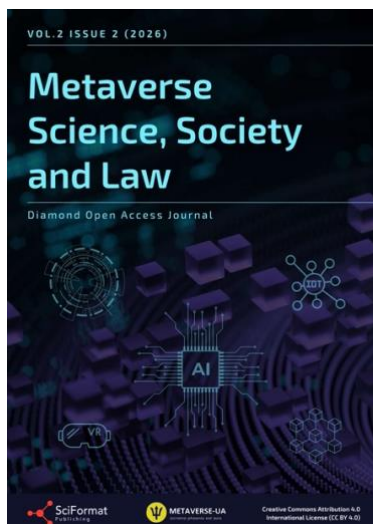




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A STRUCTURAL-COGNITIVE THEORY OF INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION: SYMBOLIC MEDIATION, COGNITIVE INTEGRATION AND COORDINATIVE SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This article develops and substantiates a structural-cognitive theory of institutional coordination. It explains how institutional structure acquires a practical capacity to coordinate action and reproduces that capacity over time. Existing strands of institutionalism convincingly elucidate the roles of rules, incentives, legitimacy, discourse and practices; however, they leave insufficiently specified the mechanism through which structural organisation is translated into compatible orientations and coordinated behaviour. The study employs problem-oriented conceptual analysis, theoretical modelling and a legal specialisation of the model. The proposed mechanism begins with participants' cognitive constraints — an underlying condition of social interaction — and proceeds through institutional structure and a symbolic system that interfaces its formal and informal contours; cognitive economy and cognitive integration then convert this structure into an emergent state of shared orientation, which is enacted as coordinated behaviour, reproduced through recurrent practices, and sustained as coordinative sustainability. The article distinguishes cognitive economy from cognitive integration, sustainability from invariability, and coordinative dysfunction from institutional crisis. Institutional crisis is defined as a regime in which two conditions hold at once: an accumulated mismatch between the complexity of interaction and an institution's structural-symbolic capacity impedes the reproduction of sufficiently compatible orientations and coordinated action; and the costs of sustaining coordination exceed the level compatible with cognitive integration. The legal specialisation shows that legal constructing encodes social factuality into legally relevant forms, whereas legal constructions support typification, predictability, reciprocal legal expectations and the procedural processing of disagreement. The theory provides a basis for comparative research on institutional reforms, legal orders and crises of coordination.

KEYWORDS

Institutional Coordination, Structural-Cognitive Theory, Symbolic System, Cognitive Economy, Cognitive Integration, Coordinative Sustainability, Institutional Crisis, Legal Constructing

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Key statements:

Institutional structure coordinates behaviour through symbolically accessible modes of orientation.

Cognitive integration is an emergent state of social interaction rather than an individual psychological state.

Coordinative sustainability denotes the reproduction of compatible orientations over time rather than the invariability of an institution.

Institutional crisis arises when the symbolic system loses its capacity to sustain structural compatibility and cognitive integration, while the costs of sustaining coordination exceed a functionally acceptable level.

Legal constructions are normative-symbolic matrices of legal coordination.

1. Introduction: Institutional Coordination as an Explanatory Problem

No society is sustained by the goodwill of its participants alone: where mutual trust ends, the work of institutions begins. Institutions organise social interaction through rules, roles, procedures, categories, established ways of interpreting situations, and forms of reciprocal expectation. In the classical institutional tradition, they are defined as humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction; in this sense, institutions reduce uncertainty, delimit possible actions, and shape participants' incentives (North, 1990). The theory of common-pool resource governance likewise demonstrates that institutional rules, mechanisms of monitoring and reciprocity, and procedures for resolving conflicts create conditions for enduring cooperation in the presence of conflicting interests and the risk of opportunistic behaviour (Ostrom, 1990, 2005).

Sociological institutionalism regards institutions as combinations of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements which, together with the associated practices and resources, provide stability and meaningful order to social life (Scott, 2014). The regulative dimension concerns rules, monitoring, and sanctions; the normative dimension concerns values, appropriate roles, and standards of conduct; and the cultural-cognitive dimension concerns shared conceptions through which participants recognise social reality and attribute meaning to it (Scott, 2014). Research on institutionalised organisations and isomorphism further shows that formal structures, professional models, and legitimate organisational templates shape practices through coercion, cultural embedding, and recognition as appropriate (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The problem of coordination becomes particularly important in complex social settings in which participants act under conditions of incomplete information, limited capacity to process signals, and uncertainty concerning the behaviour of others. The concept of bounded rationality establishes that individuals and organisations do not make choices under assumptions of complete information and unlimited computational capacity; instead, they rely on simplifications, procedures, and satisficing solutions that enable action within practicable limits (Simon, 1947, 1957). Within transaction-cost theory, institutional organisation is associated with reducing the costs of information search, negotiation, monitoring, contracting, and the enforcement of agreements (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1985).

Herein lies the real puzzle of institutional theory. The central problem of this article concerns the mechanism through which rules, roles, procedures, competences, and categories become practically accessible orientations for interaction. The formal existence of a rule does not in itself establish that participants identify the relevant situation in the same way, understand the distribution of positions, anticipate the responses of others, or can relate their own actions to institutional expectations. A rule exists on paper much more readily than in the minds of those required to follow it. This article proceeds from the proposition that symbolic-cognitive mediation operates between institutional structures and behaviour. This intermediate mechanism, rather than the letter of the rule alone, determines the explanatory focus of the article.

Institutional coordination therefore denotes the process through which practically sufficient compatibility of interpretations, reciprocal expectations, and modes of action is formed and reproduced in institutionally defined situations. Compatibility does not require unity of beliefs, interests, or evaluations. It exists when differences remain relatable to shared categories, procedures, and criteria of relevance and can be translated into mutually oriented behaviour.

The legal sphere demonstrates this connection particularly clearly. Law organises interaction through legal categories, legal facts, procedures, competences, statuses, and forms of liability. The operation of these forms presupposes that participants in legal communication can recognise legally relevant circumstances, relate them to normative categories, justify legal qualification, and anticipate the legal consequences of actions. Institutional legal theory describes the interrelationship of norms, facts, meaning, and action as part of the

institutional character of legal order (Wagner, 2009). Accordingly, an explanation of institutional coordination in law requires an analysis of the processes through which normatively and organisationally structured forms acquire symbolic expression, cognitive accessibility, and practical reproducibility.

The purpose of this article is to construct a structural-cognitive theory that establishes a sequential relationship among institutional structure, the symbolic system, cognitive economy, cognitive integration, coordinated behaviour, and coordinative sustainability. The article addresses three questions: (1) how institutional structure becomes cognitively accessible; (2) under what conditions accessible meanings form compatible orientations; and (3) how that compatibility is preserved, deformed, or destroyed over time. Each answer brings us closer to understanding why some institutions withstand decades of disruption while others disintegrate within a matter of months.

2. The Theoretical Field and the Explanatory Limits of Existing Approaches

Institutional theory has developed several influential ways of explaining how social order acquires stability and coordinates interaction. Rational-choice and new institutionalist approaches emphasise the significance of rules, property rights, incentives, sanctions, and transaction costs. From this perspective, institutions make behaviour more predictable, limit opportunism, and create conditions for mutually beneficial cooperation (North, 1990; Williamson, 1985). The theory of collective action focuses on rules developed and maintained by participants, mechanisms of monitoring, graduated sanctions, procedures for resolving conflicts, and forms of polycentric governance capable of ensuring the enduring management of common-pool resources (Ostrom, 1990, 2005).

Organisational and sociological institutionalism links coordination to shared cultural patterns, legitimacy, professional norms, and organisational fields. Institutionalised structures receive support because they are perceived as rational, appropriate, or taken for granted; organisations adopt such structures through coercive, normative, and mimetic mechanisms of isomorphism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Within this approach, institutional stability is associated with the reproduction of legitimate categories, practices, and cognitive schemas that provide participants with shared orientations for action (Scott, 2014).

Approaches centred on ideas, discourse, and communication show that institutional rules operate within an environment of interpretation. In this perspective, institutional change depends on how participants formulate problems, justify acceptable solutions, and disseminate frames of meaning capable of organising collective action (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). A communicative theory of social order likewise shows that social systems are sustained through recurrent operations of communication by which systemic boundaries, meanings, and expectations are reproduced (Luhmann, 1995). In law, this approach makes it possible to describe legal normativity as a distinctive order of communication in which the meaning of facts is determined through legally relevant distinctions, categories, and procedures (Luhmann, 2004).

Practice-oriented approaches relate institutional efficacy to the everyday reproduction of rules in concrete action. Institutions exist as external constraints and cultural schemas, while also existing as what participants enact: reproduce, interpret, adapt, and transform through practical activity (Giddens, 1984; Lawrence et al., 2009). Within institutional work, particular importance attaches to purposive action by actors aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This perspective explains why the sustainability of institutional order depends on participants' continuing practical engagement and why institutional change is associated both with external pressures and with the transformation of practices.

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory shows that behaviour is formed not as a direct effect of either stimulus or inner drive, but as the outcome of interaction among personal factors, behavioural practices, and the environment within a model of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986, 2001). Observational learning is central to this account: people acquire models of action not only through direct experience, but also through observing the behaviour of others, evaluating it, and subsequently reproducing it. The visibility, recurrence, and reinforcement of particular behavioural models create conditions for their acquisition and reproduction without continuous direct coercion.

The proposed structural-cognitive theory of institutional coordination is neither a continuation nor a variant of Bandura's social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory explains mechanisms of individual acquisition, modelling, and behavioural self-regulation; the proposed theory examines how symbolic structures, normative forms, cognitive economy, and cognitive integration enable coordinated behaviour and an institution's coordinative sustainability. The relationship between the two approaches is one of partial complementarity rather than theoretical continuation: Bandura's model identifies one of the psychological

resources of social learning, but does not reconstruct the supra-individual architecture of institutional coordination (Bandura, 1986, 2001).

Each of these approaches identifies an important condition of institutional coordination: rules and incentives structure the possibilities for action; legitimacy and cultural schemas stabilise conceptions of what is appropriate; discourse and communication organise the production of meanings; and practices translate institutional forms into recurrent action. Theoretical explanation, however, requires a model that consistently relates these dimensions through the process by which an institutionally organised structure becomes a cognitively accessible, symbolically expressed, and practically reproducible form of coordination.

Existing approaches provide necessary elements of explanation, but they do not automatically form a unified causal-processual mechanism. Rules may exist without an intelligible categorisation of situations; a legitimate order may impose excessive cognitive demands; communication may disseminate incompatible modes of interpretation; and recurrent practices may reproduce a deformed function. Theories of institutional work explain well who maintains institutions and through which practices, whereas the structural-cognitive approach specifies the particular coordinative property that such practices must reproduce.

The explanatory gap concerns transitions between levels of analysis. Anthropological limitations create a need to reduce social complexity. Institutional structure organises typical positions and relationships. The symbolic system gives that structure a sign-mediated and communicatively accessible form. Cognitive integration arises at the level of interaction as compatibility of orientations. Coordinated behaviour tests that compatibility in practice, while recurrence gives it temporal duration. Conflating these levels produces either a psychologisation of the institution or, conversely, an understanding of structure as a self-sufficient cause of behaviour.

This is the article's purpose: not to discard existing achievements, but to complete a missing link. Structural-cognitive theory is proposed as a heuristic reconstruction of institutional explanation. It does not claim to replace institutionalism, nor does it attribute to institutions an internal, agent-like consciousness. Its task is to identify the functional relationships through which institutionally organised symbolic forms reduce complexity, create conditions for compatible orientation, and sustain coordinated action. This formulation develops the thesis of the cognitive and behavioural mediation of institutions by translating it into a structural model of coordinative sustainability (Castelfranchi, 2006; Khalabudenko, 2026).

3. Methodology of Theoretical Construction

The methodological basis of the study consists of conceptual analysis and theoretical modelling. Conceptual analysis is used to determine the relationships among the concepts of cognitive constraints, institutional structure, symbolic mediation, cognitive economy, cognitive integration, recurrent practices, and coordinative sustainability. Theoretical modelling is used to establish the sequence of processes through which these concepts form a unified explanatory mechanism. This mode of inquiry corresponds to the requirements of conceptual research: it must rest on a clearly articulated research design, explain the role of the theories employed, and demonstrate the model's contribution to explaining a defined phenomenon (Jaakkola, 2020). Theory-construction methodology likewise treats the formation of an explanatory model as a movement from specifying a phenomenon to formulating theoretical principles that explain its properties and provide grounds for subsequent empirical examination (Borsboom et al., 2021).

The research design is problem-oriented. Its point of departure is the *explanandum*: an institution's coordinative sustainability, that is, its capacity to reproduce sufficiently compatible orientations and coordinated actions over time. The *explanans* consists of an ordered set of mechanisms: structural organisation, symbolic mediation, cognitive economy, cognitive integration, and practical reproduction. This design accords with the requirement that a conceptual article formulate its theoretical contribution through a novel relationship among concepts, a clear logic of mechanism, and the possibility of subsequent examination (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Jaakkola, 2020).

The method of distinction is used to differentiate related categories: cognitive limits and cognitive load; cognitive economy and cognitive integration; coordinative sustainability and structural invariability; dysfunction and crisis; and transformation and transformed form. The method of sequential modelling establishes transitions between levels without reducing social coordination to individual psychology. In this study, legal specialisation serves as an analytical test: law brings into concentrated view processes of symbolic coding, qualification, typification, procedural verification, and authoritative recognition, drawing methodologically on legal constructivism. Legal constructivism proceeds from the proposition that law does not reflect social factuality in a ready-made form; rather, it carries out its normative-symbolic reconstruction

through the selection of legally relevant circumstances, their qualification, and their incorporation into a system of legal meanings (Khalabudenko, 2024, 2025).

The level of analysis of the theory is structural. Biological and psychological properties of cognition constitute an anthropological foundation, but not the model's direct object. Cognitive load concerns the complexity of participants' orientation; the costs of sustaining coordination concern institutional procedures, repeated verification, mediation, monitoring, coercion, and error correction. The interaction of these indicators is relevant for diagnosis, but they belong to different levels of explanation.

Proposition 1. *A structural-cognitive explanation of social institutions is adequate when it distinguishes the anthropological precondition, institutional structure, the emergent state of interaction, and behavioural reproduction, while showing the functional transitions among them.*

4. Structural-Cognitive Mechanism of Institutional Coordination

4.1. Biological Limits of the Social and the Need for Institutional Orientation

Social interaction is undertaken by human beings as biologically embodied creatures whose capacities for perception, attention, memory, interpretation, anticipation, and practical action are finite. Human beings can create complex symbolic systems, accumulate knowledge, and organise collective activity; nevertheless, every particular act of social orientation takes place within limited time, incomplete information, selective attention, and a limited capacity simultaneously to relate multiple positions, meanings, and possible consequences. The biological limits of human cognition therefore constitute an anthropological precondition of social order.

The concept of the biological limits of the social does not entail a reduction of social phenomena to biological causes. It identifies the limits within which social structures, symbolic systems, and normative orders can be practically recognised, acquired, and reproduced by human beings. Social complexity may grow without limit in terms of information, specialisation, normative demands, and technological connections, whereas the biological capacities of any individual participant remain finite. This asymmetry creates a fundamental problem of institutional coordination: social order must ensure a practicable correspondence between the complexity of interaction and human capacities to orient themselves within it.

Cognitive limits specify biological finitude at the level of perceiving and making sense of social situations. They determine the volume of information that a participant can process, the number of possible actions and consequences that can be compared, and the temporal limits within which expectations are formed and practical decisions are made. The concept of bounded rationality describes one manifestation of this dependence: individuals and organisations act under conditions of incomplete information, finite computational capacities, and temporal constraints, and therefore rely on simplified procedures and satisfactory modes of problem-solving (Simon, 1947, 1957). The structural-cognitive theory, however, considers bounded rationality within a broader anthropological perspective: as one particular manifestation of the biological and cognitive finitude of participants in social interaction.

Under these conditions, social action requires institutionally formed means of reducing complexity. Participants cannot repeatedly determine every possible meaning of a situation, reconstruct the full configuration of positions, calculate the consequences of every action, and separately agree the underlying criteria with other participants. Practical interaction becomes possible through pre-established categories, roles, rules, procedures, competences, and symbolic distinctions that identify the relevant elements of a situation and the available modes of action.

Institutions constitute specialised mechanisms for bringing social complexity into correspondence with human biological and cognitive capacities. They organise recurrent situations through established rules, categories, roles, procedures, symbols, and practices. The cultural-cognitive dimension of institutional order forms shared ways of recognising what is happening, which circumstances matter, and which actions are possible, appropriate, or expected (Scott, 2014). Institutional logics combine material practices, symbolic systems, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules through which individuals and organisations attribute meaning to everyday activity, organise time and space, and reproduce social experience (Thornton et al., 2012).

Participants' cognitive orientation is socially formed. It emerges within an environment of existing categories, linguistic forms, symbolic distinctions, procedures, and models of action. Institutional context provides social cues, directs the recognition of relevant circumstances, corrects interpretations through feedback, and may simultaneously produce difficulties of sensemaking because of internal contradictions or ambiguities within the order itself (Weber & Glynn, 2006). Institutional coordination rests on sufficient

compatibility in the ways situations are recognised and reciprocal expectations are formed, while preserving the possibility that individual beliefs, aims, and evaluations may differ.

Biosocial economy of resources defines the functional basis of institutional order. Social interaction requires expenditures of time, attention, memory, interpretive effort, communication, verification, error correction, and the maintenance of reciprocal expectations. Institutions enable the economical use of these resources when they transform an indeterminate multiplicity of possible meanings and actions into reproducible categories, positions, procedures, and criteria of relevance. In this sense, biosocial economy characterises a condition of the practical feasibility of social order rather than a model of free choice or the maximisation of individual utility.

Biological limits, cognitive constraints, and biosocial economy belong to distinct levels of explanation. Biological limits constitute the anthropological precondition of sociality. Cognitive constraints characterise the practical limits of participants' orientation in complex situations. Biosocial economy expresses the functional need for an organisation of social order that enables the reproduction of interaction under conditions of human finitude. Institutional structure responds to that need, and the symbolic system makes structurally organised modes of interaction available for recognition, interpretation, and communication.

Proposition 2. *Human biological and cognitive finitude establishes the anthropological limits of social interaction and gives rise to the need to economise biosocial resources; social institutions respond to that need by structurally and symbolically organising social complexity into forms accessible to recognition, interpretation, and reciprocal anticipation.*

4.2. Institutional Structure: Formal and Informal Contours

Institutional structure characterises the ordered relationship among rules, roles, procedures, competences, categories, resources, and recurrent practices through which social interaction acquires an organised character. Its function is to establish relatively stable participant positions, modes of interaction, and points of orientation for assessing possible actions. This approach combines an understanding of institutions as rules that constrain and direct interaction (North, 1990) with an understanding of institutions as regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that provide stability and meaning to social life (Scott, 2014). Institutional structure does not exist separately from participants' activity: it is maintained, interpreted, and transformed in the practices through which rules and roles acquire concrete meaning (Giddens, 1984; Lawrence et al., 2009).

The structure of an institution encompasses formal and informal contours. The formal contour consists of normatively established rules, competences, procedures, organisations, documents, and official modes of recording. The informal contour consists of practices, expectations, modes of reciprocal recognition, professional customs, trust, and de facto rules of access. Both contours have a structural character and may support, correct, or obstruct one another.

The symbolic system does not constitute a third contour of the institution. It functions as the system that enables biosocial communication through the mechanism of cognitive integration. In this way, formal and informal elements become expressed, mutually relatable, and suitable for the relevant forms of communication. The same procedure may have an official normative meaning, an informal practice of application, and a symbolically established image of a fair or ritual order. The coordinative outcome depends on the compatibility of these meanings.

4.3. The Institutional Symbolic System: Sign Forms, Codes, and Interpretive Practices

Symbolic mediation characterises the process through which institutionally organised rules, roles, procedures, and categories acquire an expressed form and become capable of being recognised, interpreted, and applied by participants in social interaction. Symbols perform representational, integrative, and coordinative functions. They connect material elements, on the one hand, with behavioural, cognitive, and affective elements of social order, on the other; they mediate the relationship between the individual and institutional structure, and their institutionalisation occurs through typification, objectivation, and transmission (cf. Meyer et al., 2026). In this sense, the symbolic dimension creates conditions in which institutional order appears to participants not as an abstract set of rules, but as a socially recognisable and practically meaningful mode of organising interaction.

Institutional logics form symbolic systems through which individuals and organisations interpret everyday activity, identify significant objects, distinguish permissible from impermissible actions, and

organise reciprocal expectations (Thornton et al., 2012). Symbolic form gives institutional categories communicative determinacy: it makes possible their naming, repetition, application to new situations, and contestation when different modes of interpretation compete. Institutional coordination accordingly depends on whether participants can relate a particular situation to the categories, rules, roles, and expected modes of action available to them.

Communication sustains institutions through the dissemination, specification, and reproduction of such symbolic forms. Research on communicative institutionalism demonstrates that communication occupies a central place in the maintenance and transformation of institutions because communicative events reproduce the categories, meanings, and principles that structure institutional logics (Cornelissen et al., 2015). In this process, communication performs coordinative, sense-giving, translational, and theorising functions: it coordinates action, offers interpretations, carries meanings across contexts, and develops generalised accounts capable of stabilising or transforming institutional order (Cornelissen et al., 2015).

Analytically, the symbolic system comprises three interdependent elements. Sign forms materialise institutional distinctions and make them recurrent in words, texts, documents, gestures, spatial boundaries, digital interfaces, and rituals. Institutional codes establish the basic distinctions through which situations acquire meaning. Interpretive practices relate sign forms and codes to particular situations, enabling their recognition, qualification, and incorporation into shared interaction.

The relationship among these elements is recursive. Sign forms reproduce codes; codes direct interpretation; and recurrent interpretations confirm or transform the meanings of sign forms. Recursivity explains the coexistence of stability and variability: the symbolic system preserves recognisability while being adjusted in the course of its application. A rupture in the recursive relationship arises when a form continues to be reproduced but its practical function changes or ceases to correspond to the institutional task.

Proposition 3. *Institutional structure acquires the capacity to coordinate action through the recursive relationship among sign forms, institutional codes, and interpretive practices, which renders formal and informal elements mutually relatable.*

4.4. Cognitive Economy

Cognitive economy characterises the capacity of institutional order to reduce the volume of intellectual and communicative effort required by participants to orient themselves within recurrent situations of interactional dynamics. It arises when rules, roles, categories, procedures, and symbolic designations provide participants with ready-made means of recognising a situation, identifying relevant circumstances, and selecting practically permissible actions. Under conditions of bounded rationality, such modes of orientation reduce the need for a complete analysis of all available alternatives and allow action on the basis of satisfactory rather than exhaustively optimal decisions (Simon, 1947, 1957). In this sense, institutional organisation reduces the costs associated with information search, the conclusion of agreements, monitoring, and ensuring the predictability of interaction (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1985). This is the first of the two functions that institutions perform in the coordination of interactional dynamics: reducing the cognitive load required for orientation within the space of social interaction.

Symbolically expressed institutional forms reinforce cognitive economy, since they transform complex social relations into relatively stable and recurrent schemas of interpretation. Role designations, legal categories, procedural sequences, statuses, documents, professional concepts, and other public representations allow participants more quickly to establish what is happening, who holds authority, which actions are expected, and which consequences may follow. In this respect, institutions function as social cognitive artefacts: they mediate the relationship between established models of interaction and individual understanding of a situation through public representations that ensure the shared accessibility of meanings (Hodgson, 2010). Institutional logics likewise provide practical frameworks through which participants attribute meaning to activity and relate their own actions to the expected actions of others (Thornton et al., 2012).

Cognitive economy is a functional effect of symbolically organised structure. It manifests itself in the reduction of the number of operations required to determine the type of situation, the relevant positions, permissible actions, and foreseeable consequences. A ready-made category narrows the field of possible interpretations; a procedure orders the sequence of steps; a competence determines whose decision carries institutional significance; a document stabilises a fact over time. Economy disappears when every situation requires the repeated renegotiation of basic meanings or numerous compensatory verifications.

However, the reduction of load is not unconditionally positive. Excessive simplification can conceal relevant differences, exclude atypical positions, and reproduce unjust classifications. The assessment of cognitive economy therefore requires a functional criterion: the reduction of complexity must sustain sufficient accuracy of orientation, the possibility of correction, and institutionally acceptable processing of disagreement.

4.5. Cognitive Integration as an Emergent State of Interaction

Cognitive integration is an emergent state of social interaction in which participants interpret institutionally significant situations through a sufficiently shared symbolic system. Such a state reduces the costs of identifying rules, roles, and reciprocal expectations and makes it possible to coordinate interdependent actions. It does not belong to any individual participant, does not imply a collective consciousness, and does not presuppose identity of beliefs.

The criterion of integration is the practical compatibility of orientations. Participants may contest decisions, pursue conflicting aims, and advance competing interpretations while preserving integration when they recognise the subject matter of disagreement, the relevant categories, the procedure of verification, and the institutional significance of the outcome. Consensus is a possible outcome, but not a necessary condition. Interaction that procedurally organises disagreement may remain integrated.

Research on shared mental models shows that compatible knowledge structures concerning tasks, roles, and interdependencies increase the accuracy of reciprocal expectations and the capacity for implicit coordination (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993; Mathieu et al., 2000; DeChurch & Mesmer-Magnus, 2010). The structural-cognitive model employs this finding with a crucial qualification concerning the level of analysis: cognitive integration characterises a state of institutionally mediated interaction, whereas the compatibility of individual knowledge is one possible mechanism of its realisation. This is the second of the two functions that institutions perform in coordinating interaction: ensuring sufficient compatibility among the orientations, interpretations, and expectations of participants in interaction.

Cognitive economy and cognitive integration, however, perform distinct functions. Economy reduces the complexity of orientation; integration ensures compatibility of orientations among participants. An intelligible procedure may be connected in different ways to informal expectations and may therefore fail to produce integration. A shared vocabulary may conceal incompatible criteria of qualification. The theoretical distinction between these two effects makes it possible to diagnose institutions that are easy to use but incapable of stabilising reciprocal expectations.

Proposition 4. *Cognitive integration, which enables institutionally mediated communication, arises when symbolically accessible categories, codes, and procedures sustain practically sufficient compatibility of orientations; identity of belief and complete consensus are not required.*

4.6. From Cognitive Integration to Coordinated Behaviour

Coordinated behaviour is both the practical outcome and the test of cognitive integration. Compatible orientations are translated into action through the distribution of positions, temporal sequencing, reciprocal predictability, available means of correction, and recognition of institutionally significant decisions. Behaviour is coordinated when participants' actions become mutually relatable within a shared institutional situation, even where outcomes are distributed asymmetrically or remain contested.

Power affects this transition as an asymmetric mechanism of institutional mediation through the symbolic system. A position of power determines which distinctions, categories, decisions, and interpretations acquire institutional significance. It rests on two foundations: *potestas*, which secures the competence-based and procedurally established capacity to make decisions, and *auctoritas*, through which normative recognition of authority is sustained. The distinction between *potestas* and *auctoritas* has heuristic significance in this study. The former concept emphasises a capacity secured by position; the latter denotes recognised appropriateness of the grounds on which authority is claimed (Raz, 1986; Beetham, 2013; Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Jackson, 2014). Power coordinates formal and informal contours where sufficient recognition exists. A loss of recognition increases the need for coercion and generates conflict, but does not in itself predetermine either a revolutionary or a restorative outcome.

Proposition 5. *Coordinated behaviour is reproduced when participants translate compatible orientations into mutually relatable actions through institutional communication, and when the authoritative determination of institutionally significant distinctions retains sufficient normative recognisability and procedural verifiability.*

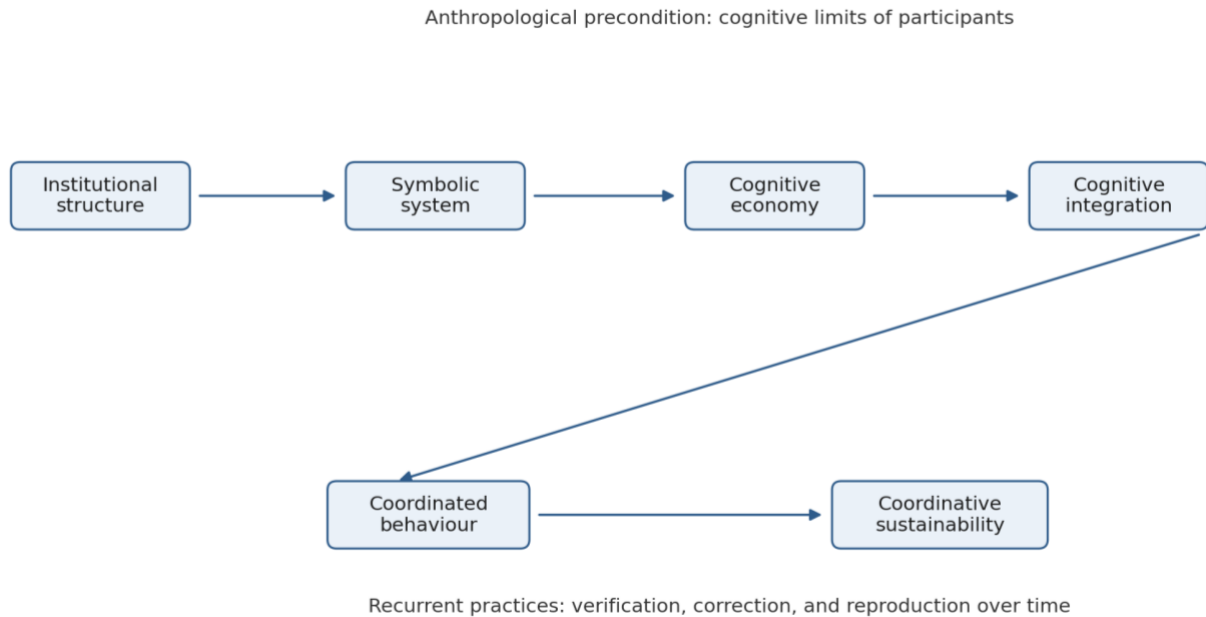


Fig. 1. Structural-cognitive mechanism of institutional coordination. Source: Developed by the author.

5. The Coordinative Sustainability, Change, and Crisis of Institutions

5.1. Recurrent Practices and Coordinative Sustainability of Institutions

Recurrent practices characterise the actions through which participants reproduce, specify, and, where necessary, adjust institutional rules, roles, procedures, and expectations in everyday interaction. Institutions retain their efficacy through the formal existence of normative prescriptions and organisational structures, as well as through the regular application, confirmation, and embedding of the corresponding forms in participants' activity. Institutional work theory defines this dimension as the practices of individual and collective actors aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Institutional maintenance encompasses actions that secure compliance with rules, reproduce normative foundations, and sustain the cognitive structures on which established interaction rests (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010).

Institutional maintenance is realised through a combination of regulative, normative, and cognitive practices. Regulative practices establish or clarify rules, distribute powers, conduct monitoring, and apply consequences for non-compliance. Normative practices sustain conceptions of what is appropriate through professional standards, positive and negative models, evaluation, and public recognition. Cognitive practices consolidate categories, ways of classifying situations, and typical patterns of action, enabling participants promptly to determine the meaning of an event and the relevant mode of response. This division corresponds to the concept of the three pillars of institutional order—regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive—and to the classification of institutional maintenance practices, which includes securing compliance with rules and reproducing norms and beliefs (Scott, 2014; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Coordinative sustainability denotes an institution's capacity to reproduce sufficiently compatible orientations and coordinated actions over time. It is a property of a regime of coordination, rather than the identity of particular decisions or the invariability of organisational form. Normative texts, technologies, the composition of participants, and modes of communication may change within an institution while structural compatibility is preserved. An institution may also remain outwardly unchanged while losing its practical function.

Recurrent practices perform three roles. They confirm the accessibility of established categories and procedures; specify them in new situations; and provide feedback through which the symbolic system and structure are adjusted. Sustainability therefore has a recursive character: structure directs practice, practice tests its capacity for coordination, and the results of application consolidate or transform structure.

Proposition 6. *Coordinative sustainability of a social institution exists when the recursive relationship among structure, the symbolic system, and practices reproduces sufficient compatibility of orientations despite changes in situations and in the composition of participants.*

5.2. Institutional Change and the Limits of Compensating for Dysfunction

Institutional change affects coordinative sustainability when it transforms the rules, procedures, roles, categories, organisational forms, or practices through which participants recognise situations, form reciprocal expectations, and coordinate action. Coordinative sustainability is preserved in the course of institutional change when new or modified forms of interaction remain symbolically accessible, interpretively sufficiently compatible, and practically reproducible. Institutional theory relates such transformations to the redistribution of resources and power, changes in incentives, transformations of normative expectations, competition among institutional logics, discursive struggle, and changing assessments of legitimacy (Schmidt, 2008, 2010; Lawrence et al., 2009; Thornton et al., 2012). Legitimacy, in this context, characterises socially formed recognition that actions, procedures, or an organisational order are acceptable, appropriate, and consistent with the system of norms, values, and beliefs of the relevant environment (Suchman, 1995). Its weakening exerts pressure towards institutional transformation because participants lose grounds for voluntarily recognising the decisions, statuses, and procedures that organise their interaction (Lenz & Viola, 2017; Dellmuth et al., 2019).

Coordinative sustainability characterises an institution's processual capacity to preserve or restore sufficient compatibility of interpretations, reciprocal expectations, and practical orientations during change. Its presence does not depend on the invariability of a particular rule, procedure, or organisational form. An institution retains coordinative sustainability when participants can recognise the content of changes, relate new rules to existing roles and categories, anticipate their consequences, and coordinate subsequent actions. The capacity of institutional orders to maintain stability in periods of transformation is associated with the preservation of their social acceptability, cognitive accessibility, and practical reproducibility (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Lenz & Viola, 2017).

Restoration of coordination characterises the set of actions and processes through which institutions restore participants' capacity to recognise jointly significant situations, form mutually intelligible expectations, and employ acceptable procedures for coordinating action. It may include clarification of rules, revision of procedures, redefinition of competences, translation of normative requirements into accessible categories, public justification of decisions, training of participants, and the creation of procedures for resolving disputes. Within institutional scholarship, such actions are treated as forms of maintenance, repair, adaptation, and the re-embedding of institutional elements in participants' practices (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010).

Coordinative dysfunction is a local or recurrent mismatch between a particular element of the mechanism and the task of institutional coordination. It may concern a category, procedure, information channel, mode of recording, distribution of competences, or the interaction between formal and informal contours. Dysfunction disrupts particular operations, but the overall regime remains capable of restoring compatibility of orientations.

Clarifications, professional mediation, informal practice, repeated verification, fallback procedures, additional monitoring, or coercion provide compensation. These means sustain the institution's efficacy, but consume resources. The accumulation of compensatory costs signals a transition from a local disruption to a systemic problem. An institution that formally fulfils its tasks only through continual exceptions, manual coordination, and duplication of procedures loses cognitive economy before coordination breaks down completely.

5.3. Transformed Forms of Institutions

Transformation denotes a process of change in structure, symbolic forms, or practices. A transformed form is the outcome of a specific type of change: the external institutional form is reproduced, while its practical function is narrowed, altered, or redirected towards an opposite purpose. For example, a procedure of participation may legitimise a decision already taken; openness may become information overload; monitoring may become formal reporting; and a rule of access may become concealed personalised admission.

A transformed form preserves the appearance of institutional definiteness and may therefore temporarily reduce open conflict. Its continuing reproduction weakens the recursive relationship among sign, code, and interpretive practice. Participants learn to distinguish official meaning from actual function, form parallel expectations, and increase the costs of verification. Reification and procedural ritualisation consolidate form as an end in itself, detaching it from its coordinative task.

5.4. Institutional Crisis as a Loss of Structural Compatibility

Institutional crisis is a regime of coordination in which an accumulated mismatch between the complexity of interaction and an institution's structural-symbolic capacity obstructs the reproduction of sufficiently compatible orientations and coordinated actions, while the costs of sustaining coordination exceed the level compatible with cognitive integration. This definition identifies the structural, cognitive, symbolic, and resource-related dimensions of crisis.

The threshold of crisis is functional in character and cannot be determined by a universal numerical indicator. It is crossed when existing rules and documents cease to serve as reliable points of orientation; basic categories systematically acquire incompatible meanings; procedures fail to bring disputes to an institutionally recognised conclusion; every new situation requires renewed agreement on foundational distinctions; and compensatory mechanisms become a permanent mode of operation.

Conflict, violation of a norm, organisational disruption, or a decline in legitimacy do not in themselves constitute a crisis. Conflict may be productively processed through procedure, a violation may be corrected, and criticism may facilitate adaptation. Crisis thus arises through the loss of an institution's capacity to transform these phenomena into situations that are accessible, mutually relatable, and practically processable. Legitimacy and coordinative sustainability interact, but retain different meanings: the former concerns normative acceptability, whereas the latter concerns the structural capacity to sustain compatible orientation and action. An institution may remain formally legitimate while no longer coordinating anyone; crisis emerges in that very gap.

Proposition 7. *Institutional crisis begins at the functional threshold at which structural-symbolic capacity ceases to secure cognitive integration, while permanent compensation absorbs the resources required to reproduce coordination.*

6. Legal Specialisation of the Structural-Cognitive Theory of Institutional Coordination

6.1. Law as a Specialised Normative-Symbolic System

Law is a specialised normative system symbolically organised within institutional order. It performs the legal coding of social reality and creates a space of legal meanings in which facts become legally relevant, are typified, qualified, and assessed. Legal reflection employs legal categories, constructions, procedures, and forms of argumentation; the binary code of legal/illegal provides the ultimate legal distinction, but does not replace the operations required for its application (Luhmann, 2004; Khalabudenko, 2025).

Formal and informal contours in law characterise the organisation of institutions; the symbolic system, in turn, characterises the production of meaning, recognition, and communication. This distinction eliminates the erroneous identification of law with the text of a norm or with the official activity of public bodies. Legal coordination depends on the interrelationship of normative formalisation, professional and everyday practices, publicly accessible categories, and procedures of competent verification.

Legal communication characterises the reproduction of legally significant assertions, arguments, decisions, objections, and procedural acts through which law determines whether circumstances belong to legal order. In Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, law appears as a functionally differentiated system of communication that reproduces itself through the specific code of legal/illegal (Luhmann, 2004). This code does not exhaust the content of legal communication, because a legal decision requires programmes, doctrinal concepts, norms, procedures, and forms of argumentation that make it possible to apply the code to a particular situation (Luhmann, 2004). Legal communication therefore does not consist merely in formally labelling an action as legal or illegal: it creates conditions in which legally relevant facts can be established, qualified, justified, and incorporated into a decision.

6.2. Legal Constructing: From Social Factuality to Legal Relevance

Legal constructing is an institutional-normative process of selecting, qualifying, forming, reproducing, and transforming legal meanings. It does not copy social factuality, but reconstructs it in accordance with legal criteria of relevance. Contract formation, the emergence of ownership, the establishment of a legal person, or the infliction of harm become legal situations through the combination of facts, statuses, competences, normative statements, and procedures of proof. The concept of institutional facts confirms the dependence of such statuses on collectively recognised constitutive rules and deontic powers (Searle, 2010).

A legal fact characterises a particular circumstance of life to which a legal norm attaches the emergence, modification, termination, or other legal consequences for legal relationships, subjective rights, legal duties,

or legal liability. The legal significance of such a circumstance is determined through its normative qualification: a law-applying authority establishes the factual data, compares them with the conditions provided for in the hypothesis of the norm, and determines the corresponding legal consequences. For example, contract formation as a legally significant situation requires the establishment of legal facts concerning the parties' declaration of intention, their legal capacity, compliance with the required form, and other conditions defined by civil legislation.

An institutional fact characterises a fact whose existence depends on a normatively organised institutional order. It arises when an event, action, conduct, or object is interpreted in the light of rules that confer a particular institutional status upon it and connect that status with specified consequences. Institutional facts include, *inter alia*, the existence of money, marriage, offices, organisations, property rights, contracts, and judicial decisions. In Neil MacCormick's theory, law constitutes an institutional normative order, and legal facts are understood as facts that acquire meaning through legal institutions and normative rules (MacCormick, 2007).

Legal constructing is connected with both levels but performs different functions in relation to each. At the level of legal facts, it secures the legal qualification of particular circumstances and the determination of their legal consequences. At the level of institutional facts, it confers a normatively organised form on legal statuses, roles, powers, and relationships, thereby enabling legally significant circumstances to be recognised, interpreted, and incorporated into legal communication.

Legal constructing therefore performs the functions of legal typification and reflection. It enables the *ex ante* formation of legal positions when subjects use available constructions for purposive action and the organisation of interaction, as well as *ex post* assessment when a competent authority reconstructs facts, qualifies conduct, and determines consequences. The recursive relationship among legislative, contractual, doctrinal, and jurisdictional constructing supports the development of legal order (Khalabudenko, 2024, 2025).

6.3. Legal Constructions as Matrices of Coordinative Sustainability

A legal construction is a normative-symbolic form that organises legally relevant facts, statuses, rights, duties, competences, procedures, and consequences into a stabilised model of a legal situation. It is the result of prior constructing and an operational matrix for subsequent legal communication. Contract, legal personhood, ownership, representation, possession, tort, and succession retain coordinative efficacy because they can be applied recurrently to different factual configurations.

Legal constructions ensure cognitive economy in the legal sphere. They provide participants in legal communication with relatively stable schemes that enable them to recognise the type of legal situation, distinguish legally relevant from irrelevant circumstances, identify a participant's position, and formulate the question of the corresponding legal consequences. By virtue of legal construction, legal qualification need not create anew, on every occasion, a conceptual relationship among facts, norms, and consequences. Instead, it is guided by an already formed model that establishes the general parameters of legal analysis and practical decision. This function corresponds to the broader understanding of legal concepts as instruments for organising legal reality and orienting action in normatively significant situations (MacCormick, 2007).

The cognitive economy of a legal construction does not exhaust its coordinative significance. A legal construction supports cognitive integration when different participants in legal communication employ it as a jointly accessible form for determining legally significant facts, statuses, rights, duties, and procedures. The legislator, court, public authority, advocate, notary, business entity, and addressee of a legal norm may have different interests and different assessments of a particular situation. Their interaction remains legally coordinated when they can relate their positions to a sufficiently compatible understanding of the applicable legal construction and the procedures for its implementation.

A legal construction creates such compatibility not by eliminating interpretive differences, but by establishing the boundaries within which those differences can be processed juridically. Legal interpretation permits competing arguments concerning the meaning of a norm, the qualification of facts, or the selection of legal consequences. At the same time, a legal construction provides a shared framework within which participants can identify the subject matter of a dispute, relevant grounds of argumentation, the allocation of the burden of proof, the competent authority, and the procedure for reaching a decision. Legal communication is reproduced through the application of legally specific distinctions, norms, programmes, and procedures that transform conflict into a legally defined form of consideration and resolution (Luhmann, 2004; Wagner, 2009).

Legal constructions support four interrelated processes: the typification of legally significant circumstances; participants' orientation in legal positions and consequences; the integration of reciprocal legal

expectations; and the procedural ordering of disputes. Their coordinative efficacy declines through systematic indeterminacy of content, incompatibility of criteria of qualification, conflicts of competence, or the ineffectiveness of verification procedures.

Power in law operates through the competence to determine legal relevance, apply the legal code, and confer institutionally binding significance on a decision. Legal *potestas* requires normative recognition and argumentative verifiability, drawing on jurisdictional practice and doctrine that secure the *auctoritas* of a decision. Formal validity may temporarily sustain compliance without sufficient recognition, but increasing coercive and compensatory costs signal a weakening of legal cognitive integration.

Proposition 8. *Legal constructions sustain the legal coordination of social institutions when they ensure stable typification of facts, accessibility of legal positions, compatibility of expectations, and the procedurally verifiable processing of disagreements.*

7. Theoretical Contribution, Scope of Application, and Testable Implications

Three results justify the effort invested in this reconstruction. The theory's first contribution lies in identifying an intermediate mechanism between institutional structure and behaviour. The symbolic system translates structural relationships into accessible sign forms and codes; cognitive economy reduces the complexity of orientation; cognitive integration sustains the compatibility of orientations; and coordinated behaviour and recurrent practices reproduce the result over time. This theoretical model brings together the dispersed achievements of economic, sociological, discursive, and practice-oriented institutionalism in a sequential explanatory chain.

The second contribution consists in shifting the cognitive focus from the individual state to the structural conditions of interaction. An institution does not think and does not possess a cognitive function in the psychological sense; nevertheless, it organises a symbolic environment in which cognitively constrained participants can form compatible orientations. This formulation preserves anthropological realism and avoids reducing social integration to an aggregate of individual mental models.

The third contribution is a dynamic typology of states. Stability, dysfunction, transformed form and crisis are distinguished by the mechanism's ability to maintain cognitive economy, integration and coordinated action. This makes it possible to analyse institutions that are formally stable but functionally distorted, as well as to distinguish local failures from a systemic loss of structural compatibility.

The model generates empirically investigable expectations. High coordinative sustainability should be manifested in convergent classifications of relevant situations, the predictability of role responses, the stability of procedural sequences, a low need for repeated clarification, and an institution's capacity to address atypical cases without renegotiating foundational meanings. The accumulation of dysfunctions should correlate with an increasing number of repeated verifications, informal intermediaries, exceptions, conflicts of competence, and the time required to complete procedures.

Operationalisation may combine analysis of normative and organisational documents, coding of judicial or administrative argumentation, comparison of participants' interpretations, process tracing of reforms, network analysis of communication, and examination of procedural costs. For legal institutions, indicators may include the stability of criteria of qualification, predictability of decisions, accessibility of appeal procedures, coherence of competences, and the capacity of legal constructions to encompass new situations.

The theory's scope of application encompasses institutions in which coordination depends on the symbolic recognition of positions, rules, and procedures. The model has less explanatory power in short-term interactions sustained predominantly by physical coercion or in processes in which symbolic mediation is minimal. It also does not establish the normative justice of an institution: a coordinatively sustainable order may reproduce an asymmetrical or unjust distribution of limited resources. Normative assessment requires separate legal and moral criteria.

8. Conclusions

Let us return to the question with which this article began: why does institutional structure alone not guarantee coordinated action? Structural-cognitive theory explains institutional coordination as a sequential transition from structural organisation, through symbolic mediation and cognitive effects, to coordinated behaviour and coordinative sustainability. Participants' cognitive limits constitute the anthropological precondition. Formal and informal contours organise positions and modes of interaction. The symbolic system makes them accessible through sign forms, codes, and interpretive practices. Cognitive economy reduces the complexity of orientation, while cognitive integration creates practically sufficient compatibility of orientations.

Coordinative sustainability is the processual capacity to reproduce this compatibility over time. Institutional change is compatible with sustainability when renewed structures and meanings remain recognisable, procedurally verifiable, and suitable for practical application. Dysfunction preserves the possibility of local compensation. A transformed form reproduces an external shell while its function has changed. Crisis arises at the threshold of the loss of structural compatibility, when basic points of orientation cease to coordinate behaviour and compensatory costs become incompatible with cognitive integration.

The legal specialisation confirms the explanatory potential of the model. Law carries out the normative-symbolic coding of social factuality; legal constructing forms legally relevant positions and relationships; and legal constructions provide recurrent matrices of qualification, expectation, and procedural dispute resolution. The further research programme should test the proposed propositions against the material of institutional reforms, open access, urban governance, justice, and transformations of legal constructions. Understanding this transition—from structure to compatible action—is a precondition for explaining why some institutions endure, others weaken, and still others finally collapse.

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