SWIMMING IN A SEA OF SHAME:

INCORPORATING EMOTION INTO EXPLANATIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL REPRODUCTION AND CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

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We theorize the role of shame in institutional processes, arguing that shame is a form of systemic power and shaming is a form of episodic power. We introduce the notion of institutional communities, the emotion-fraught social microcosms where institutional norms and beliefs are made knowable and concretized. We argue that the ubiquitous power of shame and shaming are grounded in social relations within institutional communities. Both shame and shaming rely on the personal shame response, an internalized self-policing mechanism rooted in a person’s capacity for shame. We suggest that the human imperative to preserve valued social relations underpins self-policing and drives ongoing efforts to avoid shame by complying with norms, and that this continuous anticipation and avoidance of shame fosters conformity to dominant institutional arrangements. Within institutional communities, deviance can trigger the purposive use of episodic shaming to suppress alternative ways of thinking and being. However, we argue that shaming can backfire, causing reactions to the imposition of institutional orthodoxies, including resistance that can result in institutional disruption and change.
Twenty-one years ago, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) celebrated the cognitive turn in new institutionalism, a turn that came at the expense of affective dimensions of institutions. But growing interest in emotions in many areas of organizational life (e.g. Barsade, Brief, & Spataro, 2003; Collins, 1988; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; Hochschild, 1983) has caused some to advocate for their renewed consideration in institutional research (Voronov & Vince, 2012), arguing that emotions should be viewed “as the crucial link between micro and macro levels of social reality” (Turner & Stets, 2005a:1). Recently, a small number of institutional scholars have begun to address this gap. Scott (2007), for example, has contended that emotions may operate across the standard institutional “pillars,” interacting with regulative, normative, and cognitive processes. Voronov and Vince (2012) have argued that considering the dynamics of emotional commitment adds nuance to explanations of institutional stability and change. Creed, DeJordy, and Lok (2010) have shown people experience institutional contradictions both cognitively and emotionally. Thus institutional scholars are beginning to take seriously the view that institutions are inhabited by people who bring their whole selves – heart, mind, and body – to the experience and enactment of institutions (Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville, & Scully, 2010; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Lok, 2010).

Here we offer a model that complements and extends recent work by linking a discrete emotion, shame, to institutional inhabitants’ social relations and participation in institutional processes of reproduction and disruption. By shame, we mean negative self-evaluations based on anticipated or actual depreciation by others due to a failure to meet standards of behavior, particularly by doing something one should not do (Scheff, 1990; Sheikh & Janoff-Bulman, 2010; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2004; Turner & Stets, 2005a). We contribute to the literature in several ways. Our incorporation of the emotion of shame into
institutional processes highlights the role and importance of what we are calling institutional communities, the emotion-fraught social microcosms where institutions are made knowable, as sites ripe for exploration. Our argument also points beyond the particular importance of shame to questions of how emotions are implicated in the ways people make sense of institutional prescriptions and participate in institutional processes. In addition, by showing how shame operates we offer institutionalism one way, rooted in emotional-laden intersubjective processes, of conceptualizing disciplinary power in institutional theory (Cooper, Ezzamel, & Willmott, 2008; Lawrence, 2008). Further, through the exemplar of shame, we suggest how attending to other social emotions – emotions that pertain to the state of the social relations (Sayer, 2005) that hold institutional communities together – offers one way of theorizing both power in institutions and opportunities for resistance and change. We propose that two implications of institutional pluralism are, first, that managing memberships in and emotional bonds to potentially competing institutional communities is an important activity within institutions, and second, that multiple memberships can be understood as alternative platforms for such work.

Below, we begin by reviewing arguments that current cognitive explanations limit our understanding of institutional processes due to the absence of emotions, and we briefly present current views on the intertwined nature of emotions and cognitions. With this context established, we then present our theory in two steps. First, by expanding on arguments that institutions are knowable only through social relations (Friedland & Alford, 1991), we develop the concept of institutional communities. Our conceptualization of institutional communities provides an entree for theorizing the often overlooked but central role of emotions in institutional processes. Second, we present our core argument using a discrete emotion, shame, theorizing its particular role in processes of institutional reproduction. Shame is associated with self-
evaluations based on one’s perceptions of what others think, that is, whether others see one as living and acting in ways that are congruent with or antagonistic to shared norms and the preservation of valued social bonds (Leary, 2000; Scheff, 1990, 2000; Tracy & Robins, 2004). Members’ ongoing anticipation and avoidance of shame are key to preserving valued social bonds (Scheff, 2000, 2005). We argue that such self-regulation (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007) within institutional communities is the mechanism that animates shame as a form of systemic power. We then theorize shaming as a related exercise of power, deployed to suppress transgressive behavior. Further, while shaming can work to restore normative conformity, thereby contributing to institutional reproduction, it also can backfire in some cases when sensemaking leads to rejection of norms or to the reevaluation of community norms and bonds. Thus, shame can be implicated in both institutional reproduction and change.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

An Exclusively Cognitive Perspective

In the past several decades institutional theory has reflected a dominantly cognitive point of view (c.f. DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). With its shift from the “normative to a cognitive approach to action” (1991:19), the cognitive turn emphasized the importance of the practical rationality seen in the premises, rule-following, and cultural routines characteristic of institutional processes. From this perspective, institutions rely on the presence of shared cognitions to function, that is, on socially-embedded material practices and symbolic constructions that define what has meaning and what actions are possible (Zucker, 1977) for individuals inhabiting the institutional milieu. Moreover, Friedland and Alford (1991:251), emphasizing the cognitive underpinnings of institutions, argued that “institutions set the limits on the very nature of rationality,” while providing the individual “with vocabularies of motivation
and with a sense of self.” Indicative of the dominant cognitive perspective on institutional mechanisms has been the recurring imagery of schemas, scripts, accounts, and rules. Also indicative of this cognitive perspective is that much of the literature on institutionalization processes has emphasized the constitutive and constraining nature of cognitions that reflect shared understandings about the way things are done and what they signify (Zilber, 2002). The cycle of institutional maintenance and reproduction is completed when individuals engage in rule following and enactments, guided purely by tacit or explicit mental schema, taken-for-granted typifications, and habitual, operational routines. Weber and Glynn’s recent effort to integrate sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and institutional theory, depicted in Figure 1, is one exemplar of the viewpoint generated through the cognitive turn (Weber & Glynn, 2006: 1641).

In the same celebrated introduction in which they championed the cognitive turn, DiMaggio and Powell (1991:23) suggested that a “solution to the problem of macro stability requires an integration of the cathectic, affective element of action.” Yet, despite an acknowledgement that emotion is likely a crucial factor in institutional stability, its role was not explicitly addressed in any of the chapters of that anthology or in more recent treatments of organizational institutionalism (e.g. Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008). A purely cognitive perspective has clear, albeit largely neglected, shortcomings. Collins noted the limitations of considering behavior as primarily if not solely “determined cognitively by well-defined verbal ideas” (1981: 991). Such a view offers a picture of social embeddedness and shared meaning making that is nearly devoid of any sense of what is at stake for the people involved; it is devoid of a sense of the motivational vitality that drives human behavior. Instead,
there is an overreliance on verbal ideas such as seen in Friedland and Alford’s (1991:251) claim that institutions provide actors “with vocabularies of motivation and with a sense of self.” Their claim is problematic as the cognitive-rhetorical connotations of “vocabularies” hollows out the emotional component of motivations, reducing them to articulations rather than urgently felt impulses. Behavior is motivated more by feelings than by abstract articulations. More recently, Friedland (2012:12) has noted some of these limitations by stating that “[i]nstitutional life does not operate based solely on a cognitivism, through differentially activated schemas, a taken-for-grantedness.” Rather, he notes, “[i]t demands myriad moments of located passion.” He also suggests that “institutional logics […] likely depend on distinctive emotional registers, on structures of experience to which emotions are integral” (Friedland, Forthcoming: 12).

Friedland’s remarks represent an inchoate but growing shift away from a predominantly cognitive perspective.

**The Emerging Consideration of Emotion**

Recent work attempting to integrate emotion into institutional processes has taken the critique of a cognitive perspective seriously, noting that emotions signal salience; that is, emotions are indicators of what motivates people’s actions (Voronov & Vince, 2012). Moreover, emotions have implications for the nature of the social interactions through which institutions are constructed and reproduced. Voronov and Vince (2012) convincingly argued that this lack of attention to emotion harkens back to a conception of actors as cognitive misers, as merely computational entities, and imperfect ones at that. For them, a cognition-centered view of actors is insufficient because cognitive commitment alone cannot explain when or why persons will work to maintain a given institutional order. Rather, emotion is not only necessary to understand commitment to an institutional order, but also to understand dissatisfaction, and any concomitant
engagement in institutional work for change.

Incorporating emotions into institutional theory offers several advantages while pushing scholars to theorize more deeply on the implications of calling institutions and institutional processes “inhabited” (Scully & Creed, 1997). For instance, incorporating emotion allows us to abandon views of persons as “mere computers” (de Sousa, 1987), helping us to understand the emotional context that gives texture to social life. In other words, emotions cue attention, importance, meaning, and commitment. Weber and Glynn (2006) describe how institutions prime cognition and sensemaking, providing perceptual filters that enable people to extract cues from the stream of phenomena. But it is emotions that alert people to which of the myriad potential cues are important or deserve attention, because emotions are embodied indications about what we care about (Prinz, 2004). Without emotion, the social landscapes that people inhabit and navigate are devoid of landmarks and hopelessly flat (Damasio, 1994:51). As James (1884:190) noted early on, perception without affect is “pale, colourless.” For institutional researchers, the incorporation of emotion gives us an opportunity to round out explanations of “cognitive and volitional performances” by attending to the mind’s “longings, its pleasures and pains” (James, 1884:188). To better realize the theoretical potential of the inhabited institutions perspective (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006), we need to embrace “a more integrated human being whose passions and desires are not reducible to the pursuit of rational interests” (Voronov & Vince, 2012:59).

Outside of institutional theory, organizational and related research reflects the intertwined nature of emotion and cognition in the way individuals experience the world, offering opportunities to recognize a more complete institutional inhabitant. The theoretical and empirical work on emotions offers useful points at which to anchor our exploration of emotions in
institutional processes. For instance, emotions are understood to have objects (e.g., Elfenbein, 2007), meaning that these physiological reactions are always directed at something in particular. As such, emotions are meaningfully connected with things in the world (Barrett, Mesquita, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007; Lindquist & Barrett, 2008), including ourselves and others (Elfenbein, 2007). Emotions that connect people, that help social bonds develop (Tracy & Robins, 2004), are of particular interest for us in our exploration of institutions. These “social emotions” are those that emerge as reactions to our own social standing and the standing of others within social structures (Haidt, 2003; Leary, 2000; Tangney et al., 2007); that is, they necessarily entail self-evaluation (Tracy & Robins, 2004). Social emotions take many forms. Negatively valenced “other-directed” social emotions like contempt, anger, and disgust are responses to others’ violations of the social order (e.g., Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999), while “self-directed” social emotions including guilt, embarrassment, and shame are responses to understanding that it is oneself who has violated the social order (Rozin et al., 1999; Tangney et al., 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2004). Positively valenced social emotions also tie the individual to the evaluation by others. For instance, pride is related to the sense that one is a socially valuable person (Mascolo & Fischer, 1995; Tangney et al., 2007). In effect, both other- and self-directed social emotions provide people with feedback on their standing within the community, enabling reward and punishment. We argue that social emotions affect the ways people make sense of and participate in the interactions that underpin the shared enactment of institutional order.

We focus on a particular social emotion, shame, as the negative self-evaluation based on anticipated or actual depreciation by others and an internal attribution for blame (Tracy & Robins, 2004; Turner & Stets, 2005b) for three reasons. The first pertains to specificity. Scheff (2000) argues that discussing emotions in general relies on rarified abstractions; in contrast, we
are better able to understand specific emotions – shame, fear, grief, contempt, disgust, love, joy – because we are more able to identify differences in their origins, objects, appearances, and trajectories. Second, shame has been singled out as deserving attention for the manner in which it figures in institutional reproduction and maintenance; shame provides “powerful inducements to compliance with prevailing norms” (Scott, 2007: 56). Third, as a principal component of the conscience, shame plays a key role in self-monitoring, repression, and the construction of identity (Scheff, 2000). Consequently, a focus on shame promises a compelling, concrete entrée into the dynamic relational arenas where institutional arrangements are enacted and reproduced: institutional communities.

INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNITIES

Institutions are experienced through social relations. This important theme from Friedland and Alford (1991) invites us to wrestle with the nature of these social relations and how they inspire shared understandings and bring into being systems of meaning, how they are both the muses and midwives of institutions. As they note,

…institutions are symbolic systems which have nonobservable, absolute, transrational referents and observable social relations which concretize them. Through these concrete social relations, individuals and organizations strive to achieve their ends, but they also make life meaningful and reproduce those symbolic systems (Friedland & Alford, 1991:249).

Friedland and Alford elaborate the concretizing nature of social relations by highlighting their critical connective role: “through the quotidian and most institutionalized ritual behaviors, individuals reproduce the symbolic order of the institution and the social relationships that connect this world to the transrational order” (1991:250, italics added). In other words, systems of observable social relations not only make concrete nonobservable systems of meaning, they
mediate the relationship between persons and higher-level systems of meaning.

Theorists grappling with the notion that institutions are inhabited by real people have begun to turn their attention to the nature of these social relations, to explore what unfolds within them. For example, Hallett and Ventresca (2006) have shown how both meaning making and meaning interpretation occur within the context not only of macro level institutional frameworks but also in micro level personal social interactions. Voronov and Vince (2012) refer to “relational social microcosms” as critical seedbeds when they consider linkages between patterns of emotional investment and disinvestment in institutional arrangements. Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) similarly highlight the importance of communities as sites of institutional processes.

Here we offer a theoretical conceptualization of these microcosms of social relations as “institutional communities.” Our choice of “institutional community” is deliberate as our goal is to highlight that these social microcosms are imbued with the emotional dynamics embodied in social ties and that they are embedded in a complex, pluralistic institutional context. In addition, our theorizing of institutional communities reflects our effort to address Friedland and Alford’s (1991) concern that correct social theorizing should account for all levels of analysis, macro, meso, and micro. Recent work on inhabited institutions (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) and on the microfoundations of institutions (Powell & Colyvas, 2008) has tended to overlook the meso level between persons and institutions, while other recent work on communities (Brint, 2001; Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007; Marquis, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2011a, b; Nepstad, 2004) seeks to examine this neglected intermediate level. These latter studies find that actors are influenced both by community structures as they engage in institutional processes. In other words, communities mediate actors’ participation institutional processes (Marquis et al., 2011b).
We therefore argue for the rigorous use of the concept of institutional community to foster attention on the meso-level social contexts in which embodied persons participate in institutional processes. Conceptualizing institutional communities as emotionally dynamic relational arenas where institutional arrangements are enacted and reproduced both attends to the neglected meso level and puts the break on our unchecked reliance on a predominantly cognitive view. To further explain our conceptualization of institutional communities here we will focus on several key ideas: community, emotional dynamics, complexity, and institutional pluralism.

*Community.* Brint’s (2001:8) reconsideration of sociological understandings of communities emphasizes that they are composed of people “bound together *principally by* relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern” (italics in the original). In this vein, we conceive of institutional communities as social collectivities or bounded systems of social relations that give rise to emotional bonds and forms of solidarity and embody shared symbolic constructions and material practices. Solidarity here refers to feelings of membership or of belonging to the group (Barone, 2007; Cheah, 2006), which may extend to a sense of shared history or fate. While institutional communities may overlap geographies, organizations, associations, or other forms of social groupings, they differ from such collectivities to the extent that the social relations and the persons involved give rise to emotional bonds, self-meanings or identity, solidarity, and shared practices that are infused with symbolic significance. In addition, while emotion, identity, solidarity, practices and meaning are central to our conceptualization, institutional communities do vary in the degrees or intensity to which these features are present and members may likewise vary in the degree or intensity of shared solidarity and identification that they feel. To echo Friedland and Alford (1991) as quoted above, institutional communities are the systems of social relations within which persons identify and strive to achieve their ends.
and “make life meaningful.” This can be true of such disparate institutional communities as extended families, social identity groups (e.g., the African-American or GLBT communities), diffuse religious communities (e.g., Evangelical Christians), cultural institutional affiliations (e.g., universities, museums), membership organizations (e.g., Girl Scouts), service organizations (e.g., The League of Women Voters, Planned Parenthood), advocacy groups (e.g., The Union of Concerned Scientists, The Christian Coalition), and more or less amorphous value-based social movements (e.g., feminists, environmentalists, or Tea-Partiers).

**Emotional dynamics.** Our choice of terminology also is intended to evoke the notion of social microcosms imbued with emotional dynamics embodied in social bonds. Going beyond Thornton et al.’s (2012) conception of communities as bounded by geography or interests, we use the term to draw attention to those communities that are comprised of emotion-fraught social relations and inter-subjective processes, which are interpenetrated by multiple institutions. These communities are the social locations where institutional reproduction occurs through shared sensemaking, affective as well as cognitive commitments, and normative enactments, all unfolding in the context of socio-emotional bonds. It is through these community-based social relationships and solidarities perceived, felt, and enacted collectively in community that we as institutional inhabitants live and move and have our being. And, we will argue below, it is due to this nature of specific social relations and solidarity which gives meaning, place, and identity to community members that shame has its power.

**Complexity and institutional pluralism.** By complex, pluralistic context, we mean that institutional communities operate simultaneously in multiple institutional spheres that direct action according to their specific “rules of the game” (Kraatz & Block, 2008). This multiplicity is often referred to as institutional pluralism (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Institutional complexity
arises when those different sets of rules impose incompatible prescriptions as to how to interpret reality and choose appropriate behavior (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). Institutional communities are interpenetrated by multiple sets of “rules of the game” and each community, in its distinctive ways, concretizes those competing and often contradictory institutional prescriptions. Institutional complexity is concretized, inhabited, and lived out within the context of institutional communities.

Institutional communities are of central importance to us for several reasons. First, they are the sites for sensemaking and enactments. Second, they mediate institutional complexity, setting different conditions for self-worth and framing the boundaries for acceptable approaches to managing membership in multiple institutional communities, which is a characteristic challenge of institutional pluralism. Third, they are the sites of social relations where the development of affective bonds occurs and intersubjective processes unfold. Next we consider each of these points in turn. We then discuss the implications of the notion of institutional communities for institutional complexity and conclude this section by discussing why shame is a critical emotion in institutional communities.

**Relevance of Institutional Communities**

Institutional communities are not merely social instantiations of supra-organizational patterns of activity structured in terms of particular principles or logics; instead they are “places where people and groups make sense of, interpret, and enact institutional prescriptions” (Greenwood et al., 2011:334). In other words, in such social microcosms, institutions become knowable as people engage in sensemaking and enactments. Like all social relations, the social microcosms that “make life meaningful” and prescribe ways of doing and being necessarily entail emotional dynamics. It is impossible to imagine any social relations devoid of emotions,
much less those where quotidian ritual interactions reproduce the “metaphorical mechanisms by which we not only understand the world, but by which we literally live” and connect “this world to the transrational order” (Friedland & Alford, 1991: 247, 249). When the stakes are people’s meanings and ways of being, there have to be emotions in play. This may seem an obvious claim, but the institutional literature, with its focus on cognitive factors, largely ignores this critical implication of social embeddedness. To borrow from Friedland and Alford, the neglect of this truth “hobbles our capacity to understand” (1991:249). The emotional content and dynamics of institutional communities inform all manner – all manner – of community members’ participation in institutional processes and enactments of institutional prescriptions.

Viewing institutional communities as the sites of sensemaking and enactments implies that they mediate institutional complexity. Much of the extant discussion of competing logics tends to represent institutional pluralism as a cognitive and behavioral dilemma for an atomized social actor. Too often, the dilemma is resolved by invoking a socially skilled institutional entrepreneur who is better positioned than the average institutional inhabitant to handle the challenges of bricolage, sensemaking, and mobilization necessary to reconcile or change the inherent complexity and contradiction of pluralistic institutional arrangements. Offering a contrasting, more broadly social perspective, Zilber (2009) shows how an institutional community, a rape crisis center, collectively balanced feminist and psycho-therapeutic metanarratives in its ongoing construction of its local organizational narrative. The social microcosm of the rape crisis center provides an example of how an institutional community can mediate the complexity posed by the competing meta-narratives inherent in pluralistic institutional settings. Importantly, communities such as the rape crisis center are able to simultaneously provide for some level of heterogeneity in members’ enactments while they also
reflect some level of community agreement on a shared scheme for how members can and should manage their membership. Some level of agreement is a necessary foundation if the institutional community is to establish expectations and norms, to recognize transgressions that may threaten community integrity, and to respond to what the community agrees on as unacceptable deviance (Gephart, 1978).

As they mediate complexity, institutional communities give their members things to be proud or ashamed of, which are essential building blocks for constituting the self (Saye, 2005). People are able to act, to know what is appropriate, and to understand the meaning of their actions only in terms of the symbolic resources provided and made concrete through their social relations within institutional communities. Therefore, notwithstanding the picture seen in Zilber’s (2009) study of a permissible heterogeneity in the face of complexity, there runs throughout a person’s identity construction the need to construct an identity that accords with a valued community’s definitions of praiseworthy and shameful enactments – and so meets the conditions of and sustains membership in such a community.

Although Zilber’s (2002, 2009) work accounts for membership in only one community, in modern societies the reality is that people are members of multiple institutional communities. Managing multiple memberships is difficult because different institutional communities give their members different things about which they can feel shame or pride. That is, they set different conditions for establishing self-worth and provide different ways of being that bespeak that one is living a valuable life and is a valuable member of the community (Sayer, 2005). They set different conditions because, while each of these institutional communities is necessarily interpenetrated by multiple institutions, each instantiated its distinctive distillation of ways of responding to institutional complexity in a particular space and time. Further, such communities,
like the institutions they embody, may be nested, fragmented, partial, overlapping, contradictory, and hierarchically arranged. Consequently, people can experience painful competing solidarities (Scheff, 1990) or affinities with the different communities in which they are members. Institutional pluralism thus implies not only multiple potentially competing cognitive frameworks and prescriptions, it also fosters contradictions in the form of potentially conflicting ways of being and, by extension, potentially competing emotional and moral commitments to those ways of being and their associated relational bonds.

Institutional communities are also the sites where social bonds between people develop and where emotional processes unfold. As the need to maintain social bonds, to belong, is a central human motive (Sayer, 2005), members of communities develop affective commitments and attend to one another. While these communities are held together, in part, by shared cognitions and symbol systems that constitute and give meaning to members (Thornton et al., 2012), it is the affective commitments arising from such social bonds that give body and life to them (Brint, 2001). As institutional communities concretize institutions, affective commitments to other members of the community can develop (Voronov & Vince, 2012), motivating individuals to act in ways that support and reproduce both the bonds and the institutions. Institutional communities are the sites where persons engage with symbols and practices through concrete and idealized social relationships, affective commitments, and community solidarity.

The bonds between members and the associated commitments to institutions provide temporary stability to the community and its members. In a converse manner, the experienced threat of separation from a valued community must be understood as a deeply felt emotion for the person facing that threat (Sayer, 2005) and the “social dislocation” (Willmott, 2011) that it represents must be treated seriously as a motivating impetus for members. For members, the
motivations to belong to and avoid separation from a valued community are essential and underpin processes of compliance (Scheff, 1990). The need to belong can cause members to overlook or minimize deprivations they must endure in order to belong. It can also be a driving force in community members’ ongoing efforts to understand how others view them and to gauge their own social standing within the community. In this manner, membership in an institutional community and the motivation to remain in good standing drives the intersubjective processes that underpin the social construction of members’ shared understandings regarding each other and the world around them, the “reciprocal typifications” that are central to processes of institutional reproduction and change.

**Shame in Institutional Communities**

We consider institutional communities high-stakes institutional arenas because they play a central role in setting the conditions for self-worth. In addition, given the emotional content and dynamics in institutional communities, we argue that shame figures prominently among the emotions that animate the people who inhabit them. As we noted earlier, shame’s power stems in large part from the fact that for us as a species, the maintenance of social bonds is the “most crucial human motive” (c.f., Leary, 2000; Scheff, 1990:4), and we maintain social bonds principally through meeting an institutional community’s conditions for self-worth. Thus, as well as being a social emotion, shame is a normative force that must be understood in terms of systemic, disciplinary power and self-surveillance; these facets of shame make it figure critically in processes of institutional reproduction.

Drawn from the Foucaultian (1990) view that power is relational or an effect of social relationships, the concept of systemic or disciplinary power refers to a form of power that works through mundane practices to institutionalize a social reality and invest it with a quality of
objectivity (Lawrence, 2008). In other words, systemic power operates through the construction of seemingly objective social reality. This is achieved through two processes: normalization and subjectification (Cooper et al., 2008:682). The importance of normalization to institutional compliance is perhaps clear on its face: it defines what is normal and what is not, what is in bounds and what is not. Subjectification refers to the ways in which disciplinary power is implicated in providing identity and motives to persons; “subjects come to recognize themselves as discrete and autonomous individuals whose sense of a clear identity is sustained through participation in social practices which are a condition and a consequence of the exercise of power” (Knights & Willmott, 1989:538, cited in Lawrence, 2008). In other words, subjectification operates through quotidian practices that engage persons in ongoing ways to shape their self-conceptions and desires. Both normalization and subjectification often are unapparent or invisible even as they discipline, rendering people “orderly and regimented” (Cooper et al., 2008:682). The importance of subjectification to institutional compliance and reproduction is subtler than that of normalization, however. Not only does subjectification provide the subject with identity and the basis for agency (a sense of autonomy and motivation), it enlists and relies on that subject’s agency in the operation of disciplinary “technologies of assessment and surveillance” to have its effect (Cooper et al., 2008:682).

In describing shame as a form of disciplinary power, we mean that it is a relational, diffuse, and often invisible form of power operating in institutional communities. This power works to make community norms of what constitutes shameful as opposed to praiseworthy behavior seem objective, such that each norm becomes taken-for-granted as objectively correct or natural. At the same time, these norms penetrate the identity construction of members of the community as they strive to meet community conditions for membership and self-worth. Shame,
then, can be understood as a form of subjectification that “categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault, 1983). Shame shapes the people we become – subjects with a capacity for shame and knowledge of the conditions under which shame is experienced. Shame thus enlists community members in ubiquitous processes of self-assessment and surveillance that underpin its disciplinary power. The self is constituted by and through the knowledge of both the conditions for self-worth and shame. To paraphrase Scheff (2005), we all swim in an emotional and relational sea of shame, all day, every day.

The critical surveillance mechanism in shame’s disciplinary power is an internal self-policing mechanism, which Sayer (2005:955) describes as the “shame response:”

The shame response is an important mechanism in the production of social order, for through it people internalize expectations, norms, and ideals and discipline and punish themselves. The capacity for shame is one of the mechanisms by which people are ensnared by cultural discourses and norms, in all their diversity, although the metaphor of being ensnared is too passive, for the need for recognition, whose pursuit always carries the risk of failing and being shamed, drives us to seek out ways of acting virtuously from among the many possibilities.

The “shame response” is a person’s distinctively formed capacity for shame. It is rooted in a form of self-monitoring that involves one’s taking the perspective of others and imaging their assessment of the self. Similarly, Leary (2000) used the metaphor of a “sociometer” to refer to our motivation and capacity to understand our socio-relational standing, and particularly to attend to “relational devaluation,” or “…indications that others do not regard their relationship with the individual to be as important, close, or valuable as the individual desires” (:336). This continuous self-monitoring relies on an intersubjectivity that is “built into human nature” and consistent with the idea that we always “live in the minds of others” (Cooley, 1922/2004), often
without being conscious of it. Such intense intersubjectivity implies people are not atomized but rather are ever-alert members of larger social units, where the maintenance of valued social bonds is crucial. By connecting self-policing and discipline to normative compliance, the shame response plays a central role in the reproduction and maintenance of institutional arrangements. In essence, shame as a form of systemic power disciplines through the operation of a person’s internalized self-policing mechanism. In other words, we argue that it is the constant anticipation and avoidance of shame that underpin the self-regulation of institutional inhabitants, contributing to the reproduction and maintenance of institutions.

The duo of shame and the shame response also suggests why institutional prescriptions are powerful: It is because they are rooted in the social bonds of institutional communities. In other words, while cognitions such as our thoughts and perceptions of social expectations set the stage for social control, emotions and affective commitments provide impetus for compliance. As Scheff (1990:75) notes, “We experience [expectations/prescriptions] as so compelling because of emotions, specifically, the pleasure of pride and fellow feeling, on the one hand, and the punishment of embarrassment, shame, or humiliation on the other.” This suggests that to understand institutional processes of normative compliance, which are essential to understanding institutional reproduction and maintenance, we need to consider not just cognitive constraints, but also the emotional constraints and impetus that arise from both the threat of rejection and the possibility of acceptance. From this perspective, people anticipate and avoid shame and respond powerfully to their experiences of shame because it operates as a key barometer, signaling when a person’s actions have threatened a valued social bond and whether work is needed to repair or preserve these crucial bonds (Leary, 2000). In addition, the internal and intersubjective nature of the shame response means that shame’s disciplinary power exceeds that of formal rewards and
punishment, which are infrequent and costly (Goffman, 1963). In contrast, imagined or anticipated experiences of social rejection are “virtually instantaneous, and invisible and cheap as dirt” (Scheff, 1990:75) (See Jones, Hesterly, & Borgatti, 1997 for a related argument.).

Summary

To summarize, the self is constituted through shared knowledge of institutionalized conditions for self-worth and of shame. It is this mix of intersubjectivity and internalization that makes shame a form of disciplinary power. In this sense shame can figure in actual or imagined surveillance and have similar effects. It is shame’s speed, ubiquity, and costlessness that make it such a powerful basis for institutional reproduction. The need to avoid shame so infuses our experience of intersubjectivity that not only do we swim in a sea of shame all day, every day, but its very ubiquity blunts our awareness of it. Yet, as we argue below, the role of shame is important not only in institutional reproduction, but it can also inspire change. Below, we present a process model detailing the role of shame, through an understanding of shaming, in institutional reproduction and change.

THE ROLE OF SHAMING IN INSTITUTIONAL REPRODUCTION AND CHANGE

Coercive mechanisms to induce conformity have long figured in institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Here, we argue that shaming attempts – moments where a group or some of its members seek to induce experiences of felt shame in another member or members – are situated, purposive uses of episodic power to induce compliance with community norms. Episodic power refers to more or less “discrete, strategic acts of mobilization initiated by self-interested actors” (Lawrence, 2008:174), and includes forms such as influence and force, which are said to be fundamental in institutional agency. We describe shaming as episodic power to highlight its temporary nature, and to draw a contrast to shame as ubiquitous, as systemic power.
that is ever-present. Shaming attempts rely on the presence of the shame response, the person’s internal capacity for shame: the goal of shaming is to elicit in a person the felt experience of shame so he or she complies with norms and expectations. Shaming, then, operates as a coercive mechanism that can take the form of enacted or merely threatened ostracism, degradation, stigmatization, and demonization. Shaming can therefore work to police behavior, and is aimed at institutional maintenance. Yet, as we also argue below, shaming attempts sometimes backfire, unintentionally prompting institutional change.

**Shaming**

The coercive power of shaming comes from the threat posed to the social bonds that underpin self-meaning, self-realization (Turner & Stets, 2005b) and identity (Petriglieri, 2011). And herein lies the importance of shaming as a technique of power; it signals the threat of social dislocation, shunning, ostracism, or a permanent break in those valued social bonds (Turner & Stets, 2005b). As shaming triggers the felt experiences of shame in the transgressor, it provides the person an instant readout on the state of his or her social standing as a valued (or, in this case, devalued) group member (Leary, 2000). It is the felt experience of shame that triggers the person’s sensemaking regarding the transgressive behavior (Baumeister et al., 2007).

Central to the shaming process are shamers, or those who value and have cognitive, emotional, and moral commitments to the institutional arrangements, including definitions of acceptable behavior and established patterns of social relations. Shamers take on the role of actively policing the boundaries of acceptable behavior by threatening to break the social bonds that link a transgressor to an institutional community. We contend that institutional communities can endorse and enable shaming attempts that operate at the interpersonal level and are carried out by shamers, making shaming a micro technique of power, a form of power that “reaches into
the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses and learning processes and everyday lives” (Foucault, 1980:39). However, institutional communities can and do vary both in terms of the necessary conditions for endorsing or enabling shaming and in the degree and nature of shaming that is permissible. Shaming practices can range from informal interactions to public rituals, from subtle looks of disapproval in response to simple violations of rules of etiquette, to social exclusion and ostracism, or even more complex macro practices comprising traditions and laws. Through shaming, institutional communities highlight and enforce acceptable patterns of behavior and attempt to punish or recondition those who transgress or deviate from those patterns. In essence, shaming practices complement other more widely discussed judicial, regulatory, and coercive compliance mechanisms. Shaming reduces the challenge to existing institutional meanings systems by either bringing nonconformists back in line or by threatening the exclusion of nonconformists from the social system.

Yet the power of shaming goes beyond its ability to target a specific transgressor. Its power is also due, in part, to its ability to cast a wide shadow, such that the stigma of the shaming attempt can be transferred to others associated with the transgressor (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Pontikes, Negro, & Rao, 2010). For example, when members of the community witness and vicariously experience felt shame or the threat of exclusion, shaming a transgressor serves as a warning to other “undetected” transgressors or those who might be tempted to cross the boundary of acceptable behavior. This leverages the intersubjective process and activates those witnesses’ internalized shame response. In other words, as we watch others being shamed, we come to understand and believe that a similar transgression on our part can have the same outcome, especially when we have the visceral experience of shame ourselves. In short, shaming
can activate the shame response and, by presenting threats to social bonds, lead to sensemaking in people beyond the targeted transgressor, preserving the institutional order. Yet, the institutional order is only preserved if shaming attempts induce shame and conformity, one possibility we discuss below. Another possibility is that shaming attempts are unsuccessful, eliciting rejection rather than acceptance of the underlying definitions of normativity. We discuss this second possibility below as well. Importantly, a main difference in these two trajectories is the difference between institutional maintenance and change.

Below, we theorize the shaming process through an elaboration of the model of institutional reproduction offered by Weber and Glynn (2006, reproduced earlier as Figure 1). Before we begin to theorize the shaming process, though, it is necessary to summarize and integrate our discussion to this point. We illustrate this summary and integration in Figure 2. As argued above, institutional complexity involves more than the presence of multiple institutions; it also involves multiple institutional communities, which are embedded in the pluralistic institutional context. These institutional communities – distinguished in the figure by their different shapes – each mediate the complexity of the pluralistic institutional environment for its members by incorporating in its prescriptions and norms its own distinctively distilled conditions for self-worth. Additionally, institutional complexity involves persons’ multiple memberships in institutional communities, with each membership associated with particular prescriptions and conditions for self-worth. This panoply of prescriptions is depicted in the figure by a set of arrows, one from each distinctively shaped institutional community, converging on the same point in the micro level. This is meant to convey that a person can receive and can enact diverse prescriptions and participate in the complex reproduction of diverse institutional communities. This complex reproduction process is depicted in the figure as three arrows, one returning to
As we noted earlier, in the context of institutional complexity the lived experience of institutional contradictions by community members is equivocal (Creed et al., 2010), with implications for the shame response. Community members can experience painful competing solidarities (Scheff, 1990) because institutional complexity fosters potentially conflicting social relationships, social identities and roles and, by extension, potentially competing emotional and moral commitments to those community relationships (Voronov & Vince, 2012). Complexity, in this way, creates internal tensions stemming from individuals’ competing institutional memberships (Friedland & Alford, 1991). A given person’s enactments therefore reflect a mix of prescriptions and responses to a variety of valued social bonds, relationships, and obligations in ways that may or may not fully cohere with each other. Figure 2 reflects this multiplicity of enactments over time, and how conforming behavior reproduces institutional communities and institutions.

**Conformity**

In its most basic form, a shaming attempt begins as a reaction to a person’s enactment of transgressive behavior, depicted in Figure 3 as a bent arrow to the triangle community. When this behavior is recognized by some in the institutional community, those who have a stake in or an emotional commitment to the norm that is broken may take on the role of shamers and initiate a shaming attempt targeting the transgressor, depicted as a lightning bolt in Figure 3. The transgressor’s experience of shame may lead the person to recognize that a social norm or value has been breached. When breaking a minor social norm is accidental or unintended, the
community member may not suffer significantly from the shaming attempt, experiencing it mildly. In this case, transgressing members can restore their standing by conforming to the norm, thereby ratifying one’s membership by rejecting the behavior that represented the violation of that norm. This can be done through a variety of actions – a simple apology, a nonverbal display of shame or other act of contrition and/or appeasement (Martens, Tracy, & Shariff, 2012), and prosocial actions (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011; de Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2010; Gausel, Leach, Vignoles, & Brown, 2012) – any action consistent with signaling that the transgressor values the social bonds and wants to ratify his or her standing with the group (Scheff, 1990; Turner & Stets, 2005b). In any case, shaming efforts can produce conformity (e.g., Grasmick, Bursik, & Kinsey, 1991; Panagopoulos, 2011).

A more problematic situation arises when the violation of a social norm is not a minor breach, or where full conformity is not possible. For example, conforming to the norm may somehow conflict with the more or less coherent sense of self that a given person has developed through his or her history of enactments in response to the mix of prescription, valued social bonds, obligations, and solidarities. One alternative response may be surface-level conformity, such as masking the offending behavior or identity, “passing” as a “normal” person (DeJordy, 2008; Goffman, 1963). Surface-level conformity, which according to DeJordy can be understood as a form of decoupling, may lead to acceptance by others in the institutional community, but that acceptance is potentially unstable, as it is contingent on the continued repression or masking of personal attributes. Importantly, though, both genuine and simulated conformity enable the ongoing reproduction of existing institutional arrangements, as illustrated by the rehabilitated arrow in Figure 3.

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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Although surface level conformity can have costs (DeJordy, 2008), conformity as a response to shaming attempts, in all its guises, can have benefits for the conforming community members in addition to strengthening the overarching institution. For instance, continued interaction with others in the community can generate a variety of discrete positive emotions for the members (Cialdini et al., 1976), enhancing feelings of emotional solidarity (Scheff, 1990), and leading to greater identification with and emotional commitment to the group (Voronov & Vince, 2012).

The situation depicted in Figure 3 becomes more complicated, however, as we fully account for institutional complexity. In situations where multiple community memberships create opportunities for alternative institutional enactments, fully conforming to any one community’s norms and expectations is difficult. In particular, multiple memberships in institutional communities reflect myriad commitments, with sometimes conflicting norms and expectations. These potentially conflicting expectations can mean that behavior may be seen as transgressive by some of the communities in which the person is a member, but as conforming in others.

**Rejection of Shaming Attempts**

This institutional complexity, however, also opens the possibility for alternative reactions to shaming attempts. While shaming attempts are likely to trigger negative emotions that induce sensemaking (Baumeister et al., 2007; Warren & Smith-Crowe, 2008), they do not always succeed in eliciting the feelings of shame that result conformity or self-repression. Instead, sensemaking can allow the target to derive an alternative explanation for the shaming attempt, such as attributing it to a fault with the institutional structures or to those doing the shaming.
(Turner & Stets, 2005b). This can take the form of condemning the condemner or rejecting the legitimacy of the institutional norm (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Such sensemaking is made possible by multiple memberships, which can provide alternative institutional “building blocks of sensemaking” (Weber & Glynn, 2006:1644) that can be drawn upon to resist or discredit the shaming attempt by finding alternative socially approved ways of being.

An important consequence in rejecting a shaming attempt is that community members may experience “affective detachment” (Turner & Stets, 2005b:207), weakening identification with the community where the shaming attempt arose, and may distance their self-perceptions or self-categorizations from them (Gutierrez et al., 2010). Thus, affective detachment and social dislocation (Willmott, 2011) trigger a search process for – and a “move toward” (Gutierrez et al., 2010:394) – alternative communities with whom the person can more readily identify. Using the building blocks available due to institutional pluralism and multiple community memberships, people are able to resist or discredit the shaming attempt. In this process, by changing their participation in institutional communities, people may detract from the reproduction of the institutions that were the source of the shaming attempt and contribute to the reproduction of an alternative institutional community that does not induce the felt experience of shame, as depicted by the changing size of the communities in Figure 4.

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Insert Figure 4 about here
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One possible reaction to shaming attempts is to exit the shaming community and sever the social relationships and bonds that comprise community membership. The threat of enduring anomie or social isolation (Turner & Stets, 2005b) motivates a shift to alternative institutional communities and relationships. This suggests that exit through affective detachment may be
particularly likely in situations where lessened identification with the shaming institutional community is high, the social bonds are weak, and the threat from social dislocation is minor. It may also be more likely when alternative communities exist and stronger identification with one or more of these other communities seems possible and desirable.

Paradoxically, exit from an institutional community may simultaneously contribute to both the maintenance and disruption of institutions through different but related processes, as shown in Figure 4. Exits may bolster an institutional community through the elimination of nonconformists. At the same time, such exits may disrupt an institutional community in more subtle ways, such as through reducing the number of people involved in its ongoing reproduction or through potentially leaving fissures and voids in the remaining system of social relations that could have an impact on processes of institutional reproduction. Just as shaming can cast a wide shadow that effects community members other than the transgressor, a transgressor’s exit can offer a point of light in the form of a widely perceptible alternative to conformity. Moreover, joining an alternative community during exit also strengthens the other community, and the reproduction of the institutions in which that other community is embedded.

The exit of a member from an institutional community may also have more direct consequences. In particular, because shaming attempts can sometimes prompt external attributions (Tracy & Robins, 2004), they can produce feelings of anger (Lewis, 1992; Tangney et al., 2007). When shaming attempts are experienced as unjustified that anger can be directed at the communities that initiated those shaming attempts. In such cases, former members may be more motivated to take an active role in attacking or undermining their former communities and, consequently, the institutions in which those communities are embedded. This active antagonism may be more likely to occur when the existing transgressor has strengthened bonds to an
alternative community that is composed of similarly shamed people. The transgressor can experience heightened solidarity with the alternative community and greater anger over the pattern of shaming by the former community. Through the sensemaking process triggered by the shaming attempt, the person’s understanding of what is shameful changes, such that an enactment that previously would have led to felt shame loses its shamefulness. An example is the advent of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights movement and its appropriation of what were previously pejorative heterosexist epithets as positive identity claims. It is this transformation of shame that both leads to and results from active engagement in favor of one community (the alternative community) and against the other (the exited, shaming community), with the concomitant potential for active engagement in institutional disruption. In other words, solidarity with alternative institutional communities, and the attendant affective ties required for that solidarity, lays the foundations and structures for the work of strengthening the new institutional community, and disrupting (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) the abandoned, shaming ones.

In addition to the options of renewed conformity or exit, institutional complexity and the attendant consequences for the heterogeneity of institutional communities affords transgressors or nonconformists another possible course of action. Under conditions of institutional pluralism, all institutional communities draw on and mediate a broad mix of systems of meaning, prescriptions, and practices. As a consequence, it is likely that some members of any particular community may feel stronger affective and moral commitment to some of the institutional elements in that mix than to others. This enables an alternative to exit that involves remaining in the community and selecting some elements while rejecting others. In practice, this allows for the rejection of a shaming attempt (and the institutional norms that underpin it) while remaining
within the community. This response can enable members to remain in the institutional community, to find kindred spirits, and to attempt to transform it collectively from the inside. Such a response is desirable when members feel a strong affective commitment to the social relationships and bonds within that community and to some parts of the institutionalized meanings systems embedded within that community, even while rejecting other parts of that meanings system. As before, the resistance to or discrediting of a shaming attempt is possible because of multiple community memberships, which provide members with materials to imagine new institutional configurations and communities. The efforts of GLBT Protestant ministers and their allies to make their parishes and denominations more open to and affirming of GLBT members would be an example (Creed et al., 2010). In other words, as Figure 5 shows, it is often the membership in other communities, and the social relationships, affective commitments, and alternative sensemaking, that enable or empower people to remain a part of communities attempting to shame them, yet resist or discredit those shaming attempts.

Summary

In sum, examining the reactions of institutional community members to shaming attempts shows how shame constitutes a powerful emotion that can help sustain or subvert communities and institutions. In some instances, shaming attempts elicit members’ compliance and conformity. Such conformity supports and reproduces institutions. But in other instances shaming attempts are rejected by members and do not elicit felt shame. Members are able to avail themselves of resources provided by the plurality of institutions. Some members opt for exit and disengagement from a community, while others exit the community and actively work
against it. Still others, those who have strong affective commitment to the community and see some of the internal institutional contradictions as susceptible to change, do not exit. Rather, they remain and, still rejecting the shaming attempt, work to change the community and institution from within. The rejection of shaming in each case is instrumental to enabling the disruption and change of institutional arrangements.

**DISCUSSION**

In response to an over-reliance on structural explanations of social action (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997; Lounsbury & Ventresca, 2002), institutional theorists have turned their focus to the people who participate in institutional processes. These institutional inhabitants range from active and heroic institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009), to janitors and mechanics (Lawrence, 2008), and others engaged in the routine and day-to-day activities that make up institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Despite this increased emphasis on people, conceptualizations of institutional inhabitants have remained largely flat, cognitive cut-outs. Our work set out to bring whole persons into focus and thus enrich institutional explanations of stability and change, complementing the extant cognitive approach with attention to the role of emotions. Our specific focus on shame, the shame response, and episodic shaming shows the likely importance of emotions, particularly those that animate persons’ social bonds, the so-called evaluative or social emotions (Haidt, 2003; Leary, 2000; Tangney et al., 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2004; Turner & Stets, 2005a). Our exploration advances recent arguments about the central importance of emotional investment and disinvestment in institutional orders (Voronov & Vince, 2012:72) by showing how persons’ institutional commitments are underpinned by their dynamic, intersubjective navigation of shame as they manage membership in institutional communities and competing solidarities.
In what was for us a surprising turn, our conceptual exploration of shame led us to both engage embodied, multi-dimensional persons, and to confront the larger theoretical implications of the intersubjective nature of shame. This took us down an unanticipated path: the need to consider the broader role of disciplinary power in institutional processes. Attention to disciplinary power has been a persistent gap in institutional thinking (Lawrence, 2008), which is unsurprising, as such attention would require a focus on subjectification and the social construction of the individual. Such a focus, according to Cooper et al., is “far removed from the normal science value-orientation of institutional theory, which focuses upon ‘enduring elements of social life,’ such as ‘logics’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006:215) rather than on the particularity of their subjectifying effects.” Arguably, the contributions of our analysis – of shame as a form of disciplinary power and of the shame response as a core feature of subjectification – as Cooper et al. suggest – may challenge the institutionalization of several elements of institutional theory, including, for example, the privileging of the imagery of logics, scripts, and schema over the imagery of social bonds, sentiments, and emotional commitments.

Yet, there is, we argue, opportunity in adopting this alternative theoretical imagery. For example, Cooper et al. (2008) highlight the parallels between the processes of institutionalization and subjectification. Quoting Hasselbladh and Kalinikos (2000:701), Cooper et al. (2008:675) note that “institutionalization is sustained and given meaning and direction through its capacity to constitute distinctive forms of actorhood.” In other words, they suggest that better explanations of institutional reproduction hinge on attending to the constitution of the subjects whose commitments to institutionalized practices and beliefs are both product and engine of institutionalization. To engage this agenda, however, requires that researchers embrace several critical stances that will sit uneasily with regnant institutional perspectives. It will require
interrogating established understandings of institutional inhabitants and institutional processes. We will discuss each of these challenges in turn.

**Embracing Institutional Inhabitants as Institutions in Themselves**

To begin, our work builds on Willmott’s (2011:68) challenge to what he decries as the “cult of individual” in institutional theory in which autonomous “‘individuals’ are commonsensically identified as the locus of powers that create institutions as well as maintain and destroy them” (italics in the original). Willmott argues that forgetting that the “individual” is a sociocultural formation – that is, it is an ontological representation of human beings that reflects the social rather than the biological order – enables contemporary institutional arguments to obfuscate the nature of agency. Building on this critique, we argue for a perspective where institutional inhabitants should be viewed as social beings, as persons rather than as atomized, autonomous actors whose subjectivity is disconnected from the social relations in which they are embedded. Such persons are perpetually engaged in intersubjective processes of subjectification that are animated by emotion even as their practices and meaning making are shaped by cognitions and logics of action. The alternative of interrogating the individual as an institutionalized concept is not new, but attending to the institutional nature of the individual remains an uncomfortable challenge to our theorizing as it runs afoul of the Western cultural principle of the self-contained, agentic self (Cooper et al., 2008; Scheff, 2005; Willmott, 2011). Perhaps most elementally, however, it is difficult for us as scholars to reconcile our own lives with the ideas we advance – of ongoing self-monitoring in the form of the internalized shame response, of our own reliance on a shared awareness of the shameful, and of our alert anticipation of the risk of shame. Such ideas call into question our very self-narratives because it implicitly depicts people, it depicts us, not as commonsensical, autonomous loci of power but
rather as ever vigilant members of larger social units who are constituted and disciplined by the threat of separation and the anticipation of shame (Cooley, 1922/2004; Scheff, 2005). Moreover, such a highly social perspective on institutional inhabitants is all the more uncomfortable to the degree it relies on an awkward notion of “mutual mind reading” and perpetual anxiousness over others’ assessments of us captured in Cooley’s idea that we live in the minds of others (Scheff, 2005). This perspective is perhaps most disturbing in its challenge to institutional theory’s reigning notion of an embedded but autonomous, rational agency.

In spite of the difficulty in doing so, rejecting the imagery of the individual as a commonsensical agent can yield significant theoretical benefits. For instance, rejecting the individual as an agent also helps us get beyond the structure/agent dualism that implicitly anchors the swings of institutional theory (Lounsbury & Ventresca, 2002). Individuals cannot be viewed as the opposite of institutions; they are themselves institutions, formations created through cultural processes that ascribe to persons sovereign power, agency, and a capacity “to stand against, subvert, resist, and change the ‘institutions’ that channel actions” (Willmott, 2011:69). Willmott’s critique implies that mindful institutional theorists should no longer invoke savvy institutional entrepreneurs or mundane mechanics of institutional work without simultaneously accounting for processes of subjectification in particular social contexts that make them possible. Our incorporation of shame into institutional analyses alerts us to these processes and also makes them impossible to ignore.

Communities as Institutional Microcosms

The embrace of social persons as the inhabitants of institutions also led us to interrogate institutional processes, and to the elaboration of institutional communities as sites where institutions come alive. In our conception of institutional communities, we advance the view that
they are more than mere providers of logics of action (Marquis et al., 2011b:xviii). These social microcosms are where meaning systems are negotiated (Zilber, 2002) and linked to the enactments and practices that maintain and reproduce institutions or disrupt and change them (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). We elaborate on this earlier work to conceive of these communities as social microcosms where institutional pluralism is distilled and where multiple memberships and competing solidarities are managed (e.g., Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). For us, institutional communities are a specific form of social relations that is theoretically useful because it enables us to incorporate the person in an intersubjective system of relations, where heterogeneity in institutional demands exists but where navigation of institutional complexity becomes possible. In this way, we argue that the theoretical imagery of institutional communities enables examinations of both how potentially contradictory institutional prescriptions are distilled and made knowable under conditions of institutional complexity and how competing solidarities shape patterns of participation in institutional processes.

Institutional communities are also the sites where precarious instances of institutional stability are accomplished through patterns of subjectification through which persons come to identify with particular practices and beliefs. Willmott (2011) refers to these precarious instances as “institutional closures” that temporarily stabilize the cultural formulations – rules, norms, beliefs, symbolic constructions, and material practices – that shape our sensemaking and channel our actions in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity (Willmott, 2011). In our conception of institutional communities, the accomplishment of such closures, which is more commonly understood in terms of the institutionalization of practices and beliefs, can instead be viewed through processes of subjectification underpinned by shame. Moreover, institutional communities appear not as reified objects of analysis, but rather are “mobile complexes of
juridical and disciplinary power” (Cooper et al., 2008:684). A profound consequence of treating institutional communities in this manner is to question the absence of power in institutional explanations, to question what Cooper et al. (2008) have noted is the implicit assumption of an unforced and balanced reciprocity in processes of social construction. The role of shame highlights the importance of conformity and transgression, and of shamers who police the boundaries between them. These processes of institutionalization are mediated by power relations, which need to be understood as historically specific and asymmetric, rather than universal and consensual. Thus, the disciplinary mechanisms operating in institutional settings have “power effects as they sort, rank, homogenize, differentiate, individualize, and produce the rules that are at once both inclusive and exclusive of populations of individuals” (Cooper et al., 2008:684).

But it is the precariousness of institutional closures and the stability they beget that also opens opportunities for institutional change. For instance, Willmott (2011) suggests that processes of emancipation “involve institutional work in developing new ‘typifications of habitualized actions’” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967: 72, cited in Willmott, 2011). In other words, under conditions of institutional pluralism and multiple memberships, persons can be motivated by power asymmetries and deprivations in particular institutional communities to alter their commitments to the diverse communities in which they are members, reducing some commitments and increasing others, thereby potentially mitigating those deprivations. They can also move toward alternative communities. Struggles against deprivation are possible, Willmott (2011:70) argues, because every institutional closure is inherently precarious and temporary as they are accomplished through social relationships that are themselves “inherently subject to dislocation.” At the same time, any “emancipatory” changes in commitments also represent new
patterns of subjectification, highlighting that emancipation is not a reified state, but rather an ongoing process of subjectification in alternative communities. Robust conceptualizations of pluralistic institutional communities, of the multiplicity of membership, and competing solidarities, augment our understanding of the dynamics of social dislocation that underpin the ever-present reality of subjectification and alter our understanding of persons’ participation in institutional reproduction.

Our work on institutional communities also engages and enriches current conversations that position communities as central in institutional processes (Marquis et al., 2011a) and highlight their role in facilitating the institutionalization of practices as patterned activity (Thornton et al., 2012). Our work, by incorporating emotion, complements sensemaking explanations for how such practices are created and become established, but more importantly, begins to explain why it may happen. In particular, our analysis of reactions to felt shame suggests sensemaking may be triggered by a perceived risk to the valued social bonds that anchor persons’ membership in institutional communities and participation in institutional processes. In other words, our focus on shame identifies social bonds and the threat of social dislocation (Willmott, 2011), rather than institutional logics, as engines of institutionalization.

Our analysis of shame, shaming, and reactions to shaming shows that shame – and very likely other social emotions that pertain to the evaluation and preservation of valued social bonds – figure in processes of subjectification and therefore in institutional reproduction and change. This suggests that institutional processes can be meaningfully framed as a dialectical process between subjectification and resistance, leading to emancipation in the form of an alternative subjectification in a new dialectic cycle. As various institutional communities each mediate and distill complexity in their distinctive ways, they set the stage for interconnected patterns of
subjectification, and enable heterogeneous, "divergent, incompatible productions" within the larger, interconnected system as a whole (Benson, 1977:4). In short, they set the stage for what in dialectical terms is a totality of social relations and prescribed ways of being existing in tension. This suggests that the management of multiple memberships – and associated patterns of resistance and ensuing affirmation or realignment of one’s memberships – can then be seen as a form of praxis (Creed et al., 2010; Seo & Creed, 2002).

Institutional Communities, History, and Emotional Commitments

Finally, as our work invites the incorporation of social emotions, such as shame, it suggests the importance of theorizing particular cultural resources – such as stories and narratives (Zilber, 2002) or practices (Hallett, 2011; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) – and sheds light on which are more likely to be used and useful in meaning-making: those that encode different social bonds among community members and therefore resonate emotionally with participants differently. This could help us identify, a priori, which narratives and which narrators in an institutional contest may be more likely to be accepted (e.g., Zilber, 2002) or attended to (Ocasio, 1997), based on an assessment of the social bonds that people have to one another, and to one another’s narratives and values. Following Lakoff (2004), we would argue that in institutional processes – and perhaps particularly in settings where the legitimacy of a practice or claim is contested – people are less apt to think in terms of programs, self-interest or logics and instead are more likely to be moved by value commitments and claims that resonate with self-narratives and deeply-rooted relational paradigms. Thus, our integrating of shame, shaming and the shame response into institutional explanations helps advance our understanding of the social underpinnings of persons’ motivation and intentionality in institutional processes because it
emphasizes emotional commitments to other community members as the mechanism through which commitments to institutional arrangements emerge (Voronov & Vince, 2012).

In making emotional and social bonds central to an understanding of persons’ experiences of institutional communities, we move beyond purely “interest based” notions of community, notions that reduce people to imperfect cognitive actors in the institutional realm. This offers an explanation why people may or may not “act as enthusiastic defenders” of an institutional order (Voronov & Vince, 2012:70), which is a necessary condition for agents to go “the extra mile” to conduct institutional maintenance or defense work (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Thus, our work helps shift the notion of community from a group of people with mere common interests, or working on a common task, to one where they form bonds, find social support, experience the pangs of shame, or feel the threat of rejection or loss of a community’s standing or integrity. Understanding institutional communities as social microcosms also alerts us to the particularity of institutional norms and reciprocal understandings. Institutional communities have histories that integrate community experiences, shape collective and personal sensemaking, and provide the context for persons’ own unfolding self-narratives. Attending to these histories positions us to better understand institutional processes of meaning-making and ideological contestation (e.g., Hallett, 2011; Zilber, 2002), including those where transgression of accepted norms is part of a deliberate strategy to promote institutional change.

CONCLUSION

Through the exemplar of shame, our work shows how scholars can incorporate discrete, concrete emotions into institutional theory and the value of doing so. Perhaps our most important contribution of this work lies in our effort to denaturalize the cognitive turn in institutional theory. In attempting to dismantle the doppelgängers currently inhabiting institutional
perspectives either as “disembodied minds” or “mindless bodies” (Crites, 1971:309), our work presents people as both cognitive and affective, as animated by both shared understandings and passion and love (Friedland, Forthcoming). Such people live life as members of institutional communities and thrive by preserving valued social bonds through ongoing enactments that ratify their belongingness. The importance of these social bonds causes persons to care about what others think and to “live in the minds of others,” to meet expectations and avoid breaches. Moreover, this intersubjectivity is essential to constituting personhood. In these communities, membership is not equal or democratic. Instead, social relations in a community are shaped by power, both systemic and episodic; shame and the personal self-regulation it underpins are integral to sustaining these communities. This subjectification animates persons’ various emotional commitments (Voronov & Vince, 2012), which, combined with multiple memberships and competing solidarities, create the conditions for persons becoming institutional guardians (DeJordy, 2010) and transgressors. As they manage those multiple solidarities, people engage in ongoing processes of sensemaking and self-narration that are embedded in a dialectical process of subjectification and emancipation (Friedland, 2012). It is only through a deeper engagement with these emotional, embodied, and socially embedded persons that we can begin to understand the inhabited processes of institutional stability of change.
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