

1-1-2015

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## Recommended Citation

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**From interactions to institutions: Microprocesses of framing  
and mechanisms for the structuring of institutional fields**

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Published 2015 in *Academy of Management Review*, 40(1): 115-143

## **Abstract**

Despite the centrality of meaning to institutionalization, little attention has been paid to how meanings evolve and amplify to become institutionalized cultural conventions. We develop an interactional framing perspective to explain the microprocesses and mechanisms by which this occurs. We identify three amplification processes and three ways frames stack up or laminate that become the building blocks for diffusion and institutionalization of meanings within organizations and fields. Although we focus on the “bottom-up” dynamics, we argue that framing occurs in a politicized social context and is inherently bi-directional in line with structuration because micro-level interactions instantiate macro structures. We consider how our approach complements other theories of meaning-making, its utility for informing related theoretical streams, and its implications for organizing at the meso and macro levels.

In 2004, a group of Harvard University roommates including Mark Zuckerberg leveraged technology to network with their classmates – an idea that expanded beyond Harvard to other universities in the Boston area, then to other US universities, and eventually to everyone over 13, giving birth to the largest social media company in the world (Facebook). This example illustrates how seemingly ordinary micro-level interactions can amplify to influence organizations and institutions. Understanding how collective meaning emerges from the bottom-up is central to the institutionalization process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), yet studies that stress top-down models in which macro-level institutional logics are pulled down to interpret events at the local level continue to prevail. Emphasizing these top-down approaches has limited our theorizing and prevented a full understanding of microprocesses of meaning construction and negotiation despite calls for such theorizing (Barley, 2008; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Palmer, Biggart & Dick, 2008; Suddaby, 2011). This has also led to limited engagement between more macro, structural accounts and micro, communicative or interactional explanations of institutional persistence and change. The key question we tackle then is how ordinary, micro-level interactions garner sufficient collective agreement to spur change in prevailing institutional arrangements and become solidified as new cultural repertoires.

The limited conversation between micro and macro perspectives stems in part from a scholarly “division of labor” that separates the study of extra-subjective macro-level structures from that of local and inter-subjective micro-level processes (Lammers, 2011; Weber & Glynn, 2006). Both these approaches can be criticized for conflating social interaction with social structure (Koçak, Hannan & Hsu, 2014). While structuration theory (Giddens, 1979) circumvents this problem by arguing that structure and agency are mutually constitutive, a more elaborate theory about how micro-level interactions amplify and accrete to become macro-level meaning

“structures” is still underspecified (Barley, 2008), as is theorizing about the cross-level mechanisms by which interpretive shifts occur (but see Purdy & Gray, 2009; Weber & Glynn, 2006).

We adopt a frames and framing perspective to explain the mechanisms by which collective interpretations within institutional fields evolve and amplify to eventually become institutionalized cultural conventions, which, in turn, shape subsequent interpretations.<sup>1</sup> While frames are “composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (Gitlin, 1980: 6), we stress a processual approach to frames in which framing makes “some aspects of a perceived reality...more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993: 52).

Despite widespread use of frames and framing among micro-sociologists, communication scholars, social movement researchers, and some organizational theorists, scholars are not isomorphic in their underlying theories about how frames operate. Some (following Bateson, 1972) adopt a cognitive semantic view on frames (Bateson, 1972; Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Fillmore, 1982) while others draw on interactional models of framing (Collins, 2004; Dewulf et al., 2009; Goffman, 1974; Tannen & Wallat, 1987). Other scholars emphasize the strategic function of frames as tools for constructing identities and attracting adherents to social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000; Creed, Langstraat & Scully, 2002; Hunt, Benford & Snow, 1994). Finally, some institutional approaches adopt a cognitive decision making view of frames that distinguishes threats from opportunities (George et al., 2006; Kennedy & Fiss, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Other bottom-up studies have employed such diverse constructs as sensemaking (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005), discourse (Hardy & Maguire, 2010), practice (Smets, Greenwood & Morris, 2012), institutional messages (Lammers, 2011) and institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

We build on the interactional framing perspective to explicate the microprocesses of institutionalization. Rooted in the symbolic interactionist sociology of Blumer (1971), the interactional approach to framing asserts that the symbolic aspects of meaning are continually being negotiated through ongoing interactions, but these interactions also reaffirm or challenge the frame repertoires available in the wider culture. For interactionists, framing is decidedly a social and performative phenomenon. Frames do not only exist a priori to be named and invoked from wider cultural repertoires but involve active struggles and negotiations over meaning before a frame can solidify and become institutionalized, triggering dynamic processes of meaning construction within and across groups, organizations and fields in keeping with the social constructionist aspect of institutional theory. As Cornelissen and Werner (2014: 29-30) note: “the real strength of the framing construct for institutional theory is its dual character in capturing the institutionalization of enduring meaning structures, and in providing a macro-structural underpinning for actors’ motivations, cognitions, and discourse at a micro level.”

To explain how microprocesses form the bases of macro-level institutions, we integrate a framing lens with that of structuration (Giddens, 1984). While Goffman focused on the micro-level interactions that reflect and sustain societal level institutions, Giddens (1998: 69) acknowledged that “institutional structure does not exist in spite of, or outside, the encounters of day-to-day life but is implicated in those very encounters.” Pre-existing or external structures, such as norms and decision rules are variables that “exist only because they are produced and reproduced in interaction” (Poole, McPhee & Seibold, 1985: 86).” This integration of framing and structuration avoids the “entitization of variables” (Poole et al., 1985: 87), and is important for bridging the micro/macro gap because micro-level interactions form the building blocks of macro-level actions that come to be taken-for granted as institutional structures.

We also leverage insights from social movement theory, which has extended the framing lens to a more macro level (c.f., Benford & Snow, 2000; Creed, Scully & Austin, 2002). For social movement theorists, frames play a transformative role by refocusing actors' attention on "collective action frames" designed to mobilize activity and change institutional fields (Snow & Benford, 1988: 198). In this view, frames "are decidedly more agentic and contentious in...calling for action that problematizes and challenges existing authoritative views and framings of reality" (Snow, 2004: 385). Incorporating these insights along with recent efforts to marry social movement and institutional theories (Davis et al., 2008) bolsters our theorizing about how bottom up framing processes are inextricably linked to macro-level institutions.

Our paper makes three distinct but interrelated contributions. First, we offer an alternative to top-down models of meaning making within institutional fields in which frames are primarily treated as the means for translating institutional logics from the societal to the field level (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012). While the top-down approach acknowledges that frames can also be rhetorical resources for crafting collective interpretations from the bottom up, it doesn't explain *de novo* change or how new frames arise and eventually become institutionalized. To remedy this we draw on concepts of framing and interaction rituals (Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1974) to explicate how meanings generated in local interactions either remain fluid or take root and amplify in scope, regularity and emotional intensity as broader systems of collective meaning. Our interactional approach to framing as meaning construction calls attention to the "dynamics of meaning in the process" of institutionalization (Zilber, 2008: 164) and offers a

theoretically robust account of the microprocesses of interaction linking framing and higher levels of institutionalization. Consequently, we focus on interactants<sup>2</sup> rather than single actors to emphasize that meanings reside in the social interaction rather than in an individual's mind.

Second, we inductively derive four generic patterns of institutionalization that result from combining the microprocesses in different ways. These patterns are then used to distill and organize a wide array of mechanisms of institutional change and maintenance that we identified through an analysis of the institutional and social movement literatures and synthesized into eight key mechanisms. Each generic pattern aligns with one or more institutional mechanisms, linking communication processes directly to institutional reproduction and change. By unpacking the interactional framing dynamics at work in these mechanisms, we can account for maintenance as well as disruption of accepted systems of interpretation within fields<sup>3</sup> (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005), internally and externally-imposed frame change, and allow for both the emergence of new fields (Rao, Monin & Durand, 2003) and the possibility that fields may not always reach settlements (Rao & Kenney, 2008) or achieve collective mind (Weick & Roberts, 1993) and instead remain in flux and tension for extended periods (Meyer & Höllerer, 2010; Purdy & Gray, 2009). Our explanation of institutional change processes in terms of the micro-level interactional framing processes that comprise them accounts for why some micro-level interactions ramp up and institutionalize while others become short-lived fads (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999).

While our first two contributions deliberately emphasize how localized, bottom-up processes scale up to become collective interpretations, our third contribution revisits the idea that

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<sup>2</sup> However, we note that while symbolic interactionists focus on interactions among individuals and social movement theorists focus largely at the movement organization level, our use of interactants is intended to encompass multiple levels of analysis—that is, interactions among individuals, groups, organizations or fields.

<sup>3</sup> Following Fligstein and McAdam (2011), “fields” broadly refer to evolving and often contentious social orders in which interactants engage with a set of common understandings about the purposes, relationships and rules of interaction. For our purposes these include organizations, fields and societies.



framing is inherently a bidirectional, structurational process (i.e., both top-down and bottom-up) (Collins, 2004; Creed, Langstraat & Scully, 2002). We argue that the range of institutional change mechanisms available to a focal interactant at a given time is constrained by their perception of the extant legitimation norms and power relations within the field. We use the term focal interactant to refer to one member of an interaction, recognizing that that actor's framing is not independent of the framing of others in the interaction. We present a model that organizes the eight mechanisms according to two dimensions: whether domination systems are viewed as systemic or episodic (Clegg, 1989), and whether or not legitimation norms are acceptable or should be changed (in the eyes of the focal interactant). Our theorizing draws directly on the structurationist notions that "fields do not exist independently of actors' collective interpretation systems" (Armstrong, 2005: 64) and that interpretation (signification) processes are inextricably linked to domination and legitimation processes within the field (Giddens, 1984). The framing mechanisms available to an interactant at any given point in time depend on how that interactant interprets the larger context for their actions which social movement scholars refer to as the "political opportunity structure" (Gamson & Meyer, 1996: 275). Thus, our model considers both an interactant's stance toward maintaining or changing legitimating field norms and their perception of the power distribution within the field. Combining framing and structuration theories allows the study of institutionalization to be explored as socially constructed yet maintained in a politicized social environment by interactants of varied power (Meyer & Höllerer, 2010; Rojas, 2010) acting within and outside the field. We argue that a robust theory of framing and institutionalization needs this bidirectional perspective on framing to account for how interactional frames become laminated, amplify and institutionalize, but also to acknowledge the recursive impact of these institutionalized frames in shaping or constraining subsequent framing at the micro-level.

Our paper is organized as follows. We first offer a bottom-up theory of interactional framing to explain how collective meanings can evolve from the micro to the meso and macro<sup>4</sup> levels through various framing microprocesses. Next, we inductively derive four generic patterns of institutional maintenance and change from these microprocesses and show how these patterns of microprocesses explain the cross-level dynamics through which eight institutional mechanisms generate change or stasis in fields. Then in keeping with our structurational approach, we present a model showing how a focal interactant's framing of the contextual conditions, i.e., their perceptions of the field's legitimation norms and domination structures, is related to the generic patterns of institutional maintenance or change and the mechanisms associated with these patterns. Finally, we discuss how our theorizing complements other theoretical perspectives on institutional change and consider its import for future research and practice.

### **MICROPROCESSES OF INTERACTIVE FRAMING**

**The tenets of an interactive approach to framing.** The fundamental tenets of an interactive approach to framing were set forth by Blumer, who argued that what people do “is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called on to act” (1969: 19). An interactionist framing approach assumes that frames (and institutions) are being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed as individuals engage with one another in everyday interactions. To communicate, interactants must share at least a minimal degree of understanding about what is going on in the moment and know the social rules appropriate to the context (e.g., they don't eat their lunch during a church service and they exhibit appropriate decorum at a funeral). In such situations, they draw upon extant cultural registers to make sense of (frame) the context and determine how to

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper we use *micro* to refer to the dyadic or small group level, *meso* for the organizational level, and *macro* for the field and societal level.

behave. They borrow frames from the wider culture to inform their current actions and, in so doing they reaffirm the shared interpretation held in the culture through their verbal, non-verbal and physical responses to each other (Goffman, 1974). Reaffirmation upholds the current “frame” and enables it to persist over time, generating solidarity among interactants and shared expectations for behavior that is consistent with the frame. In this way, cultures evolve and persist.

However, it is the “finely honed interactional work” (Collins, 2004: 20) of con-/de-struction that influences whether an extant frame survives intact or is questioned, challenged or replaced by another. Frames and institutions are sustained and “made real by being acted out” (Collins, 2004: 16) in patterns of interaction that may or may not become ritualized over time. If they do, Goffman (1967: 90) labels them interaction rituals--“rules of conduct that bind the actor and the recipient together” through shared understandings of and expectations about appropriate action. Thus, meaning resides in the social, not the individual (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006).

We argue that another core tenet of interactional framing theory is that micro-level interactions that reaffirm extant frames are not just replicating micro-level patterns of engagement. They also comprise the meaning structure interactants draw on to make sense of the situation and how to behave within it. Through interactive framing, interactants re-enact the norms and power of existing institutionalized structures, creating a structural process (Poole et al., 1985). While Goffman focuses on framing at the interactional level, Giddens (1984) emphasizes dimensions of signification, legitimation and domination that serve as frames to prescribe and proscribe meaning and behaviour in specific interactions. *Signification* refers to the development of interpretive frames that guide behavior in a social context. *Legitimation* describes the construction of norms that guide interactions as well as establish rights, obligations, and sanctions to enforce conformity. *Domination* refers to power interactions that create, affirm or enforce patterns of au-

tonomy and dependence among a collective (Giddens, 1984). Communication, power and sanctions operate at the interactional level, while signification, domination and legitimation are their analogues at the structural level. According to Haslett (2012: 103), not only do the “elements within these levels interact with one another (but)...All aspects of both levels are simultaneously present in every interaction.” Interactions at the micro-level either reproduce or recast these overarching frames of organizing. From a bottom up perspective, when parties repeatedly and consistently frame their interactions and act on them as if they existed independently, institutionalization occurs (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). While we explicitly revisit the recursive aspect of structuration later in the paper, we next explain the micro-level interactions at the heart of our theorizing, keeping this structural focus in mind.

**Misfirings and Laminations.** Interactive framing theory accepts the structurationist idea that past frames create behavioral norms and expectations that often perpetuate the reenactment of those earlier frames. However, it questions the premise that interactants always reproduce perfect replicas of previous frames and dutifully play their parts in upholding them. Instead, interactive framing allows for slippage and misfirings in which a respondent may deviate, either intentionally or unwittingly, from the initial frame s/he understands to have been introduced. This produces “bloops and blunders, moments of embarrassment, rending of the presentational façade [and] frame breaks” (Collins, 2004: 20) in which an interactant fails to uphold another’s frame.

Three types of misfiring are particularly important for institutional change: keyings, frame breaks and ambiguity. A keying is “the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by participants to be something quite else” (Goffman, 1974: 43-44). In a keying, the activity itself doesn’t change, but the interactants interpretations of it does, motivating them to behave differently (e.g., from play to fight or from proper etiquette to committing a faux pas).

In such cases, the prevailing norms of the interaction are disrupted and the interactants must reconnoiter on the spot to determine their responses. Misfirings may also arise if interactants intentionally break the frame because they conclude it is untenable as an interpretation in the given circumstances. African American Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery, Alabama bus exemplifies a frame break that reportedly triggered the US civil rights movement. Frame breaks are likely when weak cultural repertoires are present, but can transpire even in the presence of a widely-shared historical frame. Finally, an interaction may be characterized by ambiguity, leading to misfiring when one interactant holds a different interpretation than another about what is going on without trying to change the other's frame.

When frame misfirings happen, powerful interactants may try to rectify the breach by squelching the new frame and bringing the deviant back into line to reestablish the interaction order (Goffman, 1967), or the new frame may find footing and set off a chain of framing dynamics. In the first case, for example, an outburst during a court proceeding from a woman whose son is on trial may be deemed illegitimate, causing the woman to be held in contempt and ushered out of the proceedings to restore the court's decorum. In the second case, the new frame may spread to other users and contexts, as exemplified by the Egyptian Arab Spring movement (aided by the internet) which mustered enough power through framing to unseat the extant political leadership. A keying may trigger another keying, a frame break or ambiguity in response, which may generate a third and so on, a process that may or may not ultimately produce shared meaning. This process of responding to another's frame and adding a new interpretation on top of theirs is referred to as lamination or layering of frames (Goffman, 1974). For example, in the earlier case, another person in the courtroom may interpret the woman's outburst by adding a rekeying to explain that she was merely being empathetic rather than disruptive (e.g. "she's reacting the way any mother would"). Such rekeyings, called metatexts or metacommunication, allow

a new frame to be laminated on top of an old one such that “the previous exchange has become the subject of the next one, and the conversation is now about the previous conversation” (Robichaud, Giroux & Taylor, 2004: 622). Through such rekeyings, conversations about conversations or “frameworks of frames” (Goffman, 1974: 27) emerge. Additional laminations may be needed to bring new entrants to the interaction up to speed about what previously transpired and to incorporate their interpretations of events as new laminations of the ongoing interaction, yielding “encounters in which numerous interpretive frames are interwoven and embedded within one another” (Diehl & McFarland, 2010: 1716). For example, in the context of organizational meetings, Boden (1994: 91) explains how conversations over time create a “laminated effect” that then frames succeeding conversations. The result is that, in any given moment, interactants have a repertoire of frame choices with which to interpret their experiences. Laminations are therefore a basic building block in explaining how micro-level interactions amplify to become more widely shared, expected and routinely enacted.

### **Bottom up Framing Processes: Scaling up from micro to macro**

Amplification refers to the process by which frames generated in micro-level interactions move to the meso and macro levels and eventually acquire the taken-for-granted quality of institutions (Zucker, 1977) replacing prior frames. We suggest three processes of frame amplification: 1) expanded scope through adoption by a broader group of people; 2) greater regularity or frequency so that use of a particular frame becomes more persistent (e.g., through repetition and routinization); and/or 3) emotional intensification.

**Scope.** The first amplification process involves transfer of meaning through broadening or overlapping networks of interactants so that eventually meanings are more widely-held and move up levels. When groups of people participate in multiple networks, the frames they share in one

network may diffuse into others. Here a high degree of network overlap leads to greater conformity of views as well as “a feeling of social pressure on oneself, but also a desire to make other people conform as well” (Collins, 2004: 116). The degree of wider frame dissemination also depends on the diversity of the interactants holding that frame and their non-redundancy in overlapping networks. Amplification is likely to continue through additional networks and spread throughout an organization or even an entire field if justifications embedded in discursive narratives and shared accounts are available that emphasize the compatibility of the new frame with past practices and values (Green, 2004; Gondo & Amis, 2013). This may only require reference to previous adoptions to gain acceptance, but, as Green (2004) learned about TQM program adoptions, it also leaves the new meanings vulnerable to translation based on local rekeyings rather than exact replication of meaning and practices. Whether frames are adopted “as is” or are rekeyed in the process, if they continue to amplify in scope, “the conventions created...during small-scale interactions...can in turn spread from one interaction to the next, leading to the emergence of cultural conventions in the form of field frames, or communal common ground, across actors in an institutional field” (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014: 217).

Alternately, if others in overlapping networks hold frames that differ from the emergent one, the amplification process may trigger a frame break and generate conflict between the networks which can then amplify further. If adherents of different frames attempt to make their frame resonate to gain more followers, the ensuing frame conflict may amplify to the meso-level to become a full-fledged “framing contest” (Kaplan, 2008); thus, a cleavage between two people could amplify to become a rift at the organization level, as occurred in the departure of Steve Jobs from Apple early in the firm’s history. In dense networks with many triadic relationships,

negative interpretations of others diffuse easily, reinforcing the original break in framing (Labi-  
anca, Brass & Gray, 1998). Figure 1 illustrates these two scenarios of frame amplification, yield-  
ing agreement about frame A on the left and conflict between frames A and B on the right.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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Powerful interactants can use amplification of scope to promote new frames and deliber-  
ately impose these meanings on an organization or field while simultaneously introducing new  
norms and instilling sanctions for non-compliance that ensure their frames persist over time  
(Gray & Kish-Gephardt, 2013). However, elite interactants are not the only ones who can intro-  
duce frame breaks. Social movement theorists argue that lower power interactants can introduce  
frame breaks and promote their amplification by advancing diagnostic frames designed to attract  
new adherents to the movement (e.g., by pointing out injustices in their current circumstances)  
and prognostic and mobilization frames (Benford & Snow, 2000) to offer alternatives, pressure  
specific targets and achieve frame resonance with wider audiences (Snow & Benford, 1988).

Amplification of scope involves structuration because changes in signification are inter-  
twined with legitimation and domination processes to generate shared meanings within and  
across levels. For example, in order to reduce resistance to a social movement and help its mem-  
bers gain standing, activists construct legitimacy accounts designed to foster audience identifica-  
tion with the message (Creed, Scully & Austin, 2002) and align it with already accepted rhetoric  
within the field (Snow & Benford, 1988; Vogus & Davis, 2005). If these targets succumb to the  
new frame, their adherence grants the frame legitimacy (Green, 2004), and ramps up pressure on  
other targets to adopt as well, moving the field closer to wholesale acceptance of the emergent  
frame. In this way, collective action frames can eventually become “master frames” (Gamson,  
1988: 220, 227) that cut across multiple institutional orders, and (from the top down) guide, but



not fully determine, subsequent framing at an interactional level. For example, the rights master frame that emerged from civil rights movements provided a generalized cultural resource for subsequent rights movements such as gay, animal and women's rights.

When frame breaks challenge the current bases of legitimacy within a field, framing contests become negotiations over the legitimacy of extant frames. As competing groups gain more members and challenge defenders' efforts to protect extant frames, these framing contests can amplify in scope. If the competing frames persist, the field conflicts may end in ceasefires (Meyer & Höllerer, 2010), turn into political battles, or leave fields in states of perpetual conflict (Lewicki, Gray & Elliott, 2003; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005), offering further evidence that signification can generate shifts in and contests over domination and legitimation within fields.

**Regularity/frequency.** A second means of amplification involves increased regularity and frequency in the use of a frame by a consistent set of micro-level interactants. These recurring processes increase the durability or endurance of frames (Lammers, 2011), eventually granting them a normative force that confers both moral and practical legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) on them. In stable networks, micro-level interaction rituals become institutionalized at higher levels through repetition of practices. Eventually, the frames come to be taken for granted as typifications (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and are invoked without deliberate attention. However, when networks are fluid (i.e., many different individuals are joining and leaving), ritualization is less likely because multiple, competing frames are in play.

The repetitive nature of rituals not only heightens individual commitment to those meanings and practices, but also establishes legitimacy for the frames by stratifying group boundaries and solidifying group-level identification with them (Creed, Langstraat & Scully, 2002). For example, when mining catastrophes result in multiple deaths, the repetitive funeral rituals within

the community serve to restore solidarity among grieving family and friends. Rituals also are encapsulated in symbols which remind those practicing them of their identification with the taken-for-granted frame that is being reenacted through the ritual, as in showing commitment to national ideals by saluting the flag. Group-level identification is also strengthened because invoking rituals may generate emotional intensity, a point we develop in the next section.

The enactment of rituals also involves structuration because once a ritual is instantiated within a group, organization or field, it is reified so that it “merely reflects macro-structure” in contrast to the more fluid interaction rituals from which it originally emerged (Collins, 2004: 7). The degree of stability of rituals and routines also reflects the power relations within the organization or field. Institutions invoke rituals to extract their members’ conformance to established meanings and norms by specifying the sanctions associated with violation of the routine, identifying the enforcers of such sanctions (Collins, 1981) and enforcing them through “repetitively activated, socially constructed controls” (Jepperson, 1991: 145). As they become taken-for-granted through repeated use, these enforcement processes also become routinized and spread. As noted earlier, frame conflicts can also become ritualized and persist indefinitely. For example, in a conflict over recreational use within Voyageurs National Park, resolution was elusive as wise-use activists, environmentalists and park officials each became mired in contradictory frames that they repeatedly invoked for over forty years (Gray, 2004). Intractable conflicts not only persist over time but can become embedded in each opposing group’s collective memory. As in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Barthel, 1996), they are often passed on from generation to generation and can be emotionally rekindled through repeat skirmishes.

**Emotional intensification.** The third process of amplification involves the arousal of emotional intensity during interactional rituals. An interaction ritual “involves focusing attention on the same activity...and it has a shared emotional focus, which builds up as the ritual successfully

proceeds” (Collins, 2004: 112). The emotionality of interaction rituals is key because individuals import emotional residue from previous encounters into new ones. Emotions and emotion-laden cognitions generated in an interaction often heighten identification with the framing of participants in that interaction and set up the conditions for and spill over into subsequent interactions. The more emotional intensity generated for an interactant, the more likely participants will identify with the frame, either positively or negatively. In the case of positive identification and emotions, participants will want to reproduce the high levels of intensity by increasing the frequency or regularity of the interactions whereas interactants will seek to reduce the frequency of events generating negative identification and emotions.

Rekindling and intensification of emotions through rituals that build solidarity among interactants creates “heightened intersubjectivity” (Collins, 2004: 35) that further solidifies their shared understandings and creates specific cultural capital and symbols that capture the collective excitement [referred to as “collective effervescence” by Durkheim (1912/1965)]. Emotional intensity links encounters across time and space; reinvoking the symbols recharges the emotional fervor and also entices others to join. The power inherent in rituals lies in this ability to generate emotional contagion or to construct a collective mood within a group (Collins, 1981; Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1993), which in turn generates increased levels of cooperation or conflict and affects the overall performance of a group (Barsade, 2002).

Social movement scholarship has explained how the emergence and reproduction of emotions during an interaction may kindle enthusiasm for the cause in both proximate and distant audiences. If an issue is made emotionally moving, then individuals are more likely to feel compelled to join the cause. To amplify the frame, enlist support and galvanize collective action, activists orchestrate and strategically deploy emotions such as guilt and righteous anger (Jasper, 2011; Scheff, 1997). For example, when activists replaced the technical “female circumcision”

frame with the emotionally laden “female genital mutilation” frame, the issue of altering female genital organs for non-medical reasons gained resonance (Boyle, 2002). Emotions may also amplify when individuals identify themselves as part of a social collective, such as national guilt for wrongs committed by a subgroup within a country. The emotion created by rituals need not be dramatic to become embodied in corresponding symbols and cultural practices. They can simply be “long-lasting, underlying tones or moods that permeate social life” (Collins, 2004: 106).

Because the capacity to increase positive emotional energy and augment cultural capital is mediated by power and status (Turner & Stets, 2006), intensification of emotions is structural, regulated by the norms and power relations within a field. For example, elites may either stimulate and reward (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989) or place constraints on levels of emotional expression through framing display rules (Hochschild, 1983) that regulate the kind and level of acceptable emotion (e.g., by attaching prohibitive meta-meanings to inappropriate emotional displays). Interactants may dissuade others from joining social movements seeking to change organizational practices by using status threats to reduce their identification with the movement (Kellogg, 2012). The revving up of strongly shared emotional rituals can stratify insiders and outsiders (Collins, 1981) (as in pep rallies before sports events), cause followers to blindly accept coercive leaders, and increase cleavages between communities with historical conflicts. For example, emotional intensification has contributed to the amplification and persistence of cattle raiding rituals in Northern Uganda over many years (Jabs, 2007) recently leading to violent conflict.

As illustrated above, the three amplification processes often occur in pairs or as a trio, reinforcing one another. For example, emotional intensification can help to broaden a frame’s appeal and thereby increase its scope. Greater scope may yield increased frequency and regularity as a broader network of interactants uses a frame. Increases in the frequency or regularity of a

frame's use may also rev up its emotional intensity and increase its accessibility to a wider audience. In addition to these potential interactions, extant norms and power play a role in shaping how amplification processes unfold. Thus we offer a more granular depiction of how structuration occurs in interaction and illustrate that frames are "at once locus, outcome and focus of situated interaction" (Haslett, 2012: 207). In the next section we extend our interactional theory to explain how different combinations of framing microprocesses combine to yield broader mechanisms of institutional persistence and change.

### **MICROPROCESSES AND MECHANISMS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION**

As we noted above in our discussion of the microprocesses of institutionalization, frames can be linked by different types of lamination and these can amplify (or not) in a variety of different ways. By combining the different types of lamination with different types of amplification, we developed four generic patterns or pathways of institutionalization. In Table 1, we depict each generic pattern of institutional change or persistence differentiated by the type of microprocesses involved (both lamination and amplification). We then examined the microprocesses associated with a wide array of mechanisms culled from the institutional and social movement literatures. Mechanisms explain patterns of actions and response that capture understandable causal sequences or other sequential processes (Gross, 2009). While scholars have stressed the importance of theorizing about the mechanisms by which institutions persist or change (Davis & Marquis, 2005; Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006), a host of mechanisms have been presented in the institutional theory and social movement literatures without any systematic way to organize, compare and/or differentiate them. We culled over twenty-five different patterns of institutional change and stasis found in the above-mentioned literatures and identified the microprocesses that comprised them. By comparing these with our four generic patterns of institutionalization, we distilled the twenty-five into eight distinct mechanisms that represent variants of the four generic

patterns we induced from the microprocesses. In Table 1, we show how these eight mechanisms exemplify the four generic patterns of institutionalization. This inductive analysis enables a clear explication of the micro-level interactions comprising these eight key mechanisms of institutional maintenance and change. We illustrate the primary framing dynamics associated with each mechanism in Figure 2. While we have diagrammed interactions at the group level, these patterns are multi-level in nature. We illustrate specific mechanisms in our discussion below.

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Insert Table 1 and Figure 2  
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### **Pattern A: Frame Break and Amplification of New Frame**

The first generic pattern of institutional change involves a break in the extant frame and its replacement with a new frame. This new frame may then amplify through scope, regularity/frequency and/or emotional intensification over time. Our analysis of the literature yielded three mechanisms that illustrate pattern A.

**Externally-induced reframing.** *Externally-induced reframing* occurs when a focal interactant adopts a new frame in response to pressure from forces or parties outside the focal interactant's field. (See Figure 2a.) These pressures include exogenous events, such as shocks, jolts, or discontinuities (Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings, 2002; Meyer, 1982), as well as strong arm tactics by other more powerful interactants. External pressures force interactants within a field to break their extant frames and theorize new frames in response that eventually amplify in scope, regularity/frequency and/or emotional intensity as they are adopted by additional interactants in the field. Focal interactants may leverage frame breaks that result from external events by making them salient and developing meanings about them (Munir, 2005), representing them through examples (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010), and supporting theorizing by multiple parties (cf., Strang & Soule, 1998). However, focal interactants need not advocate for a new frame to participate in its

amplification. Simply adopting the new frame is a form of amplification because this action increases the scope and frequency/regularity of the frame in the field.

External pressures from higher level social orders may also prompt externally-induced reframing, yielding cross-level dynamics. This mechanism also operates on multiple levels. For example, at the organizational level, when national legislation gave them expanded authority, nurse practitioners in Canadian hospitals sought to increase legitimacy for their emerging profession (Reay, Golden-Biddle & Germann, 2006). They did this by building relationships, regularly reinforcing the benefits of their role, and developing a professional association to build support for their profession. These activities expanded the scope, increased regularity/frequency, and over time developed emotional intensity for the frame break among nurse practitioners that then spread to others in the field. Similar dynamics can be seen at the field level, where changes in societal preferences for higher education prompted many liberal arts colleges to professionalize their curricula (Kraatz & Zajac, 1996). Alternately, externally-induced reframing may be triggered at the field level by changes in linked fields such as when new digital technology sparked a shift in the meaning of photography from print-based preservation of memories to instant sharing of images (Munir, 2005). At the societal level, Keck and Sikkink (1999) describe how externally-induced reframing enables governments to amplify the scope, frequency and emotional intensity of new frames by signing international compacts, and adjusting policies, laws and resource allocations to align with the expectations of transnational advocacy organizations. Although all of these examples operate at different levels of analysis, the underlying pattern of institutionalization involves amplification of a new frame after a frame break prompted by external pressures.

**Internal reframing.** Pattern A is also reflected in the mechanism of *internal reframing* in which a focal interactant initiates and promotes revision of existing frames in their own organization or field (see Figure 2b). In contrast to externally-induced reframing, these interactants exploit and exaggerate institutional contradictions within established social arrangements (Seo & Creed, 2002) to produce dissatisfaction with the status quo (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996) in order to create a frame break. The new frame amplifies within an existing organization or field as it is used with greater regularity, frequency and emotional intensity, but its scope likely will not increase as the framing is oriented toward changing the frames of existing organization or field members rather than gaining new adherents outside of the original boundary of the field.

Internal pressures for change may emerge within an organization or field from tensions or mismatches between internal practices and shared expectations. For example, internal reframing occurred at the field level when state governments tried to transform existing practices for resolving public policy conflicts through alternative dispute resolution (ADR) (Purdy & Gray, 2009). They amplified the move away from bureaucratic practices by publicizing successful ADR and by soliciting effusive testimonials from powerful participants. Variations in practice that emerge strategically or serendipitously may be promoted by proponents who benefit if field expectations shift toward their newly developed practices, as when active money management became the dominant approach in mutual funds (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007). Additionally, embedding the new frame in the financial education system ensured its amplification through regularity and frequency. A societal level example involves Americans who promote their working class identities and values even though these conflict with societal norms that stress upward class mobility (Lucas, 2011). In each example, the impetus for frame break and amplification comes from interactants who are embedded in a social context that they seek to change.



**Importing a master frame.** Focal interactants who *import a master frame* (Figure 2c) seek legitimacy by linking their frames to successful social movements (Snow & Benford, 1992). They strive to undermine prevailing meaning within a field, creating frame breaks by replacing one system of signification with another. The master frame, which is widely known, frequently referenced, and already imbued with emotional intensity, is amplified as the focal interactant applies it in a new context. Because master frames cut across multiple institutional orders, they serve as a “core resource for the development of more targeted activism frames” (Thornton et al., 2012: 176) designed to recruit and motivate new adherents, which expands the frame’s scope and may promote increased regularity and emotional intensity as well.

The cross-level mechanism of importing a master frame has been observed at different levels of analysis. At the organizational level, counselors carried new therapeutic meanings into a rape crisis center founded on feminist ideals by drawing upon their professional occupational culture (Zilber, 2002). At the field level, French chefs and professional societies imported master frames rooted in the French Revolution that had transformed the fields of literature, drama and film, to shift French gastronomy from classical to nouvelle cuisine (Rao et al., 2003). Promoters of this social movement leveraged themes of realism and autonomy to accelerate emotional intensity, shifted restaurant roles to expand their scope of influence, and started gastronomic publications to increase the frequency, regularity and accessibility of their message to restaurant-goers. Importing a master frame involves a combination of forces that are internal and external to the focal field to accomplish a frame break and amplification of the new frame.

### **Pattern B: Amplification of Existing Frame**

In pattern B, the underlying microprocesses do not involve lamination. Instead, the original frame remains operative and is promoted by the focal interactant. Amplification of the extant

frame can occur through any of the three amplification processes or their combination. This process is analogous to diffusion in which an extant frame is adopted more broadly through an organization, field or society. We identified two mechanisms that fit this pattern.

**Maintaining frame dominance.** *Maintaining frame* dominance (Figure 2d) describes how the focal interactant reinforces an already existing frame in a field. Because “institutionalization simply constructs the way things are [and] alternatives may be literally unthinkable” (Zucker, 1983: 5), this mechanism explains how institutions avoid disruptions of the taken-for-granted. Existing frames are transmitted intact without frame breaks, and amplification occurs through repetition and frequent use of the frame (Lammers, 2011), combined with increasing emotional intensity. This mechanism involves amplification without lamination (i.e., no new frames are introduced) and explains diffusion processes where meanings are retained through isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Galaskiewicz & Wasserman, 1989).

Maintaining frame dominance may occur through mimetic processes in which ongoing interactions sustain the taken for granted (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), or when interactants consciously seek to ensure compliance to current norms and practices (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). For example, the social class system at Cambridge University is reinforced through strict adherence to weekly dining rituals that reaffirm protocol and leverage emotional intensity through dramaturgy (Dacin, Munir, and Tracey, 2010). At the interorganizational level, maintaining frame dominance is illustrated by a study of the annual Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race where reflexive normalization and negotiation are used to maintain institutional stability (Lok & De Rond, 2013). These examples illustrate institutional maintenance within a social context where existing frames are primarily reinforced through increasing regularity of use and emotional intensification. However, maintaining a dominant frame may also occur via amplification of scope as in simple diffusion when the frame spreads to new interactants or to related fields.

**Institutional distancing.** Pattern B also operates in the mechanism we refer to as *institutional distancing*. This occurs when some interactants in a field attempt to avoid conformance to normative pressures by insulating themselves from the dominant frame in the field (see Figure 2e). They immunize themselves from sharing the frames and expectations of the field without changing the field's frame by weakening the influence of institutional prescriptions (Lepoutre & Valente, 2012). They achieve this by increasing the regularity and frequency of their preferred frame and intensifying emotional commitment to it. For example, the UK bolsters its rejection of the Euro by leveraging its national identity and historical emotional attachment to the pound and regularly reaffirms its commitment to the national currency when economic news is reported. These interactants may resist frames if their adoption threatens a loss of autonomy or violates pragmatic concerns, even if the frames fully align with their professional affiliations and normative orientations (Detert & Pollock, 2008). Another variant of institutional distancing is decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) in which “there is a deliberate disconnection between organizational structures that enhance legitimacy and organizational practices that are believed within the organization to be technically efficient” (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008: 90). Thus, interactants engaged in institutional distancing provide a symbolic appearance of compliance with external demands while pursuing their own ends in practice.

Institutional distancing may occur within a single level of analysis, as when organizations separate employees from the structures of professional frames and norms (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006) to protect them from the monitoring and reinforcing activities of field-level audiences. It also occurs across levels when master frames or higher order norms impinge on organizational activity. For example, some hybrid social enterprises espouse social welfare publicly to promote their legitimacy (Pache & Santos, 2013) but focus on profitability by minimizing amplification of the social welfare frame for ongoing internal operations. Similarly, at the societal

level, radical non-governmental organizations shield themselves from the expectations of more mainstream partners in a social movement by using their underdog status to justify their actions to others in the movement while reinforcing among their own members that ideology justifies any tactic (Yaziji & Doh, 2013). These examples illustrate how institutional distancing allows diversity to occur within an institutionalized context without direct challenge to dominant norms or existing power relations—thereby allowing them to persist.

### **Pattern C: Keying and Amplification of Modified Frame**

The primary microprocess undergirding Pattern C is keying. In a keying a variation of an original frame is offered with a subtle shift in meaning. The keying may then amplify through the standard three processes or additional keyings or rekeyings may occur until one sticks and gains traction. We suggest two mechanisms that involve keying and/or rekeying.

**Merging Frames.** The *merging frames* mechanism occurs when two or more focal interactants participate in constructing a new frame from existing ones, yielding a wider, more-encompassing frame that supplants the original ones (Figure 2f). Frames merge through keyings that link separate and distinct frames, as when the field of biotechnology was created by recombining existing practices from biology and technology and then crafting new arrangements (Powell & Sandholtz, 2012). Amplification occurs through increases in scope, regularity/frequency, and emotional intensity as the merged frame gains acceptance distinct from the frames from which it was derived.

Merging frames typically occurs within a level of analysis, but amplification of the merged frame could cross levels. For example at the societal level issue linkage allowed interactants to adopt multiple perspectives on climate change by trading off concessions on relatively low-priority issues in exchange for gains on high-priority issues (Ansari, Wijen & Gray, 2013). At the field level, the Dutch tourism industry and environmental activists merged commercial frames

with environmental frames through a process of coconstruction to advance the field of sustainable tourism (Van Wijk et al., 2013). Social networks that linked tour operators to environmentalists enabled keying as frames were reinterpreted and layered, ultimately creating new language, practices and organizational forms that amplified the merged frame. These examples illustrate how misfirings and laminations can combine existing frames to yield merged frames that co-exist and persist in social contexts, even if other frames are more dominant.

**Situated improvising.** A second mechanism that exemplifies Pattern C is situated improvising. This mechanism (Figure 2g) involves the gradual internal modifications of practice through experimentation (Smets, Morris & Greenwood, 2012) or in the performance of organizational routines (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). The related concept of bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1966) describes how people combine disconnected practices or cultural resources they have at hand to find workable approaches to new problems and opportunities. Such combinations or laminations involve keyings that are amplified as they are repeated and regularized and spread through expansion of scope because of their practical value. Situated improvising occurred when Carlsberg Brewery employees combined elements of social responsibility and market dynamics to construct a new artifact, the Responsible Drinking Guide Book (Christiansen & Lounsbury, 2013). Situated improvising may also be enacted by carriers who have the capacity to dis-embed frames from one context and to re-embed them in new contexts where they take on new meanings (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). For example, amphibious entrepreneurs draw upon their positions in multiple social worlds to innovate by carrying, transposing and recombining frames and practices across fields (Powell & Sandholtz, 2012). In all these cases, meanings and frames are transformed during the process of transfer between different institutional spheres (Zilber, 2006). Situated improvising offers a performativity-based explanation of how new frames emerge through keying, allowing variation to emerge in institutional contexts.

## **Pattern D: Ambiguity and Inconsistent Amplification**

Pattern D is based on ambiguity derived from multiple or inconsistent laminations. When no one is certain about how to frame a situation or two or more interactants create ambiguity within an organization or field by holding different frames (perhaps to accomplish different purposes), this mechanism preserves that ambiguity and thereby allows adherents of each frame to retain their preferred approach in the presence of the other. We identified one relatively new mechanism that operates by this pattern.

**Maintaining Frame Plurality.** Exemplifying pattern D, *maintaining frame plurality* occurs when focal interactants reinforce the co-existence of multiple frames in a field (see Figure 2h). This mechanism involves interactants managing or tolerating multiple meanings drawn from overlapping, conflicting, interstitial, or otherwise unrelated field spaces in the interest of getting work done (Kraatz & Block, 2008; Murray, 2010). Ambiguity generates frame misfirings because interactants have different understandings about what is going on, what needs to be done or how to do it. These different views can amplify through expansion of the scope of existing frames, which find their way into “foreign” fields and become accepted there through regular and/or frequent use. Emotional intensification may favor one or multiple frames depending upon whether interactants experience frame-related conflicts and how they attempt to resolve them.

Maintaining frame plurality may occur across fields that become linked or within fields, especially those undergoing transitions. Interactants can allow a plurality of interpretations about the nature of the field to coexist by relying on equifinal meaning (Donnellon, Gray & Bougon, 1986), agreeing about what action to take despite their disagreement over why they may be doing so. This occurred in healthcare teams where interactants faced with multiple, conflicting logics used pragmatic collaboration to accomplish their work (Reay & Hinings, 2009). In some cases, such as patenting at the science-commerce boundary (Murray, 2010: 346), organizations or fields

intentionally strive to enkindle such differentiation and maintain it “in productive tension” to foster creativity and innovation. Maintaining frame plurality can also arise through bridging (Benford & Snow, 2000; Purdy & Gray, 2009) which allows interactants to straddle multiple frames by decoupling practices from espoused meanings and retaining their alignment with other frames in order to gain resources and legitimacy. This mechanism occurs in boundary organizations that preserve each world’s integrity of meaning while building a bridge between them (O’Mahoney & Bechky, 2008). Maintaining frame plurality results from ambiguity about meaning, supporting multiple significations when no pressure exists to align frames within a field or when such pressure is successfully resisted.

In sum, different combinations of the framing microprocesses we introduced generate the four generic patterns of institutionalization (Patterns A to D) and eight mechanisms of institutional stasis or change captured in Table 1. However, as we explain below, the activation of mechanisms of stasis or change is influenced by the interactants’ framing of the legitimation and domination processes at work within a field.

### **MAPPING MECHANISMS BY INTERACTANTS’ FRAMING OF FIELD CONDITIONS**

As we have shown, interactional framing clearly involves the microprocesses of signification. However, a structurationist lens emphasizes that processes of legitimation and domination are also integral to how the framing of meaning instantiates institutions (Poole et al., 1985). As Giddens (1979: 105-106) argues: “If signification is fundamentally structured in and through language, language at the same time expresses aspects of domination; and the codes that are involved in signification have normative force.” Consequently, creating institutional structures involves “doing legitimacy” (Barley, 2008: 506) and enacting power. In any given interaction, whether interactants take steps to maintain or change a field will be influenced by the legitimation norms and level of domination they perceive to exist within it. Thus, contexts are not merely

“taken-for-granted” givens but also depend on how interactants’ frame them. A similar argument is made in social movement theory where political opportunity structures are not “objectively given” but rather are “defined, interpreted and socially constructed” field circumstances that shape activists’ decisions about initiating movement activities (Campbell, 2005: 49).

In weighing whether they can maintain or change the legitimacy standards in a field, interactants are either enabled or constrained by the rules and roles of the extant normative order instantiated in their interactions. Adopting a new frame challenging the extant legitimation norms requires the introduction of new bases for evaluating the legitimacy of actions associated with that frame (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). It also involves judgments about the types of power within a field that might facilitate or impede the frame change. These judgments acknowledge that interactants and actions “are embedded in situationalized arrangements of power and resources” (Clemens, 1996: 226) that influence interactants’ perceptions of which situations appear possible and impossible to change. Power in this formulation is relational (Lawrence, 2008), emanates from organized systems of practice and can be perceived by interactants as either systemic or episodic (Clegg, 1989; Lawrence, Winn and Jennings, 2001). Systemic power is often taken-for-granted. It is characterized by domination that is largely invisible, and exercised through ongoing rules and sanctions that privilege certain groups while concealing their role as beneficiaries. On the other hand, episodic power is less entrenched and stratified and affords interactants more room to maneuver. When interactants perceive a field as characterized by episodic power, they feel less constrained by rules and taken-for granted assumptions, which allows them to imagine and enact alternative frames with less fear of reprisal.

In Table 2, we present a matrix that illustrates how the patterns of signification (framing microprocesses) we identified earlier are related to processes of legitimation and domination within fields. The four patterns in Table 1 are linked to interactants’ perceptions of power as



either systemic or episodic and whether they seek to maintain or change legitimation norms. Each pattern represents a different orientation toward structuring the field: revolution, evolution, status quo and power sharing (see Patterns A through D in Table 2), and activates one or more mechanisms that serve to instantiate norms and power through interactive framing. We describe framing processes associated with these orientations using the terms ‘interactants 1 and 2’ for analytical simplicity noting that, in actual encounters, there may be more than two interactants and that interactants can refer to individuals, groups, organizations, fields or even nation states.

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Insert Table 2  
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Pattern A represents a *revolutionary* orientation, where the focal interactant perceives systemic power but seeks to change legitimation norms. However, the other interactant’s power and stance toward legitimation in the field will shape which mechanisms interactant 1 is likely to invoke. For example, if interactant 2 is relatively more powerful than interactant 1, the latter may be limited to leveraging normative and rhetorical power from outside the field (e.g., by *importing a master frame*) in order to build their own power to change the legitimation norms because s/he will not have enough clout to engage in either *externally-induced* or *internal reframing*. Settings perceived to have systemic power require less powerful interactants to grapple with well-trenched powerful elites (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006). Alternately, the powerful seeking to change legitimation norms may leverage externally-induced reframing or initiate internal reframing to sustain their dominant positions. While parties may share interpretations of the opportunity structures, they may not be able to utilize the same mechanisms of maintenance or change because of differences in power. Thus, the types of mechanisms that are likely to be invoked will depend on the relative power among interactants.

Pattern B represents an orientation that preserves the *status quo*, where interactant 1 perceives a systemic power configuration and envisions no changes to the extant legitimation norms. If interactant 2 is more powerful, the former may invoke *institutional distancing* to preserve his or her extant frame instead of fully agreeing to maintain the superseding frame of interactant 2. This mechanism may also be activated when interactant 1 anticipates that revolutionary mechanisms (such as in Pattern A) might yield even less advantageous institutional arrangements. Conversely, if interactant 2 is less powerful, interactant 1 may be able to *maintain the dominant frame* without the need to distance. In both these cases, little variation in interpretations occurs and few laminations develop, resulting in persistence of extant frames. The types of mechanisms that are likely to be invoked would again depend on the relative power among interactants and degree of adherence to norms.

Pattern C represents an *evolutionary* orientation; that is, interactant 1 perceives episodic power within the field and seeks to change legitimation norms, making it fluid enough to permit variations in framing through keyings. Because of the relatively equal power distribution, when interactant 1 offers a keying, interactant 2 has sufficient power to resist the keying proposed by interactant 1, but is not able to exclusively replace the original keying with his/her own keying. Since power is distributed, change depends on both interactants. This creates the possibility of negotiations resulting in a *merged frame* that collapses the two distinctive extant frames into an overarching new frame. However, if one or both interactants are unwilling to shift their frames, change can only happen incrementally through *situated improvising* as interactants revise their frames through additional keyings. Through trial and error, they may “build a variety of ambiguous frames, investing little in any of them, since it is not yet clear which coalition or set of rules will organize the arena” (Armstrong, 2005: 167). This approach is more likely to occur when interactants perceive a context to be institutionally complex, that is, characterized by multiple

frames, structural fragmentation, and moderate centralization (Greenwood et al., 2011) and consequently, difficult to change. Thus, which of the two evolutionary mechanisms will be invoked depends more on the interactants' stances towards change than on their power differentials.

Finally, Pattern D represents an orientation of *sharing power*, where interactant 1 perceives episodic power and desires to maintain the extant legitimation norms. However, although interactant 2 also wants to maintain the extant norms, his/her interpretation of them is different, leading to ongoing tensions. Given that power is perceived to be relatively equal, each party seeks to preserve its own autonomy and distinctive frame but also needs to accept the other side's distinctive frame as legitimate. They may agree to disagree and mutually coexist with differing interpretations regarding the best approach (Murray, 2010). This orientation creates the conditions for *maintaining frame plurality*, which is likely to occur in contexts that permit a heterodoxy of interpretations, identities and practices (Durand & Szostak-Tapon, 2010; Kraatz & Block, 2008). As power is dispersed, no dominant interactant is able to force a settlement around a single set of legitimating norms and neither interactant wants to give up its frame.

In sum, a structural take on interactional framing reveals how intersubjective meaning construction (signification) is inextricably intertwined with processes of legitimation and domination instantiated in interactions. Interactants' perceptions of these processes within the field may constrain the range of mechanisms of change or maintenance that may be activated.

## **DISCUSSION**

Interpretive and political phenomena in specific contexts ground and sustain our institutions and practices. Their study is essential to understanding the dynamics of social life. While scholars have asserted that bottom up processes are central to the construction of institutions and macro-level logics (Barley, 2008; Powell & Colyvas 2008), theorizing about how these micro-

processes induce institutionalization or deinstitutionalization in fields has been scant. Limited attention to micro-social concerns has prevented a clear articulation of how micro dynamics concatenate to yield an institutionalized social order. The resultant emphasis on top-down processes has decoupled institutions from their moorings in social interaction (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) and also obscured the recursive relation between interactions and institutions.

### **Contributions and Implications**

The theory of interactive framing we have offered connects local interactions and the macro social order, recursively linking communicative interactions to institutionalization. Below we describe our three contributions, connect them to current theoretical debates, and suggest new research avenues related to each.

**Interactional Framing Processes, Amplification and the Scaling up of Meaning.** First, we drew on concepts of framing and interaction rituals (Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1974) to ground our analysis of the microprocesses at the level of communicative interactions. We noted that micro-level framings can amplify with little contest or be revised through keying, frame breaks and ambiguity, resulting in varying degrees of solidarity and conflict within a field as stacks of frames – laminations – build up. We also identified three processes of amplification (scope, regularity/frequency, and emotional intensification) that enable micro-level interactions to extend to larger groups and become institutionalized at different levels. While others have explained how macro-social orders such as logics shape everyday interactions, our approach explains the origins of such logics in framing interactions and how they may attain the durability of robust “cultural registers” (Weber, 2005). For example, an environmental or “green” logic highlighting connections between humans and the natural environment has gained increasing traction, at least since the Earth Day in 1970 (Frank, Hironaka & Schofer, 2000). While it is debatable whether a green

logic deserves to be accorded the status of an institutional logic (Thornton et al., 2012), our approach suggests how its emergence can be studied as a bottom up process, from its early framing by conservationists (e.g., in *Silent Spring*), to periods of bitter contest (e.g., among environmentalists and corporations and between climate change proponents and skeptics), to the birth of new industries such as recycling and solar energy, to its recent incarnation as corporate sustainability. Mapping this trajectory of framing processes through pitched battles to growing acceptance is necessary to explain how some lower order interactions generate higher level consequences, and the pathways that enable some ideas to crystallize into full-fledged institutions. Similar trajectories are found in globalization studies, in which the local-to-global path – accretion of local practices into a global collage – may explain more than the global-to-local path or diffusion of universalized models (Drori, Höllerer & Walgenbach, 2014). It is worth examining how some practices stay localized, such as a novel practice in a multinational’s subsidiary, while others amplify to become canonized company policy. Scholars can also explore how local interactions among corporations and their stakeholders may generate different keyings among different social audiences that may accrete to shape organizational reputations or status differently among these groups (Carter & Deephouse, 1999; Mishina, Block & Mannor, 2012). Future studies can examine the pace, trajectory, depth and durability of an idea or practice, such as women’s employment rights, as part of a nested and layered set of interactions.

**Mechanisms of Institutionalization and their Micro-Foundations.** Our second contribution was to identify the specific interactional framing processes that comprise and differentiate key mechanisms of institutional change and maintenance at the organization, field and societal levels. Identifying the microprocesses can sharpen the distinctions among these mechanisms. For example, while scholars have differentiated between diffusion and institutionalization (Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011), contrasting their distinctive micro processes adds explanatory power. Scope

tends to underpin diffusion – how micro-level interactional frames spread or get increasingly adopted by others – whereas regularity and emotional intensification tend to underpin institutionalization – how frames stick and become naturalized through frequent reproduction of behavior in a social system. Similarly, local rekeying, frame breaks and ambiguity offer a micro-level explanation of how practices vary as they diffuse triggered by various kinds of technical, cultural and political “misfits” between diffusing practices and adopters (Ansari, Fiss & Zajac, 2010).

The eight mechanisms we investigated illustrate several combinations of the interactive framing processes. For example, when rekeyings create a variation in framing, these may get lost in translation as described in Scandinavian institutionalism (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), be accepted as a lamination, or encounter resistance from status quo advocates leading to frame conflict. Consequently, the framing perspective highlights that multiple and competing frames may be in play simultaneously within a field. This helps to differentiate from existing models of institutional change (e.g., Rao & Kenney, 2008) that view change as a settlement process and presuppose resolution of differing meanings, even if temporarily. Our model explains how local changes in collective meaning can scale up to create important field level consequences such as the adoption of new practices (Kennedy & Fiss, 2009), categories (Rojas, 2010) and valuation criteria (Khair & Wadwani, 2010), how these outcomes may be impeded if powerful competing frames arise, and how multiple meanings – conflictual or not – may persist indefinitely at the meso or macro levels (Murray, 2010; Purdy & Gray, 2009) and keep the field in a state of flux.

Our approach may also offer purchase in explaining more complex mechanisms of institutional change such as the unexpected discontinuities or self-organizing processes associated with complexity theory and the challenges of coping with conflicting prescriptions of different institutional logics (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2011). For example, the microprocesses can inform processes of scaling up of social innovations (Westley et al., 2014). If complexity can be seen as

“culturally and historically differentiated institutional outcomes” (Tilly, 2006: 423) arising from different interactional processes; observing these processes can reveal the range of shared interpretations in institutional fields, the range of different interpretations a field can tolerate and still remain a field, more complex patterns of institutional development such as self-organizing and cascading (Ansari et al., 2013), or other seemingly discontinuous paths such as tipping points. The evolution and (de) institutionalization of meaning is also associated with a wide range of temporal dynamics (Lawrence et al., 2001). A small perturbation may ramp up to change an entire system in some cases while in others multiple perturbations may fail to spark change. NGOs and legislators in Bangladesh had repeatedly launched safety campaigns to make companies more responsible for safer conditions in the workplace. Yet, it took the deaths of over a thousand workers in the collapse of the building Rana Plaza to incite sufficient emotions and expand the scope of the issue to mobilize international action by global retailers to improve safety standards.

Future studies can examine how amplification processes such as emotional intensification lead institutions to remain impervious or yield to change efforts and whether frames become more or less malleable at different analytical levels. As we move up levels, the multiple, diverse and distributed sources of theorization may lead to increasing diversity and complexity in the field. This may increase the potential for conflict and forestall the construction of collective interpretations. Alternately, if interactions become increasingly routinized or taken for granted at higher levels, this may alleviate “ontological anxiety” (Giddens, 1979) and dampen conflict. A framing perspective explains how institutional complexity empowers interactants to create, blend, or segregate different frames or constrains the construction of collective interpretations.

While interactional framing may elicit an extensive array of meanings, the normalizing influence of extant legitimation norms and power relations in a field limit the degree of polymorphism in a field. Future studies can examine the conditions under which frames become

more or less coherent, all-encompassing and compelling at different analytical levels as well as interactional factors that enable or prevent conflicted fields from adopting a dominant frame. For practitioners, greater attention to when and why deviations from intended meanings occur and how to promote reframing (Gray, 2007) and brokering (Hoffman, 2011) would be valuable.

**Institutional Mechanisms and the Bidirectionality of Frames and Framing.** Our third contribution is to infuse an interactional framing perspective with insights from structuration theory to show how processes of domination and legitimation within a field inform interpretation (signification). While the bulk of our theorization elucidates bottom-up processes, we also emphasize the bi-directionality of framing – producing frames which then condition future framing processes. Our model shows how framing is top down and bottom up, encompassing both the pre-situational and the situationally-generated. Communication “produces and reproduces (i.e., legitimates) a particular structure of power relations (i.e., system of interests) to the arbitrary exclusion of other possible configurations of interest” (Deetz & Mumby, 1990: 42). As studies on power and institutional work (Martí & Fernández, 2013; Rojas, 2010), and discursive institutional entrepreneurship (Rojas, 2010) have emphasized, framings are always embedded in power relations that authorize certain actors and perspectives and neglect or exclude others (Meyer & Höllerer, 2010). We extend this work by showing how different perceptions of power relations and varying stances toward the legitimacy of field norms influence the mechanisms available to actors for challenging, initiating, and/or enforcing institutional change.

Future studies of meaning-making can examine how interactants’ framing may enable or constrain their latitude and transform their power relationships. Transnational examples include multi-party negotiations during the Kyoto Protocol that redefined legitimate environmental practices, authorized new compliance regimes, and possibly shifted structures of domination globally. However, power arrangements may also stifle social change. Homeboy Industries, a US



non-profit, has been highly successful at reforming young gang members and felons through its innovative program, but extant power structures have impeded public juvenile justice systems from adopting Homeboys' innovations. Offenders are framed as a "throwaway population" that needs to be walled off from society, and reducing prison populations flies in the face of "the interests of for-profit prison companies" (Ross, 2014: 3) that benefit from large prisoner volumes. Consequently, a beneficial social innovation is unable to scale up to solve a major social problem.

Our framework offers practical value in such situations by offering alternate mechanisms that interactants can use to influence fields. Although our matrix can only capture the mechanisms available to an actor in a given moment, fields and actors' perceptions of them are dynamic. As interactants revise their assessments of the field, other mechanisms within the same or other quadrants may become available. For example, actors may initially resist the imposition of external frames (through institutional distancing) to shield themselves from unwanted frame changes, but may eventually succumb to external pressure and accept externally induced reframing instead. Similarly, actors, such as those promoting Homeboys, who attempt to change institutional norms through internal reframing, may need to import a master frame to garner greater resources if their initial efforts to introduce wider change fail to amplify sufficiently. Therefore, the longitudinal application of our framework can provide both theoretical insights and pragmatic advice about institutional change dynamics.

Frame analysis infused with structuration can also "add missing elements of power" to the analysis of social phenomena "by considering which voices have the standing to be heard in cross-level discourses and which do not" (Creed, Langstraat & Scully, 2002). Scholars and practitioners alike could explore how changing domination modes might enable power redistribution within a field and movement on urgent transnational problems such as climate change, extreme

poverty and financial instability. This calls for research on identifying mechanisms through which actors dispute or preserve institutionalized meaning and transform social inequities.

### **Bridging Push and Pull Approaches**

Most research on institutional change explains how macro-orders are “pulled down” and instantiated in local practices, situating macro-orders inside organizations and individuals (Powell & Colyvas, 2008) while the few bottom-up approaches adopt a “built-up” focus, in which micro-level interactions aggregate over time to generate, disrupt or sustain macro social orders. Our theory combines a pull down approach with a built up explanation of how collective interpretations become institutionalized or change. Below we discuss how our approach complements these two perspectives by connecting the immediate with the distanced (Haslett, 2012) and linking what have remained “separate sides of the mountain” (Lammers, 2011: 55).

**Complementing Pull down Perspectives.** An increasingly influential pull down approach – institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012) – explains how cultural rules and exogenous categories of meaning (e.g., “the market,” “the family,” “the state”) account for practice variation at the meso and micro levels (Lounsbury, 2007; McPherson & Sauder, 2013). However, as we have already noted, it is less comprehensive about how bottom-up interactional processes may also challenge extant logics or lead to the emergence of new ones. Our framework does not assume that actors must draw upon externally available institutional “templates” such as logics (Lounsbury, 2007) and archetypes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996), but also does not preclude this possibility. More importantly, however, it allows that new collective meanings can emerge from social interactions – the “beating heart of institutions” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006: 215). Our perspective connects logics with more active struggles over meaning

on the ground. By making microprocesses such as local keyings explicit, it provides a way to determine if meaning is emerging, stable or evolving and if contenders for new logics are imminent or established logics are waning in use.

**Complementing Built up Perspectives.** Built up perspectives, such as institutional entrepreneurship and work (DiMaggio, 1988; Lawrence, Leca & Zilber, 2013), and organizational communication (e.g., Boden, 1994), focus on the intentional behaviors of agents engaged in the creation or revision of an institution. While these enrich our understanding of institutional change and practice heterogeneity, we lack an understanding of why some types of work or communication become “institutional” and transcend particular settings, interactants and organizations (Lammers & Barbour, 2006) – leading to the creation, disruption or maintenance of institutions– while other types remain localized. Also, the explicit focus on purposeful actors risks a possible interpretation of this body of work “as advocacy for a kind of methodological individualism” as against “methodological groupism,” where the focus is social interactions (Kaghan & Lounsbury, 2011: 75). Our theory recognizes that shifts in collective meanings may result from both intentional and uncalculated efforts. While some studies in this camp have addressed how institutional change may originate in the everyday practices of individuals responding to local problems (e.g., Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007; Smets et al., 2012), we offer a finer-grained account by attributing such changes to misinterpretations in practitioners’ framing that produce laminations and amplify over time.

Social movement theory has also identified theoretical mechanisms for explaining bottom up change (Davis et al., 2008). While enhancing our understanding of contention and change, many studies tend to be “movement-centric” in their focus (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Walder, 2009), taking broader “institutional and cultural factors as background conditions rather than as important explanatory factors” (de Bakker et al., 2013: 580). While scholars have explained

“movement-like” processes within organizations (Kellogg, 2012), we complement this perspective by connecting “social domains and action repertoires” (de Bakker et al., 2013: 580). Framing processes operate recursively – both as the “background structure of shared reality on the one hand and as tools for strategic and creative behaviour on the other” (Diehl & McFarland, 2010: 1719). While we know more about the strategic use of frames for persuading people to act, we know less about the interactional processes through which new meanings emerge, movement targets get (re) defined and spillovers among movements occur (Calhoun, 2012).

Micro-strands of sociological theory, such as sensemaking, communication and decision-making approaches explain action formation at the individual and organizational levels (Thornton et al., 2012). However, these approaches lack an explicit account of the embeddedness of social interactions in social space and time, how some meanings gain ascendance over others (Heimer, 1999; Lammers, 2011; Weber & Glynn, 2006), or how extant frame repertoires fuel the interaction, allowing it to scale up and become reified as widely shared collective interpretations with the potential to become overarching logics. Our interactive approach extends management and organizational research where approaches to framing typically tend to be either cognitive (e.g., Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Kennedy & Fiss, 2009) or more strategic in nature (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000). Through an interactive approach, we have emphasized the recursive aspects of institutionalization that are under-theorized in extant work using either top-down or bottom up approaches. Using an interactive framing perspective to focus on cycles of framing, action and reframing offers distinct advantages because it can shed light on how social orders are historically sustained or disrupted, and how social interactions in various situations may ratchet up to produce macro-social outcomes that are only sustained and legitimized if they continue to be

reenacted at the micro level (a key point often lost in the other approaches). Going forward, research on the microprocesses of framing can benefit from a number of methodological approaches.

### **Methodological Issues and Limitations**

These opportunities for further macro- and micro-level research raise a number of methodological challenges. Frame analysis in pull-down theorizing can benefit from methodological advances in semantic-network analyses that focus on the associational patterns between words and underlying concepts (Cornelissen, Mantere & Vaara, 2014). Meaning construction (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014) in built up theorizing can benefit from ethnographies and netnographies (participation in online interactions) to shed light on the interpretive processes of meaning construction. Conversation, discourse and interaction analyses can also reveal these dynamics (DeWulf & Bouwen, 2012). Micro-discourse analysis allows for “holistic” study of the semantics and syntax of texts that avoids selected passages being viewed in isolation (Johnston, 1995). Also, because shifts in collective meanings may result from both intentional and uncalculated efforts and actors may not always “mean what they say” (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006), creative methodologies will be required to infer meanings from observed frames. Novel methodologies in “social physics” based on big data (such as mobile phone calls and text messaging logs) may also be useful because they can allow for tracking and analyzing of amplification processes in real time and can contribute to a computational theory of collective interpretations (Pentland, 2013). Finally, multi-level studies can draw on set-theoretic methods such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to help identify patterns in interpretations or practices. These are particularly suitable for situations where causality between micro-interactions and macro-level influence is difficult to examine through standard statistical methods (Fiss, 2011; Greckhamer et al., 2008).

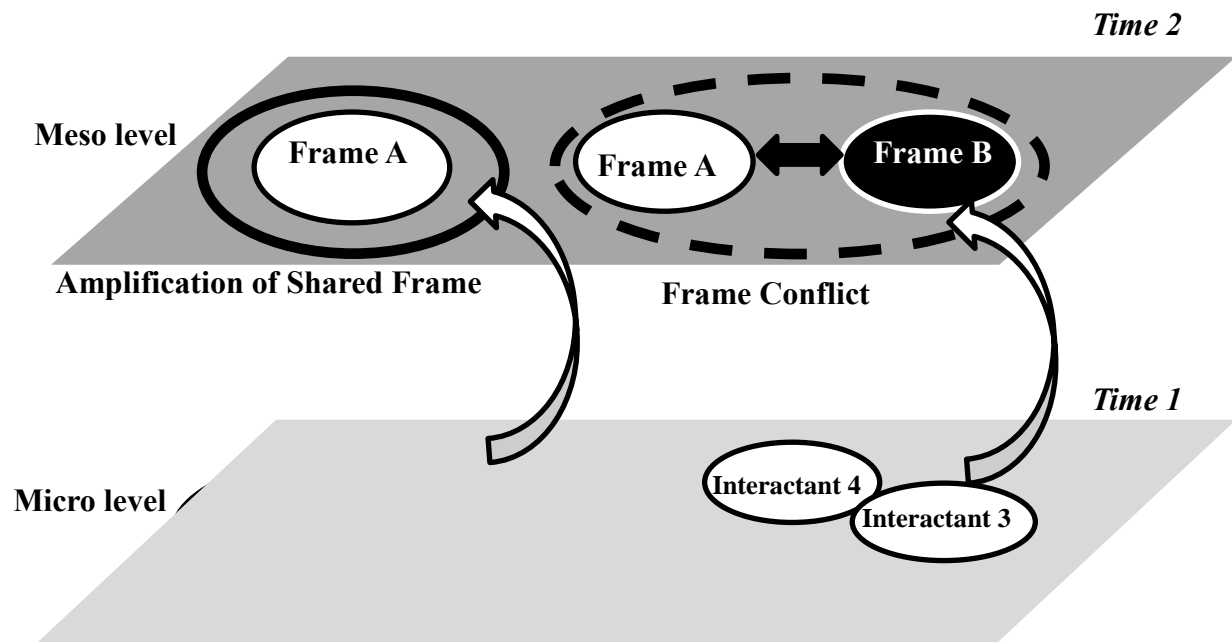
Our theory creates rich opportunities for scholars studying diverse topics to use a variety of methods to capture framing and structural dynamics across multiple levels of analysis.

Despite its promise for connecting pull down with built up perspectives, a framing perspective has limitations. One critique is that framing doesn't address the role of materiality in interpretation (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). Materiality encompasses physical artifacts, embodied actions and physiological responses (Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). Both frames and power may be moored in material circumstances and artifacts that privilege particular interpretations and framers over others (Cornelissen et al., 2014). A second challenge might be levied by poststructuralists who view power as more hegemonic and insidious in its ability to control framing (Fairclough, 1992) than interactionist views allow. Third, while we stress that framing is an iterative and recursive process, our matrix cannot fully capture this dynamism. Longitudinal work that simultaneously tracks actors' framing of their interactions and of their perceptions of how the context shifts over time is needed to answer some of the questions we have posed. For example, if a low power actor who perceives systemic power is operating in a field can successfully import a master frame, this may shift the balance of power within the field to episodic and eventually lead to a merged frame being adopted by all interactants. Tracking such shifts in each interactants' perceptions of field conditions and the concomitant invocation of different mechanisms over time goes beyond the scope of this paper, but would further our understanding of how complex institutionalization processes evolve.

An interactional framing perspective holds promise for understanding how institutionalized meaning is moored in micro social interactions. Institutional change and maintenance can be understood as intersubjectively and recursively constructed through a structurationist cycle of framing, action, and reframing over time in the face of field-level influences. Our paper offers a theoretically robust explanation of how interactional frames evolve and amplify to change, maintain

or erode institutions, and how institutionalized frames recursively influence micro framing processes. It enables moving across levels of analysis – from micro interactions to institutionalized accounts and back again – and collapses the implied dichotomies between top down and bottom up approaches. Our theorizing supports exploration of how collective meanings are challenged or sustained and the circumstances under which such attempts succeed or fail. We hope our work will spawn further conceptual and empirical analyses to understand how institutions penetrate social interactions but are also constructed, maintained and modified through them.

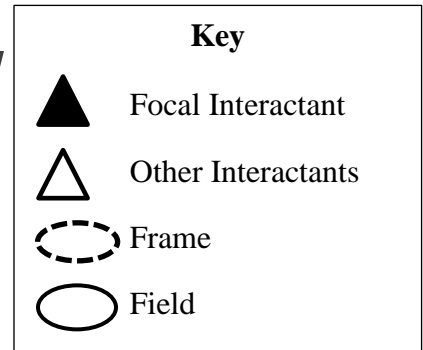
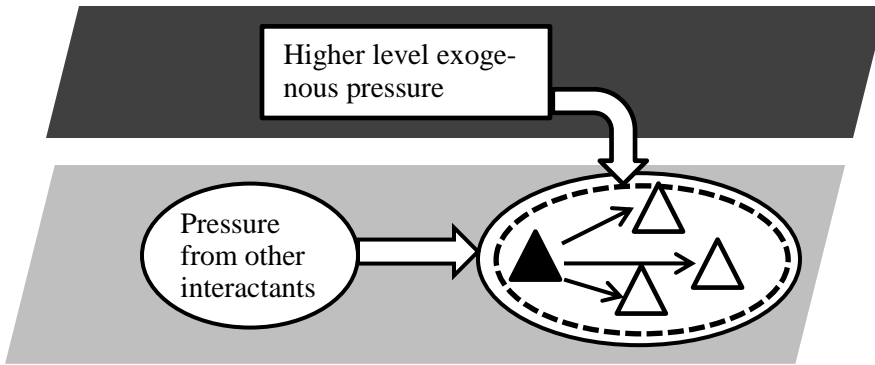
**FIGURE 1**  
**Frame Amplification Yielding Shared Frames or Frame Conflict**



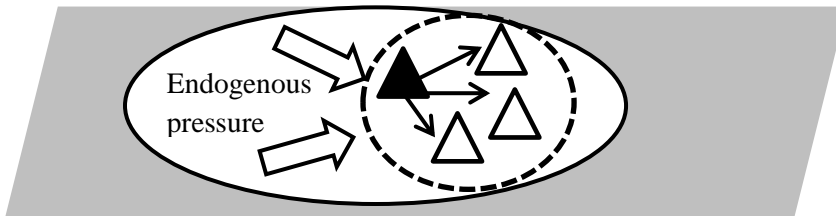


**FIGURE 2**  
**Framing Mechanisms**

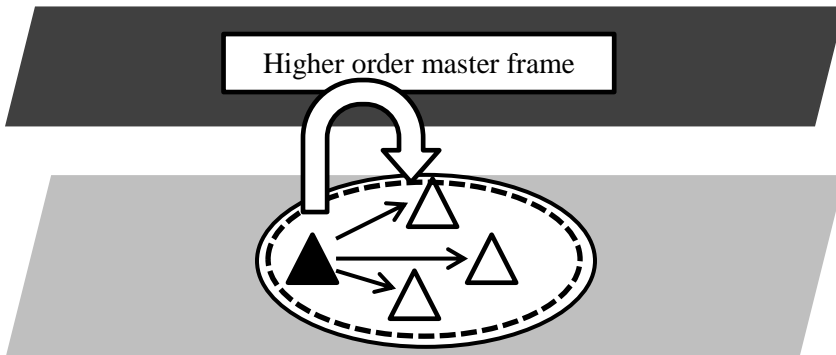
**a. Externally-Induced Reframing (Frame break)**



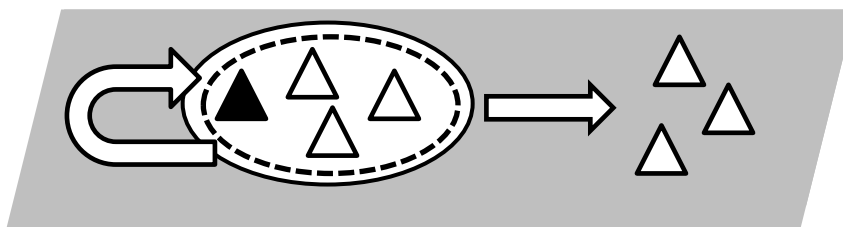
**b. Internally-Induced Reframing (Frame break)**



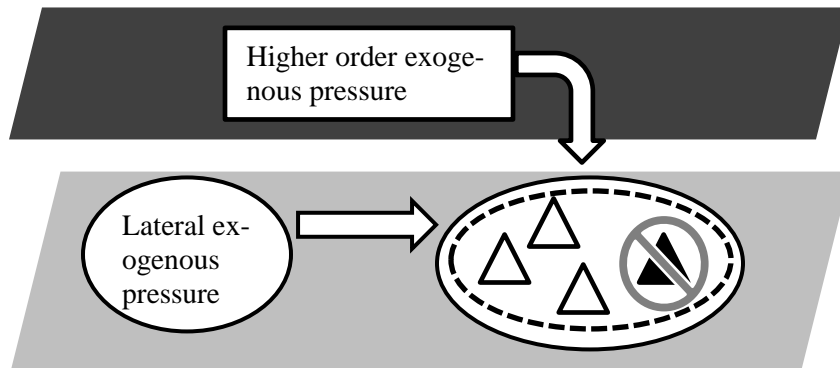
**c. Importing a Master Frame (Frame break)**



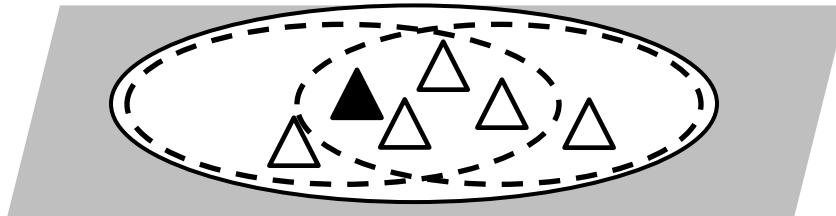
**d. Maintaining Frame Dominance (No lamination)**



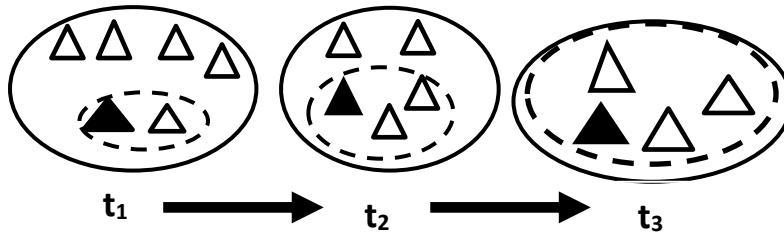
**e. Institutional Distancing (No Lamination)**



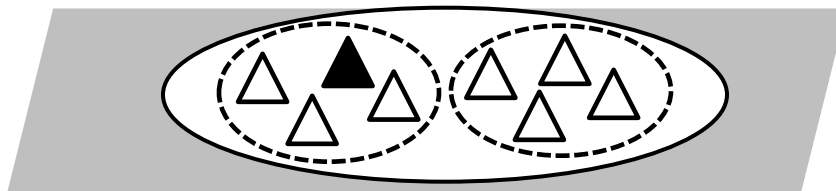
**f. Merging Frames (Keying)**



**g. Situated Improvising (Keying)**



**h. Maintaining Frame Plurality (Ambiguity)**



**TABLE 1**  
**Patterns of Microprocesses with Related Institutional Mechanisms**

Pattern	Primary Type of Lamination	Amplification Processes			Mechanism	Definition
		Scope	Regularity/Frequency	Emotional Intensity		
A	Frame break	Increases for new frame	Increases for new frame	Increases for new frame	Externally-Induced Reframing	Focal interactant promotes new frame imposed on focal field
		No change	Increases for new frame	Decreases for existing frame; Increases for new frame	Internal Reframing	Focal interactant promotes revising frame of focal field
		Increases for new frame	Increases for new frame	Decreases for existing frame; Increases for new frame	Importing a Master Frame	Focal interactant promotes higher order frame in focal field
B	None	No change	Increases for existing frame	Increases for existing frame	Maintaining Frame Dominance	Focal interactant reinforces existing frame of focal field
		No change	Increases for existing frame	Increases for existing frame	Institutional Distancing	Focal interactant insulates itself from existing frame of focal field
C	Keying	Increases for merged frame	Increases for merged frame	Increases for merged frame	Merging Frames	Focal interactant participates in constructing a new frame in the focal field from existing ones
		Increases for new frame	Increases for new frame	No change	Situated Improvising	Focal interactant gradually creates new frame in the focal field

D	Ambiguity	Increases for existing frames	Increases for existing frames	May increase or decrease for existing frames	Maintaining Frame Plurality	Focal interactant supports co-existence of frames in the focal field
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**TABLE 2**  
**Structuration Processes and Institutional Mechanisms**

		<b>Domination: Perception of power relations</b>	
		<b>SYSTEMIC</b>	<b>EPISODIC</b>
<b>Legitimation: Stance toward field norms</b>	<b>CHANGE</b>	<p align="center"><i><b>Pattern A – Revolution</b></i></p> <p>Externally-induced reframing  <i>Focal interactant promotes new frame imposed on focal field</i></p> <p>Internal reframing  <i>Focal interactant promotes revising frame of focal field</i></p> <p>Importing a master frame  <i>Focal interactant promotes higher order frame in focal field</i></p>	<p align="center"><i><b>Pattern C – Evolution</b></i></p> <p>Merging frames  <i>Focal interactant participates in constructing a new frame in the focal field from existing ones</i></p> <p>Situated improvising  <i>Focal interactant gradually creates new frame in the focal field</i></p>
	<b>MAINTAIN</b>	<p align="center"><i><b>Pattern B – Status Quo</b></i></p> <p>Maintaining frame dominance  <i>Focal interactant reinforces existing frame for focal field</i></p> <p>Institutional distancing  <i>Focal interactant insulates itself from existing frame of focal field</i></p>	<p align="center"><i><b>Pattern D – Power Sharing</b></i></p> <p>Maintaining frame plurality  <i>Focal interactant supports co-existence of multiple frames in the focal field</i></p>

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