by many developed economies. For example, many EU states do not know why R&D projects fall short of attaining their intended ends, despite of the significant means deployed by these states (Giebe, Grebe, & Wolfstetter, 2006; Lundberg & Andresen, 2012). As such, the conceptual insights developed in this paper can also contribute to resolving important contemporary practitioners and governance issues.

5. Conclusion

Motivated by the premise of practicality of good theory and responding to the need for practically relevant theory around important contemporary topics (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Suddaby, 2012), we have attempted to advance conceptual insights that can help resolve important extant governance issues for organizations. In this regard, we delineated the inherent tensions faced by R&D projects’ designers who act as institutional entrepreneurs to attenuate the compliance barriers and ensure substantive compliance for organizational adopters. We advanced the conceptual idea that a set of lower-level mechanisms, which are field dependent, lead through their interplay and in their combination to the manifestation of the higher-level phenomenon of means-ends decoupling. We applied these conceptual insights to one practically relevant institutional field, that we argued it fits the definition of opaque fields where discrepancies between organizational means and institutional ends are more likely to prevail. While the focus of my paper was to demonstrate the opacity of the publicly funded, cooperative R&D projects field, my conceptual arguments can also apply to other opaque fields such as health care, consultancy management, sustainability standards, or academia. In this paper, we called for empirical investigations that can further validate this conceptual framework and build an empirically grounded basis relevant to the manifestation of the means-ends decoupling phenomenon. In so doing, we called for integrative studies that aim at theory rapprochement, and which can benefit institutional theory from the insights of relevant paradigms and theoretical traditions. Meanwhile, we emphasize the importance of paying through attention to the appropriateness of such theory combination and infusion and ensuring the compatibility of the underlying assumptions and theoretical foundations that shape such theory combination initiatives. In sum, institutional scholars need to devote more effort into exploring the phenomenon of means-ends decoupling, which in turn complements the seminal contributions of policy-practice decoupling research in explaining the failure of organizations to achieve the intended goals for their adopted institutions, thereby developing a comprehensive theoretical framework within which the larger phenomenon of institutional decoupling can be better understood.
References


### Tables and Figures

**Table 1:** Initially examined journals and views on their quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examined Journals</th>
<th>FT List</th>
<th>UTD List</th>
<th>ABS List</th>
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<tr>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academy of Management Review</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative Science Quarterly</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journal of International Business Studies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Journal of Management Studies</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business Ethics Quarterly</td>
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<td>American Journal of Sociology</td>
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**Table 2:** A description of the examination process

<table>
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<th>Examined Journals</th>
<th>Articles initially identified</th>
<th>Articles dropped in phase 1</th>
<th>Articles maintained from phase 1</th>
<th>Articles dropped in phase 2</th>
<th>Final sample</th>
<th>Additional seminal studies</th>
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<td>Administrative Science Quarterly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journal of International Business Studies</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Management Journal</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization Science</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Management Studies</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Ethics Quarterly</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Journal of Sociology</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Articles</strong></td>
<td><strong>178</strong></td>
<td><strong>84</strong></td>
<td><strong>94</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
<td><strong>42</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: A summary of the additional journals and conferences examined and the additional identified articles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Journals</th>
<th>Additional Seminal Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounting, Organizations, and Society</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Behavioral Scientist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Journal of Political Science</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Review of Sociology</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Sociological Review</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Economics and Management Strategy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization studies</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology of Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociological Theory</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Interaction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Conferences</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Academy of Management Annals</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American Sociological Association Meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 8th New Institutionalism Workshop</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Articles  20
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of decoupling</th>
<th>Underlying conditions</th>
<th>Fundamental tenets</th>
<th>Main consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy-practice</strong></td>
<td>Policies are violated and unimplemented</td>
<td>Organizations regularly adopt policies, but do not implement them.</td>
<td>Increased legitimacy, that leads in turn to the acquisition of necessary resources for survival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of evaluation, monitoring, and sanctions.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased efficiency and preserving internal interests through buffering of core activities and daily routines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Means-ends</strong></td>
<td>Adopted policies are implemented, but the link to outcomes remains ambiguous.</td>
<td>Organizations fail to attain the intended goals for adopted policies, despite deploying resources and following clear inducements.</td>
<td>Increased internal complexity, endemic reforms, and irrational allocation of resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Failure to achieve envisaged goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Policy-practice versus means-ends decoupling.
Table 5: Sample of studies from the extant literature on policy-practice decoupling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Relevant theoretical framework</th>
<th>Empirical setting</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edelman (1992)</td>
<td>Symbolic adoption of formal policies and lack of implementation.</td>
<td>National survey of 346 US organizations relevant to the adoption of EEO/AA practices.</td>
<td>Legitimacy is increased through symbolic adoption and establishment of internal structures, although this elaboration is not related to intended outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsbach and Sutton (1992)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Qualitative examination of illegitimate actions by members of social movement organizations.</td>
<td>Increased legitimacy through symbolic adoption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westphal and Zajac (1998)</td>
<td>Exploration of stock market reactions following the adoption of governance mechanisms in 408 firms in the period between 1982 and 1992.</td>
<td>Symbolic adoptions can have positive financial outcomes for organizational adopters.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MacLean and Behnam (2010)</td>
<td>Case study examination of deceptive sales practices in a financial services corporation.</td>
<td>The gap between adopted policies and core activities enables acquisition of legitimacy, but also increases room for misconduct.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westphal and Zajac (2001)</td>
<td>Integration of agency and neo-institutional theory</td>
<td>Investigation of 412 industrial and service companies following the implementation of stock repurchase programs in the period between 1985 and 1991.</td>
<td>Policy-practice decoupling is more likely to occur when top-executives have authority over organizational boards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiss and Zajac (2004)</td>
<td>Examination of 112 German firms in the period between 1990 to 2000 following the adoption of shareholder value orientation.</td>
<td>The presence of powerful and committed actors minimizes the gap between adopted policies and internal daily practices.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zott and Nguyen Huy (2007)</td>
<td>Field study in the period between 2002 to 2004 of 26 British new ventures.</td>
<td>Managers acquire more resources when they successfully show symbolic attention to their personal credentials and competencies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Relevant theoretical framework</td>
<td>Empirical setting</td>
<td>Key Findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tilcsik (2010)</td>
<td>Integration of agency and neo-institutional theory.</td>
<td>Examination of a government agency following the allocation of public funds to subsidiaries using interviews and archival data in the period between 2004 and 2008.</td>
<td>Ideology of powerful leaders impacts the extent of decoupling and whether it persists over time within organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalev et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Irrational Allocation of Resources.</td>
<td>Examination of workforce and employment practices data for 708 US companies in the period between 1971 and 2002.</td>
<td>Irrational allocation of resources due to dedicating extensive resources to adopted standards, which have little to no effectiveness or impact on firms’ core goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short and Toffel (2010)</td>
<td>Rationalization of the institutional environment</td>
<td>Examination of 7274 US industrial facilities in relevance to the Clean Air Act in the period between 1993 and 2003.</td>
<td>Substantive compliance is more likely when there is strong legal regulation and lower threat of sanction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallett (2010)</td>
<td>Recoupling Adopted policies with internal core.</td>
<td>An ethnographic examination of urban elementary schools in the US in the period between 1999 and 2001.</td>
<td>Increased cultural pressures toward monitoring and accountability, has forced corporations to recouple their adopted policies and internal practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cole (2005)</td>
<td>Exploration of the human rights practices and treaty ratifications within 130 countries in the period between 1966 and 1999.</td>
<td></td>
<td>The gap between policy and practice shrinks over time, as firms build capacity and increase willingness among internal constituencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Relevant theoretical framework</td>
<td>Empirical setting</td>
<td>Key Findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haack, Schoenebom, and Wickert (2012)</td>
<td>Narration perspective of sustainability standards</td>
<td>A case study analysis of the Equator Principles standard in international project finance. Exploring how narratives create meaning shared by both business firms and their societal observers,</td>
<td>The authors advance a narrative perspective that illuminates the trajectory a sustainability standard follows, from being formally adopted to becoming collectively accepted as a valid solution to a problem of societal concern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crilly, Hansen, and Zollo (2012)</td>
<td>Firms’ responses to institutional pressures.</td>
<td>In-depth examination of 17 multinational corporations involving 359 interviews with internal and external actors.</td>
<td>Corporations facing identical pressures may implement policy-practice decoupling in different ways and for different reasons. Managers will intentionally practice decoupling in the presence of information asymmetry between the corporations and their stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crilly, Hansen, and Zollo (2012)</td>
<td>Cognitive-linguistic perspective for firms’ sustainability claims and stakeholders’ interpretations.</td>
<td>A textual analysis of grammatical structure in 261 interviews conducted in a large field study of 12 multinational corporations and their stakeholders.</td>
<td>Firms can deceive their stakeholders, by failing to deliver on their commitments to undertake sustainability practices without being detected. The authors developed a cognitive-linguistic perspective to explain why stakeholders are sometimes misled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Relevant theoretical framework</td>
<td>Key Conceptual Insights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Bromley and Powell (2012) | Rationalization of the institutional environment/Means-ends decoupling | The increased accountability, monitoring, control, and evaluation applied by societal, governmental, and political bodies has led to rationalization and fragmentation of the institutional environment in which contemporary organizations are rooted.  
This fundamental changes in the institutional environment call for a reexamination of traditional theories of decoupling.  
Due to the increased rationalization and fragmentation of the environment, contemporary firms feel more compelled to implement their symbolically adopted policies, which brings our attention to a different form of decoupling; the one relevant to the gap between organizational means and ends. |
| Wijen (2014)       | Compliance barriers and inducements/Means-ends decoupling   | Means-ends decoupling is more likely to prevail in opaque fields that are characterized by the compliance barriers of internal complexity, behavioral invisibility, and practice multiplicity.  
Institutions designers and implementers act like institutional entrepreneurs who create a set of inducements (setting rules, devising incentives, and transferring best practices) to attenuate the compliance barriers and create ideal conditions for goal achievement.  
The rigidity of these inducements renders the developed institutions ill-equipped to deal with the causal complexity and practice multiplicity that characterize opaque fields, which results in a trade-off between substantive compliance and goal achievement. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Relevant theoretical framework</th>
<th>Key Conceptual Insights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Haack and Schoenebom (2015) | Critiques to the work by Wijen (2014), and Bromley and Powell (2012). | Haack and Schoenebom (2015) initiated a dialogue to comment on the work accomplished by Wijen (2014), and less explicitly the work by Bromley and Powell (2012). They argue that the term ‘means-ends decoupling’ confuses the classical notion of decoupling, as the symbolic adoption of policies, with the effectiveness of the means that actors adopt for the intended ends.  
They further contend that policy-practice decoupling and means-ends decoupling originate in different theoretical traditions (social constructionism and functionalism), of which the underlying assumptions are incompatible.  
They claim that ends are not objective facts from a social constructionist lens. Thus, ends cannot serve as a fixed reference point from which means can be decoupled. Instead, the authors view the ends as ‘moving targets’ that are often determined on the basis of existing means.  
The advancement of a ‘trade-off’ between remedying policy-practice and means-ends decoupling is developed on a static perspective of social reality, overlooking the significant impact of ideational dynamics and the transitory nature of the decoupling phenomenon. |
| Wijen (2016)                | Response to the critique made by Haack and Schoenebom (2015) | Wijen contends that the integration of relevant insights from different perspectives expands the knowledge frontiers, as a single perspective does not fully capture a complex social reality. emphasizing that both functionalist and social constructionist paradigms are not incompatible.  
He further argues that scholars should aim for theoretical rapprochement and infusion, noting the contribution of integrative studies in achieving better understanding of institutional phenomena.  
He concurs to Haack and Schoenebom’s remarks regarding the dynamic and transitory nature of the decoupling phenomenon, emphasizing that the evolution of institutional arrangements is not the main focus of his article.  
Wijen further replies that symbolically adopted policies may indeed become implemented and that means and ends interpretations by adopters and designers may also converge through recurrent interactions. In his account, the practice multiplicity and causal complexity that characterize opaque fields lead to various possible interpretations of institutional arrangements, that different actors will tend to attribute dissimilar meanings to means and ends (Dobbin, 2009). |