

Advancing social procurement: An institutional work perspective

Abstract

Purpose – The adoption of social procurement, the emerging practice of using a firm's spending power to generate social value, requires buying firms to navigate conflicts of institutional logics. Adopting an institutional work perspective, our study investigates how buying firms change their existing procurement institutions to adopt and advance social procurement.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted an in-depth case study of a social procurement initiative in the UK. Our case study comprised of 16 buying firms that were actively participating in the social procurement initiative at the time of data collection (2020-2021). The data were largely captured through a set of 41 semi-structured interviews.

Findings – Four types of institutional work were observed: reducing institutional conflicts, crossing institutional boundaries, legitimising institutional change and spreading the new institutional logic. These different types of institutional work appeared in a sequential way.

Originality/value – Our study contributes to various strands of literature investigating the role of procurement in generating value and benefits within societies, adopting an institutional lens to investigate the buying firms' purposeful actions to change procurement institutions. Second, our study complements the existing literature investigating the conflicts of institutional logics by illustrating the ways firms address such institutional conflicts when adopting and advancing social procurement. Finally, our

work contributes to the recently emerging research on institutional work that examines the creation and establishment of new institutions by considering the existing procurement institutions in our examination of institutional work.

Keywords – Social procurement, social enterprise, institutional work, sustainable supply chain management, case study

Paper type – Research paper

1. Introduction

Social procurement is an emerging practice that enables firms to use their spending power to generate social value far exceeding the value of the goods and services being procured (Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020). The practice extends the already established role of procurement in operationalising social and environmental sustainability (Yawar and Seuring, 2017; Zorzini *et al.*, 2015), where firms seek to proactively contribute to solving and addressing some of the most pressing and complex social problems, such as poverty, racism, inequality and homelessness. Firms achieve such objectives by procuring their products and services from social enterprises, i.e. organisations explicitly established to pursue a social goal while simultaneously engaging in commercial activities (Dacin *et al.*, 2010).

The initiation and development of relationships with social enterprise suppliers is often associated with tensions and conflicts (Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020). Buying firms dominantly adopt a market logic where their procurement objectives largely focus on efficiency and profitability (Longoni *et al.*, 2019). The adoption of any procurement and supply chain management practices where a strong social logic (i.e. utilisation of economic activities to solve social and environmental problems, Di Domenico *et al.*, 2010) prevails causes inconsistencies with the existing market logic (Nath *et al.*, 2020). The emerging practice of social procurement requires buying firms to change their existing procurement norms and practices to include social enterprise suppliers into their supply chains (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021). For instance, previous studies have highlighted the need for changing traditional perceptions of ‘value’ that solely concerns cost, quality and reliability within the procurement function (Loosemore, 2016). In addition, while the market logic seeks to rationalise the supply chain by reducing the number of suppliers, to accommodate the limited capacity of the emerging social enterprise suppliers, buying firms are required to move towards a diversified supply base (Wontner *et al.*, 2020; Worthington, 2009).

Particularly, buying firms need to break the barriers posed by long term commercial relationships that they have developed over the years with their incumbent suppliers. Our study aims to investigate how buying firms can navigate these conflicts in logics to embrace social procurement.

Scholars in the operations and supply chain management literature have adopted an institutional lens to explain and demonstrate the existence of multiple conflicting institutional logics (i.e. institutional complexity; Pullman *et al.*, 2018). Institutional logic is defined as ‘the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality’ (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, p.804). For instance, Nath *et al.* (2020) identified conflicts of institutional logics when buying firms introduced new environmental improvement initiatives across their supply chain. McLoughlin and Meehan (2021) further illustrated the development of both social and market logics in firms moving towards a sustainable supply chain. While recent research has begun to examine the notion of institutional complexity, there is a limited understanding of how firms navigate such complexities. The existence of multiple conflicting institutional logics leads to de-institutionalisation or change of institutions (Koulikoff-Souviron and Harrison, 2008). We draw on the concept of institutional work, defined as ‘the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p.215) to address the research question of ‘how do buying firms change their existing procurement institutions to adopt and advance social procurement?’

Our study draws on an in-depth case study of a social procurement initiative in the United Kingdom to explore different types of institutional work and their relationships.

Particularly, our study seeks to explore the underlying institutional work taking into account the interplay between existing and new institutional logics.

Our contribution to the literature is threefold. First, our study adds to the social procurement and supplier diversity literature (e.g. Blount and Li, 2021; Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020) by investigating the buying firms' purposeful actions to change their existing procurement norms and practices. Second, our study complements the existing operations and supply chain management literature investigating the conflicts of institutional logics (e.g. Nath *et al.* 2020; Perner and Skjølsvik, 2016; Turkulainen *et al.*, 2017) by illustrating the ways firms address such institutional conflicts when adopting and advancing social procurement. Finally, our work contributes to the recently emerging operations and supply chain management literature on institutional work that examine the creation and establishment of new institutions (i.e. Aaltonen and Turkulainen, 2022; Mattsson and Junker, 2023; Wu and Jia, 2018) by considering the existing procurement institutions in our examination of institutional work.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Procurement for good

2.1.1 Social procurement

Over the last few decades, firms have increasingly attempted to minimise the risks of damaging elements in their supply chains. More specifically, firms have become vigilant about preventing unacceptable practices, such as environmental violations, human trafficking, child labour, and poor labour conditions, across their supply chains (Geng *et al.*, 2022). The significant role of procurement and supply management in operationalising social and environmental sustainability has been widely recognised in the relevant literature (Huq *et al.*, 2014; Yawar and Seuring, 2017). Previous studies have

identified various practices that buying firms adopt to minimise the risks of negative social outcomes in their supply chains, including establishing codes of conduct, setting targets, monitoring and assessing performance and developing capabilities (Alinaghian *et al.*, 2021; Tachizawa and Wong, 2014).

In recent years, procurement professionals have taken a more proactive role by going beyond accountability to address some of the complex, multi-layered social challenges existing worldwide such as poverty, crime, homelessness, racism, inequality and mass migration (Bals and Tate, 2018; Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020). In the literature, this phenomenon has been explored through the notion of social procurement. Social procurement involves firms utilising their spending power to generate social value beyond the value of the goods and services being procured (Loosemore *et al.*, 2021). Buying firms achieve this by procuring their products and services from social enterprises. Driven by a social mission that is enshrined in their governing documents, unlike charities or NGOs, social enterprises earn the majority of their income through trading (i.e. sales of goods or services) rather than through grants or other funding sources. Hence, social enterprises are hybrid organisations with the dual missions of social purpose and economic viability, thus embodying both social and market logics (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2010).

The extant literature has investigated the benefits (e.g. affective, cognitive, behavioural and situational outcomes; Loosemore *et al.*, 2021) and the drivers behind the adoption of social procurement. For instance, previous studies have suggested that creating social value creation through supply chain relationships is primarily driven by industry norms and institutional imperatives (e.g. Barraket and Loosemore, 2018; Shelton and Minniti, 2018). In their recent study of the Australian construction industry, Loosemore *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that coercive isomorphism is the most powerful driver of social procurement adoption. However, the authors concluded that the effective

implementation of social procurement policies requires project supply chains to shift from a compliance and imitation mindset to one that normalises social procurement.

The relationship between buying firms and social enterprises is a unique form of inter-firm relationship where the presence of dual logics, power asymmetries between the two parties and the heterogeneity of their practices require new forms of relationship arrangements (Alinaghian and Razmdoost, 2021; Nicholls and Huybrechts, 2016; Pullman *et al.*, 2018). For instance, Meqdadi *et al.* (2020) demonstrated how buying firms engage in behavioural monitoring with social enterprises to build trust in these suppliers' ability to achieve certain outcomes. While the literature has begun to highlight the unique attributes and the underlying dynamics of these emerging buyer–supplier relationships, no theoretical endeavour to date has articulated how buying firms change their existing procurement norms and practices to integrate social enterprises as new suppliers.

2.1.2 Supplier diversity

The notion of supplier diversity revolves around the ethical practice of procurement to create an inclusive supply base and provide opportunities to underutilised minority businesses (Worthington *et al.*, 2008). A minority business enterprise is defined as 'one owned by individuals who are socially disadvantaged (i.e. have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice or cultural bias because of their identity as members of a group) and economically disadvantaged (i.e. socially disadvantaged individuals who have not been able to compete due to diminished opportunities to obtain capital)' (Blount and Li, 2021, p.3). For instance, to alleviate poverty, some firms have developed supply chains with the working poor (e.g. micro-entrepreneurs who earn less than USD 5 per day in countries such as India) as upstream suppliers or downstream distributors of finished goods (Sodhi and Tang, 2014). Similarly, to create an inclusive society and foster greater diversity along the supply chain, buying firms have sourced from minority groups (e.g. ethnic

minority-owned or women-owned businesses) to provide selling opportunities (Blount and Li, 2021; Worthington *et al.*, 2008).

Although sourcing from diverse suppliers has economic and social benefits for public and private-sector buyers (Worthington *et al.*, 2008), it poses several critical challenges for the buying firms, including identifying high-quality suppliers, monitoring and managing their integration and overcoming internal resistance (Shah and Ram, 2006). Similarly, the power asymmetry in the relationship requires diverse suppliers to make an extra effort to build a relationship with various functional and influential actors within the buying firms to create a higher level of visibility and maintain their relationships (Lashley and Pollock, 2020). Scholars have identified organisational commitment, open communication and a holistic organisational approach as determinants of effective supplier diversity initiatives (e.g. Whitfield and Landeros, 2006). Despite similarities between diverse suppliers and social enterprises and their underlying relationships with large buying firms, as hybrid and dual-purpose organisations, social enterprises provide a complex setting to study how procurement institutions change.

2.2 Institutional pressure, institutional logics and institutional complexity

Institutions are defined as ‘relatively enduring systems of social beliefs and socially organized practices associated with varying functional arenas within societal systems’ (Scott, 1987, p.499). Scholars in the operations and supply chain management literature have adopted an institutional perspective to explain the function and evolution of various supply-related practices in different environments (e.g. manufacturing practices; Ketokivi and Schroeder, 2004; or supplier development; Rogers *et al.*, 2007). The rationale of this approach is to explain the impact of institutional pressure (e.g. Villena and Dhanorkar, 2020; Yadav *et al.*, 2023), embedded in a specific context or environment, on firms’ actions and behaviours (also referred to as isomorphism; Ketokivi and Schroeder, 2004;

Turkulainen *et al.*, 2017). Generally, firms operate under a set of shared norms, expectations and rules that form their institutional logic (Azadegan *et al.*, 2013). Adopting new practices often brings new realities, leading to the emergence of multiple conflicting institutional logics (i.e. institutional complexity; Pullman *et al.*, 2018) that require de-institutionalisation or a change of institutional logics (Koulikoff-Souviron and Harrison, 2008). For instance, Perner and Skjølsvik (2016) demonstrated that the formalisation of a new purchasing practice led to institutional complexity, which resulted from the conflict between the market and professional institutional logics of different teams in the buying firm.

The conflict of institutional logics is specifically evident in the context of supply chain sustainability. Nath *et al.* (2020) identified conflicts of institutional logics when buying firms introduced environmental improvement initiatives in their supply chains. Such conflicts also exist in individual's perceptions when they prioritise sustainability activities (Longoni *et al.*, 2019). McLoughlin and Meehan (2021) further illustrated that firms develop both social and market logics as they move towards sustainable supply chains.

A more recent strand of operations and supply chain management literature has begun to examine the creation and establishment of new institutions. For instance, Wu and Jia (2018) identified the creation of new institutions when Western firms establish end-to-end supply chains in emerging markets. This study mainly addressed the emergence of an institutional void (i.e. the lack of institutions to support market development; Mair *et al.*, 2012), clarifying how buying firms, government and quasi-government agencies and other market participants fill that void by creating new framing and supply chain structures in an emerging market. More recently, Selviaridis and Spring (2022) referred to institutional change in their study of how firms engage with technology-based small

and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by identifying high-level change processes. The authors proposed that when institutions are not ready to accommodate an SME innovation (i.e. labelled as institutional failure), public agencies intervene by creating institutions such as SME-friendly financing and property right rules. While prior research has examined firms' conflicting institutional logics and institutional change, there is a limited understanding of how firms purposefully make these institutional changes. Thus, drawing on the concept of *institutional work*, our study aims to unpack how buying firms change procurement institutions to accommodate institutional complexities.

2.3 Institutional work

Institutional work provides researchers with a lens to investigate the recursive, dynamic and complex relationship between agents (i.e. individuals and organisations) and structure (i.e. institutions) (Lawrence *et al.*, 2011). Although the institutional work revolves around the deliberate agency of individuals or firms that make changes to institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), it may not always lead to the change of institutions (e.g. institutional work that maintains or recreates an existing institution; Bjerregaard and Jonasson, 2014; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006).

Within the operations and supply chain management literature, scholars have recently begun to provide empirical representations of institutional work. For example, Aaltonen and Turkulainen (2022) investigated institutional work in the context of project governance practices. More specifically, they identified the processes through which relational and contractual project governance are formed (i.e. institutional work). Furthermore, Wu and Jia (2018) demonstrated that institutional work (i.e. framing operations tasks and identifying actors who can execute them) is the central process through which supply chains are localised in emerging markets. Mattsson and Junker (2023) proposed that the temporality (i.e. time, speed and duration) and translation (i.e.

exchange of ideas, knowledge and preferences between practices) of institutional work impact its enactment in markets.

Institutional work is a complex, multi-layered and multi-dimensional concept. Consequently, scholars have proposed several alternative classifications. For instance, Hampel *et al.* (2017) classified institutional work into three types by focusing on the means through which institutions are changed: symbolic work (i.e. change through the use of languages and symbols), material work (i.e. change through the use of objects, tangibles and spaces) and relational work (i.e. change through the use of interactions). Prior work has also categorised institutional work based on the nature of the phenomena being changed (i.e. changes occurring in socially constructed roles and processes) (e.g. identity, legitimacy or practice, e.g. Gawer and Phillips, 2013; Mena and Suddaby, 2016). Scholars further classified institutional work based on the process of change. For instance, Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) framework includes multiple forms of institutional work that *create*, *maintain* and *disrupt* institutions. While these typologies mainly focus on the new institutions, in our investigation of different types of institutional work our study takes into account the existing procurement institutions and their interplay with new social procurement institutions.

3. Methodology

To investigate how firms transform their existing procurement norms and practices to embrace social procurement, we conducted a qualitative in-depth case study. Owing to the exploratory nature of our research question and the limited theories and empirical evidence in the literature, this method was highly suitable. The case study provided us with a natural setting that considered the contextual aspects of the phenomenon (i.e. social procurement) through qualitative empirical descriptions (Ketokivi and Choi, 2014; Meredith, 1998). This approach allowed us to collect data from multiple sources and

make sense of various actors' experiences, as lived and perceived by the actors (Stake, 1995). Consistently, the extant literature investigating institutional work has predominantly utilised in-depth case studies or ethnographic approaches (e.g. Aaltonen and Turkulainen, 2022; Mena and Suddaby, 2016).

3.1 Research setting

We conducted an in-depth case study of a social procurement initiative in the United Kingdom. In 2016, in partnership with the UK Cabinet Office, a national membership and campaigning body for the social enterprise movement in Britain (hereafter, SE-INT) launched a challenge to gather a group of high-profile businesses to commit to spending a portion of their procurement budget with social enterprises. The challenge began with seven founding buying firms and now has 30 partner firms, representing a wide range of industries buying from approximately 400 social enterprise suppliers.

The chosen case provided a homogeneous setting in which the participating buying firms had a shared understanding of the social procurement phenomenon. In particular, given the heterogeneity in the phenomenon and a lack of unified definition and understanding of social enterprises (Saebi *et al.*, 2019), this empirical platform enabled us to delve into the purposive actions adopted to change procurement institutions.

3.2. Data collection

Our case study comprised of the buying firms that were actively participating in the social procurement initiative at the time of data collection (2020-2021). A descriptive summary of the 16 participating buying firms is presented in Table I. The abbreviations shown in the left-hand column indicate the different buying firms. The data were largely captured through a set of semi-structured interviews. In each buying firm, we began by engaging principal informants, typically senior managers responsible for the social procurement initiative. They were asked to suggest potential interviewees who played a key role in the

implementation of the social procurement initiative since its inception (e.g. procurement professionals, budget holders, sustainability and impact professionals).

INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE

An interview protocol was developed to guide the data collection, and the interviewees were asked to reflect on their experience of participating in the initiative concerning the practices adopted and their development over time. Particularly, they were encouraged to highlight and narrate critical events in forming and developing relationships with social enterprise suppliers. Additionally, to triangulate the data gathered and obtain a more well-rounded picture, we interviewed the representatives of social enterprise suppliers highlighted by the interviewees at the buying firms. A total of 21 social enterprise suppliers were identified (see Table I) and asked to reflect on the events described by the first interview group and discuss the key features in terms of the specific context, actions and outcomes.

In total, we interviewed 41 professionals from various participating buying firms and social enterprise suppliers between October 2020 and April 2021. All interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes, with an average time of 50 minutes. We subsequently conducted a two-hour workshop session with the director of business and enterprise and the head of corporate partnerships and three one-hour workshop-type interviews with the digital project and account manager and the head of corporate partnerships at SE-INT to cross-examine the data and clarify any discrepancies.

Prior to each interview with buying firms, we reviewed the survey data that SE-INT collected annually to evaluate the impact of the initiative since its launch in 2016. In total, we reviewed four surveys by the participating buying firms between 2016 and 2020. The survey questions covered a range of topics, including the background of the organisation,

its motivations for participating in the social procurement initiative, and any barriers it encountered during the process. Additionally, we reviewed various documents, including impact reports, social media posts and published case studies, related to each buying firm. For each buying firm, the survey data and documents were used to create a factsheet involving a summary of the buying firm's perceived benefits and a set of key areas and events to prompt discussion and reflection. The background study enabled us to further explore the interview responses through a series of follow-up questions.

3.2.2 Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. This process yielded transcripts of over 250,000 words (750 pages). Drawing on the qualitative data analysis principles of Gioia methodology, a coding process was used to identify first-order concepts, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Gioia, 2021). We began the coding process by reading each transcript word-by-word (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In the first-order analysis, we were looking to identify buying firms' actions that aimed to change the existing procurement norms and practices to embrace social procurement. At this stage of analysis, we made sure to stay faithful and adhere to the terms used by informants (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), thus an extensive initial list of 67 first-order categories emerged from the data. After examining their similarities and differences, the number of categories was reduced. We then gave labels to the emerged categories and regularly compared the text segments with the same categories to ensure that the same actions appeared (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The process ultimately yielded 28 first-order codes.

Subsequently, we generated second-order theoretical codes (i.e. second-order themes) and sought to further distil them into aggregate dimensions. The resulting data structure shown in Figure 1 details the process of progressing from informant-centric terms and

concepts in form of first-order codes to second-order themes and aggregate dimension of social procurement institutional work.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The first author conducted the initial stage of the first-order coding. Both authors then independently reviewed and reduced the generated categories into first-order codes. The overlap between the generated codes was checked. When there was a discrepancy, the identified code was discussed by the two authors. Any differences were reconciled through the following: a) one of the coders deferred to the other coder or b) the generated code was divided into multiple codes (Campbell *et al.*, 2013). The process yielded a total of 28 first-order categories. The second-order coding process was performed independently by the two authors. We then discussed our individual results and eventually agreed (i.e. one of the coders deferred to the other coder) on 10 second-order themes and four aggregate dimensions.

4. Results

The results of our analyses showed that buying firms engage with five different types of institutional work to engage with social enterprise suppliers and expand social procurement in their organisations. The observed institutional work include *reducing institutional conflicts*, *crossing institutional boundaries*, *legitimising institutional change* and *spreading the new institutional logic* (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

4.1 Reducing institutional conflicts

Our data suggested that the existence of conflicting institutional logics prevents the initiation and development of social procurement within buying firms. While the buying

firms predominantly followed a market logic focusing on cost, quality and reliability in managing their procurement activities, the inclusion of less established and smaller social enterprise suppliers required a new institutional logic that celebrates social value. Our results showed that those advocating social procurement within the buying firms tend to reduce such conflicting institutional logics by drawing on their congruent organisational purpose and culture, utilising existing adjacent procurement practices or reducing the resource gap between buying firms and social enterprise suppliers.

4.1.1 Drawing on congruent organisational purpose and culture

Buying firms appeared to successfully shape and reinforce the social procurement narrative within their organisations by consistently emphasising its strategic relevance. Specifically, a strong synergy was created where the buying firms aligned the social causes supported by social enterprise suppliers with their own organisational purpose. This is illustrated by B1, one of the world's largest multinational pharmaceutical and healthcare companies; for decades, B1 have been dedicated to improving outcomes for those suffering from mental illness. Hence, in a manner central to their organisational purpose, B1 started working with two social enterprise suppliers, S18 and S19– which employ people with mental health issues– to develop and print their partnership marketing materials with Mental Health UK as a part of their health and well-being agenda. According to the procurement services manager at B1:

'... there was a lot of resistance to this new model [social procurement] ... they just thought we were ripping the business away and giving it to somebody else. Working with [S18] and [S19] and all of the links in there with our purpose ... it was that Aha moment that people understood why we do what we do and how things work behind the system.'

Similarly, buying firms benefited from the existing corporate culture around sustainability and social responsibility to facilitate the adoption and development of social procurement. For instance, B6, one of the global largest industrial manufacturing companies, benefited from their strong innovative corporate culture and corporate social responsibility community in embedding social procurement values throughout the organisation.

4.1.2 Utilising adjacent procurement practices

Our data further revealed that buying firms reduce institutional conflicts by utilising existing sustainable supply chain programmes that have similar institutional logic as social procurement. For instance, B16, a European food services and facility management company, extended their existing ‘supply chain inclusion programme’, through which they source from small and medium-sized suppliers and minority suppliers, to work with social enterprise suppliers. B16’s established processes of identifying potential new suppliers through intermediaries, such as Enterprise Nation and Minority Supplier Development UK, and their mentoring and onboarding programme ensured a smooth transition to the new category of social enterprise suppliers. B16 Head of responsible sourcing states:

‘Since 2015 we have been running a diversity and inclusion program ... where we’ve worked with organisations such as Enterprise Nation, Minority Supplier Development UK ... We have an onboarding process which we call a pre-qualification questionnaire that would cover many things... in that, we have now included a whole host of social enterprise related stuff.’

Similarly, B2, a multinational pharmaceutical and healthcare company, carefully framed the new social procurement initiative as part of their responsible supply chain –

social sustainability priorities. The visual connection helped everyone to connect the dots and understand how the new initiative fits within the broader vision.

4.1.3 Reducing the resource gap between buying firms and social enterprise suppliers

Our analyses revealed that buying firms tend to close the resource gaps that cause the conflict of institutional logics. First, buying firms appeared to assist social enterprise suppliers to develop capacity and build commercial capabilities by providing resources and pro bono services. Such activities appeared to reduce the gap that existed between the market and social logics, assisting buying firms in engaging with social enterprise suppliers. For instance, B7, a UK-based infrastructure support services firm, helped S9 obtain the environmental permit needed for their joint project. B7 head of social impact stated:

'I think there's a recognition with some of the targets that we've met, we're not going to meet those targets with the existing social enterprises that are out there right now, so we are going to have to support [social enterprises] to build competency' '...we've helped [S9] get an environment permit to increase their depo, we've connected them with our Manufacturing Technology Center in Coventry, we've connected them because they've needed to create a new barrel washer for their paints.'

Second, our analysis demonstrated that buying firms attempt to break down the preconceptions that prevail about certain social causes or beneficiaries within their organisations. Such efforts removed the barrier existed against engaging with certain social enterprise suppliers. A salient example of such efforts is B10, a leading international consulting and professional services firm, and their reverse mentoring initiative with a social enterprise that teaches young ex-offenders to repair cracked phones. By pairing senior executives, including those involved with their defence and

security work, with young ex-offenders, B10 changed the views of both parties. The partnership senior manager at B10 remarked:

'It was amazing the impact it had not only on the young people, but on our people ... and I think it's hugely opened [our senior people's] eyes to the challenges but also how resilient these young people are, they've been through this but they keep trying to push forward.'

4.2 Crossing institutional boundaries

Our findings showed that buying firms utilise boundary objects, boundary spanners or boundary events to connect social enterprise suppliers to different procurement stakeholders, such as procurement professionals, budget holders and internal customers within their organisations. In other words, buying firms use these strategies to cross boundaries (i.e. “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space”, Lamont and Molnar, 2002, p. 168 and is a tool through which social actors individually and collectively agree to define a reality, Lamont and Molnar, 2002) that separate the existing buying firms' procurement systems and the new social procurement.

4.2.1 Utilising boundary objects

Boundary objects were products or services with commercial benefits with an ability to raise awareness about social enterprises and social procurement. A salient example is how the employees of B7 received personal protective equipment (PPE) that had been sourced, packaged and distributed countrywide by S2, an office supply social enterprise employing homeless people and other vulnerable populations. Impact cards were included in the packs, detailing the story of the person involved in the packing and the impact it had on their life; this has sparked positive discussion among B7's employees on various internal

as well as social media platforms and enhanced their confidence in creating impact through social procurement, as pointedly remarked by a director of social impact at B7:

'... when they packaged them up, in them they put a slip that said, this has been packed by [name]... this is the story I've been on, this is the difference it's made to me ... so whenever our people pick up the face covering, they actually see that story ... we got quite a few comments and discussions on Yammer ... It's not just the delivery of the product, it is the information about the impact their product is having socially and environmentally.'

Another example is B4, a world-leading software company, where as part of switching from a UK coffee chain to a social enterprise coffee supplier arranged an all-day coffee tasting session for their employees with S11, a social enterprise coffee supplier recruiting and working with homeless people, to engage employees and get everyone's buy in.

4.2.2 Utilising boundary spanners

Senior executives with strong social interests appeared to act as boundary spanners, advocating and advancing social procurement within their respective buying firms. For instance, a senior executive board member at B4, a world-leading software company, acted as an ambassador of the social procurement movement by using her influence to raise awareness of social enterprises and their potential as a global mechanism for change from top to bottom across the entire organisation. Her passion for social impact and a deep belief in the power of 'AND' (i.e. a good product that gets delivered on time and meets business requirements AND creates value for society) have inspired and influenced several of the organisation's employees and created an immersive social procurement culture. Procurement manager of B4 stated:

'We're very fortunate within [B4], [name] is on the senior executive team and has recently become an ambassador for social enterprise UK ... She built an

internal program where we tried to use our software to impact people's lives ... the communication is coming from her, down at the very top, filters across to the local MDs, because the local MDs somehow report to her, they are very, very interested in what we're doing. '

Furthermore, some buying firms (e.g. B1, B13 and B15) built and utilised a network of social enterprise champions within their organisations to establish the new social procurement practices and foster the culture. Specifically, the champions were instrumental in facilitating the knowledge flow, inspiring business-level managers and budget-holders and bringing employees on board. Procurement services manager of B1 shared:

'... we always say a champion has to be someone of a certain level within the organisation that has that influence and power to set up and be alongside the Management Committee or the board, to make sure that they can help in our journey to success ... we have a quarterly review with all the business champions now from all the different sectors to reflect and share good practices.'

4.2.3 Utilising boundary events

Buying firms actively organised events and campaigns to link internal stakeholders with social enterprises or increase awareness around social procurement. For instance, B7 organised a whole week communication campaign to raise the profile of social enterprises and promote social procurement across the organisation. B7 procurement manager stated:

'Back in November was social enterprise week so when we got together with marketing and comms, we did like a whole week's worth of articles, and videos and stuff via the Intranet, just to basically raise the profile of social enterprises

and keep people you know engage with the whole thing so, if anything, sort of is going on, nationally and we'll try and jump on that and make a thing about it.'

Similarly, B15, a UK-based construction company, regularly organised social enterprise meet the buyer events to raise awareness about social enterprises and provide opportunities for them to pitch to different buyers within the organisation.

Our findings further demonstrated that buying firms and social enterprises jointly organise events to discuss specific topics and exchange insights. For example, B4 organised a global webinar with B9 (B4's tier-one supplier, a food services and facility management company) and S11 (a social enterprise coffee supplier recruiting and working with homeless people) on how corporates can spend some of their budgets with social enterprises. Procurement manager at B4 stated:

'We just done a webinar about how corporates can influence spend with social enterprises ... we brought [name] onboard from [B9]... and we brought [name] from [S11]... that was done at a global level, talking about how the relationship was between the three organisations and how it evolved and gave them some tips on how to build and manage such relationships...'

4.3 Legitimising institutional change

Legitimacy is defined as “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Our analysis revealed the attempts made by buying firms to legitimise social procurement (i.e. acceptable and desirable) by recognising social enterprises as a new type of supplier and incentivising social procurement.

4.3.1 Establishing social enterprise identity within the procurement organisation

The first form of building legitimacy involves recognising social enterprises as legitimate new suppliers within the existing procurement systems. Our results suggested that the legitimisation exercise includes identifying and validating social enterprise suppliers, creating and using internal or external social enterprise directories, flagging social enterprises in global procurement systems and creating necessary commercial terms for social enterprises. For instance, B16 have worked with the national campaigning and membership body for social enterprises in the UK to identify and validate social enterprises that already existed in their extensive supply base of over 8000 suppliers. According to the head of responsible sourcing at B16:

'It's only recently that we did the review with [SE-INT] of our supply chain to identify social enterprises. At the same time, we've also now updated our system so through our onboarding process we now ask a lot of questions around ownership or leadership or focus of the supplier organisation, so when we're onboarding, we can now identify social enterprises'

To help internal buyers to identify and engage with social enterprises, B2 – a multinational pharmaceutical and healthcare company – have created an internal library where procurement teams can search for social enterprises that are currently on their database, including those that have already been used and those that are ready to be engaged.

A few buying firms have further integrated these social enterprise directories into their global procurement systems. For instance, flagging social enterprises in their global procurement platforms has enabled B1 and B7 to see the products and services being offered by social enterprise suppliers and monitor the total corporate social spending. According to procurement services manager of B1:

'our category teams ... have what we call a preferred supplier listing, which is always updated and in there, we've flagged all of the diverse suppliers and social impact vendors, so if they're looking at it broadly they can see who's a social enterprise supplier, who's not so they can invite those suppliers into those RFPs.'

The results showed that buying firms legitimise the integration of social enterprises into procurement processes by creating new contractual terms to accommodate the requirements of these new actors. The changes include offering enhanced payment terms to social enterprises (e.g. B3, B8 and B9), including social enterprises in their procurement specifications (e.g. B7 wrote S9 into their specifications) and inviting social enterprises to participate in the request for proposals (e.g. B4).

4.3.2 Incentivising social procurement

To legitimise social procurement and make it a desirable practice, buying firms appeared to develop different incentivisation mechanisms including 1) setting individual targets, 2) setting category targets and 3) establishing incentives for external partners. The first practice that emerged in our data was the incorporation of social procurement goals into personal objectives. For instance, the sourcing team of B11, a global financial services company, recently added a social responsibility element to their personal objectives with a 10% weighting. According to the senior sourcing manager of B11:

'We put something in everyone's assessments end of the year's individual plans. For our sourcing and procurement team, we have it as an individual objective with a minimum of 10% weighting, so it is quite significant. So everyone in my team, and my colleagues and on group level all have this specific objective.'

Second, the analysis of results suggested that, to enable social procurement, buying firms incorporate social procurement goals into their category plans (i.e. set social enterprise spend targets for a group of similar or related products). For instance, B9, a

multinational contract foodservice company, have set a target of at least one social enterprise per category. The global sustainability sourcing lead at B9 stated:

'... one of our key commitments was to have a social enterprise per category ... We are already working with some in certain categories ... coffee, for example, we already working with [S1] and [S11], retail we already had [S3] and added a few others. We had to look for one in HR, for example, we added [S4] in there.'

Similarly, B1 have clear “diverse spend” targets which include buying from social enterprises at the category level.

Finally, our data revealed that buying firms develop motivational mechanisms to encourage their suppliers to engage with social enterprises. For example, B7 applies weightings to the social value propositions when evaluating their tier-one suppliers. A procurement manager at B7 stated:

'There have been some specific tenders, where we have weighted in 10% for social value ... for those large strategic tenders that's what we're looking to do, for example we had a large waste contract, we did the same for temporary agency staff, which is actually our biggest spend on contract.'

4.4 Spreading the new institutional logic

The final form of institutional work observed involved buying firms spreading the institutional logic governing social procurement within their organisations by creating a sustainable and growing demand for social enterprise suppliers and extending the social procurement across their organisations.

4.4.1 Establishing the relationships with social enterprise suppliers

Our data demonstrated that buying firms provide repeated and growing business opportunities for social enterprise suppliers over time to further establish social

procurement within their organisations. A good example is B5, a leading international consulting and professional services company; they have created a growing sustainable demand for S16, a social enterprise marketing agency working with underprivileged youth. Facilitated by a collaborative approach and a willingness to develop the relationship, B5 engaged in conversations with S16 to assess their existing capacity and potential for growth. According to the procurement director at B5:

‘... we started seeding work within small packages of work [with S16] and of course it was very good, and we had a great working relationship so that scaled up to ... the first order was a few thousand pounds, last year we spent over a quarter of a million with them.’

Furthermore, we found that, to ensure continuity, when the demand for a value proposition was reduced, buying firms worked together with social enterprise suppliers to create an alternative demand. For instance, during the difficult times engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic, buying firms worked with social enterprise suppliers to redirect their orders to where they were mostly needed. For example, S12 continued their exchange with B6, one of the global largest industrial manufacturing companies, to deliver a large number of boxes of fruits and vegetables to primary schools in underprivileged areas across the UK, instead of to B6’s offices.

4.4.2 Extending social procurement across the organisation

Our data suggested that the new social procurement institutional logic is further established when a social procurement initiative expands from a small-scale project – often a pilot project – into multiple product categories, divisions, clients and geographical regions. For instance, S5 began their engagement with B15, a UK-based construction company, by offering compliance services, which the buying firm needed urgently due to the UK government’s Energy Saving Opportunity Scheme. Once established as a

supplier, S5 branched out from the initial offering into other carbon-neutrality project works, such as technology, green-contract purchasing or carbon-offsetting projects. Similarly, B5 first piloted S13's tea products in their London office and then rolled it out in their Birmingham and Manchester offices.

5. Discussion

Our study has identified four types of institutional work that buying firms perform to adopt and advance social procurement. The analysis of our results revealed two apparent features for these institutional work efforts. First, our study highlighted how the interplay of the existing and new institutions plays a role in procurement institutional change. Second, our research suggested that institutional work occurs in a sequential way, meaning that different types of institutional work build upon and relate to each other (see Figure 2).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

5.1. Institutional work: the interplay of existing and new institutional logics

Our findings illustrated that institutional work occurs in the context of two institutional logics (i.e. the existing and the new one) interplaying. For instance, our data explained how buying firms reduce the conflict between the existing and new institutional logics. Similarly, the second type of institutional work emerged in our data revolves around crossing the boundary between the existing and the new institutional logics. Legitimising institutional change shows how the new institutional logic is recognised and incentivised within the existing procurement institutional logic. Finally, spreading the new institutional logic depicts how social procurement is merged into the existing procurement institutional logic. The extant institutional literature, particularly within the

field of operations and supply chain management, has predominantly investigated the creation and establishment of new institutions overlooking the interplay between the new and existing institutions. For instance, Aaltonen and Turkulainen (2022) have demonstrated how new collaborative governance models are institutionalised in projects by examining the creation of new institutions across multiple projects. In another example, Wu and Jia (2018) investigated the creation and establishment of new institutions in local markets to enable market development. Our approach, however, considered both existing and new institutions and explored the types of institutional work that buying firms adopt to develop social procurement in the context of their existing often strong procurement institutions.

5.2. Institutional work: the sequential phases

Our analysis suggests that in order to adopt and advance social procurement, buying firms move through three phases, each associated with a unique type of institutional work namely, reducing institutional conflicts, legitimising institutional change and spreading the new institutional logic across the organisation. Particularly, we found that buying firms carry out institutional work in a sequential way, meaning that the three types of institutional work build upon and relate to each other. Additionally, our results revealed that throughout the three phases, buying firms engage with a fourth type of institutional work (i.e. crossing institutional boundaries) to adopt and advance social procurement within their organisations.

In the first phase, where a strong market logic is dominated and social logic is largely absent within the procurement organisation, buying firms engage in various institutional work efforts to reduce conflicts in institutional logics. Particularly, they achieve so by clearly linking social procurement with already accepted and recognised institutions such as sustainable sourcing and supply chain management programmes or corporate social

responsibility initiatives. For instance, B1 and B16, the two multinational companies with headquarters in the US built on the strong history of supplier diversity programmes in the US. Rooted in the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, supplier diversity programmes are long established in the US where companies commit to use some of their procurement spend with minority-owned suppliers. Framing social procurement as a synergic practice enabled the two buying firms to easily introduce the concept into their procurement organisation. Similarly, B6 benefited from their strong innovative corporate culture and corporate social responsibility community in embedding social procurement values throughout the organisation. They were able to create engagement by building on their existing CSR programmes and framing social procurement as a new pillar of their CSR efforts. Additionally, institutional conflicts can be minimised through closing resource and capability gaps between buying firms and social enterprise suppliers (e.g. breaking down the misconceptions and stigma surrounding social enterprise suppliers or developing commercial capabilities within social enterprise suppliers). Such efforts seek to create awareness about social procurement and foster engagement and reduce resistance among key stakeholders to galvanise action.

Although the extant literature has established the need for institutional work to construct new identities or concepts within the early stages of institutional change, the strong presence of reducing institutional conflicts in the first phase of social procurement development eliminated the need for such institutional work. For instance, Mattsson and Junker (2023) identified *translation* (i.e. efforts to link new meanings and concepts to the existing institutions) as a key institutional work in transforming public procurement into fossil-free procurement practices. However, in the context of social procurement, we observed that identities, concepts and associations were mainly borrowed from the existing institutions. For instance, in framing the benefits of social procurement, buying

firms appeared to consistently draw on a market logic, highlighting the cost, quality and reliability advantages of social enterprise suppliers. This conscious strategy was used to minimise potential conflicts with the existing concepts governed by the dominant market logic. Similarly, on the social side, instead of creating new concepts and identities, buying firms largely borrowed elements from the existing sustainability and social impact institutions. For example, B7 assigned the director of social impact to co-lead the social procurement initiative with their existing procurement manager, rather than creating a new role. We suggest that given the existence of social and market logic within both buying firms and social enterprise suppliers, the redefinition of identities and concepts were minimised through the reduction of institutional conflicts.

Although reducing institutional conflicts paves the way to introduce social procurement into the organisation, this institutional work does not directly promote the new institutional logic. Thus, in the second phase, buying firms engage with legitimisation activities to establish the new logic. The legitimisation of institutional change is a crucial next step in recognising and formalising social procurement as an acceptable and even preferable practice. In this phase, buying firms put in place various mechanisms such as internal or external directories or new features on their procurement systems to recognise and validate social enterprises as a new form of suppliers. They further establish motivational mechanisms (e.g. social spend category targets) to make social procurement a preferred procurement practice. Our analysis revealed that meeting these social procurement objectives are easier in certain product categories where more commercially capable social enterprise suppliers exist. However, participating buying firms in our study did not appear to have applied different motivational mechanisms across product categories (e.g. stronger incentives to encourage working with social

enterprise suppliers in more competitive and specialised product categories). This appeared as one of the key challenges in the development of social procurement.

In the final phase, buying firms attempt to spread the legitimised institutional logic governing social procurement across their organisations through creating a growing demand for social enterprise suppliers and expanding the initiative into new product categories, divisions and geographical regions. Particularly, smaller buying firms in our study such as B14 and B15 appeared to spread social procurement across several product categories despite a relatively slower progress with legitimisation of social procurement institution. The institutional work performed in this phase also enables social enterprise suppliers to effectively plan their resources and have confidence in scaling their business.

Across these three phases, we observed that buying forms constantly cross the boundary separating their existing procurement institutions from the social procurement institution. Boundary crossing was used to reduce institutional conflicts (e.g. boundary spanners raising awareness about social procurement), legitimise institutional change (e.g. boundary spanners pushing for incentivising social procurement) and spread the new institutional logic (e.g. network of champions and boundary events spreading social procurement across new product categories). Particularly, our study suggests that as the existing procurement institutional boundary becomes weaker over time, the boundary crossing institutional work fades away. In such cases, social procurement gets integrated well into the existing procurement system. A case in point is B5 where boundary crossing institutional work was not evident despite the strong presence of social procurement.

The sequential nature of different types of institutional work has been recently investigated in the literature. For instance, Boutinot and Delacour (2022) showed that the institutional maintenance of *Belle Epoque* went through three consecutive phases of damaging work, preservation work and transferability work. This is also consistent with

studies adopting a process approach to identify institutional work through a stepwise process (e.g. Bjerregaard and Jonasson, 2014). Consistently, our study suggests that the social procurement institutional work occurs in three sequential phases.

6. Theoretical and practical implications and areas for future work

6.1. Theoretical contributions

Our work contributes to the literature in different ways. First, we add to the various strands of literature investigating the role of procurement in generating social value, including social procurement and supplier diversity, by adopting an institutional lens to investigate the buying firms' purposeful actions to change procurement institutions. Extant studies have predominantly examined the challenges and drivers of sourcing from social enterprise and diverse suppliers (e.g. Loosemore *et al.*, 2021; Wontner *et al.*, 2020). These studies have further established the role of buying firms' commitment, improved communications and monitoring in enabling such initiatives (Meqdadi *et al.*, 2020; Whitfield and Landeros, 2006; Wontner *et al.*, 2020). Our findings advance these studies by providing a theoretical framework that guides the process of adopting and advancing social procurement. Specifically, our study reveals three sequential phases through which buying firms navigate the challenges of incorporating social enterprise suppliers into their supply chains.

Second, our study complements the existing operations and supply chain management literature that has investigated the conflicts of institutional logics (e.g. Perner and Skjølsvik, 2016; Pullman *et al.*, 2018) by illustrating the ways firms address such institutional conflicts when adopting and advancing social procurement. Most recently, sustainable supply chain management scholars have illustrated the existence of multiple conflicting institutional logics where firms adopt sustainable practices within their supply chains (e.g. McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021; Nath et al. 2020). Our study extends this

emerging strand of work by providing a typology of institutional work that includes strategies through which firms navigate the conflicts of institutional logics. Particularly, our model identified *reducing institutional conflicts*, *crossing institutional boundaries*, *legitimising institutional change* and *spreading the new institutional logic* as the four types of institutional work that buying firms perform to adopt and advance social procurement.

Finally, we contribute to the recently emerging operations and supply chain management literature on institutional work that examined the creation and establishment of new institutions (i.e. Aaltonen and Turkulainen, 2022; Mattsson and Junker, 2023; Wu and Jia, 2018) by explaining the institutional work efforts in light of the interplay of existing and new institutional logics. In fact, extant studies have predominantly looked at the creation of *new* institutions. For instance, existing studies discussed the processes through which relational and contractual project governance are formed (Aaltonen and Turkulainen, 2022), operations tasks are defined (Wu and Jia, 2018), and SME-friendly innovation finance is created (Selviaridis and Spring, 2022). We add to this line of theorisation by considering the existing procurement institutions in our investigation of social procurement institutional work.

6.2 Practical implications

Our study provides several practical implications. First, our study of different types of institutional work and associated practices provides buying firms with a guiding framework for initiating and establishing new sustainable procurement initiatives such as social procurement. The framework offers practical guidelines on how buying firms can create a shared intention to engage and promote social procurement (in phase 1), building systems and processes to place the activity on a more formal footing (in phase 2) and increase its capacity and capabilities (in phase 3). Our framework could form a basis for

the development of a maturity model to evaluate the buying firms' progress against the various phases of social procurement advancement in their organisations.

Furthermore, our study provides practical implications for policy makers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) advocating social procurement. Specifically, our results provide a framework to identify areas that require resources, legislation or community and capacity building to complement and enhance the institutional work performed by buying firms. For instance, our results showed buying firms' efforts to create a growing and sustainable demand for social enterprise suppliers and expand social procurement to new categories and divisions. However, some firms failed to achieve this due to the lack of social enterprise capacity or presence in certain categories. Therefore, government bodies and NGOs must introduce new initiatives to scale up social enterprises or to bring several new product and service offerings into the market in response to corporate needs.

6.3 Limitations and future research

We recognise that our study has some limitations that suggest future research opportunities. First, although we identified different types of institutional work and their sequential order, our study is limited in revealing the evolution of new institutions and the (potential) disruption or erosion of existing ones. In fact, we were unable to observe the mechanisms through which institutional work leads to actual changes. Future research is required to amass longitudinal and rich data (e.g. through an ethnographic research design) to provide a more granular account of the institutional dynamics when a firm transforms its procurement practices.

From a theoretical point of view, we believe that a focus on other classifications of institutional work (e.g. symbolic, material and relational work; Hampel *et al.*, 2017; identity or practice; Mena and Suddaby, 2016) could provide new and more nuanced

angles in understanding the adoption of social procurement. For instance, the identity work perspective can explain how the role of procurement managers changes in organisations as they become social procurement change agents. Alternatively, practice work could discuss how existing procurement practices evolve with the adoption of social procurement.

Additionally, our study provided a firm-level analysis to investigate social procurement institutional work. However, to extend our understanding of social procurement, future research should adopt dyadic, network or ecosystem-based levels of analysis. These studies could benefit from multi-layered data collection and an analysis investigating all actors involved (e.g. activists, social enterprises, third-party institutions, private-sector firms and governments).

Finally, while our study was limited to the UK context, future research could investigate social procurement elsewhere (e.g. Canada, Australia etc.). Although a case-based approach was deemed appropriate at this stage, with more firms adopting this practice, subsequent studies could perform extensive sample data collection and analyses across multiple countries. These studies could further examine the effect of different cultural and regulatory contexts.

References

- Aaltonen, K. and Turkulainen, V. (2022), "Institutionalization of a collaborative governance model to deliver large, inter-organizational projects", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 42 No. 8, pp.1294-1328.
- Alinaghian, L. and Razmdoost, K. (2021), "How do social enterprises manage business relationships: a review of the literature and directions for future research", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 136, pp.488-498.
- Alinaghian, L., Qiu, J. and Razmdoost, K. (2021), "The role of network structural properties in supply chain sustainability: a systematic review and agenda for future research", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp.192-211.
- Azadegan, A., Napshin, S. and Oke, A. (2013), "The influence of R&D partnerships on innovation in manufacturing firms: the moderating role of institutional attachment", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 248-274.
- Barraket, J. and Loosemore, M. (2018), "Co-creating social value through cross-sector collaboration between social enterprises and the construction industry", *Construction Management and Economics*, Vol. 36 No. 7, pp.394-408.
- Bals, L. and Tate, W. (2018), "Sustainable supply chain design in social businesses: advancing the theory of supply chain", *Journal of Business Logistics*, Vol. 39 No.1, pp.57-79.
- Bjerregaard, T. and Jonasson, C. (2014), "Managing unstable institutional contradictions: the work of becoming", *Organisation Studies*, Vol. 35 No. 10, pp.1507-1536.

- Blount, I. and Li, M. (2021), "How buyers' attitude towards supplier diversity affect their expenditure with ethnics minority businesses", *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, Vol. 57 No. 3, pp.3-24.
- Boutinot, A. and Delacour, H. (2022), "How the malleability of material artefacts contributes to institutional maintenance: the Guimard metropolitan railway entrances, 1914–2000", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 43 No. 12, pp.1967-1989.
- Campbell, J.L., Quincy, C., Osserman, J. and Pedersen, O.K. (2013), "Coding in-depth semi-structured interviews: problems of unitization and intercoder reliability and agreement", *Sociological Methods and Research*, Vol. 42 No. 3, pp.294-320.
- Dacin, P.A., Dacin, M.T. and Matear, M. (2010), "Social entrepreneurship: why we don't need a new theory and how we move forward from here", *Academy of Management Perspectives*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp.37-57.
- Di Domenico, M., Tracey, P. and Haugh, H. (2010), "Social bricolage: theorizing social value creation in social enterprises", *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, Vol. 34 No. 4, pp.681-703.
- Gawer, A. and Phillips, N. (2013), "Institutional work as logics shift: the case of Intel's transformation to platform leader", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 34 No. 8, pp.1035-1071.
- Geng, R., Lam, H.K.S. and Stevenson, M. (2022), "Addressing modern slavery in supply chains: an awareness-motivation-capability perspective", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 42 No. 3, pp.331-356.
- Gioia, D.A., Corley, K.G. and Hamilton, A.L. (2013), "Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research notes on the Gioia methodology", *Organizational Research Methods*, Vol. 16, pp.15-31.

- Gioia, D. (2021), "A systematic methodology for doing qualitative research", *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 57 No.1, pp. 20-29.
- Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Aldine Publishing, Chicago, IL.
- Greenwood, R. and Suddaby, R. (2006), "Institutional entrepreneurship in mature fields: the big five accounting firms", *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 49 No. 1, pp.27-48.
- Hampel, C.E., Lawrence, T.B. and Tracey P. (2017), "Institutional work: taking stock and making it matter", Greenwood, R., Oliver, C., Lawrence, T.B. and Meyer, R. (Eds.), *Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, 2nd ed., Sage Publications, London, pp.558-590.
- Huq, F., Stevenson, M. and Zorzini, M. (2014), "Social sustainability in developing country suppliers: an exploratory study in the ready-made garments industry of Bangladesh", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 34 No. 5, pp.610-638.
- Ketokivi, M.A. and Choi, T. (2014), "Renaissance of case research as a scientific method", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 32 No. 5, pp.232-240.
- Ketokivi, M.A. and Schroeder, R.G. (2004), "Strategic, structural contingency and institutional explanations in the adoption of innovative manufacturing practices", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 22, pp.63-89.
- Koulikoff-Souviron, M. and Harrison, A. (2008), "Independent supply relationships as institutions: the role of HR practices", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 28 No. 5, pp.412-432.
- Lamont, M. and Molnar, V. (2002). "The study of boundaries in the social sciences", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 28, pp. 167-195.

- Lashley, K. and Pollock, T. (2020), "Dancing with giants: how small women- and minority-owned firms use soft power to manage asymmetric relationships with larger partners", *Organization Science*, Vol. 36 No. 6, pp.1313-1335.
- Lawrence, T.B. and Suddaby, R. (2006), "Institutions and institutional work", Clegg, S.R., Hardy, C., Lawrence, T.B. and Nord, W.R. (Ed.s.), *Sage Handbook of Organization Studies*, 2nd ed., Sage Publications, London, pp.215-254.
- Lawrence, T., Suddaby, R. and Leca, B. (2011), "Institutional work: refocusing institutional studies of organization", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp.52-58.
- Longoni, A., Luzzini, D., Pullman, M. and Habiague, M. (2019), "Business for society is society's business: tension management in a migrant integration supply chain", *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, Vol. 55 No. 4, pp.3-33.
- Loosemore, M. (2016), "Social procurement in UK construction projects", *International Journal of Project Management*, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp.133-144.
- Loosemore, M., Alkilani, S. and Murphy, R. (2021), "The institutional drivers of social procurement implementation in Australian construction projects", *International Journal of Project Management*, Vol. 39, No. 7, pp.750-761.
- Mair, J., Marti, I. and Ventresca, M.J. (2012), "Building inclusive markets in rural Bangladesh: how intermediaries work institutional voids", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 55 No. 4, pp.819-850.
- Mattsson, L.G. and Junker, S.O. (2023), "Market shaping for a fossil-free economy: institutional work to change market practices of public procurement", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 108, pp.23-34.

- McLoughlin K. and Meehan, J. (2021), "The institutional logic of the sustainable organisation: the case of a chocolate supply network", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 41 No. 3, pp. 251-274.
- Mena, S. and Suddaby, R. (2016), "Theorization as institutional work: the dynamics of roles and practices", *Human Relations*, Vol. 69 No. 8, pp. 1669-1780.
- Meqdadi, O., Johnsen, T.E. and Pagell, M. (2020), "Relationship configurations for procuring from social enterprises", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 40 No. 6, pp.819-845.
- Meredith, J. (1998), "Building operations management theory through case and field research", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp.441-454.
- Nath, S.D., Eweje, G. and Sajjad, A. (2020), "The hidden side of sub-supplier firms' sustainability – an empirical analysis", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 40 No. 13, pp.1771-1799.
- Nicholls, A. and Huybrechts, B. (2016), "Sustaining inter-organizational relationships across institutional logics and power asymmetries: the case of Fair Trade", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 135 No. 4, pp.699-714.
- Pemer, F. and Skjølvsvik, T. (2016), "Purchasing policy or purchasing police? The influence of institutional logics and power on responses to purchasing formalisation", *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, Vol. 52 No. 4, pp.6-21.
- Pullman, M., Longoni, A. and Luzzini, D. (2018), "Emerging discourse incubator: the roles of institutional complexity and hybridity in social impact supply chain management", *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp.3-20.
- Rogers, K.W., Purdy, L., Safayeni, F. and Buimering, P.R. (2007), "A supplier development program: rational process or institutional image construction?", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 25, pp.556-572.

- Saebi, T., Foss, N.J. and Linder, S. (2019), "Social entrepreneurship research: past achievements and future promises", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 45 No. 1, pp.70-95.
- Scott, W.R. (1987), "The adolescence of institutional theory", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 32 No. 4, pp.493-511.
- Selviaridis, K. and Spring, M. (2022), "Fostering SME supplier-enabled innovation in the supply chain: the role of innovation policy", *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, Vol. 58, pp.92-123.
- Shah, M. and Ram, M. (2006), "Supplier diversity and minority business enterprise development: case study experience of three US multinationals", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp.75-81.
- Shelton, L.M. and Minniti, M. (2018), "Enhancing product market access: minority entrepreneurship, status leveraging and preferential procurement programs", *Small Business Economics*, Vol. 50 No. 3, pp.481-498.
- Suchman, M. (1995), "Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 20, pp. 571-610.
- Sodhi, M.S. and Tang, C.S. (2014), "Supply-chain research opportunities with the poor as suppliers or distributors in developing countries", *Production and Operations Management*, Vol. 23 No. 9, pp.1483-1494.
- Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J. (1990), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park.
- Stake, R.E. (1995), *The Art of Case Study Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- Tachizawa, E.M. and Wong, C.Y. (2014), "Towards a theory of multi-tier sustainable supply chains: a systematic literature review", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 19 No. 5/6, pp.643-663.

- Thornton, P.H. and Ocasio, W. (1999), "Institutional logics and historical contingency of power in organizations: executive succession in the higher education publishing industry, 1958–1999." *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 150 No. 3, pp.801-843.
- Turkulainen, V., Kauppi, K. and Nermes, E. (2017), "Institutional explanations: missing link in operations management?" *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 37 No. 8, pp.1117-1140.
- Villena, V.H. and Dhanorkar, S. (2020), "How institutional pressures and managerial incentives elicit carbon transparency in global supply chains ", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 66 No. 6, pp.697-734.
- Whitfield, G and Landeros, R. (2006), "Supplier diversity effectiveness: does organizational culture really matter?" *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, Vol. 42, No. 4, pp. 16-28.
- Wontner, K.L., Walker, H., Harris, I. and Lynch, J. (2020), "Maximising 'community benefits' in public procurement: tensions and trade-offs", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 40 No. 12, pp.1909-1939.
- Worthington, I., Ram, M., Boyal, H. and Shah. M. (2008), "Researching the drivers of socially responsible purchasing: a cross-national study of supplier diversity initiatives", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 79, pp.319-331.
- Wu, Z. and Jia, F. (2018), "Towards a theory of supply chain fields – understanding the institutional process of supply chain localization", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 58-59, pp.27-41.
- Yadav, S., Choi, T.M., Kumar, A., Luthra, S. and Naz, F. (2023), "A meta-analysis of sustainable supply chain practices and performance: the moderating roles of type of economy and innovation", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 43 No. 5, pp. 802-845.

Yawar, S. and Seuring, S. (2017), "Management of social issues in supply chains: a literature review exploring social issues, actions and performance outcomes", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 141 No. 3, pp.621-643.

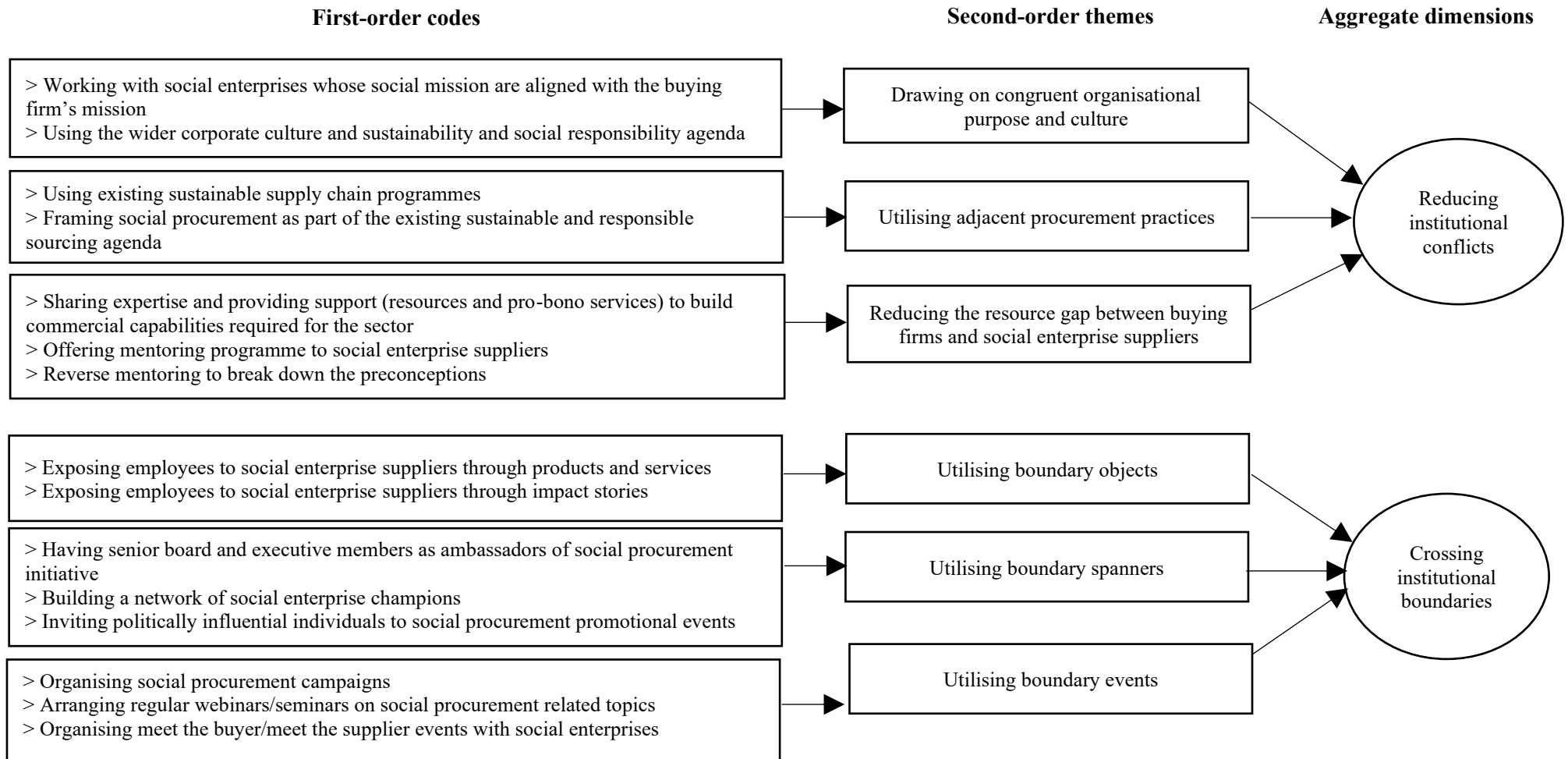
Zorzini, M., Hendry, L., Huq, F. and Stevenson, M. (2015), "Socially responsible sourcing: reviewing the literature and its use of theory", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp.60-109.

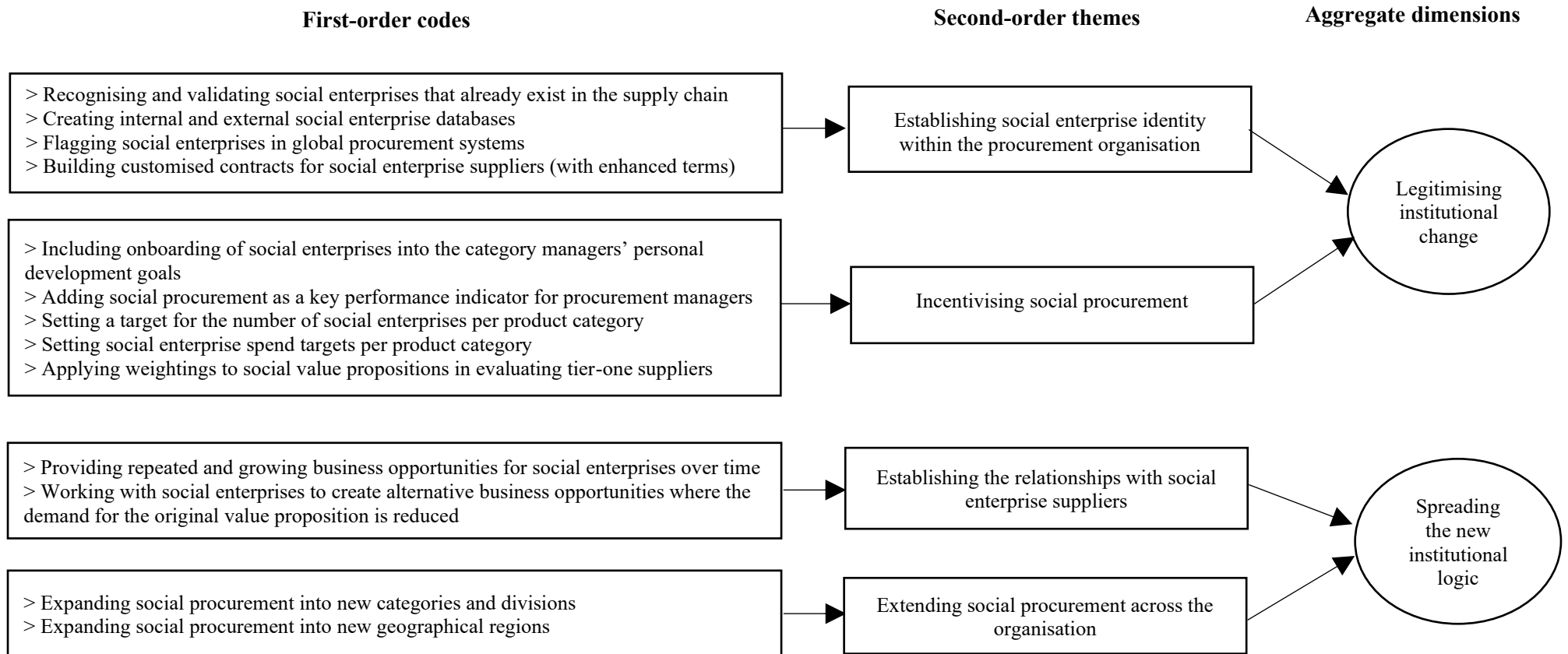
Table I, Interview participants and company profiles

Buying firm	Industry [~No. of employees]	Average Social Procurement Annual Expenditure (2019~2021)	Interviewees' title	Social enterprise suppliers [Beneficiaries]
B1	Pharmaceutical and healthcare [145,000]	£2,618,333	Supplier social responsibility director Procurement services manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • S1 Coffee [Ex-offenders] • S2 Office supply [Homeless people] • S3 Beverage [Water Aid] • S4 Children clothing [Orphaned and abandoned children] • S5 Energy services [Households experiencing fuel poverty] • S6 Crewing services [Homeless people] • S7 Job board [People with disabilities] • S8 Management consulting services [Multiple beneficiaries] • S9 Paint products [Marginalised job seekers] • S10 IT consulting services [Autistic adults] • S11 Coffee [Homeless people] • S12 Fruit delivery [Marginalised communities] • S13 Tea [Refugees] • S14 Cleaning services [Low-income workers] • S15 Office supply [Marginalised entrepreneurs] • S16 Marketing agency [Underprivileged youth] • S17 Manufacturing services [Veterans and armed forces with disability] • S18 Design and printing services [People with mental health] • S19 Communication agency [People with mental health] • S20 Online retail [Multiple beneficiaries] • S21 Mental health training services [People with mental health]
B2	Pharmaceutical and healthcare [75,000]	£2,321,333	Supplier diversity manager Sustainability and supplier diversity	
B3	Financial services [18,000]	£2,256,000	Senior manager property services	
B4	Software [105,000]	£295,000	Procurement manager	
B5	Consulting and professional services [295,000]	£1,697,667	Procurement director	
B6	Industrial manufacturing [300,000]	£1,509,333	SCM sustainability lead	
B7	Construction, infrastructure and real estate [19,000]	£3,454,333	Director of social impact Procurement manager	
B8	Construction, infrastructure and real estate [105,000]	£1,213,333	UK procurement director	
B9	Food services and facility management [480,000]	£1,668,000	Global sustainability sourcing lead	
B10	Consulting and professional services [345,000]	£374,667	Partnerships manager	
B11	Financial services [54,000]	£495,333	Senior sourcing manager	
B12	Utility [170,000]	£1,722,667	Head of responsible business	
B13	Telecommunication [18,000]	£51,000	Corporate governance director	
B14	Consulting and professional services [5,000]	£282,333	HR Contract and sourcing advisor	
B15	Construction, infrastructure and real estate [4,000]	£5,990,333	Head of social value	
B16	Food services and facility management [410,000]	£3,303,500	Head of responsible sourcing	

Source: Authors own creation

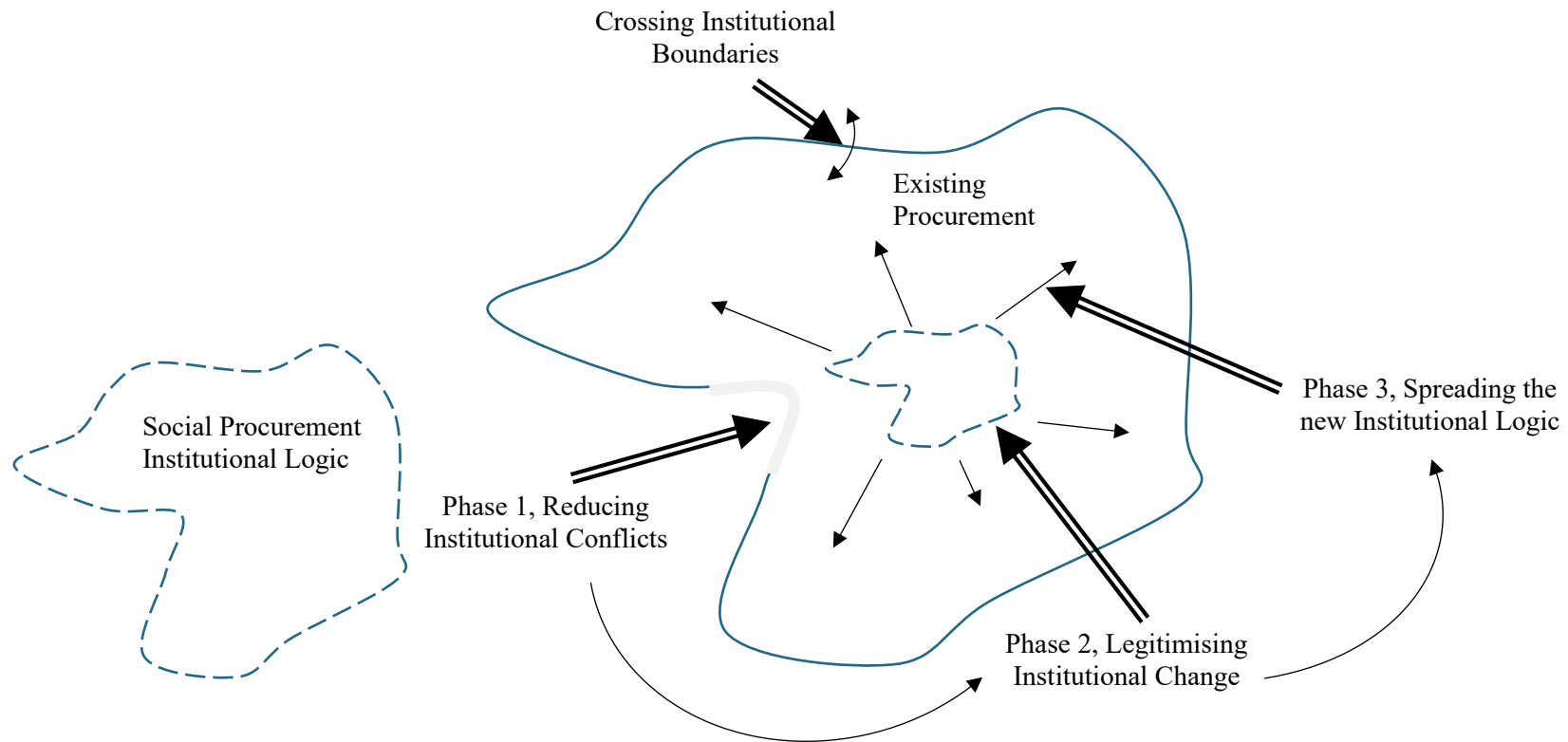
Figure 1 – Data structure





Source: Authors own creation

Figure 2 – Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors own creatin