



Best Friends Forever: Relationship Schemas, Organizational Forms, and Institutional Change

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Abstract

Scholars have drawn on cultural concepts to demonstrate the capacity of organizational actors to transform existing institutional scripts and invent new ones. When it comes to accounting for the limits on such change, however, scholars have tended to fall back on structural dynamics. I argue that paying attention to the symbolic analogies and oppositions in terms of which institutional schemas have meaning can shed light on the role of cultural constraints alongside creativity in institutional change. In this article, I investigate schemas of personal relationships. By transposing the obligations and expectations of a familiar relationship from one kind of interaction to another—by treating employees like members of a sports team or a research collaborative, for example—organizational actors can bring about new habits of interaction and create new organizational forms. But people's emotional investment in the integrity of a relationship script may make them unwilling to modify the script when it proves impractical. Shared relationship schemas are thus a source of creativity and constraint. I show that understanding this dialectic accounts for several puzzling features of the diffusion of participatory democratic organizational forms among progressive movements in the late 1960s: notably, that even in the absence of a legitimated model of participatory democracy, activists adopted a similar form of organization, and that, for all their creativity, activists were unable to modify that form to cope with the inequalities it produced.

Keywords

culture, institutional theory, organizational form, social movements, social movement theories

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As numerous writers have observed, new institutionalist renderings of organizational diffusion have been effective in capturing isomorphism more at the macro level than the micro level (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Zilber, 2017). While large-N studies revealed new organizational practices, forms, or roles diffusing across organizations in a field irrespective of their actual utility (and ultimately, often honored ceremonially rather than substantively), small-N qualitative studies revealed something else: resistance, invention, bricolage, and hybridization (Battilana, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). In recent years, some scholars have argued that the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of agency, with little attention paid to the ways in which existing institutions constrain change efforts (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008; Hardy & Maguire, 2017; Hinings, Logue, & Zietsma, 2017; Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2021).

I believe the problem is different. Understanding institutional reproduction and change is hampered not so much by an overemphasis on agency as against constraint as it is a tendency to locate the two in different places: agency in culture and constraint in structure. Scholars tend to use culture to account for how organizational actors invent, interpret, refuse, transpose, and combine institutional logics, but not to account for how those logics resist reinterpretation or limit the possibilities for change. To explain the latter, scholars typically fall back on structure: on the sheer institutionalization of a logic, on the coercive power of people outside the organization in imposing a new institutional logic, or on organizational entrepreneurs' status and power in the field. Obstacles to change come from other people and organizational arrangements, not from ideas or values. Scholars thus use culture to account for divergence and use structure to account for conformity.

A more robust cultural approach to institutional change recognizes that just as structure enables and constrains (Giddens, 1984), so too does culture. We should be able to see people

both using culture and used by it: that is, creatively transposing and modifying cultural ideas, values, and beliefs to open up practical possibilities, and at the same time doing so in ways that foreclose other possibilities. We should see people agentially reproducing institutions even as they seek to change them. To develop that perspective, we can build on two insights from cultural sociology. One, rooted in the symbolic structuralism of Levi-Strauss and Saussure, is that cultural objects, whether institutional scripts, concepts, values, or identities, have meaning in relations of analogy and difference with other cultural objects (Alexander & Smith, 1993; Kane, 1991; Weber, 2005). Of course, these relations are complex, contested, and while they are sticky, they are by no means immutable. Still, the status of a cultural object as *not* something else is essential to its meaning and value. This means that, right from the beginning, bids for change are shaped and limited by the symbolic oppositions and analogies in relation to which people consider alternatives. More specifically, it means that if people *can* transpose institutional scripts from one setting to another and can combine institutional scripts in novel ways, there are limits on how they are likely to do so. Institutional scripts—ideas about how an institution should and does work—have a kind of integrity that makes them less than modular.

The second key point is that culture structures work from the outside in as well as the top down. People operate within local cultures, and they interpret and respond to externally imposed mandates in terms of the beliefs, values, and norms that have accrued within the group over time. But they also respond to external pressures—even resist external pressures—in terms of cultural beliefs and norms that extend beyond the group. The result is likely to be similarities in how local organizations operate that are the result, not of external pressures, but rather of the freely made choices of organizational actors. Together, these two insights foster a view of institutional constraint as cultural rather than only structural. They allow us to see new institutional scripts butting up against existing structures of power and practice,

but also against existing beliefs. They allow us to see why organizational actors might actively and agentially embrace an institutional logic that dis-serves them. And they allow us to see isomorphism in small-N studies and coming from the bottom up rather than only in large-N studies and coming from the top down.

In this article, I show how such a cultural approach can improve on existing theories of institutional change. Drawing on two institutional perspectives that are already attentive to culture—theories of institutional logics and inhabited institutions—I show that paying attention to the symbolic analogies and oppositions in terms of which institutional logics make sense (both to organizational actors and those outside the organization) helps us to see more going on in the empirical cases the authors analyze. In particular, it helps us to see constraint where the authors see only creativity, and conformity where the authors see variation.

I turn to one kind of institutional logic—relationship schemas—in order to pursue the point that the cultural integrity of schemas (the fact they are different from other schemas) makes them creatively transposable across settings *and* limits just how transposable they are. Relationship scripts or schemas (I use the terms interchangeably) are widely shared cultural recipes for how to do familiar relationships (Baldwin, 1992; Planalp & Rivers, 1995). Such scripts specify, for example, how much self-disclosure is appropriate in a friendship or acquaintanceship, whether exchanges should be strictly reciprocal, and so on. The familiarity of such relationship scripts and their capacity to elicit reciprocal feelings and behavior means that organizational actors can and do use them to promote new ways of interacting and, indeed, to bring about institutional change. However, as a body of psychological research makes clear, although relationship scripts are modified as they are enacted, to modify the script too much or to do so under stressful circumstances, or for one party to modify it more than the other, creates emotional distress (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). Constraint thus comes from people's emotional investment in

the integrity of relationship schemas. This in turn makes it difficult for them to creatively alter the norms of those relationships—even when they are not serving them especially well.

To show how relationship scripts may both foster change and limit it, I draw on several empirical examples, but I focus on one in which isomorphism occurred seemingly in the absence of institutional pressure. In the 1960s, activists in the new left, anti-war, women's liberation and other progressive movements created radically egalitarian collectivist organizations. Leadership rotated, decision-making was by consensus, and tasks were allocated without regard to position or skill. While these organizational forms were largely unknown by student activists in the late 1950s, within a decade they became widespread, indeed, normative in leftist circles. Since most progressive movement organizations in the 1960s were small, local, and received scant funding from outside organizations, they encountered little in the way of external pressure to adopt participatory democratic forms. Nor did they receive guidance on how to run organizations in this unconventional way. Instead, left-leaning activists in the 1960s made up participatory democracy as they went along. Why did they do so in such similar ways?

Why, moreover, did they do so in ways that often doomed their organizations to failure? This is a second puzzle. Certainly, all social movement organizations are difficult to sustain, and it is easy to see tensions between commitments to radical democracy and the need to make consequential decisions on a tight schedule. But the disputes that consumed participatory democratic organizations concerned less their failure to be efficient and more their failure to be egalitarian. Jo Freeman (1973) famously described the "tyranny of structurelessness": in the absence of formal rules, organizations ended up being governed informally—and inequitably—by exclusive cliques. Once those left out of the ruling clique protested, battles ensued that often led to the organization's dissolution. But why? If activists' concern was with members' equality, why would they not implement the formal mechanisms that would have better

produced that equality? Why would they not modify the script of participatory democracy to make it work? In addition to accounting for isomorphism in the absence of powerful actors pressing a particular script, then, we need to account for organizations failing to modify a script that disserves them.

I argue that while 1960s activists were inventing participatory democracy as they went along, they did not do so out of whole cloth. Even as they created a new institutional script, they drew on preexisting institutional scripts to do so. To make decisions, allocate tasks, and resolve conflicts, activists relied on the behavioral norms and expectations of friendship. Activists modified the norms of friendship as they enacted them: extending the relationship to a larger group than usual and making political discussion and action an obligation of the relationship. Still, transposing the culturally shared expectations of friendship from the private sphere, where the script was familiar, to that of politics, where it was distinctly unfamiliar, was not only radical, but in some ways effective. In particular, friendship's characteristic and distinctive norm of equality equipped it for decision-making that was radically democratic but still relatively expeditious.

Yet if an institutional script of friendship came with norms that facilitated egalitarian decision-making, other norms characteristic of the same schema, notably its exclusivity and its informality, created challenges. To formalize decision-making felt wrong, but only because it was at odds with the expectations of friendship. In other words, the same script that made it easy for activists to enact a new organizational form, and that led to the rapid diffusion of the form, also jeopardized the survival of the organizations that adopted it.

More generally, I suggest that studying how organizational actors conceptualize, feel about, and act on the symbolic boundaries distinguishing one schema from another gives us fuller access to the simultaneously constructed and given character of institutions. It allows us to see individual creativity but also conformity; institutional change but also the limits on that change.

Varieties of Institutionalism

Though at its origins new institutionalism was a cultural theory, a generation of studies after the initial new institutionalist formulations gave short shrift to the cultural dynamics of institutionalization. Treating institutionalization as diffusion, scholars relied on quantitative, longitudinal data to trace the spread of structures and practices across firms (Whitson, Weber, Hirsch, & Bermiss, 2013). Over the course of the 1990s, however, in tandem with efforts to recognize the role of actors' *agency* in institutional emergence, enactment, and change, scholars began also to theorize the role of meaning in those processes (Zilber, 2017).

In the following, I focus on two such efforts: one focused on *institutional logics* and the other on *inhabited institutions*. Each perspective goes some way in recognizing the role of culture in producing institutional change and constraining it. But neither goes far enough, and so I take them as a jumping off point for developing an alternative.

Institutional logics

Where do new institutional scripts come from? Scholars of institutional entrepreneurship had set out to identify the conditions in which new scripts emerged and gained acceptance; conditions such as entrepreneurs' distinctive structural role (Battilana, 2006), an exogenous shock or crisis (Fligstein, 1997), or conflict between existing scripts (Seo & Creed, 2002). But these conditions were structural. There was nothing about the content of the new script that made it more or less likely to gain purchase, and no reason was offered for why some scripts might seem competing rather than complementary.

Scholars of institutional logics proposed an alternative. Rather than locating new scripts in the imaginations of individuals or in the sheer existence of ideational conflict, they suggested that there are always materials for challenge and invention in the macro-level scripts that structure familiar institutions. Friedland and Alford early on made the point that the coexistence of "potentially contradictory" institutions

(Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 240) accounted for social transformation. Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury, in a series of separate and joint articles, built on that insight. The fact that society is an “inter-institutional system implies that the institutional orders have modularity and decomposable elements,” Thornton and Ocasio (2008, p. 117) wrote. The decomposable nature of the macro-logics governing institutional orders of family, community, religion, state, market, professions, and corporations, and the fact that the elements of each logic could be abstracted, combined, and segregated meant that individuals could “actively import and export elements of institutional logics across institutional orders” (p. 117).

Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury did not deny the existence of isomorphism. “Shared commitments or conformity to institutional logics will lead to isomorphism among organizations or social groups that share the same logics,” they wrote (2017, p. 522). But conformity was never assured given the heterogeneity of macro-institutional logics available at any one time. Institutional entrepreneurs were, in this sense, *cultural* entrepreneurs, whose past experience gave them the familiarity with alternative institutions and access to the transposable values, identities, standards, and categories of worth of those institutions. Chain store founder, J.C. Penney, was one such entrepreneur (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Reared in a Baptist household and heartily imbued with a dislike for usury, Penney opposed the common practice of stores pricing merchandise depending on customers’ status. By conceptualizing customers and employees as members of something like a “congregation,” whose allegiance depended on fair and generous practices, and by pricing merchandise uniformly, Penney was able to overcome consumers’ distrust of chain stores. Effectively challenging the old model of retailing as family capitalism, he recast it as ethical corporate enterprise. Penney’s background gave him the cultural tools to blend logics of religion, corporation, and market, while separating logics of family and market. Thornton et al. (2012) find

the same transposition and segregation of logics in University of Phoenix founder John Sperling’s creation of an institution of higher learning geared to working students as consumers, and in corporate finance professor R.P. Ettinger’s importation of a logic of corporation to the previous craft operation of textbook publishing. The larger point is that the “near decomposability” of institutional logics—the fact that they can be broken down into their component parts—gives them modularity. Logics can be transposed from one sphere of activity to another in a way that opens up new possibilities for action.

How much scope, though, do actors have to engage in that transposition? While Thornton et al. (2012) refer to the “near decomposability” of institutional logics, they never make clear where the limits of decomposability are. Can anyone combine a logic derived from religion with one derived from commerce? The authors say that one needs to have experience of the logic to use it (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 117), and that “those institutional orders that are more complementary to one another would be more likely have greater transposition capacity among their elemental categories than those institutional orders that are in diametric conflict” (p. 125). They give as an example the difficulty of combining

categories associated with the market and the family. No doubt to do so by trying to act like a used car salesman at the family dinner table would draw disdain while treating a used car salesman like a family member would predispose exploitation. (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 125)

But if it is difficult to combine less proximate institutional logics, why was J.C. Penney able to combine logics of religion and commerce? What made those spheres proximate enough to be combined, but family and commerce too distant to do so? As Friedland puts it, precisely what makes logics “real, available, good to think and act with” is the fact that they have “limited modularity.” “Identities of subjects, material practices, and valued objects are

co-implicated, lashed together and difficult to decompose” (Friedland, 2012, p. 25). “The more decomposable [institutional logics] are,” Friedland suggests, “the less they can be argued to exist” (p. 24). If there is some integrity to institutional scripts, then they cannot be so easily modified or combined. In this sense, Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury’s two criteria for decomposability—experience with an institution and the proximity of institutions—may actually be in tension. One of the things that often comes with deep experience in an institution is a strong investment in what makes it different from other, proximate institutions (see, for example, the literature on professional boundaries reviewed in Lamont & Molnár, 2002). This means that, pace Thornton and colleagues, it may be difficult for entrepreneurs to combine proximate institutional logics as much as distant ones.

More generally, by failing to grapple with the specifically cultural constraints on actors’ capacity to combine and transpose logics, the authors end up limiting constraint to what happens after the logic is institutionalized in durable structures and practices. They fail to recognize the ways in which, right from the beginning, institutional change is shaped and limited by shared beliefs about what kinds of combinations and transpositions are appropriate. To get at the latter, we need to better understand the cultural frameworks within which institutional logics have meaning. Depending on where the boundaries around logics lie—what it is that gives a logic its coherence—and how firm those boundaries are, we may see the audiences for the new logic, or indeed, the entrepreneur him or herself, either refusing it or refusing to adapt it to the situation at hand because to do so would be to violate its coherence. It would violate what makes the logic different from other institutional logics. As a result, we may see isomorphism coming not from the top down but from the bottom up as people in different organizations similarly fail to modify the logic to cope with situational exigencies. To get at dynamics like these, though, we need to examine how people make sense of

culture (the institutional logic) *in terms of culture* (the wider structures of meaning that give the logic its coherence).

Inhabited institutions

This seems to be the promise of a recent strand of work on the creation, enactment, and transformation of institutions. Scholars of inhabited institutions, like those of institutional logics, are interested in meaning-making, and like them, seek to integrate agency and constraint in their accounts. Much more than scholars of institutional logics, however, they attend closely to the processes on the ground whereby people interpret and transform institutional logics. As a result of those processes, they argue, what a form such as bureaucracy looks like differs substantially across the organizations that adopt it (Fine & Hallett, 2014; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006).

Hallett and Ventresca (2006) elaborate this core idea through a rereading of Alvin Gouldner’s (1954) famous ethnography of bureaucratization in a gypsum mine. Gouldner showed that workers actively resisted the rational management that was being promoted by the regional office via the mine’s new supervisor, Vincent Peele. External pressures to bureaucratize were real but workers confronted those pressures based on a local culture of workers’ autonomy, minimal supervision, and leniency in enforcement of the rules. What resulted in the mine, then, unlike other parts of the company, was a kind of “mock bureaucracy” in which the rules operated in name only. In other words, an institutional script of bureaucracy was imposed from outside the organization and it did press in the direction of conformity. But that script was responded to in the terms of a local culture. Note that scholars in this perspective do not pit the agency of individuals against the power of macro-level actors. Instead, inhabited institutionalists focus on what Goffman called the “interaction order.” The interaction order is constraining insofar as it has stability and influence, but it is made up of the past actions and memories of local actors (Fine & Hallett, 2014).

However, like symbolic interactionists more generally, inhabited institutionalists tend to see structures and cultures as emergent. The interaction order develops from within the group. The specifically cultural resources that allowed miners to modify a bureaucratic script came only from that interaction order, from a prior workplace culture and not from outside the workplace. A more fully developed cultural approach, however, would treat the sources of cultural meanings as lying both outside and inside the group. It is not only the institutional script that is handed on down. The ideas, beliefs, values, categories, and standards necessary to make sense of and respond to the script are also handed on down. Indeed, "handed on down" is the wrong term, since those terms shape and constrain just how those at the top think about imposing the script as well as how those lower down react to it.

This should be clear by way of an alternative reading of Gouldner. In this reading, bureaucracy was an institutional logic whose meaning was negotiated in a local setting. *But the local negotiation was shaped by institutions that reached beyond the local setting.* Gender was one such institution; gender understood not as an attribute of people (something men and women have) but as an organizing principle of interaction. Critically, I argue, gender affected the actions both of miners and of higher-ups. Gouldner's account shows that bureaucracy and its agent, Vincent Peele, were seen as feminine. Peele was repeatedly characterized as "nervous," weak, and unable to exercise independent judgment. Workers viewed Peele's behavior, Gouldner writes, "as unmanly" (1954, p. 78). Similarly, the system that Peele pressed for was seen as meek, dependent, and punctilious, plagued with an overweening respect for "proper channels" (p. 109).

Hallett and Ventresca are right that bureaucracy was contrasted with a *laissez faire* informality that privileged relationships over rules. But it was also contrasted with a manly independence. This is in part why the sub-surface mine workers resisted it. And more interestingly, this is why higher-ups *exempted* the

sub-surface mine workers from it. Hallett and Ventresca do not emphasize something that Gouldner does: Peele and other supervisors did not *try* to get the sub-surface mine workers to conform to the bureaucratic rules. "Management's conception of the miners encouraged them to accept the *status quo* in the mine, *forestalling* efforts at bureaucratization, however desirable these might seem" (Gouldner, 1954, p. 143; emphasis in the original). Why did management treat the miners differently from other workers? The fact that mine work was dangerous gave mineworkers some privilege to define their own conditions of work. But privilege came also from the fact that mine work, unlike the factory work in the plant, was seen as manly. The surface workers in the factory liked "cleaner" things (p. 123), Gouldner observed; they aspired to "impress their neighbors with a well-kept house" (p. 125); they were driven by concerns of "security" and "respectability" (p. 126); and didn't "'stand up to' or 'talk back to'" supervisors" (p. 108). The miners, by contrast, did dirty work, they had a "disregard for authority" (p. 108), and vented complaints in a "direct" and "forceful" manner (p. 112). They spent evenings "out with the boys" (p. 135), "drinking, swearing, and gambling" (p. 136); in the words of a surface worker, they "whored around" (p. 126). They were "engaged in a 'manly' role," Gouldner explained, and could "lay effective claims to being 'boss' in their own homes" (p. 135). Female virtues of cleanliness, frugality, domesticity, and restraint were contrasted with male ones of strength, independence, directness, sexual voraciousness, and an indifference to status. Surface men were attributed values that conflated femininity and bureaucratic management: a liking for clean things and for up-to-date rational administration, a well-kept house and workplace status, sexual modesty and a subservient and indirect style. Miners' manliness was in itself a bulwark against bureaucracy.

On my reading, then, an institutional logic of bureaucracy was only partially institutionalized in the mine for two reasons. One was that it was resisted insofar as it came up against local

norms of leniency and autonomy—Hallett and Ventresca's point. But it was also variably *imposed* insofar as it came up against a logic of gender; that is, against norms that were local and extra-local, i.e., that predated workers and supervisors' interactions in the mine. Like bureaucracy, gender was an institutional logic that came originally from outside the organization. But gender was not imposed on workers; it was actively embraced by them. To understand why bureaucracy took the form it did, then, we need to go beyond an image of external institutional pressures resisted by way of the norms of a local culture. Bureaucracy was gendered even before Peele sought to impose it on the mine-workers. The struggle was local but it was informed by cultural beliefs that reached outside the local. Why does this matter? For one thing, it suggests that if bureaucracy took three different forms in the mine Gouldner studied, the kind of mock bureaucracy that operated among the sub-surface miners might be replicated in otherwise very different workplaces but ones where workers were similarly coded as masculine. There would be isomorphism, not because of pressure on the part of higher-ups to conformity, but rather because higher-ups and workers understood bureaucracy in the same gendered terms. In the version I am proposing, culture here operated not only from the top down (the institutional script of bureaucracy) and the bottom up (the local indulgency pattern), but also simultaneously from the outside in (gender).

A Theoretical Alternative: Culture as Symbolic Structures

I take from scholars of institutional logics the insight that people draw on already existing institutional scripts to create novel practices and organizational forms. People's ability to transpose institutional scripts is an important source of creativity. Another source of creativity, and this I take from scholars of inhabited institutions, is organizational actors' ability to negotiate the meaning of those scripts in interaction

with others in the group. Together, these perspectives suggest that we should see institutional change brought about by individuals and groups, and heterogeneity in the ways that groups enact institutional scripts. However, I have criticized both perspectives for failing to fully account for the role of culture in these processes and, specifically, for the ways in which culture constrains actors' menu of options. Failing to recognize that institutional scripts have their own integrity risks exaggerating actors' capacity to transpose and combine preexisting scripts. Failing to recognize that people make sense of institutional scripts in terms of cultural frameworks that reach beyond the local misses another potential source of isomorphism; namely, the fact that organizational actors may adapt scripts to local contingencies in a similar way, not because they face similar structural pressures from the environment, but because they adapt familiar cultural tools in similar—culturally recognizable—ways.

An approach that sees meaning as forged in and through a shared symbolic system of analogies and oppositions can help capture the constraint and isomorphic tendencies that these theoretical perspectives miss. In this alternative, to return to Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury's (2012) example, one would not act like a used car salesman at the family dinner table because to do so would violate oppositions of commerce and leisure, money and blood, cold calculation and warm affection. Symbolic oppositions are good not only to think with, but also to feel and judge with (Alexander & Smith, 1993). To be sure, cultural structuralist approaches rightly have been criticized for exaggerating the shared and systemic character of cultural structures, for missing the agency and contestation that is involved in defining terms, and, especially, for underestimating the extent to which symbolic codes change (Emirbayer, 2004). Indeed, two decades after Gouldner studied the gypsum plant, feminist activists rejected bureaucracy as an organizational form not because they saw it as feminine but because they saw it as masculine. Characterized by hierarchy and formality,

bureaucracy was at odds with the communality and informality that had come to be seen as women's values (Polletta, 2002). And just as Vincent Peele forewent some of the practical advantages of bureaucracy because he, like the miners, accepted its coding as feminine, feminists may have sacrificed some of the practical benefits of bureaucratic organizational forms because they coded it as masculine.

I follow recent critics, then, in objecting to a tendency to see institutional logics as simply given, as things (Lounsbury, Steele, Wang, & Toubiana, 2021; Zilber, 2018). The challenge in responding to that tendency, though, has been to do more than simply describe logics' origins and evolution. We should be able to analyze the basis for their coherence (Lounsbury et al., 2021), for their openness to change, and for their resistance to change (Micelotta et al., 2021). Paying attention to the symbolic codes in terms of which any logic makes sense—and notably, paying attention to how organizational actors experience and feel in relation to those codes—is a way to do those things. In particular, while rejecting cultural structuralists' view of symbolic codes as timeless and unambiguous, I draw on their insight that practices, structures, or categories may be considered inappropriate or irrational because of their symbolic associations; that is, because of what they are *not*.

I propose to do this by focusing on one kind of institutional schema and its placement in a larger framework of cultural beliefs: that of personal relationships. Institutional scholars have treated personal relationships as the basis for institutional *innovation* rather than conformity (Dorado, 2013), and as sources of *creative resistance* to constraining institutional logics rather than as an incarnation of them (Courpasson, Younes, & Reed, 2021; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). But such approaches miss the extent to which local, intimate, idiosyncratic relationships are also shaped by norms that come from outside the relationship. They are shaped by bundles of expectations about how one *does* friendship, or colleagueship, or board membership. Insofar as those expectations exist

separate from their instantiation in an actual relationship, they can be transposed to new settings, opening up new ways of interacting. But insofar as those expectations are coherent, that is, insofar as they have meaning in terms of their difference from the expectations of other relationship scripts, they may be difficult to modify. If the first is a source of creativity, the second helps to explain why groups may not be able to flexibly modify the interactional norms they have adopted to cope with the practical exigencies they face.

Relationship schemas

A literature in psychology, communications, and anthropology has shown that people approach interactions with a set of expectations based in part on their own personal histories of relationships but also on cultural schemas or scripts indicating, for example, the appropriate level of self-disclosure for that kind of relationship, the expected level of intimacy, the norms of exchange, and the orientation to the task or socioemotional work at hand (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Baldwin, 1992; Wish, Deutsch, & Kaplan, 1976). Schemas are modified as they are enacted, and, accordingly, no two relationships look exactly alike. Still, especially at the beginning of interactions, relationship schemas provide the stability of shared expectations. As Ginsburg puts it, such schemas “can be expected to facilitate the coordination of action, reduce the effort of interaction, reduce the necessity of attention to small details and allow joint action to be organized in large rather than minute chunks” (Ginsburg, 1988, p. 30). The operation of relationship schemas is evident in the studies that have shown, variously, that people characterize typical relations between close friends, salesperson and customer, interviewer and job applicant, casual acquaintances, and teammates in similar ways (Wish et al., 1976); that people use a relationship schema to fill in missing information about a relationship (Miell, 1987); that people often confuse those with whom they interact in a similar relationship (Fiske, Haslam, & Fiske,

1991); that people strive to behave in line with the behavior acceptable to the relationship that is salient (Baldwin & Holmes, 1987); and that when people act in terms of the wrong relationship script, they are met with emotional consternation and erratic valuation of the objects being exchanged (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997).

And yet, there are many situations in which people deliberately act in terms of the “wrong” relationship script. Economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer describes a woman who lost her job and was forced to borrow money from her great-aunt. Despite the fact that she would eventually inherit from the great-aunt, she insisted on drawing up a legal contract. “To preserve her dignity and independence,” Zelizer notes, “it mattered greatly to her . . . to mark the relationship as lender–borrower, not benefactor–welfare recipient” (2012, p. 153). Her aunt presumably acceded to the fiction because she wanted her niece to feel better about herself. In his study of the letters that Renaissance Florentines wrote seeking favors from powerful patrons, McLean (1998) shows that letter-writers often sought to write relationships into existence, for example, by combining appeals to honor (among equals) and munificence (toward an unequal) so as to subtly shift the expectations and obligations of the relationship.

What makes the use of a wrong relationship schema effective is that unless the other party refuses the fictive relationship, one can assume that she knows what behaviors are expected of her, and she knows that I know what behaviors are expected. It is the reciprocal character of parties’ expectations of each other that distinguishes a relationship schema from a role. More perhaps than a role, too, a relationship schema is associated with a familiar range of emotions. In my role as a parent, I might well feel pity for a friend’s child, but I would not feel pity for my own child. Parents are expected to feel love, compassion, and worry for their own children, not pity. Indeed, as Voronov and Weber (2016) suggest, institutions (like parenthood) exist in and through people’s ability to feel and perform institutionally appropriate

emotions. This means that claiming a different relationship schema than the one that exists may encourage the other party not just to behave in line with it, but to *feel* in line with it.

In formal organizations, people may use relationship schemas to try to normatively establish new behavioral expectations. If we want to promote more open sharing of information in our workplace, we may begin to refer to each other as collaborators or team members, drawing relationship schemas from sports teams of which we have been members or scientific work groups we have read about. Note that, as in the latter case, we may draw on relationship schemas that are culturally familiar rather than ones we have directly experienced (as Clemens, 1996, notes about associational schemas more generally). If people know more culture than they routinely use (Swidler, 1986), then creativity comes from their ability to draw on that larger fund of possibilities. Relationship scripts figure as something like practical metaphors (Cornelissen, 2005; Lakoff, 1993), ones that carry a set of behavioral expectations from one sphere of social interaction to another (Sewell, 1992).

Return for a moment to Thornton and colleagues’ (2012) discussion of institutional logics. Although the authors distinguish logics by their “root metaphors,” “the basis of norms,” and “attentional focus,” relationship schemas actually figure prominently in the cases of cultural entrepreneurship they describe. J.C. Penney “evangelized ‘managers as associates,’ and ‘customers as neighbors,’” the authors write (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 109). John Sperling “mobilized students as customers and educators as shareholders.” R.P. Ettinger “evangelized editors as entrepreneurs” (p. 109). In several of these cases, “as if” probably is a better term than “as”—entrepreneurs acted *as if* managers were associates, customers were neighbors, and educators were entrepreneurs. Cultural entrepreneurship involved treating people in terms of relationships other than the ones they had. Penney’s customers surely knew what it was to be a neighbor, and Sperling’s students and colleagues knew what it was to be a

customer, despite the fact that, in this setting, until then, they had not been those things. They knew the behavioral expectations and obligations of those relationships and could be expected to behave accordingly. Ettinger's editors may never have been entrepreneurs themselves but the relationship of entrepreneur to consumers was culturally familiar. In each case, the entrepreneur transposed the expectations of a relationship from one setting to another in a way that opened up new ways of acting and interacting.

Familiar relationship scripts make it possible to create new forms of organization. For example, Chinese Communist Party organizers in the 1940s used the schema of "sisterhood" to organize women mill workers (Honig, 1985). Sisterhoods were small groups of women who pledged allegiance to each other in a ritual ceremony to protect themselves from abuse by employers. Mill workers had already transposed the relationship schema of sisterhood from the world of family to that of work. Now, organizers sought to turn it into a force for revolutionary solidarity. In her study of a hospital union organizing drive, Sacks (1988) found that organizers invoked family, and specifically, the relations between parents and grown children, to describe what they believed they were entitled to from management. Hierarchy was acceptable in this relationship schema provided it was combined with respect and with an acknowledgment of the individual's capacity to take on increasing responsibility. A familiar script of family provided the template for a new kind of organization.

In a study of two hospitals' efforts to reduce the number of hours that interns worked, Kellogg (2009) similarly found relationship schemas operating as practical metaphors. Both hospitals hired floating teams of surgical residents for the night shift, making it possible for interns to leave earlier in the evening. But the interns were unwilling to take advantage of the new system in either hospital, instead staying late to complete the routine scut work that had traditionally been required of them. That did eventually change in one hospital, as a result of

the informal interaction among residents and interns that the distinctive spatial layout of medical rounds made possible. But critical to the change was that residents began to refer to their relationships with interns and with each other differently. They began calling senior residents "coaches" rather than "commanders," day residents "team players" rather than "wingmen," the new night residents "members of the team" rather than "stopgaps," and interns "rookies" rather than "beasts of burden" (Kellogg, 2009, p. 693). Once interns were "rookies," they were more like students or apprentices. They were naive, certainly, and still had the obligation to prove themselves to more senior residents, but the term implied that they would eventually become senior residents themselves rather than existing only to be exploited.

The constraints of familiar relationships

So far, I have described creativity in the transposition of relationship schemas. But the process also comes with constraint. Relationship schemas are meaningful insofar as they are different from other relationships. Friendship has meaning insofar as it is different from romance, acquaintanceship, colleagueship, and partnership. A relationship of colleagueship, for example, comes with an expectation of mutual respect and friendliness, but not necessarily intimacy. To return to my earlier point about institutional scripts more generally, relationship scripts have some integrity. Parties may modify culturally familiar scripts as they develop particular relationships; for example, making a formal supervisor-supervisee relationship much more egalitarian, and closer to a friendship, than is usually the case. But to modify the norms too much, or for one party to modify them without the other's acquiescence, may create conflict.

There are several kinds of limits on people's ability to practically modify the norms of familiar relationships. One is simply that people with power may refuse the relationship that is claimed. For example, Berend (2016) found that the women she studied who served as

reproductive surrogates experienced their relationship with the couples for whom they carried a child as a romantic one. It was not the child that surrogates cared about; it was the child's parents, and surrogates wanted the relationship to continue. They felt betrayed when the parents pulled away, redefining their relationship as a contractual one. But surrogates had no way of making the parents see the relationship as something other than contractual. Another example comes from my own and Tufail's study of debt settlement agencies (Polletta, 2020). Agents persuaded potential clients to allow them to try to negotiate down the principal of their debt by reframing clients' relationship with their creditor as an equal and reciprocal one. If the client had not received good service, according to these agents, he or she should feel entitled not to pay the debt back in full. But of course, creditors did not see the relationship as a reciprocal, egalitarian one, and they had the law on their side. The result was that, while debt settlement companies profited, clients often suffered financial and legal penalties.

Particular relationship schemas may be seen as inappropriate in a particular setting or by certain parties to the interaction. In their account of how international donors sought to respond to the scourge of AIDS in Malawi, Swidler and Watkins (2017) show that Westerners found discomfiting and sometimes outright immoral the expectations of a patron–client relationship that Malawians took for granted. Tufail and I (Polletta, 2020) found that debt settlement agents who were men were able to countenance the fact that they were arguably preying on people in debt by styling their relationship with clients as an educational one. They were simply educating clients on their financial options, they said, not forcing anyone to contract with the company. But women agents were not able to claim that relationship. They were expected by clients to be something like therapists, and as a result, they experienced especially sharply the emotional burdens of the moral dirty work they did.

Still another source of constraint is that the people doing the transposing of a familiar script

may themselves resist modifying the script, even when doing so would allow them to operate more effectively, because to do so would risk turning the relationship into something it is not. As I noted, people have an emotional investment in maintaining the boundaries between different kinds of relationship. Certainly, they can and do move from one to the other. We invite an acquaintance to join our intramural soccer team, or a former romantic partner becomes a friend. But shifts like that take considerable emotional work. Fiske and colleagues (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; McGraw, Tetlock, & Kristel, 2003) show that people strongly resist applying the norms of one relationship type to an interaction that is seen as properly governed by another. Other researchers have demonstrated that modifying the norms of relationships too much or modifying them in particularly stressful situations creates emotional strain (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp & Rivers, 1995). It puts the relationship in an uncertain position, and people may try to avoid that uncertainty by sticking to the schema—even though doing so may come at the expense of adapting practically to the schema's limits.

Finally, even if people in a group *do* modify the relationship schema to solve some of the practical challenges it poses, people outside the group may not recognize those modifications. Research on *group entitativity* (Lickel, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2001) finds striking consistency not only in how people categorize groups doing things together (for example, a task group versus an intimate group), but also in the norms and behaviors people outside the group see as characteristic of the group. Once the group is identified by observers as a work group or a group of friends, observers will likely impute distinct goals and norms to the group.

In sum, relationship scripts are both detachable from actual relationships and, at the same time, freighted with expectations about their use. This means that every attempt to act on the basis of an imagined relationship is both potentially effective and risky. In the next section, I

turn to a more extended example. Together, the features of relationship scripts I have just outlined help to explain why a distinctive form of democratic organization diffused rapidly among a field of left-wing movement groups in the 1960s in the absence of environmental pressure. Understanding these features also explains the challenges that activists faced in enacting this organizational form. And they help to explain why, even when activists sought to respond to these challenges by modifying the form, they were ultimately unsuccessful.

An Illustration: Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy, collectivism, horizontalism, or flat organization are labels that all refer to an organizational form that is decentralized and nonhierarchical and in which decision-making is consensus-oriented. It can be contrasted with bureaucracy, in which organization is centralized, hierarchical, and based on a formal division of labor, as well as with representative democracy and majority vote. Although such collectivist organizations have taken multiple forms (Polletta, 2002), the version that became most widely known in the United States followed its adoption by the new left group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the early 1960s, by radical feminist groups in the late 1960s, and then by its wide diffusion among grassroots progressive groups (Breines, 1989). Committed to enacting a “participatory democracy” in the here and now—the term introduced in SDS’s 1962 Port Huron Statement—activists rotated leadership, made decisions by consensus, and refused bureaucratic job descriptions. Countless cooperatives such as grocery stores, day care centers, health providers, rape crisis centers, publishers, and legal clinics operated in the same way (Case & Taylor, 1979). By the 1970s, participatory democracy had become a popular way of making decisions in leftist circles (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979).

What accounts for the adoption and diffusion of the form? Clearly an instrumentalist account, with participatory democracy adopted for its clear strategic benefits, fails. Participatory democracy was, and is, often inefficient. Many organizations tore themselves apart in trying to sustain radically democratic practices. But a conventional institutionalist account also fails to account for the surprising popularity of the organizational form. In studying the history of participatory democracy in the post-war period, I found that there was no legitimated model to which activists strove to conform.¹ To the contrary, organizations in the old left (including SDS’s parent organization, the League for Industrial Democracy) and those associated with the Democratic Party pressed young activists to operate more conventionally. If those organizations were influential, it was mainly as models *not* to emulate. New leftists were determined not to recreate organizations they saw as paralyzingly slow-moving, as well as wrapped up in petty disputes and power plays, afraid of controversy, and more oriented to their own survival than to the cause to which they were supposedly dedicated (Polletta, 2002).

But an abstract commitment to democracy and a desire not to be like the organizations with which they were familiar did not give young SDS activists much in the way of guidance for how to operate. Activists did have contact with older radical pacifists who themselves relied on Quaker consensus in their organizations. But pacifists deliberately did not train student activists in their decision-making style. “You rely on consensus when you have a shared understanding of the theology. It is not to be imposed on people,” is how longtime pacifist George Lakey describes their thinking at the time (Polletta, 2002, p. 39). SDS activists were also in contact with the young staffers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who were working to register voters in the most repressive areas of the Deep South using decentralized and consensus-based decision-making. Indeed, SDS’s call for “participatory democracy” in the 1962 Port Huron Statement was in

part inspired by SNCC. But it was SNCC workers' determination to give voice to the politically marginalized that was influential for SDS activists, not their style of decision-making. The Port Huron Statement writers understood participatory democracy as a macro-political vision, not an organizational procedure (Polletta, 2002, pp. 126–7).

Indeed, at the time of the Port Huron Statement and for several years afterward, SDS did not operate, formally at least, as a participatory democracy. There were offices, parliamentary procedure, and voting. But in practice the procedures and offices were ignored. "Participatory democracy came naturally," early SDS national secretary James Monsonis explains (Polletta, 2002, p. 129). Decisions were generally made by informal consensus and tasks were allocated or volunteered for on the basis of participants' skills. Notes of SDS National Council meetings show participants pressing for a programmatic focus because someone in the group was interested in it; arguing against the kinds of procedural rules that would limit people's flexibility; and maintaining a steady stream of playful asides and affectionate ribbing. Disputes were heated but rarely lasted from one meeting to another. And unilateral action by individuals in the group was either justified by the triviality of the issue or was excused as a well-intentioned blunder rather than a bid for control (Polletta, 2002, ch. 5).

SDS was a "community of friends," as early SDSer Helen Garvy put it (Polletta, 2002, p. 130). Their bonds were reinforced by meetings that went on for days with considerable revelry. To be sure, the community of friends was wider than the ones most of us are used to, extending into a variety of student groups and movements. "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine," Garvy characterizes their thinking. "That means I go to your house. I sleep on your floor. I totally trust what you say. I trust your friends" (quoted in Hogan, 2013, p. 262). New leftists were building on relations of friendship but were also extending their behavioral mandates, making

friendship into something more politically oriented and more inclusive than usual.

Still, a schema of friendship was familiar to college students and it was in some ways a natural model for participatory democracy. After all, friends enjoy spending time together, so they have an interest in sustaining the relationship apart from what it provides them individually. Translated to an organizational context, decision-makers who disagree but are friends have a stake in whatever decision will allow them to maintain the relationship. Friends are also equal, but their equality is based not on their similar strengths and competencies but on their complementary strengths and competencies, and, indeed, on their potential rather than existing ones (Ackelsberg, 1983). In a democracy modeled on friendship, participants want others to take on the tasks that will enable them to develop skills. Friends' mutual trust and affection and their orientation to what the other wants makes it easy to make decisions quickly (Polletta, 2002).

To operate politically as friends was not only easy, but also novel. It brought into political decision-making the trust, affection, and intimacy that were so palpably missing from mainstream politics. This was perhaps even more true for the radical feminist organizations that spun off from the new left in 1967 and 1968. For women whose relationships with other women had always been subordinated to their relationships with men, friendship was a novel basis for political solidarity. Women's collectives were small, shared tasks, and operated by consensus. As in SDS, there was rarely any line between allocating and volunteering for tasks. "You do this, I'll do that" was the standard approach (Polletta, 2002). When discussions that had begun in someone's living room spilled over into a bar, women strengthened relationships that carried over into their meetings the next week (Baxandall, 1998; Hanisch, 2001). Activists politicized the relationship script of friendship as they used it. But they also relied on friendship's familiar norms to make decisions and to negotiate potential conflicts.

Note that friendship was not the only relationship script on the basis of which groups have built radically democratic organizations. For pacifists before and after World War II, I found that the norms of *religious fellowship* provided a guide for how to make decisions, allocate tasks, and handle disagreement. For the southern civil rights organizers who were trained in a Deweyan-inspired form of radical education, consensus-based decision-making and rotating leadership were pedagogical tools for building leadership among those without political experience. The relationship was one of *tutelage*. In each case, activists drew on a relationship schema that was familiar to them to enact their commitments to radical democracy. Decision-making looked very different across organizations, as a result, but it was perceived in each one as practical and fair (Polletta, 2002).

That is, for a time. Each relationship script came with norms that, in predictable circumstances, made it more difficult rather than less to deliberate fairly and effectively. And the difficulty of modifying those norms accounts for the organizational crises these groups experienced. I will discuss tutelage and religious fellowship briefly in the conclusion. The problem of friendship lies in its exclusivity and its resistance to rules, the flip side of its intimacy and informality. Friendship *depends* on its exclusivity: if one extended one's friendship to everyone, it would not mean very much (Zeggelink, 1995). And it depends on its informality: enforcing obligations or privileges of friendship would compromise its fundamentally voluntary character (Ackelsberg 1983; Allan, 1989). When friendship is the basis for organizational decision-making, problems are likely when newcomers join the organization—and not necessarily very many of them. Their very presence threatens existing friendships. They may as a result find it difficult to secure the trust, respect, and solicitousness that veterans enjoy. At the same time, newcomers probably anticipate their marginalization. What veterans see as a friend's inadvertent lapse in a participatory democratic ethos, newcomers may see as yet one more instance of elitism. A problem of a very different kind may occur when

people try to make the group more egalitarian by implementing formal rules that guarantee strict equality. Even as groups willingly adopt them, such rules may end up seeming unappealingly at odds with the informality characteristic of friendship. These things happened in SDS and in the radical feminist movement.

The limits of friendship in SDS and radical feminist organizations

After an SDS-sponsored march against the war in Vietnam in April 1965 gained national publicity, SDS chapters mushroomed, with more than fifty created in a year (Sale, 1973, p. 168). The group was certainly more unwieldy, but the disputes about decision-making that wracked it in 1965 were a response neither to the lack of centralized and hierarchical structure nor to the ad hoc imposition of such structures in an effort to cope with the organization's size and new political profile. No new structures had been created, and those who launched the debate wanted even less formal structure. Most accounts suggest that the problem was not the sheer numbers of people who joined the organization, but rather the fact that newcomers were more interested in personal liberation than political effectiveness and brought with them an anarchistic approach to organization. "Prairie people," they were called, and on most accounts, their takeover of SDS led to the progressive elimination of organizational structure—and, on some accounts, sounded the death knell for the organization (Gitlin, 1987; Sale, 1973).

However, my interviews and reading of letters and memos that circulated at the time suggest that the so-called prairie people in fact had diverse ideological commitments, and generally unformed ones. Letters from Jeff Shero, the person who led the charge to dismantle SDS's structure in the name of democracy, instead reveal a combination of admiration for SDS's founders and frustration with what he perceived their exclusivity. "The old leaders are those that have been in SDS since its early days and have a rather developed sense of friendship and mutual respect," he complained (Polletta, 2002,

p. 140). They tended to consult with each other about decisions, he said, leaving people like him out of the loop. In fact, a steady stream of letters by new chapter members refer repeatedly and enviously to the founding generation of SDS as a group of friends from which they were excluded. "The main problem seems to be to reach new people," Helen Garvy wrote to a chapter member who complained of being shut out of "the mysterious inner workings of SDS." To SDS's leadership, she wondered, "How do we permeate an informal leadership that grew from the days when SDS was a small group of friends?" (Polletta, 2002, p. 140).

To be sure, SDS had expanded since its founding by integrating newcomers through friendship circles. Friends had brought friends into the group. "The friendship group just reached the saturation point," Tom Hayden recalls (Polletta, 2002, p. 142). But for a group of friends, the saturation point is fairly easily reached (Zeggelink, 1995). Perhaps even more important, people outside the friendship group are likely to interpret friends' behaviors as signs of exclusion. SDS leaders were eager to integrate newcomers. But it was easy for newcomers to see behaviors that were natural for friends—veterans gravitating toward each other at national meetings, talking in shorthand during deliberations, or consulting informally with each other about a decision—as a sign of a tight clique running things. That newcomers responded to their sense of marginality by calling for more democracy is not surprising; after all, that was what the organization was supposed to be about. But the result was that the battle was defined as one between old guard and new guard and between keeping the existing organizational structure and abolishing structure altogether, since, they admitted later, the challengers had no idea of what kind of structure they wanted. The organization did not dissolve at this point, but any hope for coordinated activity across SDS's many chapters was lost (Polletta, 2002).

To recap: friendship's inherent exclusivity made that relationship problematic as the basis for participatory democracy. Now, why not try

to create mechanisms to integrate newcomers into the organization? And why not create formal procedures to equalize authority and influence: allocating tasks by lot, for example, or structuring decision-making so that no one person or clique would dominate, say, by requiring that speakers surrender one of a personal allotment of disks each time they spoke? SDS never tried to do that, but activists in the women's liberation movement did—and here they came up against friendship's resistance to formalization. A participant in one feminist collective put her finger on the problem when she explained the failure of her group's effort to create a formal occasion for integrating new members: "One could hardly order active participants to make friends with all recruits. This was seen as a private, personal activity" (quoted in Cassell, 1977, p. 146).

In groups that were based on ties of friendship, efforts to formalize interactions seemed at odds with the informality that is a critical feature of friendship. Disk systems and lot systems seemed artificial, "mechanical," says the women's liberationist Chude Pamela Allen (Polletta, 2002, p. 168). When New York Radical Women experienced an influx of newcomers, straining its capacity to run as a collective, the group decided to divide into three randomly assigned groups. "Nobody had the nerve to say that they didn't want to do it by lot, that they wanted to be with their friends," recalls the group's founder, Anne Foror (quoted in Echols, 1989, p. 100). Rather than question the procedure, many women simply ignored their assignments, continuing to meet with their friends. The resulting conflict led many to leave the organization altogether, and it collapsed soon thereafter (Baxandall, 1998; Hanisch, 2001). As well as being exclusive, friendship is also resolutely voluntary and informal. Formalizing friendship's behavioral obligations would have risked transforming the relationship into something else.

The failure of SDS and radical feminists to sustain participatory democratic organizations did not lead activists to give up on the form. To the contrary, bids to create collectivist

organizations mushroomed, extending from the sphere of direct action to the provision of services, such as education, health care, and food (Case & Taylor, 1979). Activists remained committed to creating egalitarian organizations, and they did become more comfortable implementing the kinds of rules and norms that might prevent individuals or groups from monopolizing power, such as having a facilitator call on participants who were reticent, using more formalized consensus decision-making, and allocating tasks more systematically (Mansbridge, 1979). But the rules easily became one more object of contention rather than a way to resolve disputes. Small decision items became opportunities for larger battles.

Rules, in short, were not enough. Making decisions, I suggest, depends not just on a set of formal decision rules, for instance, a formal chain of hierarchical command, or parliamentary procedure, or strict or modified consensus, but on countless informal rules about what kinds of issues are appropriate for group discussion and how to raise them, how to formulate and assess deliberative options, what kinds and degree of emotions to display in debates, how to deal with breaches of the rules, and so on (Poole, Siebold, & McPhee, 1986). In addition to these informal norms—rules *behind* the rules—joint decision-making depends on the interpersonal trust that fills in the gaps *between* the rules (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). On the occasions when the rules are breached or are themselves ambiguous, trust is what leads participants to assume that the breach is trivial or inadvertent and that the rules' ambiguity is a problem of misinterpretation rather than of the rules' fundamental indeterminacy. Relationships turn trusting behavior into a matter of habit, one that comes from expectations about how one should behave in that kind of relationship. Without an alternative to friendship, a reliance on formal rules was inadequate to sustain participatory democratic organizations.

Discussion and Conclusion

Other than an abstract commitment to radical democracy and a desire to operate differently

than the hidebound organizations of the old left, new leftists and radical feminists had few models for how to run their grassroots organizations in a radically egalitarian way. The practices they developed for allocating tasks and making decisions were later adopted by other organizations in the broad progressive left—this despite the fact that they often generated precisely the inequalities that they were intended to surmount. Why? In line with an institutional logics approach, I have argued that activists creatively transposed friendship, a personal relationship, to the sphere of radical politics. In line with an inhabited institutions approach, they modified the relationship script in a way that made political discussion and action one of its obligations. Both approaches help us to see the creativity in activists' use of a preexisting cultural script. These approaches are less helpful, however, in shedding light on the constraints that accompanied that process. If a script of friendship fostered interactions that were mutually respectful, caring, and egalitarian, it also fostered interactions that were exclusive and determinedly informal. The latter values were as much a part of the logic of friendship as were the former and could not be so easily detached from it. Friendship's natural exclusiveness created problems when organizations grew in size. The problem was less the sheer impracticality of the form than the fact that newcomers interpreted the behaviors of veterans who were friends as cliquish and undemocratic. And when activists tried to adopt formal rules to equalize their relations, the rules seemed unnatural, contrary to friendship's resolute informality.

Organizations in the pacifist movement that styled their interactions on religious fellowship faced different but parallel problems. Their practice of locating the ultimate authority for a decision in God or in individual conscience made in general for a deferential and uncontentious style of decision-making. But it also made it difficult to handle principled internal dissent. When members fought for policies based on the dictates of conscience, activists struggled to deal with the challenge they posed (Polletta, 2002). For civil rights organizing projects in the Deep South, the challenge lay in the limits of a

relationship schema of tutelage. Disputes emerged rather when *no one* would fight for, or even propose, new policies. Determined only to teach skills, and not impose goals, organizers were paralyzed when the movement's previous agenda proved obsolete, and they responded by attacking each other for their failure to "let the people decide" (Polletta, 2002, pp. 96–102). The result here too was a crisis that threatened the survival of the organization. In each case, then, activists were able to transpose relationship schemas (friendship, religious fellowship, tutelage) from one setting to another but, contrary to existing institutional perspectives, they were unable to discard elements of those schemas that proved impractical. Activists were able to modify the norms of familiar relationships to some extent, but contrary to inhabited institutions perspective, only up to the point where modifying the norms risked turning the relationship into another kind of relationship.

The episodes I have described raise several sets of questions. If the behavioral norms characteristic of familiar relationships often make it difficult for organizations to adapt to the practical difficulties they face, can organizations create new relationship schemas? Is it possible, for example, for participatory democrats to capitalize on the strengths of friendship as an organizational model, and notably, on friendship's premium on equality, while modifying features of the relationship schema that promote exclusivity and that are hostile to formality? Yes. In fact, the history of collectivist organizations since the 1960s suggests that this is just what activists have learned to do. Observers have noted contemporary collectivists' reliance on formal rules and mechanisms: among them, provisions for modified consensus and an array of hand signals for facilitating discussions. These, they say, have helped to counter participatory democracy's tendency to generate inequalities (Haug & Rucht, 2013; Smith & Glidden, 2012). But case studies suggest that perhaps more important has been the development of new ways of interacting (Leach, 2016), and indeed, relationship schemas. Activists have crafted new modes of association—"affinity groups,"

"working groups," "*encuentros*," "non-exclusive friendship," among them—that aim to foster individual initiative along with common purpose, equality with opportunities for individual growth, and intimacy with openness (Haug & Rucht, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2012; Polletta, 2020).

To be sure, the unfamiliarity of these schemas has posed a challenge. New relationships cannot be enforced the way rules can. Accordingly, and more generally, developing *rituals* seems to be important to making the expectations of new relationship scripts normative. As Durkheim (1912) observed, rituals strengthen group solidarity by taking people out of the routine of daily life and reenacting their essential groupness. Rituals may be used to strengthen new forms of group solidarity as well as older ones, infusing new relationships with a power and appeal that transcend narrow calculations of interest. This deserves more study, both in the context of social movement organizations, and in other kinds of organizations.

So too does the question of whether organizations that want to operate differently are well served by relying on familiar relationship schemas to do so. I have argued that transposing the norms and expectations of familiar relationships may supply the stability, mutuality, and trust that make it easier for people to interact in terms of new priorities and values. Friendship did so for participatory democracies in the new left and women's movement; tutelage did so for southern civil rights organizers; religious fellowship did so for pacifists; sisterhood did so for Chinese mill organizers (Honig, 1985); family did so for unionizing hospital staff (Sacks, 1988); and sports teams did so for the hospital residents who had been asked to cut interns some slack (Kellogg, 2009). But I have also suggested that familiar relationship schemas may be resistant to the modifications that are necessary to making them work in a particular setting. While outsiders may refuse a relationship schema or refuse to recognize the modifications that have been made to it, insiders too—the very people using the schema—may also be reluctant to alter its norms. They are invested in what makes this relationship schema

different from others: what makes a team different from a friendship group or a corporate division or a therapy group. And that may lead them to avoid making changes that would allow the group to operate more efficiently, more fairly, or otherwise more productively. Again, this deserves more study.

I conclude, though, by highlighting ways in which the theoretical perspective I have described may contribute to the larger literature on institutional change. I have argued that if people can and do transpose, combine, and modify institutional schemas in ways that produce change, they tend to do so in circumscribed ways. Recognizing this requires a fuller account of culture than institutionalists have tended to provide. Rather than treating culture as the source only of creativity and resistance to institutional logics, I have treated it as the source both of creativity and constraint. Cultural beliefs account for variation in how groups interpret institutional logics and, accordingly, organizational diversity, but they also account for similarity and isomorphism. The key to both lies in the fact that people make sense of institutional logics, like all cultural objects, in terms of their relation to other cultural objects. This means, on the one hand, that people can and do use logics practically to suit their distinctive needs. But it also means that there are specifically cultural limits on their ability to do so.

As Hinings and colleagues (2017) note, although the concept of *institutional infrastructure* was introduced to assert the importance of structural factors like actors' network positions and governance arrangements as key components of organizational fields, since then, scholars have probed the ways in which structure and culture interact in determining a field's coherence. I suggest, in that vein, that a field's infrastructure includes both relationships and relationship schemas. To treat each other like friends made sense for students whose main experience of an egalitarian relationship was friendship. That schema was structurally available to them given their position as young students. For the Protestant activists who formed radically democratic pacifist organizations, by

contrast, religious fellowship was the more familiar template of radical equality. This suggests that organizations within a field may operate similarly not because they face isomorphic pressures traditionally understood, but rather because it seems natural to them to adopt the same relationship schema to operate in a new way.

Certainly, people may draw on relationship schemas with which they are culturally familiar rather than have experienced themselves to model new modes of interacting: scientific collaborations, academic seminars, or political campaigns. But the key is that those relationship schemas are positively valued and are the source of reciprocal emotions. When turned into practical metaphors—we are like a “team” or a “family” or a “crowd”—they motivate behavior from the inside out. That is, they lead us to conform to the expectations of the relationship script not because we are incentivized to do so, but rather because we feel the appropriate feelings. Of course, those in power can exploit this dynamic, and those without power may resist it. Calling workers' freely offered labor “crowd sourced,” as became popular a few years ago, may have given workers the enthusiastic sense of being part of a fun and exciting crowd, or it may have made them even more resentful of being exploited. But “crowds” had come to be positively valorized. They were still associated symbolically with effusive emotion and collective will as had long been the case, but they now were also associated with effectiveness rather than excess, with rationality rather than irrationality (Polletta, 2020). Better grasping how and why certain relationship schemas become available, appropriate, and imbued with moral affect can help us to understand how fields change.

Going beyond relationship schemas, we can explain the appeal of a new organizational form, practice, or role in terms of its enmeshment in symbolic codes of analogy and difference (Weber, 2005). Criteria of efficiency, practicality, legality and so on are understood and evaluated in relation, but complex relation, to *what might seem unrelated* binaries of male/

female, public/private, rational/emotional, cultural/natural, and Black/white. Bureaucracy as an organizational form was unappealing to Gouldner's miners because it was symbolically coded feminine, and later it was unappealing to feminists because it was symbolically coded masculine. For new left activists, bureaucracy was associated with the staid moderation of liberals and the old left. For the young activists of the southern civil rights movement, that was true too, until new leftists became so enamored of their southern movement heroes' practice of participatory democracy that Black activists began to distance themselves from the form. Participatory democracy came to be seen as ideological, self-indulgent, middle-class and white. Bureaucracy, in contrast, came to be seen as practical, radical, and Black. The latter symbolic associations and oppositions endured, with consequences for white-dominated movements' ability to build cross-racial coalitions (Polletta, 2005).

While each set of symbolic associations was specific to a time and place, they exercised real force on how bureaucracy was understood and what it could accomplish. We can extend this insight to institutional logics. Scholars have rightly argued that institutional logics are not reified objects, but rather mutable and contested (Lounsbury et al., 2021; Micelotta et al., 2021). Their seeming givenness is an accomplishment. And yet, much of the time, institutional logics *do* seem given, do seem to be powerful things. And where they conflict with other institutional logics (a "market" logic, for example, with a "care" logic or a "craft" logic), that conflict seems real enough to spur change. The kind of cultural perspective I have described acknowledges the powerful thingness of institutional logics—not despite their dependence on cultural meaning but crucially because of it.

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Note

1. I studied minutes and recordings of meetings, internal correspondence, and interviews with former members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and feminist collectives like New York Radical Women (NYRW) and Chicago Women's Liberation, as well as secondary accounts of pacifist organizations and other feminist collectives. I traced how each group came to adopt their organizational procedures—both formal and informal—and examined how they operated in practice. I focused especially on how groups allocated tasks, made decisions, resolved conflicts, and dealt with perceived breaches of the rules. This inductive analysis led me to believe that differences in how the groups operated reflected the underpinning relationship schemas on which they relied (Polletta, 2002).

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