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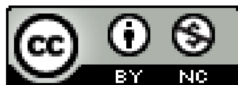

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The raison d'etre of informality studies: an introduction

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The first reader of *A Hitchhiker's Guide to Informal Problem-Solving in Human Life*, its anonymous reviewer, summed up the volume as follows:

> Along with the first two volumes of *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality*, it sets the boundaries, rules and standards of what is shaping up to be the field of informality studies. These standards include a *cross-disciplinary approach* (which combines approaches and insights into political sciences, sociology, social anthropology, social psychology, organisational theory, behavioural economics, and other disciplines); *the network expertise* (which is a response to the problem produced by the contradictory tendencies of the growing volume and complexity of knowledge on the one hand, and scholars' hyper-specialisation and the fragmentation of academic knowledge, on the other); *a bottom-up perspective* (that gives voice to the witnesses of informal practices in local contexts); *the means of identification of informal practices* (which often escape articulation in official discourse, but must have a name in the local jargon); *focusing on 'what works'* (rather than 'what should work' or the reasons why public policies 'do not work'); *context-sensitive comparisons* (comparisons of similar informal practices from various parts of the world, which provide a generalization of knowledge without losing sight of the local context); and *keeping in mind the ambivalence of informal practices* (their substantive, functional, normative, and motivational ambivalence).

I will explain why these principles are central to informality studies and why informality plays such an important role in finding solutions to twenty-first-century problems.

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1. The problem-oriented approach

The rapid deployment of the Internet and other digital technologies in the last two decades has amplified two conflicting trends which have been developing since the second half of the nineteenth century – knowledge fragmentation and the need for integration. As the depth and complexity of knowledge has been increasing exponentially, the specialisation of scholars has been increasing at a similar rate. Because of the fragmentation of academic knowledge, individual scholars are unable to tackle complex problems which require urgent solutions (Harari 2018; Keller 2022). One clear example of this is climate change, itself only a part of the sustainability problem, which requires a multitude of scientific perspectives as well as an understanding of societies and their foundational principle – human cooperation. In his 1948 article 'Science and Complexity', Warren Weaver stated:

> These new problems [of complexity] … require science to make a third great advance, an advance that must be even greater than the nineteenth-century conquest of problems of simplicity or the twentieth-century victory over problems of disorganized complexity. Science must, over the next 50 years, learn to deal with these problems of organized complexity.
>
> (1948: 540 quoted in Castellani 2014)

In order to achieve this:

> an open learning environment would need to be created, where students could be introduced to new and innovative notions of complexity, critical thinking, data visualisation and modelling, as well as the challenges of mixed-methods, interdisciplinary teamwork, global complexity, and big data! In short, the social sciences would need to be 'opened-up,' as Weaver called for in 1948 …!
>
> (Castellani 2014; see also Byrne and Callaghan 2014)

Three-quarters of a century later, we continue to call for social sciences to develop methodologies that capture contexts in order to resolve the ambivalence of informal practices and map their complexity. Using mixed methods, cross-disciplinary teamwork and institutional architecture as a means of bridging intellectual boundaries remains a challenge, even if one accepts the limitations of individual expertise.

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According to the cultural historian Peter Burke, historically, the challenges scattered across different fields had been addressed by individuals with encyclopaedic knowledge, or polymaths, such as Da Vinci, Erasmus, Pascal, Newton, von Humboldt, Pareto and Keynes (Burke 2020: 2), but deepening specialisation and increasing complexity of knowledge have made them virtually impossible to overcome. Today's scholars need to collaborate and overcome the limits of specialisation to reproduce a similar effect.

As early as the 1920s, top-down, institutional initiatives to facilitate collaboration between different fields of study led to the creation of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and the Rockefeller Foundation programme for the social sciences (Jay 1973; Ruml 1930). In the 1920s and 1930s, leading US universities – Yale, Harvard, Chicago – attempted to unite professors from different fields. In the social sciences, extended departments, joint seminars and discussion groups were organised to enable collaboration and integration. In 1940, Chicago University set up a multidisciplinary Committee on Human Development that linked natural and social sciences (Burke 2020: 224). A new format for interdisciplinary research under which scholars from different fields worked, conversed and collaborated under one roof – the Institute of Advanced Studies – emerged in 1931 at Princeton University. It was adopted throughout the Western world in the 1960s, mostly due to support of interdisciplinary research by Western governments in the aftermath of the Second World War. In Burke's view, 'in the case of humanities and social sciences … the results of these initiatives were disappointing' and many interdisciplinary research centres, interdisciplinary committees and educational programmes ceased to exist (Burke 2020: 228).

The so-called area studies, government-sponsored research collaboration initiatives, continue to this day. The School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) in London was founded in 1915. In the aftermath of World War II, the US administration, eager to learn about its rival the USSR, joined forces with private foundations in order to establish cross-disciplinary research centres dedicated to Soviet or Russian studies. Later on, similar institutions were created to study the Middle East, South-East Asia, China and Latin America, now focused on decolonising efforts to interrogate and transform the institutional, structural and epistemological legacies of colonialism (see for example, https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/).

Area studies-based collaborations have also produced a new generation of problem-centred fields and programmes: development studies, studies of women and minorities, cultural studies, global studies, media

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studies, religious studies, post-colonial studies, cognitive studies, liminality studies and so on. These have evolved bottom-up in response to social issues, as opposed to the top-down efforts to promote cross-disciplinarity. According to Burke, the problem-solving focus has been much more productive. Development studies grounded in neo-institutional theory have led the way. One example of success is Elinor Ostrom's project on governing the commons, which was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. The evidence compiled by Ostrom supported the theory that local communities are best at managing their own natural resources as they are the ones who use them, and she argued that the resources should be regulated at a local level, rather than a higher, centralised authority without a direct access to the resources. However, when bureaucracies adopt these results for their own use, the outcomes may differ significantly (Hart 2009). Urban studies 'hold the record for the number of disciplines involved in its programs in different universities – anthropology, archaeology, architecture, economics, geography, history, literature, politics and sociology – held together by a concern with major urban problems such as poverty and violence' (Burke 2020: 233). Due to the visibility of issues of informal settlements, urban studies takes the lead in research on informality and sets the policy agenda on urban development around the globe.

Similar to how formal institutions command more attention than informal ones on the subject of solving complex research problems, top-down institutional approaches to interdisciplinarity receive the most coverage. However, it has always been complemented and even preceded by bottom-up, informal ways to overcome the fragmentation of knowledge and enable collaborations between scholars from different fields. Burke describes 'The Club' established in London by Samuel Johnson and Joshua Reynolds in 1764 as an early example of such cross-fertilisation. Members of The Club who represented different professions met at a London tavern and discussed matters of shared interest. Similar informal groupings proliferated in London, Boston and many European cities towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the most famous being the Vienna Circle; History of Ideas Club, Baltimore; Ratio Club, London; Parisian salons and the like (Burke 2020: 233).

Most informal groups had a limited life (from 5 to 15 years), included a small number of participants with different backgrounds and managed to make significant advances in understanding specific problems as opposed to producing breakthrough scientific discoveries. Their strengths lay in the strong motivation and cognitive diversity of the participants, as well as flexibility of interaction free from any formal constraints or obligations. Their weaknesses were limited resources,

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including time and lack of a specific research agenda or a need to deliver (the case of the off-the-record Bilderberg club, established in 1954, might be an exception here).

Both top-down and bottom-up efforts to facilitate some interdisciplinary collaboration demonstrate the potential of these groups as well as their limitations. Both require a unifying force that holds the participants together. The format of a high table at Oxbridge colleges generates cross-discipline discussions and exchange of perspectives. However, it is only when the researchers cooperate to address a specific problem that their collaboration becomes sustainable and produces remarkable outcomes (Burke 2020: 228). Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson argues that effective collaboration between professionals with diverse backgrounds takes place when they face a challenge that is equally important to all of them but cannot be resolved without others who have complementary skills and knowledge (Edmondson 2012). The 'network expertise' assembled within the Global Informality Project (GIP) somewhat matches Edmondson's idea of 'teaming'.

First, it would not be possible to assemble this global collection of informal practices without the collaboration of researchers across cultures, disciplines and methods. Hundreds of scholars from all over the globe, willing to capture, map and describe informal practices, were united by the challenge of shedding light on informality and its role in the world. Second, most informal practices of problem-solving described in this encyclopaedia are themselves based on the teaming principle – people face challenges which they are unable to overcome simply by relying on existing, top-down, formal mechanisms, so they turn to other people with whom they have no formal bonds but whose help is indispensable. By combining resources, they overcome the challenge and find a solution. Third, the 'network expertise' approach relies on the classics: the strength of the weak ties (Granovetter 1973), activated by the 'network leadership' (Shekshnia and Matveeva 2019a, 2019b). Finally, there are wider forces at play that sparked interest in informality studies in the search for alternative solutions to societal problems and sustainability. One example is the 'Strategic interactive map of informality', set in motion by the World Economic Forum (WEF) strategic intelligence team (WEF 2022).

2. From capturing to mapping informality

Visualisation of informal practices and their impact helps to accomplish what *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality* attempts to achieve: to capture specific informal practices in a context-sensitive way, to map the

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patterns of informality around the world and to document the ambivalent impact of informal practices on people engaged in them, societies in which they take place, and global public goods (www.in-formality.com).

The critical role of informal practices as a means of solving problems that people face at various stages in their lives has been neglected for centuries. Most commonly, informality has been associated with its visible and measurable types: informal settlements and informal economy. However, the last two decades witnessed a successful effort to capture and map less visible practices. Social network analysis (SNA) has produced major breakthroughs (Butts 2008). This shift was also due to the qualitative research produced by a new generation of scholars who use mixed methods and innovative approaches to record less observable aspects of informality such as informal networks, informal governance, informal exchanges and informal currencies (Giordano and Hayoz 2013; Morris and Polese 2013; Henig and Makovicky 2017; Polese et al. 2022a).

A WEF strategic intelligence team working on strategic insights and contextual intelligence monitors forces that drive transformational change across economies, industries and systems. When approached to create an informal economy map, the GIP team sought to integrate

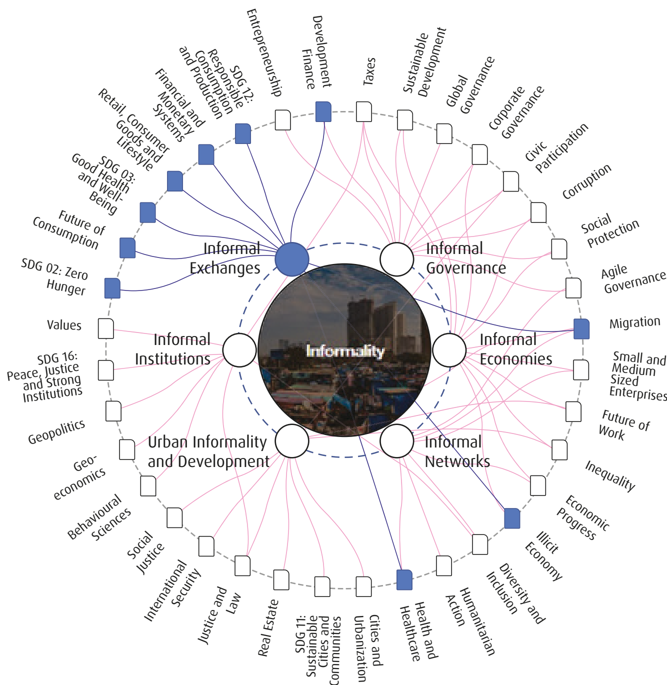

Figure 0.1.1 (Cont.)

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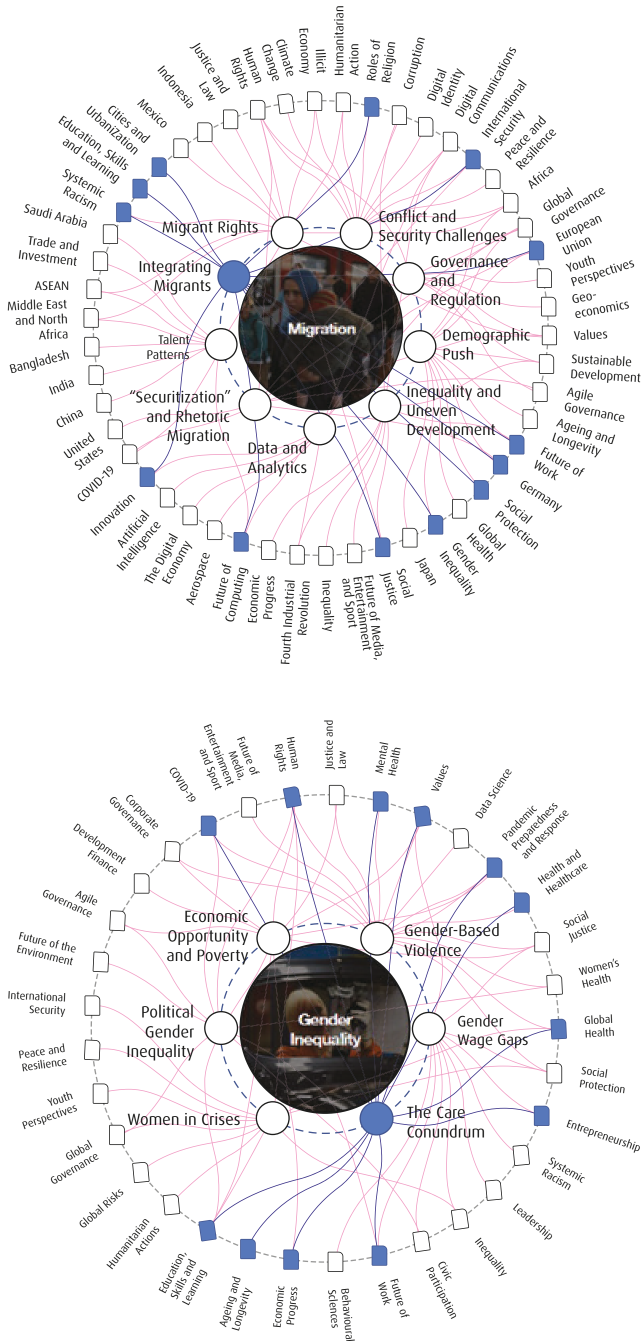

Figure 0.1.1 Transformation map of informality: from informality through migration to gender inequality CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. © World Economic Forum Strategic Intelligence.

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social and cultural complexity into strategic thinking, with a particular emphasis on those invisible and less measurable aspects of informality that make the latter so pervasive and omnipresent. In cooperation with doctoral students funded by the EC Marie-Curie innovative training network, and WEF tech specialists, six key constituents of informality were established (WEF 2022). Each one is associated with global issues and contexts, links to other interactive strategic maps and gets updated by new resources pulled by the AI algorithm. The interactive map comes to life when you select one of the six nodes. The blue lines in Figure 0.1.1 illustrate just one of the multiple tracks linking informality to the world's strategic policy agenda.

Let us examine the key issues traditionally associated with informality, starting with the informal economy, the area that perhaps has attracted the most attention (Morris 2019; Polese et al. 2019). Forming part of the national economy, the informal economy, however, escapes direct regulation and is not registered for tax purposes. According to Eurostat, the size of the informal economy ranges from 1 per cent of the whole economy in Norway to 28 per cent in Romania. Survey-based indices of the informal economy in emerging markets report much higher estimates of the share of shadow economies in the gross domestic product (GDP) (Putniņš and Sauka 2015; Polese et al. 2022b; see also Colin Williams' conceptual introduction to Chapter 8 in this volume).

Like most informal practices, informal economic activities are ambivalent. On the one hand, they create value for entrepreneurs and additional goods and services for consumers, and they create jobs for employees and put otherwise idle resources to productive use. On the other hand, they lead to the loss of public revenue, which undermines the financing of social security systems and the sustainability of public finances and erodes public trust in formal institutions.

The strategic map links informal economies to economic progress, corruption, inequality, employment, sustainability and public finances, as depicted in Figure 0.1.2, while urban informality, perhaps counterintuitively, is related to real estate development business and civic participation, urbanisation and international security, migration and corporate governance (see Figure 0.1.3).

Urban informality embraces everyday tactics that people use to appropriate and claim space, cope with scarce resources and strategically bypass or bend official regulations. It can be readily observed in the form of unregulated occupation of public or private buildings (squatting), land grabbing, construction of buildings for residential and commercial purposes without permits, establishing of slums and shantytowns and the

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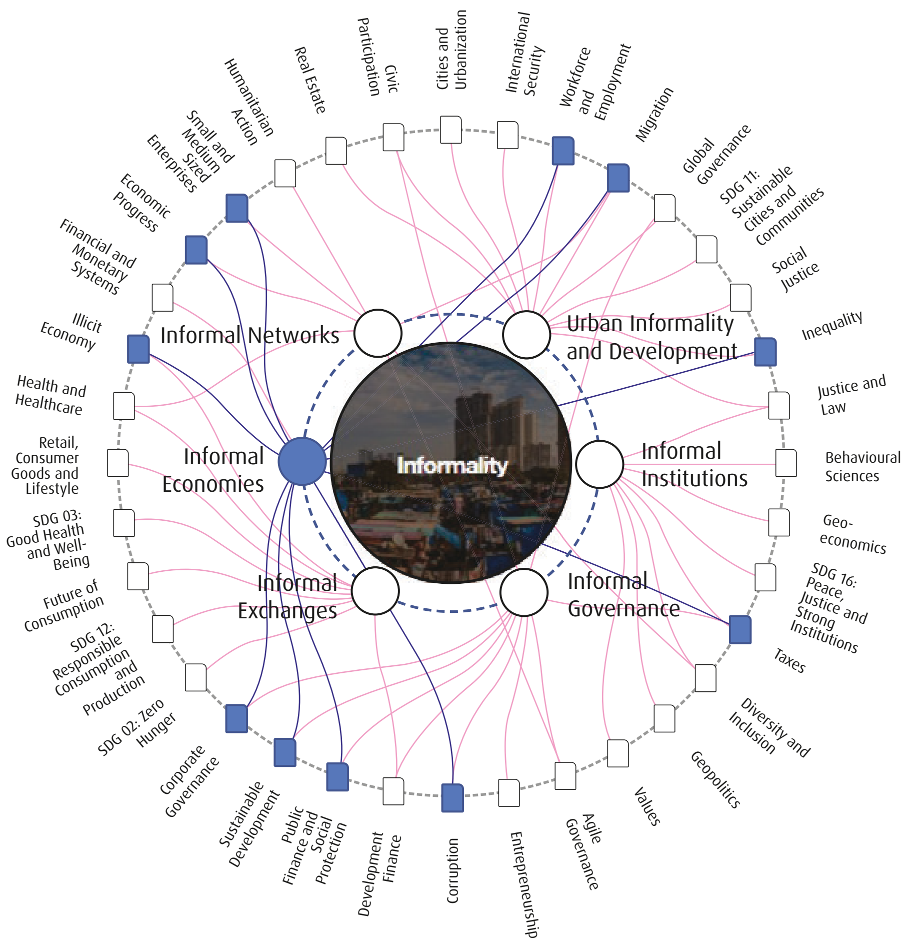

Figure 0.1.2 Transformation map of informality: informal economies. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. © World Economic Forum Strategic Intelligence.

emergence of temporary, unregulated settlements as a result of the mass displacement of populations due to war or natural disasters (see typology in the introduction to Chapter 11). Informal settlements are not only a result of housing shortages; their formation can be a strategic choice made in response to the lack of affordable housing and access to employment opportunities in urban areas where employment opportunities tend to be concentrated. *Colonias* in the USA (see 11.1 in this volume), *favelas* in Brazil, slum cities in India and *campamentos* in Chile accommodate millions of people. Less visible, perhaps, is the informal housing of the rich (Pow 2017; Martínez and Chiodelli 2021).

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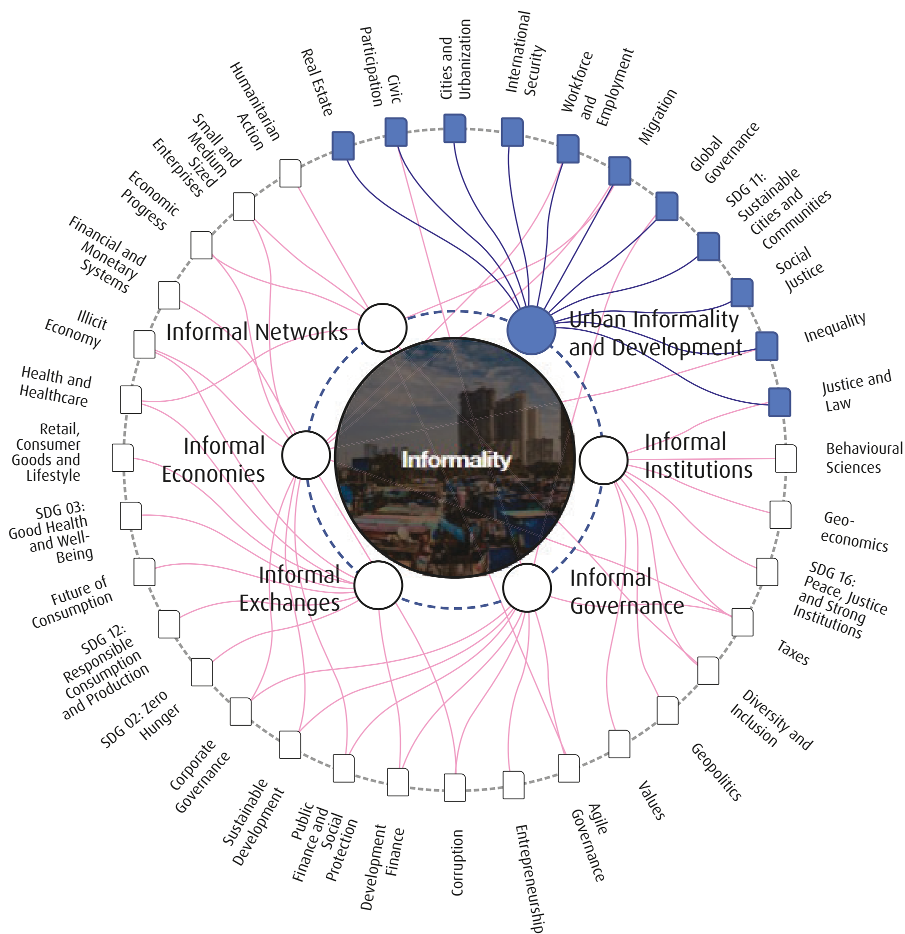

Figure 0.1.3 Transformation map of informality: urban informality. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. © World Economic Forum Strategic Intelligence.

The focus on informal networks in Figure 0.1.4 reveals the less obvious side of informality – the impact of personal connections on various aspects of human and social life. Whether it is about knowing the right person to find accommodation, arrange transport, release a package held at customs, or find a tutor, in many parts of the world connections are indispensable for getting things done. Connections are part and parcel of cooperation and solidarity, and their strength and quantity directly affect one's quality of life. Strong connections guarantee better support and informal care as people are more likely to help those with whom they share a bond. Informal networks offer a sense of belonging and bonding ties that correlate with well-being and happiness, and even

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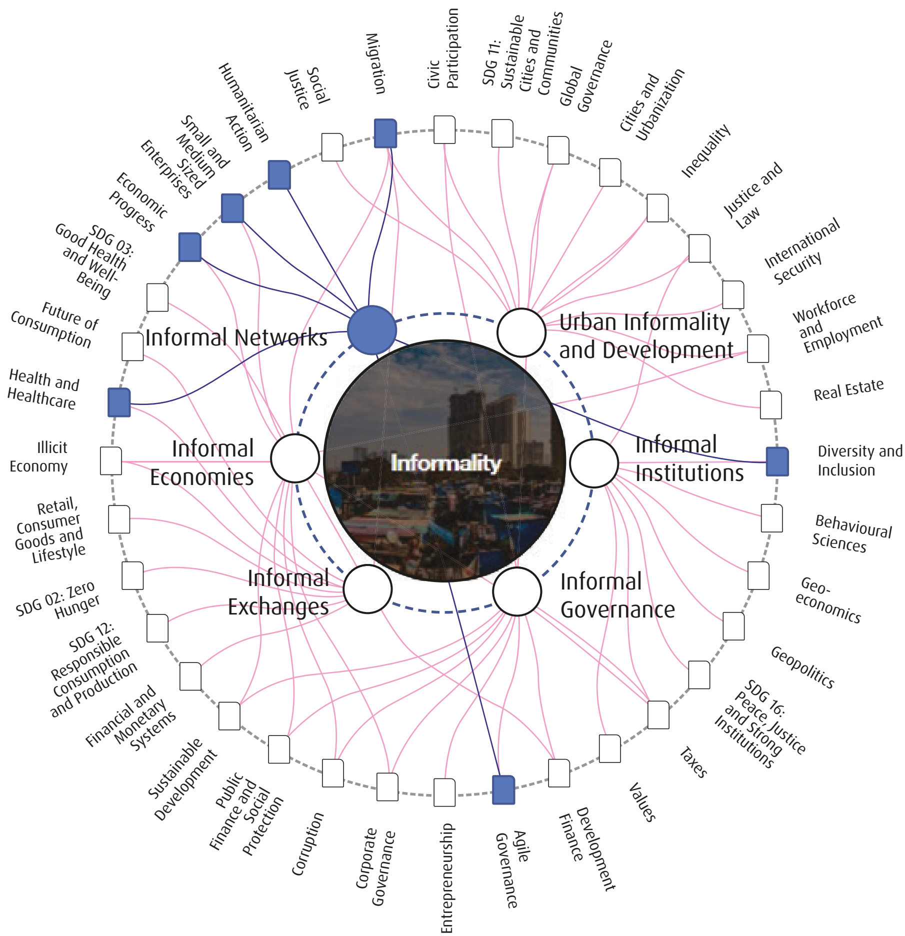

Figure 0.1.4 Transformation map of informality: informal networks. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. © World Economic Forum Strategic Intelligence.

weaker connections serve as bridging ties. The networks channel social capital that serves to improve life chances and provide practical benefits to everyone involved, as captured in the entry about the reproduction of aristocrats in France (see *les rallyes mondains*, 2.1 in this volume), alongside the emotional benefits associated with friendship, security and happiness.

However, a wealth of social capital can also have a negative effect by encouraging dependence on informal contacts and generating corrupt behaviour. Informal networks can restrict personal choice and have a 'lock-in' effect. Ultimately, individuals might feel trapped by the expectations of their connections. While insiders experience

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the burden of inclusion, outsiders feel deprived and excluded from access to resources and opportunities. As Chapter 5 on belonging and Chapter 7 on gaining advantage show, this duality also applies to informal social networks, which foster sociability and cohesion for insiders while excluding outsiders.

Interpreting the invisible part of the informal iceberg is not a straightforward undertaking. The focus on the invisible, unarticulated and immeasurable in informality studies concurs with the school of suspicion, associated with Paul Ricoeur's famous analysis of the great 'masters of suspicion', each of whom came up with an idea of falseness of consciousness – Karl Marx (class interest), Sigmund Freud (sex) and Friedrich Nietzsche (will power) (Ricoeur 2008 [1970]; Coyne 2020). Informality studies seeks to relativise the intellectual rigidity and intrinsic biases of approaches based on formalisation, visibility, articulation and measurability. The strategic interactive maps of informality have made a step in this direction by complicating the picture of the world with evidence of informal shortcuts that pervade contemporary societies.

3. The drivers of informality studies

In embracing both the developing and developed world, informal studies complements the global studies agenda with a bottom-up perspective that gives a voice to participants in liminal spaces and grey zones – often an undervalued source of policy solutions (Marinaro 2022). Informality studies enables the bridging and bonding of scholars with area studies expertise from all over the globe, thus creating a platform to explore deep structures of collective existence and critical analysis of contextuality (Geertz 1990).

In the last two decades, scholars of post-communist societies have made a remarkable contribution to the field of informality (see Polese 2023 for a review). The relationship between informality and the state has been scrutinised: from the connivance of the state and exploitation of informal refuse collectors, carers of the elderly and other service providers, to turning a blind eye to activities parallel to the state or not worth regulating (see *Pfandsammeln*, 8.10 in this volume; *Andare in giro*, 8.11 in this volume; *Babushki*, 1.10 in this volume; Rivkin-Fish and Zdravomyslova introductions to Chapters 1 and 14 in this volume). Once a peripheral theme of informality, associated with area studies, post-communist regimes and underdeveloped economies, has become

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mainstream, as formalised policies aimed at better governance continued to fail. The black box of informal institutions has been unpacked, and informal networks, channelling social values and peer pressure to conform with them became part of the transformative policy agenda (North 1990; Ostrom 1998; Minbaeva et al. 2022). The disciplinary divide in studying informal institutions, networks and practices has been partially overcome by intense cross-discipline collaboration within large-scale projects, application of network expertise, surveys and comparative research (Ledeneva 2010; Morris and Polese 2013; Ledeneva et al. 2018).

Several factors have created a demand for deeper understanding of informality as part of the global intellectual agenda (Harari 2018). The failure of global governance vis-à-vis nation states led to countless crises – geopolitical, environmental, the COVID-19 pandemic, migration – and pushed for novel, non-bureaucratic ways to solve global problems. Critical reviews of hegemonic discourses – via decolonisation and woke culture – questioned the assumptions of the historical and social roles of formal institutions. The transformations of the twenty-first century – the crisis of liberal ideology, the omnipresence of the Internet, the emergence of a gig economy and AI-based services, the rise of social media and political polarisation – undermined the normative analyses that had previously sidelined informality as marginal and detrimental to the effectiveness of formal institutions and created a need to assess the role of the informal in the new context. A focus on resilience and the ability to deal with uncertainty changed the angle on informality from traditionally suspect or borderline corrupt, to the problem-solving potential in the context of the 'new normal' (Stuart et al. 2018). Here I elaborate on the three main factors driving researchers' and practitioners' interest in informality studies and the impact thereof.

Facing uncertainty

Unregulated migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme weather, political polarisation, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, energy shortages and wild fluctuations of major currencies are only the most recent crises that have put severe pressure on governments and created an unprecedented level of uncertainty that has become the salient characteristic of the contemporary world. Solutions grounded in economics, theory of probability and game theory, with their emphasis on human rationality, strong institutions (including international bodies like the United Nations [UN], North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], World Trade Organization [WTO] and International Monetary Fund [IMF]), bilateral

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and multilateral treaties and negotiations, preventive risk identification and mitigation strategies have mostly failed to address the new challenges.

In order to make sense of realities that bypass traditional theoretical frames and resist institutions of global governance and integrate them into policy, scholars in economics, management and political science turned to behavioural economics, experimental methods and nudge policy approaches (Ahn and Ostrom 2002; Thaler and Sunstein 2008; Sunstein and Reisch 2017; Hodgeson 2021). In times of crisis, informal practices, associated with flexibility and intuition grounded in social norms and cultural values, affect the default mode of rules and procedures. It is essential to provide insights for studying alternative ways of dealing with uncertainty individually, collectively and at policy level.

Transcending West-centric transitional paradigms

Of the hundred countries that could be identified as transitional by the twenty-first century, no more than twenty are on a path to a well-functioning democracy. Most of the countries do not appear to be consolidating democratic institutions, while others have regressed into authoritarianism (Carothers 2002: 9–10). The sheer number of adjectives to describe these democracies as formal, façade, pseudo, weak, illiberal, sovereign, managed or virtual points to the problem with the key assumption of the transition paradigm: transition can be prompted at will by political elites, top-down, regardless of the country's predisposition for democracy and should be based on the creation of strong institutions, which will lead to flourishing economies, prosperous societies and effective states. The establishment and strengthening of such institutions became the core of the liberal reforms and democratisation efforts that swept the world from the 1980s to the 2000s, despite warnings of the effects of cultural and social norms on governance structures and emphasis on the habitual behaviour and irrational decision-making in the context of peer pressure and community-driven interests. Organisational theory posits that agents' actions and rationality reflect the norms pervading their workplace, so the principal–agent models of the public sector must integrate the collective action theory (Ahn and Ostrom 2002; Marquette and Peiffer 2015). The backsliding of democracies in many countries, including the new members of the EU from Central and Eastern Europe adopting the so-called 'no-predisposition' approach, gave way to comparative analyses that identified patterns of governance, fundamental for understanding the grey zones of political regimes, exiting from, or returning to, authoritarianism. These patterns are referred to as patronal

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politics in Eurasia (Hale 2014, 2019), subversive institutions, stubborn structures or informal institutions (Bunce 1999; Lauth 2000; Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 2006; Gel'man 2017; Magyar and Madlovich 2020), or informal governance (Christiansen and Piattoni 2003, Christiansen and Neuhold 2012, Ledeneva 2013; Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva 2017).

Thirty years after the fall of communism in Europe, scholars from different disciplines have joined forces to develop more balanced perspectives and reflect upon the pathways of post-communist transitions (Douarin and Havrylyshyn 2021) and subsequent 'democratic backsliding' (Cianetti et al. 2020). New conceptual frameworks for dealing with the path dependence of post-communist regimes (Magyar and Madlovich 2020) and critical review of their legacies and lessons have benefited wider intellectual frameworks (Kubik and Linch 2013; Duncan and Schimpfössl 2019), and facilitated new fields of study such as informal politics (Gill 2023: 410).

Balancing out ahistoric, state-centric thinking

In most sources, the prerequisites for governance include the power to act and the authority to do so. Governing is usually associated with the formal institutions of a modern state. However, historically, the modern state and its institutions are relatively recent phenomena, bound to specific factors facilitating their emergence and global dominance. The relevance of the West-centric concept of the state for countries run by Sharia law is questionable (Acemoglu et al. 2002) as it plays down the role of religion. The practical and ideological hegemony of state-led governance resulted in a loaded, if not stigmatised, understanding of non-Western, non-formalised processes of government, culminating in a rather naïve belief in the linear triumph of modernity over tradition. In this vein, the top-down perspective on informality, especially when associated with poverty, underdevelopment and the informal sector, has colonial roots (Hart 1973; Gerxhani 2004; Acemoglu et al. 2001, 2002).

Normative and classic institutionalist perspectives view informality as subversive, bad and obsolete, if not outright corrupt and illegal, and thus something to cast aside or erase from modern societies dominated by strong institutions, representative democracy and top-down governance. However, in recent decades the impact of informality has increased not only in emerging countries but also in liberal democracies. Dichotomic, normative thinking fails to explain the persistence of informality, because it cannot capture the ambivalent nature of informality: it creates issues while resolving problems. In later academic literature, informality is predominantly viewed in association with corruption, poor governance and the draining of resources from the formal sector.

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4. Skills to study informality

Scholars of informality face an intrinsic challenge. The unarticulated, or hidden, nature of informal practices makes their measurement problematic and their research dependent predominantly on qualitative methods. Data collection relies on the participants' willingness and ability to articulate practices for observers. Insiders' biases may distort the outsiders' interpretations, and vice versa. Controlling for positionality is essential. In addition, a researcher of informality, and an eager informality critic alike, may want to exercise caution in capturing, mapping or targeting informality, given the warning against 'allowing the informal economic practices to be portrayed as a kind of democratic resistance' (Misztal 2002; Hart 2009: 1). The following must-have research skills can enable one to see and assess the world through the lens of informality.

Operationalising informality

Is informality indeed a *lens* through which we observe human cooperation in particular times and spaces? Is it an *umbrella* concept embracing the variety of forms of human cooperation? Is it a *pattern* of cooperation that re-emerges in different contexts and is fundamentally repetitive? Do we even need a definition for it? To paraphrase Nietzsche, informality is a term that has history, rather than a definition. Without attempting to achieve consensus, and in the spirit of the social and cultural complexity in informality studies, it might still be useful to question the widespread assumptions about informality. Let us take issue with the ChatGPT-generated definition that does not distinguish between the concept and the practices it refers to:

> Informality refers to behavior, relationships, or structures that operate outside of formal rules, norms, or procedures. In social or economic contexts, informality can refer to practices that are not regulated or recognized by the state or other formal institutions, such as informal labor markets or unregistered businesses. Informality can also refer to social behavior that is relaxed, casual, or unstructured, as opposed to formal, rigid, or traditional. The term can be used in a variety of contexts, including politics, economics, sociology, and culture, to describe phenomena that are not fully regulated or institutionalized.
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Three assumptions come to the fore: (1) informal behaviour takes place *outside* formal rules, norms and procedures, rather than penetrating, exploiting and diverting them, (2) the definition relies on the formal–informal *dichotomy* rather than shades of grey in the interrelation of its poles and (3) it promotes the residual principle, what is not formal is informal, whereby the state is perceived to be the centre (independent variable) that shapes and regulates informal behaviour (dependent variable). On these three counts, the ChatGPT definition lacks sophistication and does not go beyond a dichotomic, black-and-white, top-down account of informality.

In response to the question on the spread of informality, the ChatGPT fared much better by emphasising the global and universal nature of informality:

> Informality is a global phenomenon that is present in both developed and developing countries. It is estimated that more than half of the world's workforce is employed in informal jobs, with the highest rates of informality in developing countries. In many developing countries, informal employment can account for as much as 80–90% of the workforce, particularly in rural areas and in the service sector. However, informality is not limited to developing countries and can also be found in developed countries, particularly in the form of undeclared work, self-employment, and irregular employment arrangements.
>
> (Generated 28 March 2023)

The operationalisation of informality as informal employment is somewhat limited, especially from the perspective of urban studies and other angles as represented in this volume. Disaggregating informality into informal ways of problem-solving is the means by which it is operationalised in the GIP. In other words, researchers have operationalised the concept of informality in a context-sensitive way that suited their research needs best.

Exercising cross-disciplinarity

Tackling informality requires a cross-disciplinary perspective. The following discipline-based concepts are essential for understanding informality: informal institutions in political sciences, informal networks in sociology, informal practices in social anthropology, governmentality in social theory and informal governance in management studies, informal power in organisational theory, informal influence in social psychology

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and trust in behavioural economics. The cross-disciplinary perspective allows us to reflect on the choice of conceptual tools used to understand and describe a range of informal problem-solving practices presented in this volume.

Most of these concepts are needed to explore a commonplace practice of *kabel*, the use of connections in Malaysia, 5.8 in this volume. To understand *kabel* one has to grasp its history, its political significance and ideological nature of bargaining powers, economic functions and the social skills and divisions that *kabel* produces. A cross-disciplinary analysis of *kabel* networks, practices, exchanges and relationships was necessary to conceptualise this everywhere-and-nowhere phenomenon. In turn, research on *kabel* is relevant for the study of social capital, consumption, labour markets, entrepreneurship, trust, mobility, migration, remittance economies and gender in Malaysia.

Bringing entries from different area studies and disciplines under one roof does not necessarily create cross-discipline or cross-area studies knowledge. What it does do, however, is create an informational platform for further collaboration between scholars with different backgrounds around specific research questions or problems, which produces a collective polymath effect.

The first two volumes of the encyclopaedia enabled such cross-discipline and cross-area studies endeavours, published in the UCL Press FRINGE series and as special issues of peer-reviewed journals (www.in-formality.com/wiki/index.php?title=Related_Publications). We anticipate that this collection will also inspire new projects and cooperation for the future volumes of this Encyclopaedia. The teaming method, a collaboration of people with different backgrounds and specialisations in order to solve a specific problem, applied to informality studies can become a powerful tool for developing novel approaches to policy making.

Globalising knowledge: area studies without borders

An informality scholar contributes to the globalising of knowledge about informal problem-solving and creates datasets for context-sensitive comparisons, as well as feeds from wider frameworks of thought (see introductions to chapters in this volume; Kennedy 2014). The local wisdom and know-how embedded in informality are maintained and transmitted through informal practices. By criss-crossing evidence emanating from different corners of the world, this volume seeks to

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overcome the limitations of understanding local knowledge, unwritten rules and hidden practices in societies other than one's own. We aim to reach out to other disciplines and area studies in order to generate networks for problem-solving. We facilitate public engagement with issues around informality. Specific ways in which knowledge, images, symbols and practices are shared locally or globally reveal some universal patterns, the fractals of informality. Looking at the case studies in the encyclopaedia, we can attempt so-called 'context-sensitive comparisons', thus facilitating the globalising of knowledge, yet without losing local context. Our organisation of material transcends the geographical principle and area studies divide to highlight the universal patterns of problem-solving in societies.

Superseding dichotomies

In the Western sociological literature, informality is conceptualised as the opposite of formality, following Erving Goffman's conception of 'role distance' and frontstage–backstage dichotomy (Goffman 2002 [1959]). On stage, actors ought to perform according to their scripts; backstage, they can relax and use backstage language. Do these opposites help or impede our grasp of grey areas and blurred boundaries?

This encyclopaedia highlights how the space between the two 'opposites' is filled with tension, which makes them mutually inclusive. Many informal practices have ambivalent names and meanings, and/or are left deliberately unclear, or have multiple, context-bound meanings. In Chinese mandarin, for example, there is no word for dichotomy, and the words for East and West are not opposites. The language implies what the Chinese philosophical tradition has long argued: opposites always coexist (Marková 2002). The tension between the formal and informal constitutes the very terrain upon which the forces of interaction unfold. Although this statement may appear trivial, it has important, symmetrical, implications.

If studying the informal is not possible without the formal, the reverse should also be true. When researching formal institutions, networks or practices, one should not lose sight of their informal underpinnings, if only for their potential in problem-solving. For example, the role of informal networks in governance has become a prominent concern in the field of organisational behaviour in response to the ineffectiveness of international organisations in local settings, as well as a partial solution to the problem (Horak et al. 2020; Marková 2003; Minbaeva et al. 2023).

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Context-sensitive comparisons

What is context in the analysis of formal–informal interaction is a question that calls for the *gestalt* principles of figure-ground and symmetry. If one focuses on formal institutions, informal institutions, networks and practices constitute the background, or context, within which the workings of formal institutions unfold against the interplay of historical, cultural, social and interpersonal factors. However, when the focus shifts to hidden, under-researched or unarticulated informal practices, that is, informality, formal frameworks (legal, bureaucratic, official) themselves can be perceived as contextual. Mastering the contexts and acquiring skills of context sensitivity can be achieved by comparative analysis of the complex interplay of the formal and informal in each of the compared cases and an assessment of the similarity/difference of all constituents in the formal–informal interaction.

For example, a comparative study of *blat* in Russia and *guanxi* in China not only highlighted similarities and differences in the functionality of seemingly parallel practices, in their formal frameworks and their transformations, but also pointed to the complex interplay between formal and informal (Ledeneva 2008). A comparative study of informal institutions, networks and practices in Russia and China led to the conclusion that even when focusing on the informal its formal counterpart is part and parcel of the comparative analysis. The symmetry principle means that the reverse is also true.

Switching between figure and background allows us to navigate the grey zones between sociability and instrumentality in relationships, between need and greed in corrupt exchanges, between us and them in applying double standards and between private and public in double motives.

Informal practices are ambivalent by nature; they provide solutions but also create problems, they produce competitive advantage for an individual at the expense of a larger group and they privilege members of a closed circle over strangers.

To identify universal patterns but preserve the context that helps differentiate the modes of human interaction and modalities of our perception of it has been a paradoxical yet effective tool in tackling ambivalence. In addition to the emotional ambivalence coined by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler in the early twentieth century (Bleuler 1914), Robert K. Merton identified and developed the concept of sociological ambivalence, associated with clashing demands on professionals such as doctors and teachers, resulting in their oscillating behaviour. A doctor,

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for example, should be both compassionate and impartial in treating patients. The poles themselves are not the problem; it is the uncertainty of which one transpires in which context that creates the dilemma. The tension of ambivalence is resolved temporarily and situationally, thus producing a context-bound oscillation that differentiates ambivalence from ambiguity. Cases of non-resolution of the clashing constraints are those where the notions of ambivalence and ambiguity overlap. The challenge for informality scholars is to examine an informal practice through the lens of ambivalence and acquire the critical skills of a master of suspicion.

Looking for paradoxes that are resolved by informal practices in particular contexts and clustering similar contexts has become a major conceptual tool to capture, map and measure informal practices that escape articulation in official discourse but represent the know-how of what works in the vernacular (Ledeneva 2018: 1).

Mastering ambivalence

The previous two volumes of *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality* revealed the significance of the ambivalence of informal practices, networks and institutions (Ledeneva et al. 2018). Four types of ambivalence relevant to informality studies were distinguished: substantive, functional, normative and motivational. These four types, associated with doublethink, double standards, double deed and double incentives, can also be traced in this volume.

The blurred boundaries between sociable and instrumental in relationships means that it is not possible to disentangle a relationship from the (ab)use of that relationship. Being neither or both is possible. The *substantive ambivalence* of informal exchanges rules out any single categorisation of the way in which gifts, favours, transfers and transactions are given, taken or exchanged. The ambivalent nature of relationships – seen as social by participants, but as instrumental by observers – points to the fact that a clear-cut categorisation is not possible. Relationships are both social and instrumental. Positionality is crucial in defining the interested or disinterested nature of informal exchanges and draws attention to timing, obligation of the recipient, domination of the donor, logic of antagonism or alliance, personalisation or anonymity, as well as the interconnectedness of public and private contexts in navigating the complexity of social exchanges.

The same pattern can be seen in double standards at play, whereby the comfort of belonging, inclusion and sharing an identity seamlessly

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leads to the exclusion of others – the *normative ambivalence*. Kinship and local communities reward members with a safety net and support, but also restrict individual rights. Social networks in so-called open access societies are declared open yet are filled with hidden social filters. The double standards applied to 'us' and 'them', to insiders and outsiders, differ considerably depending on the context, but a common pattern is the ambivalent nature of belonging; enabling but also constraining (Barsukova and Denisova-Schmidt 2022; Staiger's introduction, Bliznakovski's entry 12.3 and others in Chapter 12 in this volume).

Informality tends to be stigmatised as dysfunctional, yet it is a powerful resource, if one focuses on 'what works', rather than on what should work. A master of *functional ambivalence* explores the enabling power of constraints. Paradoxically, practices subversive of formal constraints, such as geographical borders, regulations circumstances (such as food shortages), are also supportive of them and help them reproduce. Bending the rules also implies complying with and reinforcing them. The coping strategies described in the entries are often conceptualised as a 'weapons of the weak', channelling resistance to existing constraints, thereby subverting but also supporting them (Scott 1985). Participants commonly justify their strategies of gaining advantage or gaming the system as a forced choice, a necessity, a need, rather than as seeking an unfair advantage (see Lipovetsky's introduction and other entries in Chapter 7, for example Peluso 7.7). Outsiders, however, are likely to interpret this as bending the rules.

Finally, *motivational ambivalence* resides in the grey zones of informal power connecting the public and the private domains. Blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private calls into question the adequacy of the public–private dichotomy for grasping symbiotic patterns and complex constellations in present-day societies, which is not exercised exclusively top-down or bottom-up. Practices of informal power such as co-optation, co-dependence and informal control, as depicted in the 3C model of informal governance, are often diffuse (Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva 2017). These may be exercised through collective action, provision of access to material resources (privileges, allowances or loans) or symbolic resources (such as access to decision makers). In most cases, informal power is exercised in non-violent and more nuanced forms of indirect pressure, resulting in compliance and even self-censorship (Gerlach et al. 2019).

The third volume goes beyond these four types of ambivalence and highlights emotional ambivalence and points to the centrality of

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gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, class and status. In line with the previous volumes, this collection challenges the widespread assumption that informality is driven by a purely pragmatic approach to solving problems and is associated with poverty, underdevelopment, the Global South, oppressive regimes or the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. By embracing informal practices that support people throughout their entire lives, the third volume offers nuances of gender and age, ethnicity and migration, beliefs and spirituality, care and emotions, and everything that makes us human. Equipped with the skills of operationalising informality, exercising cross-disciplinarity, globalising knowledge, superseding dichotomies, implementing context-sensitive comparisons and mastering ambivalence, the patient and informed hitchhiker is now ready to face the uncertainty of the journey through this book.

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