

**Sustaining Engagement in Social Purpose Organizations:  
An Institutional Perspective on Positive Organizational Practices**

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## Abstract

This exploratory study seeks to develop theoretical insight into positive institutional work via a qualitative inquiry into the practices that constitute and sustain organizational engagement in social purpose organizations. Synthesizing the emerging field of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) (Cameron, Dutton et al., 2003), I define ‘positive’ as a quality that reflects a state of intrinsic subjective fulfillment situated in a broader extrinsic framework of social, moral, and/or spiritual meaningfulness. The study focuses on organizational engagement as a particularly rich exemplar of the kinds of positive phenomena taken up by POS scholars. Based on existing empirical work (Kahn, 1990; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; May, Gilson et al., 2004; Schaufeli, Bakker et al., 2006), I define organizational engagement as a resilient, intersubjective experience of attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning.

Responding to the call of POS researchers to explore positive institution-building (Bernstein, 2003), and working from a neoinstitutional perspective (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Scott, 2001), I develop comparative case studies of three social purpose organizations that have proven to be unusually engaging.

The case studies show that organizational engagement is constituted and sustained via three sets of practices:

1. Transboundary Work: Practices that challenge role, task, group, and purpose boundaries, making those boundaries more pliable and permeable.
2. Inscaping: Practices that surface the inner, subjective experiences of organization members.
3. Expression: Practices that simultaneously express the needs, perspectives, and experiences of individual organization members *and* the identity of the organization as a whole.

These practices suggest a mode of positive institutional work that differs from the institutional work portrayed in the literature (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). I theorize that positive institutional work has the following qualities: it is aspirationally motivated rather than protectively motivated; it is rooted in experiential legitimacy rather than symbolic legitimacy; its primary mode of agency is dialogical inquiry rather than dialectical contest.

By integrating neoinstitutional theory with Positive Organizational Scholarship, this study fills significant gaps in our understanding of institutional work while simultaneously developing a robust typology of approaches to organizational engagement that should prove useful to social change practitioners.

## Résumé

*Cette étude exploratoire développe une compréhension théorique du travail institutionnel positif par le biais d'une enquête qualitative des pratiques qui constituent et maintiennent l'engagement organisationnel dans les organismes à vocations sociales. Afin d'effectuer une synthèse du champ d'études émergent qu'est le Positive Organizational Scholarship (Recherche concernant les phénomènes organisationnels positifs) (Cameron, Dutton et al., 2003), je définis le terme «positif» comme une qualité reflétant un sentiment intrinsèque et subjectif d'accomplissement au sein d'un plus vaste cadre extrinsèque de sens moral, social et/ou spirituel. Cette étude se concentre sur l'engagement organisationnel, qui est un exemple particulièrement riche du type de phénomènes positifs dont traitent les spécialistes en P.O.S. En me basant sur un travail empirique existant (Kahn, 1990; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; May, Gilson et al., 2004; Schaufeli, Bakker et al., 2006), je définis l'engagement organisationnel comme une expérience d'harmonisation, de croissance, mutuelle et signifiante qui est à la fois résiliente et intersubjective.*

*Afin de répondre à l'appel des chercheurs en Positive Organizational Scholarship (P.O.S) qui invitent à l'exploration de la construction d'institutions positives (Bernstein, 2003) et en travaillant à partir d'une perspective néo-institutionnelle (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Scott, 2001), j'ai rédigé des études de cas comparant trois organisations à vocations sociales qui se sont avérées particulièrement engageantes.*

*Ces études de cas démontrent que l'engagement organisationnel se constitue et se maintient par le biais de trois groupes de pratiques :*

- 1- Le travail transfrontières: Constitué de pratiques qui remettent en question la délimitation des rôles, des tâches, des groupes et des objectifs, rendant ainsi ces frontières plus flexibles et perméables.*
- 2- Le Inscaping : Constitué de pratiques qui ramènent à la surface les expériences intimes et subjectives des membres de l'organisation.*
- 3- L'expression : Constitué de pratiques qui expriment simultanément les besoins, les perspectives et les expériences des membres individuels de l'organisation ainsi que l'identité de l'organisation dans son ensemble.*

*Ces pratiques suggèrent qu'il existe un mode de travail institutionnel positif qui diffère de celui décrit dans la littérature (Lawrence et Suddaby, 2006). Je théorise que le travail institutionnel positif possède les qualités suivantes : c'est un travail auquel on aspire plutôt qu'un travail qu'on tente d'éviter, il est basé sur une légitimité vécue plutôt que symbolique et son mode premier d'action est le questionnement dialogique plutôt que la compétition dialectique.*

*En intégrant la théorie néo-institutionnelle et le Positive Organizational Scholarship, cette étude comble des manques importants dans notre compréhension du travail institutionnel tout en développant une robuste typologie des approches à l'engagement organisationnel qui devrait être utile pour les praticiens du changement social.*

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doctoral students wandering the halls at all hours. Special thanks to program administrator Stella Scalia, a wrangler and advocate who juggles the troubles and deadlines of dozens of us at a time. How she has managed not to throw even one doctoral student out of a fifth floor window during her time here I don't know. Thanks also to Hector Cantor who keeps the entire place running and has been a good friend to me and to many, many others. If you need a wise word, a friendly beer, or a sharp game of pool, you can never do better than Hector. And special thanks to Santa Balanca-Rodrigues who always had something kind to say and who could always find Henry when I needed him, no matter where he was in the world.

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While working on this thesis, I spent much of my time teaching. I am very grateful to all of the students I've taught and learned from. No matter how tired I was, a few minutes in class with them always gave me new energy. I am fond of them all, even the ones who

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In a fit of research modesty, I told the three organizations that I studied for this thesis that they would remain anonymous. I regret it. I don't think they cared about that anonymity in the slightest. Certainly the portrait I paint of them here is flattering enough. But the forms I signed promised it, so I am unable to thank them by name. This is too bad, because I owe them a great deal of thanks. I had unlimited access in each organization, and people spoke freely and openly about things that were very close to their hearts. So to all the people who participated in focus groups, interviews, and observations, thanks indeed.

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# 1

## Introduction

This study was born out of my experience pursuing social change work in Baltimore, Maryland during the 1990s. The community sector is a wonderful place to work. It is filled with passionate people pursuing meaningful callings. During my time in Baltimore, I collaborated with incredibly diverse groups of neighborhood residents, community organizers, counselors, advocates, developers, politicians, funders, and business people. Some of the projects we worked on were more successful than others, but they were all interesting, and even the failures helped us to learn.

Still, I always sensed that something wasn't quite right. The organizations I encountered felt clunky and dispiriting. If they weren't lifeless, they were certainly fatigued. I hadn't the vaguest idea why. The work we were doing was important. The people involved were kind and diligent. They cared about the communities they served. But often they too seemed tired as they moved through their days, and it was hard for any of us really to know what kind of impact we were making. Relationships among the people involved in the organizations and projects I crossed paths with were friendly but seemed to have little vitality or depth.

After I had gained some experience, I was given the chance to spearhead the creation of a new organization, and I was determined that this organization would feel different than the others I had been involved with. Baltimore Caregivers was to be a nonprofit, health care staffing company that would hire people transitioning off of welfare and train them to be nursing aides. One of the goals of the project was that as the organization got on its feet it would gradually transition to become a full-fledged, for-profit worker cooperative. We rented a mouse-ridden suite of vacant offices above a small, community bank. We recruited our first group of nine caregiver trainees. And we began.

We set out to create a vibrant and human place, where people would participate authentically in their own work lives. We also set out to create a staffing business that would make money by subcontracting nursing aide hours from nursing homes, assisted

living facilities, and home care agencies. We knew little about how to achieve either goal, but we did our best. For a time, we did manage to sustain an organization of considerable spirit. Despite the fact that most members worked offsite, there were often a number of people happily buzzing about the office. Friendships formed. People's lives changed. We graduated several cohorts of trainees.

We also encountered one difficulty after another. Contracts came and went. People showed up for their shifts or didn't. Personal crises often loomed large. The stress of monitoring a 24-hour service burned people out. Eventually the organization's energy ran down. We were unable to sustain it.

We tried all sorts of ways to foster connections between the needs of organization members and the needs of our health care contractors. We went through various scheduling and incentive systems including having caregivers schedule themselves. We implemented policies, revised them, discarded them. We held meetings, retreats, and celebrations. Caregivers got involved in hiring, training, planning, and administration. We shifted roles. We changed clients. We tried to be kind to everyone who came in the door. We cultivated community as best we knew how. We fired people more frequently than we were comfortable with. We were quick to act, quick to make decisions after the most cursory conversations, and quick to include people in those conversations. We were blithely experimental, and though our hearts were in the right places, I'm sure, our experiments lacked ground. They were never rooted in real deliberation, real community. They grew from the idea of community, but not from its practice. We had no real understanding of what that practice might be.

We never did manage to make much money, but, thanks to the support of funders and of our parent organization, we survived for three mostly happy years before finally closing our doors. Convinced that the key to creating meaningful social change lay in understanding more about the organizations that pursued such change, I enrolled in a Ph.D. program at McGill to study organizational engagement, and I moved to Montreal.

Early on during my coursework, I was looking for a social purpose organization with which to do some pilot ethnographic work. I hoped to find an organization that was deeply engaging in ways I had not encountered in my previous work. My partner, Tana, suggested a small meals-on-wheels organization she had heard about as being a particularly lively place – the organization I refer to as Food Cycle in this study. On the surface, few types of social purpose organizations could have been less attractive to me. There are thousands of meals-on-wheels programs in North America preparing meals and delivering them to people living with a loss of autonomy. Most of the programs rely heavily on volunteers. It is a valuable and unfortunately necessary service, but there is nothing particularly innovative about it. Such programs run now very similarly to the way they ran decades ago when they were first conceived. I was looking for something more current, more visionary. Still, I kept hearing about Food Cycle’s astonishing ability to attract volunteers, particularly young people. The organization did no advertising and almost no outreach, but at any given time it had some 200 volunteers actively engaged in its work. It also was known for focusing on intergenerational community building and the personal development of both clients and volunteers. Though the meals were important, they were seen as a vehicle for deeper change, not as an end in themselves.

So I poked my head in the door one day, and in some ways have never left. What I found was a place brimming with vitality, enthusiasm, and a general sense of invitation, but without anything cliquish in its culture or dogmatic in its mission. All sorts of people interacted with the organization in all sorts of ways. Yet they described their experiences there in very similar terms. Most saw Food Cycle as a place where they could explore parts of themselves and interact with other people in particularly profound, yet unforced ways, all while connecting to a larger sense of community and possibility that itself was gentle, non-ideological, and often even unarticulated. People talked about a kind of freedom – the freedom to be oneself, to share with others in simple and satisfying ways, and to participate in the work precisely in the manner and to the degree that they wanted. I couldn’t have asked for a richer organizational partner with which to pursue my inquiries.

In the meantime, I began reading the emerging literature on Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) (Cameron, Dutton, et al., 2003) and was delighted to find a broad community of scholars exploring similar questions around how organizations work when they are at their life-giving best. That literature is filled with theories and examples of the kinds of relational patterns that can make organizations energizing, noble, compassionate, and generative. My own organizational experiences, however, left me skeptical, not that such relational patterns could exist – I could see them before my eyes at Food Cycle – but that we really had an understanding of how they could be created and sustained. I knew that ideas, policies, structures, etc. were only partial enablers at best. From my own experiences and from what I was seeing at Food Cycle, positive organizational patterns came to life and were embedded via practices – the daily, often subconscious, patterns of interaction among organization members. Many POS scholars acknowledge the fundamental role that practices play, but the discussion of practices in POS articles is often provisional. Where practices are gone into in depth (often in articles related to specific organizational interventions like Appreciative Inquiry (Srivastava and Cooperrider, 1987)), there is a richness of explanation that seems to generate both broad theoretical insight and approachable prescriptions for intentional action.

Also from my own experience, I knew that practices were stubborn things. The common practices that shape our social lives are deeply embedded, not only in our behaviors but in our minds. Those practices are reality to us, and it is hard to see beyond them. Even when we try consciously to create new patterns, old patterns encroach. It is for this reason that I turned to institutional theory in sociology (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Scott, 2001). That branch of institutional theory is essentially the study of how widely shared social patterns emerge from our daily micro-interactions and how those fundamentally intersubjective patterns come to be taken-for-granted as objective reality. The first great work of modern institutional theory was not written by Selznick in 1949 or Berger and Luckman in 1966. It was written by Cervantes in 1605. Don Quixote is the story of a man who absorbs the institutionalized practices of chivalry so deeply that he sees giants where there are only windmills, dark wizards where there are only friars. The windmill *is* a giant to Don Quixote. The friar *is* a wizard. It is not an opinion, desire, or moral leaning. It is a

cognitive fact. He cannot be convinced otherwise. Institutional theory considers just such reality-making in terms of social patterns, from handshakes to marriages to monetary systems.

The present study builds off of insights synthesized from POS and institutional theory to explore the question of how engagement practices in particular and positive practices in general come to be sustained in social purpose organizations. It involves a qualitative inquiry into Food Cycle and two additional organizations that are unusually engaging.

Its broad questions are:

1. What are the practices that constitute organizational engagement in social purpose organizations?
2. How can we sustain such engagement over time, even in the face of environmental shifts?
3. To what degree can we be intentional about such engagement?
4. How does organizational engagement relate to the broader social change goals of social purpose organizations?

To craft a working definition of organizational engagement, I draw heavily from the POS literature (Bernstein, 2003; Cameron, Dutton et al., 2003; Caza and Caza, 2008) as well as related work on engagement (Kahn, 1990; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; May, Gilson et al., 2004; Schaufeli, Bakker et al., 2006). I root my analysis of institutional stability in the neoinstitutional literature in sociology (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Giddens, 1984; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Scott, 2001) with particular attention to the subset of that literature concerned with agency and institutional work (DiMaggio, 1988; Colomy, 1998; Beckert, 1999; Lawrence, 1999; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006).

This study responds to the call from POS scholars to develop insight into positive institutions (Bernstein, 2003). My hope is that this research will contribute to a new theory of positive institutional work. As positive branches of psychology, organizational

behavior, organizational development, organization theory, and community development continue to mature, we come closer to the possibility of arriving at an integrative perspective on how vibrant social systems may be nurtured and sustained.

Personally, thanks to the three organizations I spent time with, this study of organizational engagement has itself been deeply engaging for me. I hope that that sense of engagement comes through to the reader, particularly in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, where I do my best to bring these organizations to life.

## Literature Review

### ***Social Purpose Organizations***

Because my underlying interest is in the way that organizations can catalyze meaningful and positive social innovation, this study will focus on social purpose organizations. Some of the findings may well port to traditional business organizations, but other findings may be dependent on the particular way that social purpose organizations understand and interact with that middle word, ‘purpose’.

By ‘social purpose organization’ (SPO), I am referring to any organization whose primary purpose is to achieve a social outcome. Examples include formal and informal social movement organizations, social service organizations, development organizations, advocacy groups, educational institutions, healthcare institutions, religious institutions, public agencies, and social enterprises (organizations that use market-based strategies to meet a public social objective).

‘Social Purpose Organization’ is not a term used in the literature. The reason for adopting a novel definition that conflates organizational forms typically studied separately is that socially focused organizations are increasingly taking on networked, collaborative, and hybrid forms. Service and community organizations are consciously working to further broad social change goals (Chetkovich and Kunreuther, 2006; Hawken, 2007). Global change organizations in the form of inter-organizational networks are emerging that transcend previously rigid sectoral boundaries (Cooperrider and Dutton, 1999). Private advocacy organizations adopt a heterogeneous array of organizational forms (Minkoff, Aisenbrey et al., 2008). Publicly funded social services are being delivered by networks of public and community-based organizations (Graddy and Chen, 2006). Public agencies can take on counter-establishment advocacy roles (Lambright and O’Gormon, 1992). Social entrepreneurs use market techniques to create social enterprises (Masseti, 2008). The increasing development of hybrid and network forms argues strongly that it makes

more sense to look at social purpose organizations from a field perspective than from a sub-sectoral perspective, if we adopt Scott's (1994) perspective of a field as describing "the existence of a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside of the field" (207-8).

And what do I mean by 'purpose'? Organizational scholars have a number of ways of thinking about purpose. Classical definitions focus on a unitary conception of purpose as the organization's collection of formalized goals (Scott, 1998). Other definitions emphasize politics and negotiation, describing organizational purpose in terms of the interaction of divergent goals and interests of various actors. From this perspective, the organization's formal goal definitions have no particular priority, as Cyert and March (1992) illustrate nicely: "Ultimately, it makes only slightly more sense to say that the goal of a business organization is to maximize profit than to say that its goal is to maximize the salary of Sam Smith, Assistant to the Janitor" (34).

As will become clearer in the ensuing sections, my use of 'purpose' centers not around a particular theoretical abstraction or a framework of individual exchange but around the ways that *shared* purpose is experienced in the daily, practical consciousness of organization members. Consequently I will adopt Warriner's (1965) heuristic definition of purpose: "collective assumptions made by participants in the organization as to the functions of each of the activities" they pursue (143). That is, organizational purposes are the shared meanings and goals that organizational members ascribe to the things they actually do. He contrasts this definition with both a purely formal definition (an organization's purpose is whatever it says it does) and a purely outcome-based approach (an organization's purposes is whatever it actually does). Instead, Warriner sees purpose as rooted in the "logics" that members use to make sense of their work (an organization's purpose is whatever its members think it does). By 'logics' he means beliefs and cognitive categories that "provide the general 'definitions of the situation' as well as specific definitions of the major objects and events in the life of the organization"

(143). This is the definition that I think most aptly captures the way that people in SPOs think about and work with the social ‘purposes’ in which they are invested.

### ***Positive Organizational Scholarship and Organizational Engagement***

In this section I will offer an overview of the literature on Positive Organizational Scholarship and derive an emergent definition of ‘positive’ from that literature. I will then synthesize the empirical research on engagement, framing engagement as a four-dimensional positive construct involving attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning. I will show that engagement is a particularly rich exemplar of positive phenomena, and therefore an appropriate lens through which to theorize about positive experiences as a whole. Finally, I will operationalize a working definition of engagement at the organizational level.

### **Defining the ‘Positive’ in Positive Organizational Scholarship**

Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) is an emerging stream of thought within organization studies. It is largely a product of the current decade, but has various roots in positive psychology, organizational development (particularly via appreciative inquiry), community psychology, humanistic organizational behavior, prosocial motivation, citizenship behavior, and corporate social responsibility (Cameron, Dutton et al., 2003; Cameron and Caza, 2004). POS seeks to explore “positive deviance” (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004) or “especially positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations and their members” (Cameron, Dutton et al., 2003: 4). POS is framed as a new paradigm in organization studies – not a substitute for, but an alternative and complement to, problem-focused, deficit-based approaches (Caza and Caza, 2008).

Early critics of POS argue that POS researchers have not adequately differentiated POS from traditional organizational studies frameworks concerned with ostensibly positive constructs, nor have POS researchers even clearly defined what they mean by ‘positive’ (George, 2004)<sup>1</sup>. And in fact, POS theorists *have* been wary of ascribing a unifying

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, critiques of the related field of Positive Organizational Behavior (POB) have complained of construct proliferation and inadequate definition (Hackman, 2009).

definition to ‘positive’ in POS. Instead, introductions to POS typically provide laundry lists of the kinds of things POS researchers study, e.g., thriving, flourishing, abundance, resilience, virtuousness (including specific virtues like compassion, forgiveness, courage) vitality, meaningfulness, exhilaration, and high-quality connections (Cameron, Dutton et al., 2003). To be fair to the critics, some explanations of POS can make it challenging to see how POS offers anything new. Consider this quote from one of the field’s leading scholars:

*We are trying to be very clear that positive organizational scholarship is multidimensional. It’s about all different patterns of extraordinary behavior. It is about making money and it is about creating contexts in which people flourish. Any pattern of excellence is a pattern worthy of interest. (Bernstein, 2003: 207)*

‘Any pattern of excellence’ is a broad frame – excellence in what? – and there are ample excellence-based literatures on any number of topics like efficiency, innovation, profitability, etc.

Cameron (Cameron, 2008) argues that ‘positive’ in POS has encompassed three broad convergences of analysis: a focus on extraordinary, positive outcomes or performance; a focus on change processes rooted in strengths and capabilities; and a focus on virtuousness and the intrinsic orientation toward the good. However, I believe an examination of the POS literature reveals an emergent definition of ‘positive’ that further synthesizes Cameron’s three categories. This emergent definition more clearly differentiates POS from traditional work that sees organizational success largely in terms of survival, growth, and profitability. It also differentiates POS from well-established strands of organizational behavior research focused on things like values, commitment, job satisfaction, job involvement, etc. And it sets POS apart from ethics, governance, and strategy literatures on topics like corporate social responsibility and environmental sustainability. I will outline this emergent definition below and then make the case that the interesting, but lightly developed, literature on ‘engagement’ offers a powerful exemplar of the POS frame as a whole.

Most self-identified POS articles have in common an unusual duality. Whether they are describing organizational qualities, processes, structures, or outcomes, they frame the positive phenomena in question from the following two seemingly contradictory perspectives.

1) *Positive phenomena are subjectively fulfilling.* They are energizing, nourishing, and pleasurable for the people involved. They are *experienced* as good in and of themselves. They are intrinsically rewarding or what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) calls “autotelic.” This perspective reflects the “experiential turn” in psychology with its roots in the work of James, Dewey, and Maslow (Rathunde, 2001).

2) *Positive phenomena are rooted in systems of meaning that transcend the organization itself.* They are connected to superordinate moral, social, and/or spiritual conceptions of what is good, both from the vantage point of the theorist and from the vantage point of organizational participants, who experience the phenomena as meaningful.

Thus the ‘positive’ in Positive Organizational Studies is *at the same time* phenomenologically positive (positive as experienced in consciousness), and positive in some larger, more abstract, culturally shared way. For example theorists who explore organizational virtues like hope, gratitude, forgiveness, and resilience (Cameron, 2003; Cameron, Bright et al., 2004) see them as “good to and for human beings” (49). They are moral/cultural categories that contribute to the good of society, but they are also personally fulfilling:

*[W]ell-being is not a consequence of virtuous action but rather an inherent aspect of such action . . . Fulfillment is part and parcel of the actions that manifest virtue. For example, when a work supervisor fairly adjudicates a dispute between two workers, the act of adjudication does not cause her or him (or the workers) to feel satisfied at some later point in time; being satisfied is an inherent aspect of justice in action. (Park and Peterson, 2003)*

Other examples abound. “Vitality” (Feldman and Khademian, 2003) is framed at the experiential level as “physical or mental vigor that creates the capacity to live, grow, and develop” and as “a positive feeling individuals will try to sustain or enhance” (344). But

it is also framed at the social level as an attribute of empowerment and a resource that can “cascade” from the organization out into larger social domains, contributing to civic engagement and healthy democracy. “Meaningfulness” is explored as it is experienced subjectively by organization members “in work” (finding meaning in the actual tasks they perform) and “at work” (finding meaning in organizational membership itself because of the organization’s qualities and its broader place in the world) (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). “Authentic leadership” (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Verbos, Gerard et al., 2007) is conceived of as a state in which leaders act “in accord with the true self,” which is presumed to be rooted in positive traits and virtues like confidence, hope, optimism and resiliency (this is the internal, subjective perspective), but are also “guided by a set of end-values that represent an orientation toward doing what’s right for their constituency” (this is the external, meaning-based perspective) (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). ‘Thriving’ at work is an experiential state involving “a sense of learning (greater understanding and knowledge) and a sense of vitality (aliveness),” but thriving is connected to and promoted by “positive meaning resources” (the connection of work to broader patterns of significance and import) (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe et al., 2005).

Of course not all self-described POS articles develop this duality equally. They exist on a continuum, some being primarily focused on subjective, fulfilling experiences and some on broader systems of meaning. But many deal richly with both perspectives and almost all at least make a nod toward both. In summary, POS scholars are drawn toward exploring multi-dimensional, positive, subjective experiences; they are unembarrassed to introduce broad contestable, external meaning frames; and they are eager to understand the relationship between the two.

The fulfillment/meaning duality distinguishes POS from other streams of thought in a number of ways. Classical organizational behavior approaches often focus on constructs that have a small number of experiential dimensions and are framed instrumentally in terms of organizational goals rather than broader meanings. For example, commitment is seen as identification with an organization based on cognitive acceptance of organizational goals and values, willingness to exert effort for the organization, and

affective desire to remain part of the organization (Swales, 2002). Commitment is not generally placed in relationship to broader moral, social, or spiritual goals, nor is the inner experience of commitment explored in terms of how it actually feels and how it contributes to the development and fulfillment of an individual. On the other end of the spectrum, traditional articles on Corporate Social Responsibility focus on the integration of broad social and environmental values into organizational operations via stakeholder involvement (O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2008), but they do not deeply explore the subjective experience of such integration on stakeholders.

Form this point on, when I use the term 'positive' in this study, I am referring to this quality that emerges in the POS literature: a quality that reflects a state of intrinsic subjective fulfillment situated in a broader extrinsic framework of social, moral, and/or spiritual meaningfulness.

### **Defining Engagement**

Engagement, as it has been defined in the literature, is a state that exemplifies this interaction of fulfilling, energizing, autotelic experiences and larger patterns of share meaning. One might argue that, based on the definition of 'positive' emerging from the POS literature, engagement is the quintessential positive state. At the very least, it is a rich and multi-dimensional state that shares significant attributes with many of the constructs that POS scholars develop.

Bakker and Schaufeli (2008) distinguish three strands of employee engagement literature: engagement as a set of motivating resources; engagement as commitment and extra-role behavior; and engagement as a fulfilling state of work well-being independent of job resources and organizational outcomes. The first strand is about organizational contexts, not experiences or attitudes, thus it is counter to the prevailing view of engagement as an experiential state. The second strand, as the authors argue, is barely distinguishable from the well-established literature on commitment. It is the third strand – phenomenological and autotelic – that is most distinct, fruitful, and aligned with emerging POS literature.

Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2003) are part of that third strand. Building largely on flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre, 1989; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), they define ‘vital engagement’ in a way that fits neatly into our emerging definition of POS. They describe vital engagement as “a certain way of being related to the world” (2003: 86) that has two signal qualities: *flow* and *meaning*.

### ***Flow***

Flow is interaction with the environment characterized by “enjoyed absorption.” It is essentially a state of present, energized fulfillment, in direct contrast to states of boredom and anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). (Though ‘fulfillment’ is not a signal part of the flow vocabulary, Csikszentmihalyi explicitly equates boredom and anxiety with an experience of feeling “unfulfilled” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 2) and describes flow in sociological terms as “the opposite of anomie and alienation” (ibid: 5). Flow interactions are autotelic. Originally, Csikszentmihalyi framed his studies of flow largely in terms of autotelic activities like games, sports, and artistic pursuits (e.g., chess, rock climbing, and painting). But flow can be experienced via any autotelic relationship with activities, ideas, or people. Flow dynamics can be described in a number of ways, but they involve essentially three interrelated classes of experience: attunement, growth, and mutuality. (Note these three terms are not widely used in the flow literature. I adopt them because I think they best synthesize the larger, unclassified set of dynamics found in the flow literature, and they also make it easier to see connections between the flow literatures and broader engagement and POS literatures, as I show.)

#### 1) Attunement in Flow

People describe experiences of flow as involving an energizing, focused sense of absorption, control, and capability. Absorption involves tuning into the experience so fully that little self-consciousness remains and one’s sense of time becomes quite plastic (it may slow down or speed up or, strangely, both). And control, here, is not based on certainty of outcomes. In fact, “. . . it is not possible to experience [this] feeling of control unless one is willing to give up the safety of protective routines” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 59). Instead, one feels equal to whatever may happen. This

kind of control may better be described as the absence of anxiety. A person in flow “[lacks] the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life” (ibid: 59). An important contextual factor leading to attunement is that the nature and complexity of the activity or relationship in question be aligned with one’s perceived capabilities. The activity should be challenging enough to avoid boredom, but not so overwhelming that it produces a high degree of anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre, 1989; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Attunement is also often associated with goal clarity, but it may be experienced in apparently goalless situations where people are simply being rather than doing (ibid). (Csikszentmihalyi argues that even these situations have tacit goals contributing to flow.) Whether there are explicit goals or not, feedback has also been found to be an important condition for producing a sense of attunement. Capability is monitored, reinforced, and developed via feedback about the results of one’s interactions with the environment (ibid).

## 2) Growth in Flow

The second important category of flow dynamics is growth. Attunement involves feeling positively challenged. That experience of challenge is connected to the feeling that one is growing and developing toward one’s potential (c.f. Maslow’s (1943) concept of ‘self actualization’). In flow, the “body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 3). One begins to feel “mastery,” or, even more generally, a sense of participation in determining the content of life” (ibid: 4). This idea of participation is crucial. In something of a paradox, the growth dynamic of flow is not primarily future-oriented. It is linked to having an enjoyable, *present* sense of creative involvement. It can be thought of as “the quality of experience of people who play with and transform the opportunities in their surroundings” (ibid: 149). That quality of experience fosters growth:

*Because the dynamics of flow align optimal subjective experience with the stretching of capacities, to find flow in what one is doing – to be caught up in an activity from moment to moment for its own sake – is to grow. (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003: 92)*

Flow requires both participation and pleasure in that participation. Flow is defeated if either is lacking.

### 3) Mutuality in Flow

Flow also involves a boundary-transcending feeling of oneness with one's environment (including the other people within that environment). The sense of the self as an isolated, discrete entity working within or upon an environment lessens or even disappears. "What slips below the threshold is the *concept* of the self" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 64). As *self-consciousness* decreases, overall consciousness expands and comes to include people and activities that are usually perceived of as external.

*When not preoccupied with our selves, we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are. Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward. This feeling is not just a fancy of the imagination, but is based on a concrete experience of close interaction with some other, an interaction that produces a rare sense of unity with these usually foreign entities. (ibid: 64)*

"Valued aspects" of the self come to be understood and "realized" not simply on their own terms but in and through relationship to others (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003: 88).

### ***Meaning***

Flow by itself is not engagement. Flow describes a momentary experience of attunement, mutuality, and growth. Vital engagement as defined by Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (ibid) is a sustained state, an orientation toward the world that has some resilience. Schaufli, Bakker et al. (2006) found empirical support for the sustained nature of engagement. They describe it as a "persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behavior" (702) and found significant one-year stability in engagement measures. What gives engagement this stability is the way in which individual moments of flow or fulfillment are integrated into a larger pattern that is experienced as meaningful over time. Meaningfulness here is "felt significance" and may be linked to a number of frames: relationships, life goals, religious participation, etc. (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Meaning can be understood to be an interpretation people give to an experience that connects that experience to a deeper purpose and thereby creates stability (Wrzesniewski, 2003). "An experience that draws a person into participation in the world yet holds little subjective significance may

be absorbing – but not vitally engaging. Involving activities are vitally engaging to the extent that they hold meaning for the individual” (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003: 94). Meaning in this sense grows out of an “ongoing relationship with the environment” (ibid: 92).

It’s important to emphasize that flow and meaningfulness here are not two independent experiences. They contribute to and reinforce each other. Positive experiences are enriched by being placed within broader patterns of significance even as new understandings and goals emerge from those very positive experiences (ibid).

*What happens at any given moment is responsive to what happened the moment before within the relationship, rather than being dictated by some drive ascribed to the person or some directive ascribed to the environment. In a flow activity, motivation is emergent in the sense that proximal goals arise out of the interaction between person and object. (ibid: 92)*

Meaning here is “specifically rooted in positive experience” (ibid: 95). “As a person is drawn onward by enjoyable interaction with an object, the meaning of the relationship gradually deepens” (ibid: 95). The meaning experienced during engagement, then, though it may be connected to an external frame (e.g., a religion, a profession) is not static. It is emergent, something that one must continue to discover over time.

The above synthesis of engagement as the interaction between flow and meaning is based largely on the research of Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, but it is buttressed by the work of other researchers, even when the underlying dynamics are named, grouped, and framed slightly differently.

For example, using structural equation modeling, Schaufli, Baker et al. (2006) analyzed 27 different studies of employee well-being in 10 different countries and found empirical support for ‘work engagement’ as a construct with three dimensions:

- Vigor, understood as energy, resilience, investment, persistence.
- Dedication, understood as involvement, significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, challenge.

- Absorption, understood as a state of being fully concentrated, happily engrossed.

We can see in ‘vigor’ and ‘absorption’ essentially a less developed stand-in for flow. Being energized and engrossed in experience are important aspects of flow, though empirical work has allowed us to define the elements of that kind of vigorous absorption much more clearly. ‘Dedication’ may be seen as a stand-in for meaning, particularly as it represents a long-term (“involvement”) relationship with activity understood to be “significant.”

Kahn (1990) uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches to define personal engagement within organizations as the physical, cognitive, and emotional “harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles” (694). When people are engaged, they are expressing and employing their “preferred sel[ves] in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence . . . and active, full role performance” (700). He develops the concept of ‘presence’ further to include attentiveness, connection, integration, and focus (Kahn, 1992)<sup>2</sup>. His constructs resonate with Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi’s vital engagement in several ways. Presence involves a quality of attention or absorption that is not disabled by anxiety (c.f. attunement), an honoring of and full focus on the work at hand (again, c.f. attunement), an empathic connection to others and a sense of systemic wholeness (c.f. mutuality), and authenticity and integration of all aspects of the self (c.f. growth). Engagement involves perceived meaningfulness, and meaningfulness is facilitated by experiences that offer a sense of competence (c.f. attunement), growth, and rewarding interpersonal interactions (c.f. mutuality). In addition, many of the important contextual features that Kahn describes (e.g., feedback) have direct analogues in the flow literature.

May, Gilson, and Harter’s (2004) research on meaningfulness, safety, and availability explores engagement from the perspective of work-role fit and self-efficacy (attunement

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<sup>2</sup> See also related work on mindfulness (e.g., Argote, 2006; Thomas 2006; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006; Weick and Putnam, 2006; Brown and Ryan, 2003).

and growth), rewarding and supportive relationships (mutuality), and the meanings that people ascribe to their work.

Bloch's (2000) empirical work on flow offers support for three phenomenological structures "arising in different combinations within concrete experiences of flow" (43):

1. Achievement – an experience of "excitement, presence, competence, optimacy" (attunement and growth).
2. Unity/Totality – an experience of self-transcendence, power, freedom, and "a fusion or blending with the outer world" (mutuality).
3. Other Spheres of Meaning – an experience of being absorbed in a sphere of meaning that is outside of the reality of everyday life.

Work on Open Systems Theory associates intrinsic motivation with challenging goals and feedback (attunement), opportunity to learn (growth), mutual support and respect (mutuality), and meaningfulness (Hornstein and de Guerre, 2006).

In summary, a working definition of engagement as a sustained, experiential state integrating attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning has theoretical and empirical support from researchers working from a number of different perspectives.

### **Engagement as an exemplar of POS**

I have argued that engagement can be seen as an exemplar for POS in that POS is concerned with the interaction of fulfilling subjective experiences and larger systems of meaning. That interaction generally distinguishes the framing of the POS orientation from more traditional orientations. But engagement also exemplifies the *content* of many POS constructs. While POS articles explore a wide range of phenomena, those phenomena tend to invoke many of the relational dynamics ascribed to engagement, insofar as:

1. *They involve the feeling of attunement as focus, energy, control and competence.*  
They increase the vitality and vibrancy of the organization and those participating in

it. This energy is also associated with a feeling of presence or absorption and self-efficacy (see e.g., Baker, Cross et al., 2003; Clifton and Harter, 2003; Cooperrider and Skerka, 2003; Dutton and Heaphy, 2003; Feldman and Khademian, 2003; Frederickson, 2003; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2003; Wrzesniewski, 2003; Quinn, 2007; Walter and Bruch, 2008).

2. *They are oriented toward growth and learning.* They present a dynamic picture of individual and organizational development (see e.g., Higgins, 1997; Bateman and Porath, 2003; Clifton and Harter, 2003; Emmons, 2003; Feldman and Khademian, 2003; Gittell, 2003; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Roberts, Dutton et al., 2005; Roberts, 2007; Lilius, Worline et al., 2008).
3. *They are rooted in mutuality.* They deepen connections and lower boundaries between the self and others. ‘Others’ may include not only individuals, but activities and systems. POS perspectives move away from seeing relationships as primarily means for the exchange of fixed resources and toward an understanding of relationships as experientially positive in and of themselves and generative with respect to organizational and system resources (Ragins and Dutton, 2007). Positive relationships are rooted in ‘High Quality Connections’ that are “life-giving” (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). (See e.g., Srivastava and Cooperrider, 1999; Bagozzi, 2003; Baker, Cross et al., 2003; Bateman and Porath, 2003; Clifton and Harter, 2003; Cooperrider and Skerka, 2003; Dutton and Heaphy, 2003; Feldman and Khademian, 2003; Gittell, 2003; Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2003; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003; Worline and Quinn, 2003; Dutton, Worline et al., 2006; Baker and Dutton, 2007; Golden-Biddle, GermAnn et al., 2007; Roberts, 2007).
4. *They are concerned with meaningfulness.* Individuals and organizations are in touch with broad social, moral, and spiritual meanings beyond the immediate goals and objectives of the workplace (Cameron, 2003; Emmons, 2003; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Worline and Quinn, 2003; Wrzesniewski, 2003; Golden-Biddle, GermAnn et al., 2007; Carlsen, 2008).

Because its dimensions are so generally reflected in POS work, engagement is a particularly useful phenomenon to explore if one hopes to derive broad theoretical insight about the nature of positive phenomena as a whole.

### **Defining Organizational Engagement**

Positive Organizational Scholarship focuses, of course, not simply on individual-level phenomena but on organizational-level phenomena. I have characterized engagement as a persistent state characterized by the interaction of experienced fulfillment (via attunement, growth, and mutuality) and broader patterns of meaning. What then is *organizational* engagement? There are two approaches typically taken in POS literature to defining an individual construct at the organizational level.

- 1- Focusing on organizational *contexts* that create and/or support the individual construct in question. For example, Park and Peterson (2003) characterize organizational-level virtues as those practices that ensure individual-level virtues will continue to be manifest even as personnel change. While this is an important feature of organizational-level analysis, it doesn't go quite far enough. Imagine an organization where computer programmers work at individual cubicles without interacting with each other at all. It is possible to conceive of the circumstances in which each of the programmers feels individually engaged, say, but it's difficult to accept that such a description provides a complete picture of an organization that is engaged.
- 2- Focusing on organizational *functions* or outputs that mimic the behavior of the individual construct. For example, Feldman and Khademian (2003) define individual vitality as "physical or mental vigor that creates the capacity to live, grow, and develop" (344). They then describe a vital organization as one that nurtures the growth and development of its members (again, the context perspective) and that also "exudes positive energy" itself – energy it can draw on to pursue its objectives (function perspective). The problem with the function perspective is that engagement (or any POS construct) is an experience in consciousness, not simply a behavior or output. How does an organization have an experience in consciousness? To make this problem clearer, supposed we are interested in organizational memory. If we are

interested in memory as a function we can conceive of organizational memory as the ability to store and retrieve historical information. This definition is relatively unproblematic. But if we are interested in how human beings *experience* memory (what does it feel like to remember - cognitively, emotionally, physically), a simple functional definition is inadequate.

The approach that I will adopt here is to treat organizational engagement as a relational construct. That is, organizational engagement is neither a purely *intrasubjective* phenomenon experienced only by individuals nor an objective phenomenon observable only in terms of effect. It is an *intersubjective* phenomenon sustained in and through relationship. The only manner in which an organization can be said to have a consciousness is intersubjectively (Schutz, 1967) – i.e., via relational experiences and shared meanings. Organizational engagement from this perspective is engagement experienced in and through organizational relationships. Engagement is experienced *in* relationship when the relationship itself is collectively apprehended as engaging (i.e., we both/all experience *our interaction* as fulfilling and meaningful). Engagement is experienced *through* relationship when the relationship feeds our individual senses of engagement. The latter is similar to the contextual definition above, except that it specifically defines context in terms of daily relationships rather than in abstract organizational policies or processes. Organizational engagement as a relational construct will become clearer in the next sections where I provide an overview of the relevant literature on social structure and outline the fundamentally relational, interactive nature of institutional practices.

### ***Sustaining Engagement: Institutional Theory and Intentional Change***

With a working definition of organizational engagement, we can now turn our attention to the central question of this study: How can organizational engagement be sustained? By ‘sustained’, I mean largely self-reproducing and relatively resilient in the face of contextual changes. Can engagement – or any positive phenomenon – take on an enduring social reality independent of particular leaders or particular immediate circumstances? Can engagement, in effect, be institutionalized? And since we are focused

on social purpose organizations, we are interested not just in institutional patterns of engagement within the organization but in the way those patterns interact with the larger institutional fields the organization is seeking to strengthen or change.

POS scholars have taken several approaches to exploring the question of how positive phenomena are enabled in organizations:

- A cultural approach in which positive modes of organization are transmitted through norms (Brockner and James, 2008; Walter and Bruch, 2008), symbols (Golden-Biddle, Germann et al., 2007), narratives (Carlsen, 2008), or explicit values statements (Walter and Bruch, 2008).
- A design approach in which positive modes of organization are facilitated by structural features like participative decision-making processes (Feldman and Khademian, 2003), job redesign (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003), and boundary spanning (Gittell, 2003).
- A leadership approach in which positive modes of organization are catalyzed by individuals who have particular traits (e.g., the ability to energize others (Baker, Cross et al., 2003)), who set principled examples (Worline and Quinn, 2003), or who “evangelize” (Golden-Biddle, Germann et al., 2007).

Scholars have also considered self-reinforcing mechanisms (often termed ‘loops’ or ‘spirals’) with respect to more generalized positive dynamics like positive affect or positive relationships. For example, Walter and Bruch (2008) describe a “positive group affect spiral” as a recursive, self-reinforcing dynamic wherein; group members display similar positive emotions; this similarity fosters high quality relationships; those relationships in turn foster increased similarity of positive emotions; and so on. They outline several psychological mechanisms (e.g., empathy, emotional contagion, emotional comparison) at work in this spiral. Thus we can see the beginnings of a partial theory of how positive dynamics can come to be sustained within organizations. But the theory focuses only on affect, whereas integrated states like engagement are multi-dimensional (cognitive, affective, physical). Cooperrider and Skerka (2003) describe a

more multi-dimensional spiral triggered by an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process of searching out an organization's "positive core," or the places in its relational network where it is most alive. The underlying mechanism at work is that "human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about" (234). Again this is a promising partial theory, but it is rooted in a specific intervention. How can this kind of inquiry take on a structural quality that is sustained via ongoing interaction but is independent of any specific person or intervention?

All of the above approaches offer insight into how positive phenomena might be sustained in organizations, but they are middle-range explanations. The POS literature currently offers few explanations at the micro-level of positive practices or at the macro-level of generalized theories of how those positive practices come to be sustained across time and space.<sup>3</sup> These levels are critical to explore more fully if we want to understand how to intentionally nurture positive organizations.

A practice focus allows us to examine the actual, situated experiences of people as they enact positive phenomena. That is, it is one thing to say that positive phenomena are reinforced through cultures or through structural principles, but how are those cultures or principles reproduced on an everyday basis? What do people do? How, specifically, do they interact with each other within their work contexts? What is the role of agency or intention in the ongoing enactment of those cultures or principles? There are a handful of POS articles that develop a practice perspective. Baker and Dutton (2007) explore 'positive social capital' in terms of practices. They define social capital as positive "if the means by which social capital is created expands the generative capacity of people and groups" (326). They then examine specific practices that contribute<sup>4</sup> to positive social capital, such as selecting new organization members based on their relational skills, or

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<sup>3</sup> As noted, Appreciative Inquiry is one of the only POS theories that offer the beginnings of a generalized, essentially institutional theory.

<sup>4</sup> The authors call the practices they explore 'enablers' of social capital, but, as I argue in detail in the next section, practices don't enable or cause social patterns and individual experiences; they constitute those patterns and experiences. That is, a certain mode of employee selection *is* a form of ongoing social capital reproduction. As people are interviewed in a certain way, welcomed in a certain way, etc. social capital is being continuously created. See below for a much fuller explication of this line of argument, which has its roots in neoinstitutional/structurationist theory.

rotating people through multiple departments. Similarly, Wrzesniewski (2003) in an article on ‘positive meaning’ in work, proposes a handful of practices that might invoke such meaning. ‘Job crafting’ (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001), for example, involves making physical or cognitive changes to the task or relational boundaries of one’s work. Other enablers of meaning in the article, such as having an orientation to work as a calling, are framed less as practices than as individual characteristics. The article ends, as do many POS articles, with what is essentially a call for more practice research into “how managers and coworkers can help to create social and organizational contexts in which Callings can be expressed, and in which job crafting in service of finding deeper meaning in work is encouraged” (307). Practice research is one important frontier in POS.

A broader, synthetic, theoretical focus, on the other hand, will allow us to begin to make sense of not just the practices that constitute various positive phenomena, but how such practices are sustained. Job crafting, for example, cannot simply be implemented by a policy, or by the exhortation of a manager. A practice is not simply an action, but a complex interweaving of actions, values, beliefs, emotions, rules, and relationships. Moreover, various categories and levels of practices are mutually implicated. Practices interrelate. They recursively create each other. To understand how positive practices are sustained, we have to explore the general processes, mechanisms, and types of intentional work by which practices cohere into larger systems of action, meaning, and experience. How, in essence, do micro-level practices and macro-level social structures interact?

### **Institutional Theory**

That question is precisely the question that sociological branches of institutional theory were developed to explore. Whereas institutional perspectives in political science and economics focus primarily on regulatory structures (e.g., legislatures), and theorize their development and maintenance largely in terms of rational actor models of motivation and behavior (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991), sociological perspectives on institutions focus on a wide range of social structures (e.g., marriages, professions, organizational forms) and are largely rooted in normative and cognitive models of motivation and behavior (ibid). The central question undergirding sociological institutional theory is, “How is it possible

that subjective meanings *become* objective facticities? . . . How is it possible that human activities should produce a world of things?” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 18).

Institutions are “those practices which have the greatest time-space extensions within [societal] totalities” (Giddens, 1984: 17). Institutionalization is not a binary state, it is a variable (Zucker, 1977). Practices are institutionalized to the degree that they acquire legitimacy –broadly defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995: 574). Institutionalized practices are developed, integrated, and maintained in organizational ‘fields.’ An organizational field is a set of organizations “bounded by the presence of shared cultural-cognitive or normative frameworks or a common regulatory system so as to ‘constitute a recognized area of institutional life’” (Scott, 2001: 84). Thus a field is not limited to organizations of a certain industrial or sectoral type. A field includes all organizational actors who share in a given meaning system and interact with each other by virtue of that meaning system (Scott, 1994). If we think of book publishing, say, as a field, it would include not only publishers themselves, but bookstores, review departments of various media outlets, university departments, professional writers’ associations, printers and printer’s unions, related public regulatory agencies, etc.

In organization studies, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) distinguish old institutionalism (Selznick, 1984 (1949); Selznick, 1984 (1957)) from new institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In old institutionalism, organizational stability in the face of environmental change is seen largely as a product of embedded values and political cooptation. Organizational *cultures* become institutionalized as organizational values become more widely and deeply shared by members and as conflicting interests are aligned with organizational interests (e.g., by formally joining with a competing organization or actor).

New institutionalism attributes organizational stability to the persistence of cognitive schema as they are reproduced via interaction. A given *structure* is persistent in society

(i.e., institutionalized) not because it provides a rational solution to a technical problem (e.g., transaction costs), or because it is valued by actors, or because it serves particular interests (though all three of those things might be true). The structure is persistent because it is taken *as* reality. It is cognitively submerged to the point that exploring, or even knowing about, alternatives becomes increasingly difficult. “This is how these things are done” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). We come to take institutionalized practices for granted through interaction. Activity becomes habitualized, and we develop shared typifications of both actor (e.g., “cook”) and action (e.g., “cooking”) that are ritualized and objectified – that is, seen as existing apart from the individuals who were originally interacting (ibid). Structures may of course be reproduced and diffused in a number of ways: through coercion (by the state, professional associations, or organizations with considerable resource power), through mimesis (imitation in the face of uncertainty), and/or through normative pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). But the most deeply institutionalized structures do not rely primarily on coercive or normative pressure nor do they rely on the rational selection of whom or what to imitate.

*Institutions also, by the very fact of their existence, control human conduct by setting predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible. It is important to stress that this controlling character is inherent in institutionalization as such, prior to or apart from any mechanisms or sanctions specifically set up to support an institution . . . Additional control mechanisms are required only insofar as the processes of institutionalization are less than completely successful. (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 55)*

Now before considering more carefully the question of what it would mean to institutionalize a positive phenomenon like organizational engagement, we have to define just what new institutional theorists mean by structure.

## **Structure**

Early organization scholars studied organizational structure as reflective of and implicated in broader social structures (e.g., political systems, cultural systems, belief systems, etc.), but as the discipline of organization studies matured, structure came to be seen largely in terms of reified, rational patterns of authority, communication, and activity, driven primarily by instrumental needs associated with the economic and

technical objectives of the firm (Lounsbury and Ventresca, 2003). The 1990's saw a re-emergence of interest in organizational structure from a broader sociological perspective, but with a new focus on interaction, practice, and institutionalization building off of ethnomethodological, social-constructionist traditions (e.g., Meade, Goffman, Berger and Luckmann, Bourdieu, Giddens). Lounsbury and Ventresca (ibid) call this development "the new structuralism in organization studies." I approach structure from this new structuralist perspective, the essential features of which I would synthesize in the following way:

- *Duality*. Agents and structures comprise a duality in which each is constitutive of the other. Social agents do not exist prior to or independently of social structures. The 'self' is defined subjectively and objectively through a structuring process that involves 'others' – both immediately apparent, physically present others, and others as they are manifested in broader social relational patterns (rules, customs, roles, etc.) across time and space. 'I' think of myself as a 'self' because I have developed within a social structure. Nor can we say that social structures exist prior to or independently of social agents. Structure is continually produced, reproduced, and/or altered by the daily interactions of individuals. Giddens (1984) terms this duality 'structuration' and describes its essentially recursive nature: "[T]he structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize" (25).
- *The relational self*. Because of the duality described above, individuals and social structures can only be understood in terms of relationships or relational selves (Emirbayer, 1997). The social constructionist tradition (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967) sees the intersubjective relationship as the driver of social creation.

*For social constructionists, what we take to be real is an outcome of social relationships. This is no small matter, either intellectually or politically. [The cognitive perspective of scholars like Piaget, Kelly, and von Glaserfeld] is allied with the individualist tradition in the West, the individual mind is the center of interest. Yet many constructionists are deeply critical of the individualist tradition and search for relational alternatives to understanding and action. (Gergen, 1999: 237)*

In organization studies, there is a substantial (though minority) research tradition rooted in the relational perspective (often framed as ‘sensemaking’) (Bradbury and Lichtenstein, 2000).

- *Knowledge.* Agents are knowledgeable, though not perfectly, about the social worlds they participate in. While some of this knowledge takes the form of theories or ideas, “commonsense ‘knowledge’ . . . must be the central focus of the sociology of knowledge” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The new structural tradition focuses on knowledgeableability in everyday life, and much of this knowledge is practical. “For knowledgeableability is founded less upon discursive than practical consciousness. The knowledge of social conventions, of oneself, and of other human beings, presumed in being able to ‘go on’ in the diversity of contexts of social life is detailed and dazzling. All competent members of society are vastly skilled in the practical accomplishments of social activities and are expert ‘sociologists’” (Giddens, 1984: 26).
- *Interaction and practice.* Since the relational self is at the heart of social structuring, the elemental unit of sociological analysis is not the individual or the system, but the interaction<sup>5</sup>. Scholars have focused on symbolic interaction (Meade, 1934; Collins, 1994) and semi-improvisational performance via interaction rituals (Goffman, 1959). Practice theorists like Bourdieu (1984) and Giddens (1984) develop and critique the interaction-based perspective by situating interactions in terms of *practices*: arrays of activities constitutive of and constituted by fields of social knowledge, belief, power, language, etc. (Barnes, 2001; Schatzki, 2001). In organization studies, ‘community of practice’ scholars argue that the fundamental coordinating challenge is not aligning individual goals with organizational goals but rather aligning the various epistemic frameworks of divergent communities of practice (e.g., technicians and accountants) (Brown and Duguid, 2001).

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the term ‘interaction’ is a bit problematic: Emirbayer (1997) assigns ‘inter-action’ to philosophical and sociological perspectives that presuppose existing, stable individuals who act with each other but do not alter, let alone constitute, each other. The interactionist tradition I’m describing here is rooted in mutually constitutive interaction, comparable to Emirbayer’s ‘trans-action’, which he develops from Dewey.

In summary, social structures are patterns of interaction that are organized via practices. They are enacted by agents with practical, if often tacit, knowledge of those practices. Agents themselves both constitute and are constituted by structural practices.

### **Neoinstitutional Theory, Change, and Agency**

Returning now to the concept of ‘institution’, a practice is institutionalized to the degree that it is reproduced across space and over time and is self-maintaining (i.e., with little conscious or coercive intervention on the part of agents) and resistant to change.

The three central features that distinguish new institutional theory in sociology from older sociological theories and from other branches of institutional theory alike are:

1. Its insistence that institutional practices are largely cognitively taken for granted and therefore mainly constituted via practical action, not via discursive negotiation.
2. Its emphasis on the micro-macro duality of agent and structure, rooted in a cognitive, motivational explanation of human thought and behavior in social interaction. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) argue that you cannot explore institutional processes without at least implicitly theorizing in terms of micro-sociology or social psychology.
3. Its assertion that institutional dynamics are primarily intersubjective. Subjects are mutually constitutive, developing a shared picture of reality via interaction.

The first years of new institutional theory focused mainly on organizational and field-level stability (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). In the late 1980’s and the 1990’s, however, new institutional theorists began to take up the question of institutional change (e.g., DiMaggio, 1988). Clearly, institutional patterns did change over time. How did they change? What were the conditions for change? And what role did human agency play in that change? This exploration of change and agency sparked a renewed interest in old institutionalism with its emphasis on actor-driven politics. Greenwood and Hinings (1996) coined the term ‘neoinstitutionalism’ to describe the fusion between the cognitive roots of new institutionalism and the political agency focus of old institutionalism.

Neoinstitutional thought describes institutional change as the product of functional, political, and social forces (Oliver, 1992) that deinstitutionalize existing institutions (ibid) and catalyze competition among multiple institutional logics (Dacin, Goodstein et al., 2002). Institutional change can be seen as the contested interplay of actors, actions, and meanings (Zilber, 2002). Institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein, 1997) engage in framing contests, attempting to build legitimacy for social structures that privilege their interests and beliefs.

Empirical work suggests that new institutional patterns are likely to emerge as different institutional logics encounter each other through inter-organizational collaboration (Lawrence, Hardy et al., 2002) and discursive politics (Maguire and Hardy, 2006). The strategic institutional actor often uses symbolic management (Elsbach, 1994) to bridge, broker, or translate between older institutional forms and newer. Thus an important feature of institutional change is that older institutional forms are in some sense transfigured into newer forms rather than simply defeated and abandoned. Entrepreneurs rely on familiar problem-solving frames and/or moral frames but infuse them with new content (Colomy, 1998). They work to make new structures comprehensible by embedding them within larger shared belief systems (Suchman, 1995) or connecting them to the projects of other actors in the field (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). For example, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, women's groups, organized labor, and farmers bypassed and subverted traditional party politics, from which they were generally excluded, by using familiar organizational forms (e.g., associational clubs, trade unions, marketing cooperatives) in novel ways, both in terms of how membership was defined and in terms of the nature of the political activity the form entailed. The result was a transformation of institutionalized politics: interest-group lobbying surpassed party-based power as the most important driver of political change (Clemens, 1993; 1997).

Institutional entrepreneurs also often serve as brokers between previously unconnected communities (Maguire, Hardy et al., 2004) and competing discourses (Maguire and Hardy, 2006). The ultimate effect of creative interaction between established and emerging institutional forms is that the institutionalized world is sedimented (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) – layered in such a way that new forms are embedded on top of old.

Intentional practices aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions, have recently been conceptualized as ‘institutional work’ (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Institutional work extends the conceptualization of institutional entrepreneurship by recognizing institutional maintenance as part of institutional agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) and conceptualizing agency as practice (ongoing, situated, intelligent activity) rather than as process (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006).

### **Can ‘Engagement’ be Institutionalized?**

What would it mean to “institutionalize” a positive phenomenon like engagement? To include interior, subjective experience in a concept of institutionalization runs counter to the typical focus on objective, observable behaviors by neoinstitutional theorists in organization studies. But much of the current literature neglects neoinstitutional theory’s interpretive, relational roots in which institutions are conceived of not as objective but as intersubjective phenomena (Bowring, 2008).

‘Engagement’ is a subjective construct, but ‘*organizational* engagement,’ in that it is shared, is an intersubjective construct. A phenomenon (an experience in consciousness) that is intersubjective has three properties (Berger and Luckmann, 1966):

1. Our subjective experiences of the phenomenon must, to a large degree, be congruent. They do not have to be exactly the same, but they must share essential features.
2. Part of our experience of the phenomenon is *being aware* that other people are experiencing the phenomenon in ways congruent with our own experiences.
3. The phenomenon is relational; it is produced and reproduced through interaction.

Berger and Luckmann (ibid) illustrate these properties in their description of “everyday life” as intersubjective.

*This intersubjectivity sharply differentiates everyday life from other realities of which I am conscious. I am alone in the world of my dreams, but I know that the world of everyday life is as real to others as it is to myself. Indeed, I cannot exist in everyday life without continually interacting and communicating with others. I know that my natural attitude to this world corresponds to the natural attitude of others, that they also comprehend the objectifications by which this world is*

*ordered, that they also organize this world around the “here and now” of their being in it and have projects for working it. (23)*

We can apply the same criteria to a less encompassing band of shared experience than “everyday life.” Engagement, say, will be intersubjective within some defined community (an organization in this case) when multiple members of that community share in its “reality,” aware that they are experiencing the subjective dynamics of attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning in roughly congruent ways through their relationships with each other and their shared work. Note that, just as with “everyday reality” as a whole, this awareness will be partly explicit, but largely tacit. We may talk together about some aspect of a dynamic like ‘growth’ (by whatever name), for example, but apprehend other elements of the experience subconsciously (while still feeling or intuiting that others are sharing in our “engaged” reality, even if we don’t put names to many elements of that reality).

‘Practices’ are the social mechanisms through which intersubjective experiences are constituted. Practices are the stuff of institutionalization. The more a practice is reproduced across space and time (Giddens, 1984) and the more that practice is taken for granted as an unquestioned aspect of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), the more deeply institutionalized that practice is. Organizational scholars tend to associate institutionalization with various things: activities and relationships (Barley and Tolbert, 1997), actions (Clemens and Cook, 1999), structures (Meyer and Rowen, 1977; Tolbert and Zucker, 1983), rules and procedures (Jepperson, 1991), etc., but insofar as these things require ongoing social reproduction, they can all be usefully thought of as practices (and many organizational scholars use that term directly, without defining it).

But what is a practice? A practice is an array of activities linked together within a socially inscribed (Barnes, 2001; Schatzki, 2001) category. Practices are “the practical activities carried out in the enactment of everyday life” (Giddens, 1984: 242). ‘Activities’ here should not be simply equated with outwardly observable behavior. Activity in the social sense is an interactive concept. It is a mode of relating. To shake hands is an activity, but

to shake hands is not the same as the observable behavior of reaching out my hand and grasping another person's hand. That is not social activity; that is physical behavior. 'Shaking hands' as a practice includes that physical behavior, but also the structural implications (e.g., we are equal), the symbolic (cultural) meanings, and the cognitive, affective and physical experience of enacting (knowing and reproducing) those structures and meanings.

Three things about practices are important to keep in mind from a neoinstitutional point of view:

1) *A practice includes both objective and subjective phenomena.* When exploring a practice, we may tend to focus on observable things like words and behaviors, but our interior experiences of those words and behaviors are *part* of the practice. In his theory of structuration, Giddens (1984) is emphatic that broad, apparently external social structures and our inner experience of life as a 'self' constitute each other and can in no way be separated. When we want to study or theorize about objective or subjective aspects of practice, we can "bracket" them (ibid), but we should not forget that we are doing just that. A handshake is an institutionalized practice. It is an observable behavior, but it is also an internal experience (of safety or amity or welcome or equality, etc.). Similarly, Barnes (2001) argues that "no infeasible distinction can be established between visible external practices and invisible, internal states" (19). In organization studies, scholars have often paid more attention to the external aspects of institutionalized practices. Indeed, Scott (2001) goes so far as to claim that neoinstitutional theory is distinguished by this focus, which he traces through Berger and Luckmann, saying that they emphasize first externalization and objectification<sup>6</sup> of interaction-based meaning structures and "only then" internalization (40). Berger and Luckmann (1967) would, however, disagree with this reading. In the very same text that Scott is citing, they are clear that there is no primacy or temporal order to the interplay between externalization and internalization.

*Since society exists as both objective and subjective reality, any adequate theoretical understanding of it must comprehend both these aspects. As we have already argued, these aspects receive their proper recognition if society is*

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<sup>6</sup> Berger and Luckmann actually use the term 'objectivation.'

*understood in terms of an ongoing dialectical process composed of the three moments of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. As far as the societal phenomenon is concerned, these moments are not to be thought of as occurring in a temporal sequence . . . The same is true of the individual member of society who simultaneously externalizes his own being into the social world and internalizes it as an objective reality. In other words, to be in society is to participate in its dialectic. (129)*

The current emphasis by neoinstitutional scholars on external phenomena distorts neoinstitutional theory's dialectical, social constructionist roots, and in doing so obscures much of what gives the theory its power and distinguishes it from positivist, functionalist approaches to social structure (Bowring, 2000).

2) *Our internal experience of a practice is not just cognitive; it is also affective.* Affect is typically associated more with old institutional theory than new institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991), but again, this is an analytical distinction and not a theoretical one. The confusion comes about, I think, because neoinstitutional theory is rooted in a conception of practical or “everyday” knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). But everyday knowledge is distinguished from discursive knowledge precisely because it draws on the whole range of ways that we “know” things experientially. A handshake doesn't just “mean” friendship to me in a cognitive sense. I experience friendship both emotionally and physically as I touch the other person.

Berger and Luckmann (1967) note that institutionalization of social classes and identities is not simply a matter of behavior, but of affect.

*[An] upper-class child may experience his first stirrings of patriotic emotion about the time that his lower-class contemporary first experiences hatred of the police and everything they stand for. (137)*

Schatzki (2001) builds off of Charles Taylor's work on “semantic spaces” to show that the “meaning” inherent in any practice is multidimensional and interactive.

*Charles Taylor pronounces semantic spaces a central feature of the social. A semantic space embraces three fields of meaning, one each for (1) people's states of being (e.g., their desires, feelings, emotions), (2) the situations they confront (thus the people, events, and things with which they deal) and (3) their behavior in those situations. (44)*

In short, a practice is neither objective or subjective, it is *the experiential interaction of the subjective and objective*. It is by continuous monitoring of that interaction that practices are reproduced (Giddens, 1984).

3) *The objective dimensions of a practice do not cause the subjective dimensions of a practice, nor vice-a-versa*. Again, the relationship between external and internal phenomena can only be understood in terms of ongoing dialectical interplay. The handshake does not cause me to feel friendship, nor does my feeling of friendship cause me to shake hands. While social behavior may be motivated, motivation is also socialized.

Returning now to the concept of institutionalizing organizational engagement, it would be a typical analytical strategy to take an indirect approach by looking at the ways that objective behaviors, structures, etc. “cause” engagement. But this strategy would be a positivistic misreading of the neoinstitutional perspective, for the reasons outlined above. My claim is that organizational engagement, like any intersubjective phenomenon, may be understood as a practice with interacting objective and subjective dimensions. Therefore we can logically talk about institutionalizing organizational engagement. Though such a framing is unusual with respect to the current organizational literature, I believe it represents a more multidimensional understanding of neoinstitutional processes than is typical in that literature.

The question then is not what practices cause organizational engagement. It is what practices *constitute* organizational engagement. Organizational engagement would exist not because of certain practices, but through those practices. Those practices, with their objective and subjective dimensions, *are* organizational engagement. To study this question then, we need to look at the modes of relationship among people, and between people and other aspects of the social environment (e.g., work activities, meanings, structures, etc.) that constitute organizational engagement, and then to explore how those modes of relationship are sustained across space and time.

## **Toward A Theory of Positive Institutional Work**

There are several problems or gaps in our current understanding of institutional dynamics, if we want to explore the kind of institutional work necessary to sustain a positive phenomenon like engagement.

*1) Motivation: Neoinstitutional theory has not considered its social-psychological underpinnings from a positive perspective.*

Are the dynamics of institutionalization as we have come to understand them applicable to the types of engagement that positive organizational scholars talk about? Does it mean the same thing to institutionalize patterns of engagement as it does to institutionalize, say, patterns of professionalization, or corporate governance, or even something like marriage? There are social-psychological reasons to think not.

Few institutional scholars give explicit attention to the motivational social-psychology underlying institutional development. Scholars do agree that pattern attribution is at the heart of institutional creation and maintenance. Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe institutionalization in terms of habituation and reciprocal typification. That is, repeated (habitual) forms of interaction are cast into objectified, abstracted “types.” Types include roles like ‘cook’ and routines like ‘cooking’, along with all of the various shared meanings associated with those roles and routines. But why do we notice some patterns and not others? Surely every repeating human interaction isn’t institutionalized. Giddens (1984), building off Schutz (1967), is one of the few institutional theorists to tackle this question directly, claiming that anxiety (or the control of anxiety) “is the most generalized motivational origin of human conduct”(54). DiMaggio and Powell (1991) develop this line of thinking, arguing that the “cognitive turn” in neoinstitutional theory “informs an emergent ‘theory of practical action’” (22), one in which people allay their anxiety by reinforcing identity (sense of self) via interaction that promotes solidarity with certain groups and antagonism toward others. It is not a particular interaction-based identity people seek (let alone the pursuit of rational interests); it is generalized solidarity (reinforced by out-group antagonism). Institutionalization is, from this point of view, simply anxiety-driven mimesis.

Negative and positive experiential states are not different points along one continuum. “Scholars have found the antecedents and consequences of positive and negative affective states to be non-parallel and asymmetrical, suggesting that positive and negative affective dynamics will follow fundamentally different patterns” (Walter and Bruch, 2008: 240). Reducing anxiety, then, does not involve the same sorts of psychological and relational dynamics as producing, say, joy. The former may or may not be necessary for the latter, but at any rate it is not sufficient. Therefore, institutionalization of joy is not likely to follow the same developmental patterns as institutionalization of the absence of anxiety. We can see why this is so if we consider the sociology of standard neoinstitutional accounts.

Neoinstitutional theory is anchored in objectified routines. As routines become increasingly institutionalized, they take on a fact-like quality quite apart from any individual who happens to be performing them. The individual experiences the routine as something distinct from herself, a *partial identity* that is not aligned with her whole person, but only with her institutionalized role.

*Now a part of the self is objectified as the performer of this action, with the whole self again becoming relatively disidentified from the performed action. That is, it becomes possible to conceive of the self as having been only partially involved in the action . . . It is not difficult to see that, as these objectifications accumulate . . . an entire sector of self-consciousness is structured in terms of these objectifications. In other words, a segment of the self is objectified in terms of the socially available typifications. This segment is the truly “social self,” which is subjectively experienced as distinct from and even confronting the self in its totality. (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 73)*

In contrast, many POS scholars place *interactions as whole persons* at the heart of positive organizational patterns. Such patterns require people to recognize and relate to each other as more than their work identities (Dutton, Worline et al., 2006), blurring the boundaries between work and other domains, and creating room for people to express themselves holistically (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). Relationships become ground for identity exploration as people work to “craft an identity that a person feels is worthwhile

and that fits who employees are or who they wish to become” (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003: 270).

In other words, the relational and identity dynamics at the heart of positive organizational patterns are quite different from the dynamics generally supposed to be at the heart of anxiety-driven institutionalization.

**2) Legitimacy:** *Neoinstitutional theory has been largely focused on objective, symbolic forms and has not taken up the question of institutional legitimacy with respect to the subjective dimension of experience.*

As I argue above, a practice perspective assumes that social experiences involve the interaction of objective and subjective dimensions, but institutional theorists have primarily explored only the objective dimension, concentrating on the ways in which social forms express symbolic legitimacy. Old institutionalists focused on the values that infused informal structures, seeing legitimacy as derived from those values (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). But values in this sense are cultural markers. Adopting Geertz’s (1973) conception of culture as essentially semiotic, values are meanings associated with visible signs such as behaviors and words. Legitimacy is derived from how people do things and how they talk about them, but not necessarily from how they experience them subjectively. For example, from an old institutional perspective the value of trust may be institutionalized in an organizational culture. But this means that the culture will exhibit *behaviors and words* that are understood to be ‘trusting’. Behaviors and language that violate that understanding will be perceived as illegitimate. Trust as something that is experienced subjectively – that is, the *feeling* of trust or being trusted – is not a direct measure of legitimacy, though it may be indirectly monitored via specific behaviors. What is institutionalized is trust as a form more than trust as an experience, at least in terms of the analytical lens that is used in this tradition.

New institutionalists focus less on culture and more on “the institutionalized quality of formal structures themselves” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 27). Legitimacy is derived from the way that “post hoc accounts” (ibid) of those structures conform to our cognitive

maps of reality. New institutional theorists are even less likely than old institutionalists to look at patterns of subjective experience. If I experience something as making sense, it is legitimate, no matter whether I experience that sense in a positive or negative manner. I might find it quite constricting to wear a tie, for example, but my personal experience of ties will have little bearing on their legitimacy (or lack thereof) in given social context.

If we want to consider engagement in an institutional light, we shall have to develop a different understanding of legitimacy, one that derives not from behaviors and language associated with engagement, but from the experience of engagement itself, since after all we have defined engagement as something experienced in consciousness. In an organization that has institutionalized engagement, if an encounter leads someone to feel disengaged then, insofar as that feeling is known and shared, that encounter will be perceived to be illegitimate, even if the behaviors and the words appear to conform to our previous experiences of engagement. “This is how we always talk about this or do this and it has always made people feel engaged before,” will not be legitimating stance. It is the intersubjective experience that will be seen as either legitimate or illegitimate, not the form. This version of legitimacy implies a high degree of sharing of members’ subjective experiences, though that sharing need not be exclusively verbal.

*3) Agency: Neoinstitutional agency has largely been conceived of in terms of rational, individualistic projects with clearly defined instrumental ends.*

The signal contribution of new institutional theory is its claim that the most powerful institutions are cognitively submerged. The more deeply embedded an institutional practice is in our day-to-day relationships with each other, the less we are conscious of possible alternatives to that practice. We have practical knowledge of such institutions; we know how to enact them together. But we have little discursive knowledge of them and little explicit awareness of their nature and effects. Institutionalized relationships are complex, sedimented, and relatively opaque.

Neoinstitutional scholars resurrect the political themes of old institutionalism and describe institutional *agency* in terms of competition among various interests. By doing

so, they essentially bypass the basic new institutional paradigm. Neoinstitutional entrepreneurs perceive problems, take on “projects,” and intentionally work to institutionalize particular “remedies” (Colomy, 1998). They have precise awareness of the institutional dynamics within which they are working:

*The particular remedy touted in the project identifies the social fields in which change is sought; specifies the functions, purposes, or goals to be fulfilled by the proposed alteration; outlines its structural lineaments; and in many cases reaffirms entrepreneurs claims to authoritative roles in directing the development of the newly envisioned realm. (ibid: 272)*

From this perspective, entrepreneurs understand their remedies explicitly and are able to work with them discursively and rationally. They “articulate, sponsor, and defend” the particular practices they seek to put in place (Lawrence, 1999: 163) and adopt discursive and symbolic strategies (Elsbach, 1994; Maguire and Hardy, 2006; Maguire and Hardy, 2009; Green, Li, et al., 2009).

The neoinstitutional entrepreneur’s understanding of her own “interests” is treated relatively unproblematically (e.g., Suchman, 1995; Colomy, 1998; Lawrence, 1999; Garud, Jain et al., 2002; Maguire, Hardy, et al., 2004; Maguire and Hardy, 2006). Clemens and Cook (1999) point out that institutional theorists do take a broader view of interests than do economists; institutional interests are not just about “who gets what, when, and how.” Yet they go on to say that the final point of institutional politics is still “the ultimate distribution of benefits.” That is, the benefits in question may be more subtly defined than “who gets what” – they can involve voice, access, the ability to frame issues, the power to establish rules and procedures, etc. – but they are still seen as serving or harming the interests of particular people. According to new institutional theory, however, interests, like all other psycho-social constructs, are institutionally derived. They are socially constructed and just as likely to be opaque and a-rational as any other sort of institutional frame (Scott, 2001). It’s a fair question, then, to ask why neoinstitutional theorists assume that entrepreneurs see and understand their own interests and how those interests will or won’t connect to various institutional outcomes. If we take interests at face value as whatever actors’ think they are at a given time, we can question the degree of institutional agency involved at all. If on the other hand we

attribute to entrepreneurs a preternatural ability to see institutionalized interests and outcomes clearly, we should take that aspect of entrepreneurship seriously and not just treat it in a black box fashion.

Furthermore, neoinstitutional entrepreneurs are portrayed as individual subjects who act upon others, despite the fact that new institutional theorists see institutional creation and maintenance as intersubjective. Entrepreneurs occupy “subject positions” from which they use discursive and political means (Maguire, Hardy et al., 2004) to persuade other actors or to define rules of membership and standardization (Lawrence, 1999). They use “social skills” as “tactics” (Fligstein, 1997). New institutional theory suggests, however, that the ‘self’ that is portrayed as entrepreneurial in neoinstitutionalism is in fact an ongoing relational construct. Institutions are not subjectively created and maintained, they are intersubjectively co-created and co-maintained.

How do people come to think and act in socially novel and creative ways within institutionalized systems that not only cognitively delimit what it is possible to conceive of in the first place but also delimit the identity of the actor herself? This question is known as the problem of “embedded agency” (Seo and Creed, 2002; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). Theorists have offered a dialectical solution to this problem in which exposure to institutional contradictions (Seo and Creed, 2002) by virtue of social positions that bridge different institutional logics (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006) can catalyze awareness of new institutional possibilities. But the dialectical model has two shortcomings. First, it simply pushes the problem of institutional constraint and agency back a level. That is, people become potential entrepreneurs, in an over-determined way, by virtue of their structural (institutionalized) positions. No mention is made of the agentic possibility of *seeking out* contact with alternate logics. From a learning or discovery-based perspective, agents can consciously choose to push themselves beyond their current understandings of the world without having preconceived, new understandings in mind. Second, the dialectical model still frames institutional entrepreneurship as a matter of political and discursive *contests* driven by individual entrepreneurs. Such contests represent only one possibility for intentional interaction.

Other more collaborative and dialogical models are not explored in the neoinstitutional literature.

This gap offers an avenue for descriptive research, but it also suggests a prescriptive program aimed at the social innovator. If we start with the neoinstitutional postulate that most institutional patterns are submerged, the innovator must assume that at best she has only limited clarity as to potential alternative approaches within her institutional field. Even if she has somehow conceived of a new structuring possibility, that possibility can only be the tip of the institutional iceberg, resting as it must on many other relational patterns, which are invisible to the innovator herself since she is unconsciously enacting them every day. For the most part, the innovator can't help but reproduce those submerged, root-level patterns, *unless she discovers a way to intentionally and collaboratively surface and explore them*. She is at risk of undercutting her own social program by failing to recognize the ways in which her new practices reinforce older, more deeply rooted structures.

For example, I mentioned earlier Clemens' (1993; 1997) study of the rise of interest group politics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women's groups, organized labor, and farmers' associations were critical in catalyzing this rise; in order to make their voices heard, they developed new ways of using old organizational forms and created political processes to match (e.g., referenda and ballot initiatives). They consciously challenged the institutional *surface structures* of party-driven politics. They failed, however, to see and challenge the deeper structure embedded in the party system: the competition among voices in which each voice seeks to defeat and dis-empower the voices of its "opponents." The result was that as this competitive dynamic was reproduced in a seemingly new form, entrenched political actors adopted the new form as well.

*Political challengers . . . worked all the angles, simultaneously seeking to link shared strategies or organizational forms to greater returns for the membership, to construct new logics of appropriateness to legitimate their adoption of new forms of action, and to diffuse their organizational innovations so as to expand the scope of potentially shared political mobilization. Precisely because of the collective character of these efforts, however, the innovations and advantages secured by one set of political actors were not easily monopolized. Challengers*

*copied elites, elites copied challengers as soon as they secured some margin of political advantage. What new institutionalists have called mimetic isomorphism is not only a reaction to uncertainty – it may also be fundamentally agonistic . . . Political challengers had helped to dismantle the party system of the nineteenth century to a considerable extent; whether they were pleased with the results is, of course, another question. (Clemens, 1997: 324-325)*

Whether mimetic isomorphism must always be “agonistic” is one of the central questions this study hopes to explore. But the main point here is that the biggest challenge for an institutional entrepreneur is not enforcing her program but *discovering* that program, particularly if she wants it to lead her where she actually (thinks she) wants to go. This challenge seems to call for a view of institutional entrepreneurship not as a political contest but as a collaborative discovery process.

The problem I have outlined here is a general one, pertinent to the study of neoinstitutional agency as a whole, but it is particularly meaningful from the perspective of positive institutional agency. If we want to focus on the reproduction only of social forms, then an instrumental approach to agency may suffice. The agent has clear end goals in mind and works to achieve those goals. But insofar as positive institutionalization is rooted in experience, not form, the *process* by which patterns are formed and maintained is likely to be crucial. That is, the agent interested in creating or maintaining positive institutional patterns must concern herself with *how* people experience institutional work, not just its visible outcomes in form.

In addition, as I outlined above, positive social structures are rooted in mutuality. They presume at least a tacit recognition of shared interests and meanings. An agonistic political approach to institutional change seems unlikely to nourish such recognition. Positive social structures are also generative. They are energized by creativity and growth. Creating profoundly new institutional patterns would seem to require the collaboration of many minds and spirits, any one of whom on her own can only ever have the smallest partial revelation of new possibilities. And growing those patterns is even more dependent on collaboration, since it is through continual relational enactment that a

social experience takes hold. You can't institutionalize a social experience on your own. Nor can you "convince" others to have a particular experience the way you can convince them to adopt a behavior or a belief. You must live it out, together, within community, until it becomes part of how that community encounters the world.

**Positive Institutional Work**

Combining the understanding of 'positive' that emerges from POS literature with the practice perspective developed in neoinstitutional theory, we can formulate a definition of 'positive institutional work':

*Positive institutional work consists of intentional practices undertaken: 1) to create and maintain institutional patterns that are experienced as intrinsically fulfilling and extrinsically meaningful; and 2) to disrupt institutional patterns that are not so experienced.*

The following table summarizes the gaps in the literature with respect to this definition.

<b>Gaps in Neoinstitutional Theory with respect to Positive Institutional Work</b>		
	<i>Current Neoinstitutional Framing</i>	<i>Unanswered Questions Related to Positive Institutional Work</i>
<i>Motivation</i>	Institutionalized practices are motivated by anxiety and are therefore generally protective.	How would aspirational practices differ from protective practices?
<i>Legitimacy</i>	Practices are legitimated symbolically based on the meanings ascribed to their objective forms (behaviors, words, visible relational markers).	How can the subjective dimension of practice be incorporated into assessments of legitimacy?
<i>Agency</i>	Institutional agency is instrumental (structured by goals and outcomes) and enacted via individuals and organizations engaged in political and discursive contests.	How can agency be structured in a collaborative, exploratory way?

## **Research Questions**

The research questions that, from a practice perspective, address the theoretical gaps outlined above are:

**R1:** What are the organizational practices that constitute organizational engagement in SPOs?

**R2:** What is the nature of the positive institutional work that allows such practices to be sustained across space and time?

R2a: *Motivation*. How does positively motivated institutional work differ from protectively motivated institutional work?

R2b: *Legitimacy*. How is the inner, subjective dimension of positive practices incorporated into evaluations of legitimacy?

R2c: *Agency*. How is intention brought to bear on positive institutional work?

## Methodology

### **Approach**

This study is designed to contribute to both the theory and the practice of institutional engagement.

### **Theory-Building**

The questions at the heart of this study are ‘how’ questions. “How do we sustain positive practices in the context of social purpose organizations?” “How might we bring intention to bear on such practices?” It is an open-ended inquiry with the primary goal of pattern identification (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Though I began with an established, theoretical construct (engagement) that has been empirically validated, the focus of the study is on *sustaining* (or institutionally maintaining) engagement, for which there is no adequate theory at hand. This study therefore is not theory-testing but theory-building (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). It seeks to develop a set of middle-range proposals about a class of phenomena (Glesne, 1999). Theory building is often best done through a qualitative, multi-method, case-based approach (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). This is particularly true when there are complex social processes involved (ibid), as the number of possibly important variables is high and the important sub-processes driven by these variables are unknown.

This study adopts a grounded theory approach to theory building. Grounded theory does not utilize pre-research hypotheses. Instead, it involves an iterative pattern of data gathering and data analysis during which induction and deduction are symbiotic, and sampling is emergent (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is an interpretive, creative process meant to develop insight into socially constructed relational patterns (Suddaby, 2006). It is a particularly appropriate approach if we want to “understand the process by which actors construct meaning out of intersubjective experience”(ibid: 634). The grounded theory approach also fits my research questions because while it is useful for working with phenomenological (subjectively experienced) data, it seeks to go

beyond such data, focusing on how “subjective experiences can be abstracted into theoretical statements about causal relations between actors” (ibid).

It would be possible to adopt a hypothesis-driven approach rather than a grounded theory approach. For example, one of the dynamics frequently associated with engagement is goal clarity. We could hypothesize that practices leading to goal clarity are central to organizational engagement. However there are several problems with such an approach. First, it is not goal clarity per se that is important in engagement, it is the relaxation of anxiety produced by this clarity that allows people to concentrate and immerse themselves in their present experience. So while goal clarity may be one prevalent way of reducing such anxiety, there may be others. For example, it’s possible that continued appreciation by co-workers results in a longer-term sense of security so that even in unclear, uncertain, risky situations, identity is not threatened and the person is able to concentrate despite the lack of a clear goal. A hypothesis-based approach would inhibit the discovery of alternative dynamics. Secondly, it may be precisely those alternative dynamics that lead us to a clearer understanding of *sustaining* engagement. If sustained engagement is relatively rare, it may be that common paths to temporary flow are less amenable to institutionalization than other, less well-known paths. Finally, even to say that ‘goal clarity’ is an important dynamic is not to delineate the *practices* associated with it. How is subjective goal clarity achieved? Who sets goals? What processes are used? What do goals consist of? How do people understand and work with such goals? Do they change over time? If so, how? Rich data is needed to uncover such practice dynamics, and though we may end up with a parsimonious theoretical perspective from that data, that perspective will involve generalizations about the practices themselves, not about fixed, opaque variables like “goal clarity.”

### **Practice-Building**

With its emphasis on practice, this study has a utilization focus (Patton, 2002) in addition to its theory-building focus. One of my goals has been to create an accessible typology of practices that SPO members could use to catalyze organizational engagement. I also hope that the theory-building component of the study will have a practical result in that it will

help SPO members understand more clearly the relationship between various practices of engagement and the SPO's broader social/institutional mission.

### **Case Studies**

In order to explore those questions, this study develops and compares three case studies. Cases were selected using theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling involves selecting “unusually revelatory” cases that are particularly likely to offer theoretical insight (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), rather than selecting cases randomly or based on their typicality. This approach has also been described as “purposeful sampling” (Patton, 2002).

I treat organizational engagement as a pattern variable, not as a binary state. From this perspective, it makes no sense to ask whether an organization is or isn't engaging. Instead, I focus on when and how patterns of engagement occur in a given organization. For theoretical purposes, then, I used “intensity sampling,” choosing cases that were “information-rich” with respect to the phenomenon in question (ibid). I chose three small organizations, because small organizations are particularly likely to be revealing of social patterns. In small organizations the multi-level dynamics of those patterns are played out in a visible, researchable way (Weick, 1974). We can see the whole “system” in a way that is difficult in larger organizations. But apart from size, my sample set is heterogeneous, differing in terms of governance, institutional type, age, and mission. “Maximum variation sampling” (Patton, 2002) yields a more portable set of generalizations with respect to both theory and practice.

I identified the first research site, Food Cycle, via pilot work I had done over the past seven years. As I mentioned in the introduction, I was looking for a particularly engaging SPO in which to do some ethnographic research, and came upon Food Cycle almost by chance. I continued periodically to do ethnographic and interview work at Food Cycle from early 2002 through 2008. (Note that in Chapter 4 I describe how, during the current phase of this study, I applied the same verification techniques to Food Cycle that I did to the two organizations that were new to me.) To identify potential case studies, I asked my

large, extended network of social change practitioners to suggest sites that they felt were engaging (I provided my working definition) in a robust and sustained way. Based on correspondents' descriptions, follow-up conversations, preliminary archival research, my need for heterogeneity, and the likelihood of access, I contacted several organizations and identified three candidate sites. One of the sites turned out to be at the suggestion of a close relative who is an administrator there (see footnote below), but I subjected this site to the same scrutiny that I did to the other suggested sites. Each site was described as quite unusual within its institutional environment with respect to levels of engagement.

The three cases are (names are generic to protect anonymity):

- 1- **Food Cycle** – (Canada) A fourteen-year-old, youth-driven, intergenerational meals-on-wheels project integrating aspects of food security, youth development, environmental sustainability, and community building. Food Cycle is well known in Canada for its energizing spirit, its intergenerational approach, and its ability to attract large numbers of dedicated, mostly young volunteers.
- 2- **Hollins School (UCS)**<sup>7</sup> – (United States) A four-year-old, inner-city, public charter school with both an educational and a community mandate. Charter schools are publicly funded and subject to the overall direction of the school board, but have specialized missions and much greater autonomy than typical public schools. Working in a very challenging neighborhood and within a rigidly institutionalized context, Hollins School has developed many practices that run counter to institutional norms. City officials, school staff, parents, and students alike recognize the extraordinary degree of teacher and student engagement at this school.

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<sup>7</sup> Disclosure: A close relative of mine is an administrator at Hollins School, which is how I first heard about the school. Though the risk of bias on my part and of altered response patterns from the participants at the school cannot be denied, I was especially careful to ensure confidentiality for participants during data gathering at this site and to look for challenges and counters to my initial codes and generalizations during data analysis. I hope that my full presentation of the data in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 is rich and detailed enough – particularly as the data from the school aligns well with the data from the other two sites – to convince the reader that the picture I paint of the school is not unduly distorted by my relationship with one of the participants at that site. (I knew none of the other participants at all, prior to this study, and I do not live in the city where the school is located.)

- 3- **Homestead** – (Canada) A twenty-year-old, community-supported, independent co-housing project for people with mental illness. Homestead organizes volunteers and partners from faith and community groups to manage and provide ongoing support to ten unusually vibrant independent residences for small groups of people living with mental health challenges.

	<i>Study Sites</i>		
	<i>Food Cycle</i>	<i>Hollins School</i>	<i>Homestead</i>
<i>Age</i>	14	4	20
<i>Staff</i>	12	28	3
<i>Volunteers</i>	200	-	60
<i>Clients/Students</i>	250	200	30
<i>Annual Budget</i>	\$600,000	\$2,000,000	\$250,000

Despite my initial, superficially positive assessment, I couldn't be certain that the organizations were engaging enough for my purposes until I began gathering primary data. In Chapter 4, I give a brief overview of each organization, and I describe the site verification approach I used in detail.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Pilot Work at Food Cycle**

As I had done pilot research at Food Cycle over the last seven years, I was able to take a longitudinal approach to this one organization. Pilot work included sustained volunteer participation in the organization and three separate periods of ethnographic observations, archival review, and interviews (Spring 2002, Fall 2004, Winter 2006). During each of these three periods, I spent several weeks of observation and conducted semi-structured interviews with staff, volunteers, and clients. In total during pilot work, I conducted 25 interviews. I kept field notebooks of my observations and notes or recordings for all of

the interviews. In addition, I had access to quasi-secondary data from an organizational evaluation that I helped design and analyze in 2006. (This is quasi-secondary data, because I did not conduct the actual evaluation interviews myself.) The evaluation included 75 interviews of current and former participants. The richness and time frame of the data I had access to made Food Cycle something of an anchor organization for this study.

### **Current Data Collection at All Three Sites**

The main body of the study, however, included parallel current data collection from all three organizations (including Food Cycle where many of the current participants were new since my last round of formal interviews in 2006). This data collection used the multiple methods below.

### ***Focus Group Dialogues***

The bulk of the data were collected via small, dialogue-based focus groups of 3-5 people. Focus groups were cross-sectional, mixing various roles together, e.g., staff, board, and volunteers. At each site I included virtually all staff, plus selected board members, selected volunteers, and selected clients (where appropriate). (For exact numbers, see Chapter 4 and Appendices A, B, and C.) Board members, volunteers, and clients were self-selected via general email callouts and posted notices describing the research project and requesting focus group participants. The average length of a focus group conversation was 90 minutes. I conducted 10 focus groups at Food Cycle, nine at Hollins School, and three at Homestead. I audio recorded all focus groups and had the recordings transcribed, yielding 600 single spaced pages of transcripts.

There were three main reasons to rely primarily on focus groups rather than individual interviews. First, I was in fact “focused” on a very specific issue: engagement. I was not conducting case studies of the organizations per se, but case studies of engagement patterns within the organizations. Focus groups are useful for going deeply into a particular, focused area of interest (Patton, 2002; Stewart, Shamdasani et al., 2007).

Second, organizational engagement is a relational construct. It is not simply about people being individually engaged within organizations. It is about the relational patterns of organizational life being engaging. To study those, we need to explore not just the space within individual minds, but the space between individual minds. Focus groups allow the researcher to observe interaction among participants as they explore meaning together (Morgan, 1997).

Third, as discussed above, deeply institutionalized practices are often tacit and cognitively submerged. They can be difficult for individuals to bring into consciousness and articulate. Such practices are also shared. They are intersubjective. While individual interviews are good for revealing intrasubjective phenomena, and observations are good for revealing objective, observable phenomena, focus groups are particularly useful for revealing intersubjective, socially constructed meanings and experiences that may not be accessible otherwise (Berg, 2001). Because people can build off of each other's partial views of the topic, focus groups provide greater depth about "topics that are either habit-ridden [i.e., institutionalized] or not thought out in detail" (Morgan, 1997: 11). Adopting a dialogic approach (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998; Markova, Linell et al., 2007) can make focus groups an even more powerful tool to "expose assumptions and tacit cultural/functional theories in use" (Bokeno and Gantt, 2000: 240). A dialogic approach asks participants to suspend their initial assumptions and judgments, to look for common meanings or experiences behind seemingly divergent points of view, and to attempt to generate new meanings by building off of each other's perspectives (Isaacs, 1999).

The focus group conversations themselves were loosely structured around a small set of guiding questions (see Interview Protocol, Appendix D). I began by asking people simply to place the organization, for good or bad, in the context of their other organizational experiences. This topic often provoked a 15 or 20 minute discussion in which a number of issues related to organizational engagement began to emerge. I then asked people questions more specifically designed to encourage conversation related to the dynamics of engagement – attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning. To explore attunement, I asked people to talk about the times when they felt most connected to and energized by

their work in the organization. (I found that a more precise description of attunement was unnecessary, as this general version yielded rich examples of attunement characteristics like presence, self-efficacy, etc.). To explore growth, I simply asked people to reflect on how they had grown through their work in the organization. To encourage discussions of mutuality, I found that simply asking people to talk about relationships in the organization produced the most detailed, useful answers. (I tried more specific mutuality questions early on, but these seemed to be too technical. They confused people and shut down the conversation rather than opening it up.) For meaning, I asked people what they found most meaningful in their work. And finally, to better understand the relationship between participants' personal experience and their understanding of the organization's social purpose, I asked people to describe the purpose of the organization. When pressed to explain what I meant by purpose, I just told people to define it however they liked. (This seemingly mundane question led to some of the richest and most interesting conversation in the focus groups.) In order to elicit a greater variety of data, I often changed the order of the questions (though I always started with the broad context setting question), so that responses in different focus groups would develop along different paths. That way, any patterns that I observed across focus groups would not simply be the result of conversational path dependence.

This basic set of guiding questions might seem too straightforward. I was not cagey about what I was interested in. My approach was to invite people to think together about the questions at the heart of this study. A critique of this approach could be that it might overstate the actual engagement levels of these organizations. After all, anyone in any organization might be able to describe ways that they have grown or when they feel most energized, etc. But my focus was not on *whether* or not people answered these questions positively. It was on the level of detail and passion they expressed, the degree to which they were able to contrast their current experiences to other organizational experiences, and the depth with which they could situate those experiences within organizational practices. (For a more detailed explanation of how I validated these sites as unusually engaging places, see Chapter 4.) I found these broad questions to be very effective in producing rich and pertinent data, as I believe Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will show.

Beyond the guiding questions, I worked to facilitate the conversation as a dialogue in order that people could help each other explore levels of their organizational experience that might normally be subconscious and taken for granted. I did this in several ways:

- I constantly pushed people to consider their experiences in the context of organizational practices. Very often, the initial answer to a question would be vaguely cast in terms of a general feeling or quality. “It feels like a family here . . . . People here really appreciate each other . . . I’m so excited about my work . . . I’m more patient and confident and trusting now than I used to be . . .” and so on. I would ask people to expand on such statements, and then I would ask what it was about the organization that enabled such experiences to take place. This often proved to be a difficult question. Real insight into practices seemed to occur most frequently when other people began to build off the initial speaker’s response. One of the ways of getting to the practice level that I found most effective was to ask people to imagine they were giving advice to another organization about the topic in question – what would they say? This sustained focus on practice did yield a number of interesting observations and examples that would not have been obvious from the initial responses to the question.
- I encouraged people to build off each other’s statements (“Does that resonate with anyone else?” “Does anyone have examples of something similar?”) and to ask each other questions. In some of the livelier focus groups, I had to do very little facilitation as people became interested enough in the topics to ask each other follow-up questions and to shape the conversations themselves.
- On the other hand, I also asked people negative, contrary questions. (“Does anyone disagree?” “Can you think of examples that don’t fit what she just described?” “Tell me about a time when you had a negative experience here, felt hurt, burned out, unfulfilled, etc.”) I did this to keep groupthink to a minimum (building off of each other’s answers dialogically is not the same thing as mindlessly agreeing with each other) and to shed light on engagement patterns by exploring times when such patterns were threatened.

Overall, the use of focus groups as my primary data gathering mechanism appeared to be a sound strategy. During every session there were numerous moments in which one person would be struggling to capture her experience fully or to explain it in terms of organizational practices and then other people would offer examples of their own and begin theorizing together about *why* they experienced the organization in the way that they did. I know that in my earlier pilot work with Food Cycle – during which I used individual interviews and observations, but not focus groups – while I was able to richly capture the phenomenology of the organization (the “how” of people’s experiences), I was much less successful in capturing the practices of the organization (the organizational “why” of their experiences).

### ***Individual Interviews***

Where necessary for clarification and context setting, I conducted additional semi-structured interviews with key informants. I also conducted unstructured interviews at the various events that I attended. I used much the same protocol that I did for the focus groups (without the dialogical facilitation, of course). All told, during the current research period, I conducted 24 additional interviews (6 at Food Cycle, 13 at Hollins School, and 5 at Homestead) ranging from 10 minutes to two hours long. The longer, semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The shorter, un-structured interviews were recorded in note form. Supporting the relative reliability of the focus groups, none of the themes that emerged during the focus groups was significantly contradicted, and no substantially new themes were raised during the individual interviews.

### ***Observation***

In each of the three organizations, I spent time observing routine, daily activities, and I also attended meetings and events. I used a broad ethnographic approach to observations, sometimes keeping myself out of the way in a corner, and sometimes chatting informally with the various people I encountered. In order to afford myself better triangulation of the focus groups and interviews, I attempted to avoid actively looking for examples of engagement (“Hey, there’s some mutuality . . .”) and instead tried to take a very open,

descriptive approach (Patton 2002) in which I merely recorded in my field notebook what I saw. I did not try to guess whether or not my observations would be pertinent or useful while I was recording, though after leaving the field, I would immediately begin reviewing my notes for things that seemed to pertain to my research questions. Of course, one can't observe and record everything, so I did focus my observations by paying particular attention to the following categories: physical space, body language, modes of conversation, and topics of conversation. I also used my own experience working in and studying various SPOs to alert me to any little detail that struck me as particularly unusual for such contexts.

In terms of meetings and events, I observed staff meetings at all three organizations, board meetings at Hollins School and Homestead, a parent meeting at Hollins School, two special events at Homestead, and at least 20 special events at Food Cycle (including pilot work). In total, I spent at least 200 hours observing Food Cycle (including pilot work), 40 hours observing Hollins School, and 15 hours observing Homestead.

### ***Archival Review***

To set the organizations in broader context, I reviewed internal documents (e.g., annual reports, grant applications, minutes, websites) and external documents (e.g., newspaper articles, evaluations).

### ***Data Analysis***

I took an interpretive approach to data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994), in that my goal was to use the texts I had generated, coupled with my field notes and archival materials, to elucidate underlying meanings and the practices through which those meanings were expressed. In other words, I was not simply analyzing the texts as texts. I was not seeking to draw conclusions about how people *talked about* their organizations, but about how they actually experienced the organizations (phenomenological perspective (Patton 2002)) and about how those experiences were constituted via organizational practices (practice perspective (ibid)). As per the grounded theory norm, I

moved iteratively between data gathering, coding, and analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

As I worked, my approach took shape in the following way:

1. During and immediately after each focus group or interview, I jotted down observations in my field notebook about anything that struck me as intriguing. These observations were very loose, often remarking on new categories of experience or practice that seemed to have emerged, connections between the current session and other sessions, bits of theory from the literature that might pertain, and intuitions of how to explain the institutionalized patterns I was seeing that didn't seem to be fully explained by the existing neoinstitutional literature.
2. After the focus groups and interviews were transcribed, I began iteratively coding and looking for patterns within each individual transcript, intra-organizationally, and cross-organizationally (Eisenhardt, 1989). I first wrote up coding "memos" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glesne, 1999) for each passage in each transcript, making notes of themes, questions, and possible codes that might be associated with the passage. When I began to see multiple instances of a possible code, I recorded the code in my coding notes, and went back over previous transcripts to mark instances of it. I re-coded the earlier transcripts many times. As I progressed and the codes became clearer and more established, each subsequent transcript had to be re-coded fewer times.
3. During the first rounds of coding, I focused primarily on developing categories for phenomenological patterns. What were the common, engagement-related ways that people seemed to be experiencing these organizations?
4. I then began to focus more carefully on developing practice categories. What were the organizational practices that constituted these experiences?
5. As a category/code developed, I paid particular attention to divergences. I frequently found that when a number of people were describing an experience in a similar way, it was the person who described it differently that provoked the most

- insight. Often, I would decide the original code was not useful, and would create new codes that reconciled the responses, either by identifying an underlying similarity or focusing on different elements of the responses than I had originally focused on and identifying characteristics that explained *why* the responses were divergent.
6. I frequently compared the emerging focus group and interview categories with observations from my field notes. Had I seen other examples of this category? Had I seen things that would challenge, delimit, or qualify this category?
  7. As I developed categories of experience and practice that seemed relatively robust, I began to triangulate by asking people in the organization to comment on them. I would describe the category as I saw it, and ask if it resonated with their experience of the organization, how they would describe that category in their own words, and whether they could think of anything that might challenge the category. I found this practice to be quite useful. Sometimes I would eliminate a category altogether if several people told me it didn't align with their experience. More frequently, I would refine my understanding of the category as people offered additional examples and qualifications.
  8. Finally, I sought to develop plausible, theoretical linkages between my coded categories and my topics of study (Eisenhardt, 1989). Why would a given practice that I identified be constitutive of engagement? Why might that practice contribute to the institutional maintenance of engagement (or more generally, other positive phenomena)?

To illustrate this process, I will describe how I began to work with the following passage. It is a quote from Lowell, an experienced teacher in his first year at Hollins School. I've selected this passage at random. There is nothing particularly unusual about it compared to other passages in this study.

*I felt from day one that the school was alive in the sense that people were coming by to check on me and see if I needed anything. Other teachers would always come by and see what I needed, and I just felt like this is a community that cared that everyone was successful. So like going from being intimidated right off the*

*bat to being, “Oh, well OK. This is kind of cool, and we are all on the same page.” And I think a lot of that excitement that maybe Baron gets, or that maybe I get – for me, I’ve never had to create my own curriculum before. And it was really neat to watch the curriculum that Vandana and I created for the Japan unit, seeing all those things flesh out and pan out at the end of each assessment period. And to me that was amazing – something that we created, our own curriculum. I’ve always had textbooks or scripts – you say this, the students say this – and at first it was very overwhelming to me here. But it was neat, and it brought excitement. It was a challenge, and then I rose to that challenge. For this new unit, we’re writing our own curriculum again, and even though it’s incredibly overwhelming, I am excited about some of the outcomes, and I’m excited about what [the students] are going to learn through what we chose to do. (Hollins School-FG2: 5)*

There’s a lot going on in this quote. Here are some of the initial memos I made in my coding notes:

- *Feels supported by many people, not just immediate coworkers. Community.*
- *Feels they show genuine interest and caring. Authentic.*
- *Intimidated at first, and still overwhelmed, but authentic community makes him feel safer.*
- *Also feels challenged and excited.*
- *Creating his own curriculum. Autonomy. Flexibility. Growth.*

And here is some of the iterative theorizing and code development I did as I went along:

- *Attunement and growth require challenge – can see that here. Challenge coming from creating his own curriculum. He’s trying new things out. Possible phenom codes: creativity, experiment, freedom.*
- *Practice? Task flexibility (very different from his other schools) – there is literature support connecting task autonomy to engagement. Boundaries of task are being loosened. Have also seen role and group boundaries being challenged and loosened. Possible practice codes: boundary challenge or transboundary work? Subcategories for tasks, roles, etc.*
- *Attunement and growth require feeling of safety – can’t be too overwhelmed or anxious. Usually theorized to come from clear goals and guidelines. Here seems to come from sense of community, feeling supported by others, not from strict guidelines. Feeling of intimidation lessened as people showed support. Possible phenom codes: safety, inclusion, belonging, unity.*
- *Practice? Lots of people welcoming him, not just immediate coworkers. Not a formal orientation, but lots of people checking in on him and helping. Also he’s working as part of a two-person team. Possible practice codes: collaborative structures, participatory welcome/orientation.*

- *Why does it feel authentic to him (“felt this is a community that cared”)? At a practice level, what makes people feel that interactions are authentic? Possible phenom code: authenticity.*

As I made notes, observations, and preliminary codes like these, I cross-referenced them and used them to confirm or contradict each other. The biggest challenge was trying to go deeply enough into the phenomenological experience that a practice was revealed. This often required seeing beyond the initial pattern that struck my eye. As I said, I paid particular attention to things that didn’t seem to fit emerging patterns, as those things often revealed deeper patterns.

For example, like Lowell, many people at Hollins School felt very welcomed and supported in a loose, informal way during their first days at the school. I saw a similar pattern at Food Cycle, where a number of people talked about the feeling of welcome they had as soon as they walked in the door for the first time. People often contrasted this experience to their experiences in other organizations, so it seemed significant for that reason. And theoretically, it wasn’t hard to see the connection between engagement and this feeling of being welcomed by the community. It seemed to create feelings of safety (necessary for attunement and growth) and mutuality. Still, “being genuinely welcoming” is not a very useful sort of practice to highlight. What makes someone experience a welcome as genuine or authentic? What are the organizational practices that constitute that experience?

As I mined the various quotes related to this issue, some clues emerged. First, there were three people at Food Cycle who said their initial encounter with the organization had been uncomfortable. One volunteer specifically said that she didn’t feel welcomed during her first shift. Why not? She focused on the fact that no one had told her exactly what to do, how things worked, what she could expect. She had no problem with how people talked to her. They were friendly enough. It was the absence of clear instructions that she found unwelcoming. The other two people mentioned being uncomfortable for similar reasons. (These were in three separate focus groups.) The people who did feel welcomed,

on the other hand, weren't talking about instructions or clarity. Many of them also said they didn't know what to do at first. They were talking about how people interacted with them. So there were actually two dynamics at work here. One dynamic had to do with the fact that orientations were very loosely structured and people were given a lot of freedom to figure things out for themselves. Some people found this dynamic initially uncomfortable, and even unwelcoming (though they all described adapting to it, and two of them found it to be ultimately positive.) The other dynamic, the one most people were talking about, had to do with the mode of interaction. This interaction was perceived to be unusually hospitable and authentic.

Why did people find this interaction authentic? First, they felt that the people welcoming them took a genuine interest in them as individuals, not as staff members or volunteers. People seemed curious to get to know them, not to get them to do things. Second, the people who were welcoming them were doing it on their own time and in their own way. No one had been assigned to greet the new members or assist them. People did so spontaneously when they were moved to. The experience of walking into Food Cycle wasn't that a "greeter" came to the door. People were bustling about and working, and invariably someone looked up, noticed the new person, and came over to say hi. The same thing was true at Hollins School. Teachers and administrators simply stopped by the new person's classroom when they had time or thought about it. They were clearly there because they wanted to be, not because they had been told to be. Third, as they greeted newcomers, veteran members revealed something of themselves. They talked about personal things. They didn't say they were happy if they were having a tough day. They immediately began interacting as individuals, not as roles.

I tested these patterns out against my own observations. Particularly at Food Cycle, I had recorded many notes related to how people were greeted as they came in the door. Rarely did the same person greet two consecutive entries. Sometimes the greeter was a staff person, sometimes a volunteer. They took time to chat, never seeming rushed to get back to work. They asked questions, but they also talked about themselves. If the person coming in was a new volunteer, anybody might show them what to do. (Even when the

volunteer coordinator was present, he wasn't necessarily the one to take on this role.) The overall feeling of these interactions was gentle and warm. There was often a lot of laughter. Different people would jump in and out of the "training" as they passed by. New volunteers weren't given a lot of information, just enough to get them started. In short, my observations dovetailed nicely with what people were describing to me in the focus groups and interviews.

I won't go into the details of how I parsed all of this out into phenomenological categories and ultimately practice categories. That will become clear in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. But we can see that the initially generic, rough category of feeling welcomed turned out to reveal a number of interesting things. There is a practice here around letting all organization members freely participate in welcoming and orienting people in an unscripted way. There is a practice here in making newcomers find their bearings through their wits and through idiosyncratic relationships rather than through a standardized orientation. There is a practice here in the way that people relate to each other by revealing something of their inner selves – even to newcomers – rather than acting primarily in their role capacities. All of these practices can be theorized to have logical connections to engagement. And so it went.

Over time, I built up a working list of 12 phenomenological codes which then mapped onto three broad categories of practice (Appendix E). Each practice category could strongly and logically be linked to engagement. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explore those practice categories and those engagement links. I also theorized that the three practice categories represented distinctive aspects of positive institutional maintenance. These aspects did not seem to be adequately explained in the literature, and in Chapter 8, I suggest ways in which they could be used to begin to build a theory of positive institutions.

## Study Site Overview & Verification

Although this research is exploratory, for it to be meaningful and convincing, I needed to identify SPOs in which organizational engagement is unusually high and sustained.

Theoretically, if both engagement and institutionalization are seen as variables and not binary states, one could study the sustained, engaging characteristics, such as they are, of any organization. Presumably almost every organization has at least some patterns of engagement. One could explore and attempt to explain those patterns, even if many other patterns in the organization were disengaging. However, I was operating under two assumptions that pointed me toward outlier organizations.

1. As engagement is a generalized, relatively resilient multi-dimensional state, not a momentary uni-dimensional experience, engaging patterns cannot be neatly separated out from broader organizational patterns. That is, in the abstract it seems possible that I might experience, say, my relationships with coworkers as engaging but my relationships with clients or with the work itself as disengaging. My assumption, however, is that such a segmented experience would not lead to an overall, long-term feeling of personal engagement at work, let alone a generalized pattern of shared organizational engagement. I assume, instead, that engaging/disengaging activities and relationships reinforce each other.
2. Institutional patterns also reinforce each other. Institutional patterns are not discrete, they are related to each other through broader symbolic, meaning systems (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984), which generally include, roles, routines, classes or groups, and various legitimating narratives. While divergent institutional frames can certainly co-exist in tension with each other, each of those frames must be rich and multi-dimensional if it is to be reliably reproduced. Therefore, if we want to understand institutionalized engagement, we have to study social settings where engagement dynamics are reproduced via multiple, related institutional practices.

The quest, then, was to find SPOs in which engagement practices were unusually thick. These organizations didn't have to meet some sort of optimal criteria. They didn't have to be the most engaging places possible. (I don't know what that would even mean.) They simply had to demonstrate unusually sustained and widespread patterns of engagement within their day-to-day relational structures.

I identified the first organization, Food Cycle, several years ago via pilot work. I began the search for the other two sites by describing the dynamics of engagement (i.e., attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning) in a brief written summary and circulating this summary within my own and related networks of SPO practitioners. I received some 40 suggestions for potential sites, and I focused on those for which the person who was recommending it seemed to have detailed knowledge of what the *experience* of participating in that organization was like. A number of the suggestions simply focused on external criteria, e.g., an interesting mission, or a reputation for effectiveness. While external criteria can be suggestive, since engagement is a subjective state it can only truly be verified via experiential data. From the people suggesting sites, I was able to learn enough about the experiential qualities of two additional organizations to make them seem like likely candidates. (As noted, one of the two sites turned out to come from the suggestion of a close relative who worked there. However, I applied the same criteria for verifying that site as I would have for any other site.) I reviewed all external indicators that I could (discussed below for each site) and had preliminary conversations with leaders of each of the three organizations, but could only verify the sites by actually collecting primary data. I subjected Food Cycle to the same scrutiny as the other two organizations, even though I was more familiar with it, since my initial selection of Food Cycle for pilot work had been quite loose.

The biggest challenge in assessing the richness of overall engagement at the sites was that participants knew I was studying engagement (which I had defined for them in my project summary). Even though I encouraged participants to discuss disengaging experiences, as well, it seemed likely that people would say mostly positive things about the organizations, particularly since they were largely interacting with me in group

settings. Therefore, I did not consider the mere presence of generic positive statements to be a sufficient indicator of engagement (even if those could be conceptually related more specifically to attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning).

I approached the data instead the way one might approach a letter of recommendation for a job or a school application. Virtually all recommendation letters are positive, since the applicant is unlikely to ask someone with negative feelings toward her to write one. What distinguishes the best letters of recommendation is the level of passion and detail that the author puts into it. If you say that I am a good student, you haven't said much. If you give rich, enthusiastic descriptions of the various ways in which I am a good student and buttress those descriptions with specific examples, you have said a great deal.

I reviewed my data with this philosophy in mind, looking at the following characteristics of participants' overall assessments of their organizational experience.

- Level of detail
- Number and richness of examples
- Degree of passion in the particular language used (e.g., strong, personal, emotional words vs. more abstract, analytical words)
- Ability to contrast current experiences with experiences in other organizational settings

I then rated each person's overall assessment of their experience using the following five categories:

- *High Positive Contrast* – Stark positive contrast with most other organizational experiences. Richly detailed descriptions and examples of that contrast. Strong emotional language used.
- *Positive Contrast* – Significant positive contrast with other organizational experiences. Specific descriptions and examples of that contrast. Positive analytical language used.
- *Neutral* – No particular contrast with most other organizational experiences. No descriptions and examples of contrast. Neutral analytical language used.
- *Negative Contrast* – Significant negative contrast with other organizational experiences. Specific descriptions and examples of that contrast. Negative analytical language used.

- *High Negative Contrast* – Stark negative contrast with most other organizational experiences. Richly detailed descriptions and examples of that contrast. Strong emotional language used.

Keep in mind, assessing the *level* of organizational engagement is not the primary objective of this research. I was not trying to develop a precise assessment instrument. I was simply trying to verify that the sites would have rich enough data on engagement to make it likely that they would reveal something useful related to my primary questions about the organizational dynamics of institutionalizing engagement patterns. I expected responses to be mostly positive, so what I was interested in was the number of people in the top two categories. As it turned out, there was no one who offered a negative assessment of their experiences. Even when I specifically asked questions about struggles, difficulties, etc., participants often ended up describing those situations as ultimately engaging, even if they were initially disengaging. (For example, several people described personal confusion and lack of confidence when first confronted with the relatively open decision-making structures at the three sites, but then went on to talk about their increased clarity and confidence as they worked through various situations with what they saw as very significant emotional and professional support from colleagues. Others described interpersonal conflicts that ended up creating what they experienced as healthier, more open and empathic relationships.)

Below, after giving a brief overview of each organization, I summarize the nature of responses with respect to overall engagement and provide a number of illustrative quotes by way of example. I hope the examples I provide are rich enough to be compelling and that the ensuing chapters will demonstrate in further detail why I think the claim that these three organizations demonstrate an unusually high level of sustained engagement is a fair one. (Note that the quotes largely come from separate individuals. There are a very small number of repetitions when the same person highlighted more than one common theme in a particularly representative and evocative way.)

## **Food Cycle**

### **Organizational Overview**

Food Cycle was founded as a meals-on-wheels program in 1995 by two men in their twenties, both of whom were working in a restaurant at the time. Neither had any experience running a nonprofit organization, let alone creating one. As a meals-on-wheels program, Food Cycle's primary mission was simple: to prepare and deliver meals to people living with a loss of autonomy. Meals-on-wheels programs are well established, having existed in the United Kingdom and North America for over 50 years, and there are currently thousands of them operating. Most clients of meals-on-wheels programs are seniors, though clients typically include people with various illnesses or disabilities, as well.

Despite its apparently ordinary social service approach, a number of things distinguished Food Cycle right from the beginning. Whereas most meals-on-wheels programs rely primarily on elderly volunteers, Food Cycle had an intergenerational focus and recruited young (mostly under 30) staff and volunteers. Instead of relying on cars for delivery, Food Cycle volunteers delivered mainly on bike and on foot. Most importantly, Food Cycle framed youth development and community building as key aspects of its mission. While the meals-on-wheels service was the hub of organizational activity, Food Cycle hoped to nurture intergenerational links and to offer meaningful experiences to young people through that service. Food Cycle wasn't conceived as a youth program exactly. That is, no one was creating activities designed *for* young people. Young people weren't seen as a separate category of client. They were actually doing the work of the organization itself, from basic meal preparation and delivery to client and volunteer coordination to program development to fund raising. Today, the organization retains that emphasis. Most of the staff are under 30. The executive director, for example, is 28 and was hired in that role when she was 25. At the same time, there are no formal restrictions on age, and the volunteer base includes people under ten and over ninety.

During its early days, Food Cycle relied largely on paid staff working under short-term contracts supported by government-funded youth employment programs. The organization was very much identified with its two founders, and it grew in size and visibility through the second half of the 1990's. It came to be known regionally and nationally as an especially energetic place with a unique culture and an unusual hybrid mission.

When the founders left in 2000, the organization underwent a turbulent time as it experimented with new programs, experienced high staff turnover, and struggled to adapt to new funding structures. But even during this stressful and uncertain period, according to people who were involved, the organization retained its vibrancy and spirit. Things stabilized in 2001, and the organization has been relatively sure-footed, financially and programmatically, ever since. It currently prepares and delivers approximately 20,000 meals annually, serving 250 clients through the course of the year. There are a dozen paid staff and, at any given time, around 200 active volunteers. In addition to the core meals-on-wheels program, Food Cycle has developed a number of other programs and projects over the years: a bicycle workshop; a basement friperie (used clothing store); a vermicompost center; an oral history project; kitchen workshops; various recurring and one-time events (e.g., street fairs, galas, brunches, field trips); and a large, organic rooftop garden. The garden is the organization's keystone for its increasing focus on environmental sustainability, an issue that has come to be seen as part of Food Cycle's core mandate. While not playing a formal advocacy role, the organization does participate in a number of local, national, and international networks, committees, and roundtables related to issues like food security, senior care, and youth development. Food Cycle's annual budget is roughly \$600,000, raised from a notably diverse and balanced funding stream. The organization has recently purchased its own building and will be moving in and developing that building as a sustainable community center over the coming year.

## **External Indicators of Potential Engagement**

There are several external indicators that Food Cycle may be a particularly engaging place.

- The organization's volunteer base is mostly young people, a demographic that is typically difficult to reach and that produces high turnover due to the relative lack of life situation stability. Despite these challenges, Food Cycle maintains a large volunteer base (roughly 200 people active at any given time) with very little outreach or recruiting. The organization requires no specific commitment from volunteers in terms of number of months or number of shifts, yet is still able to keep to an unyielding delivery schedule (five days a week with double meal preparation on two of those days, year-round, in all weathers) staffed mainly by volunteers. Its other large projects (e.g., rooftop garden, bike workshop, major events) are mostly carried out by volunteers, as well. Other organizations and groups frequently ask Food Cycle to share the "strategies" that allow them to consistently attract so many reliable volunteers. While Food Cycle responds to these questions as best it can, it is adamant that its volunteers are drawn in not through specific strategies but because of the overall experience of being involved in the organization.
- Food Cycle has received national awards in recognition of its organizational strength.
- A major national foundation has selected Food Cycle as one of its "applied dissemination" organizations. These are organizations that are seen as social innovation leaders. The foundation is funding and facilitating a process through which those organizations can share their experiences and insights to catalyze more widespread change.
- An international network working to identify social innovation learning centers around the world has selected Food Cycle as one of 16 such centers.
- During the current major economic recession (a period of time in which sources of private and foundation funding have been shrinking dramatically), Food Cycle

has raised \$1,400,000 in grants and donations for its capital campaign to buy a new building. This figure is growing and even now represents more than twice the organization's annual budget.

- The organization's word-of-mouth reputation in its home city typically highlights what an unusually energetic and attractive place it is.

### **Experiential Indicators of Engagement**

Food Cycle participants themselves frame their experiences in the organization as deeply fulfilling and meaningful (i.e., engaging). A large majority of the people I talked to during my informal, ethnographic pilot work over the last seven years (see Chapter 3) describe their participation in positive, passionate, and detailed terms, often in contrast to other organizational experiences they have had. More formally, 35 people participated in the current round of focus groups and interviews including:

- 10 (out of 12) current staff
- 6 former staff
- 9 (out of 9) current board members
- 1 former board member
- 9 (out of 200) volunteers

Of these, 25 spoke in terms of high positive experiential contrast with other organizations and 10 spoke in terms of positive experiential contrast. No one that I talked to spoke in neutral or negative terms. (See Appendix A.) (Note: I did not include clients in this round of research, since I was focused on underlying organizational patterns that only a small number of clients have occasion to observe. One of the board members, however, is also a client, so she was able to reflect on both perspectives. And I did interview six clients in 2004, all of whom contrasted their relationships with Food Cycle volunteers and staff in strongly positive terms with other service and institutional relationships they had.)

When contrasting their Food Cycle experiences with other experiences, participants tended to focus on:

- The energizing and joyful quality of the organization
- Opportunities for personal and professional growth
- The authenticity of relationships (honesty of communication and sense that people interacted as whole selves rather than simply as roles)
- Respect for each individual member
- Overall sense of participation, equality, and connection among members
- The scope and meaningfulness of the work and its direct, visible impact

The following comments are examples of the kinds of observations people made, particularly when asked to compare their organizational experiences at Food Cycle with other organizational experiences they had had. (The detailed examples that followed many of these comments are not included, as they are explored in the ensuing three data analysis chapters.)

#### Examples of Comments made in Contrast to Other Organizational Experiences

*The first time I entered the door, for my job interview, I can't say it any other way, but that it touched my heart. It's an organization that focuses on the individual, on the human at the center. There's a structure, but it's not heavy. It's enough to accomplish the mission, but it allows people to connect in all the ways that are possible.* Staff Member

*You feel a vibrancy when you walk into the organization.* Board Member

*When you enter the room, there's an immediate atmosphere that's the opposite of being oppressed. There's tons of places that you might go to – even good jobs that you might go to – you might have that Monday morning fear, that stress of like, “I've got to face the music.” But I don't think there's anyone who works or volunteers at Food Cycle with that air of trepidation. So there's an immediate atmosphere where right away there's a welcoming air to the place.* Volunteer

*Ninety-nine percent of the time, I always walk away feeling so full of life . . . so excited . . . that was so great, and I love it.* Volunteer

*It's like the organization is run on people's initiative . . . There are tons of people who are there because they chose to be there, and so they are bringing their enthusiasm and their energy. Volunteer*

*One of the things that struck me when I first came here is that it's not a place that takes into consideration where you're at in life, whether you have a Ph.D., whether you're rich, whether you're poor, whether you're young, whether you're old and I could go on forever and ever. I think it's one of the rare places where you can have people from all walks of life, doing the same thing and getting along. Volunteer*

*The belonging [is] there first, and we work out the details. There is something about really respecting what people can bring . . . A sense of acceptance and working with the best of someone. Board Member*

*There is a culture here that fosters the good in people – to see the good in people and to see the gifts that everyone has. Former Staff Member*

*There is a very strong respect for each individual . . . respect and faith that they are capable of completing what they need to do . . . There's constant communication. Volunteer*

*There is a lot of honesty. Everybody can speak their minds as long as they're respectful about it. When I walked into this space, I knew there was something different. You treat people like equals here with trust, and frankness. Staff Member*

*We always keep the communication open if people start to feel that it's not working or people start to feel that hierarchy is building in some ways. I've never been involved with another organization that has put that into practice successfully. Staff Member*

*Whoever you are, walking in the door, there is someone there to greet you who is also taking an interest in you as a person and not just as a volunteer and not just as someone who's going to help the organization. That's one thing that I haven't found in other places. Volunteer*

*There is a sense of community that I feel with a bunch of strangers. The sense that you don't have to know the people here, and you already feel like you are part of the community with them, which I think is rare. Board Member*

*This place is insanely democratic. We were trying to organize this big event. A hundred volunteers showed up. And we didn't even know what was going on. We didn't know how things were set up or where things were stored. And people would just walk up and start doing whatever. A*

*volunteer would say, "Help me with this." And it just happened. It just materialized. You come back two hours later and the entire room is set up. You don't know who did it. You don't know how it happened, but it happened. You just say, "Holy shit." Staff Member*

*I have so much to do here, and it uses my capacities fully. Before this, I worked as a researcher, and I did one thing. I was in my head. And I couldn't do it anymore. Here the experience is full. It's like a micro-society. Staff Member*

*I'm more relaxed now. My involvement in Food Cycle is helping me sort of trust more, and [understand] my place in life and my own natural rhythm. Board Member*

*[I've been] definitely educated by the qualities of the people that I've worked with [on creative projects at Food Cycle] – top quality professionals, and that's an amazing benefit. I'm not alone in saying that. I can speak for almost a generation of people now. And everyone knows that when you create something, it's amazing growth. Volunteer*

*I have left other jobs where I wasn't feeling inspired – feeling like there's got to be something else, like I need to do something that's going to be meaningful. And in coming here, I feel like the growth that happened in me is to a certain extent growth in self-esteem or in understanding the talents that I do have. This place really gave me lots of self-confidence. And I got reflected back to me that I do have a lot in my basket that I can offer people. "These are the talents you have. These are the gifts you can bring anywhere." And I think just being in an environment where I really felt listened to, appreciated, and respected, allowed me to grow. Former Staff Member*

*It's fantastic for your self-esteem. I remember one time when I was volunteering, doing deliveries. A neighbor of one of the people I was delivering to said, "You're going to heaven for this." [But] every exchange with people at the door, I learn something. And when he said that to me, I really felt, "You know what? I'm in heaven now. The gift is now." Former Staff Member and Volunteer*

*Everybody here is both receiving and giving something. It is not just the client who's receiving. I think that's very special. Client and Board Member*

*[The purpose of Food Cycle] is connection – building community, but also connecting to the self. The purpose is to be in touch with the whole cycle of things . . . and to live what we want to see, to live the connection that we want to feel. Staff Member*

*In many offices of other [social purpose] organizations I've been in, people have their offices and they are all separate, and you don't see people when you go in there. You see the secretary. I've found that there is a very high rate of people who are at work there because it is their job, not necessarily because this is what they want to contribute to. [Here it's like people feel], "This is something I feel strongly about and I want to contribute to." And I think that you really see that. One of my absolute favorite things the first time I came to Food Cycle was when I went to the washroom and saw that there were awards in there. It's clearly not like many organization you see where all the awards are up in a wall: "Look at all the great work we do." . . . Awards aren't the goal for Food Cycle. They're secondary. They happen when they do awesome work, but they are not the focus. Volunteer*

*When I came in I kind of thought, "This is a funny little place," . . . [but, I] was able to step right in and get really pretty engaged very quickly [and realized] . . . "This is a funny little place but it's got an awful lot going for it." And there's so much it does. To just describe it as a meals-on-wheels organization doesn't capture it at all." Board Member*

*This place grows goodness. It bubbles over with goodness. Even dealing with things that are difficult, we do it in a "goodness" way. The whole place is growing, and [it's a] contagious feeling. Board Member*

*I just think it's a uniquely, exceptionally joyful place. Staff Member*

## **Hollins School**

### **Organizational Overview**

Hollins School was founded in 2005 as one of the first charter schools in its city's newly instituted charter program. Charter schools are publicly funded schools with considerably more autonomy than in the traditional public system. While Hollins School must meet state mandated testing criteria, report to the city's School Board, and adhere to certain general policies (e.g., the school can only hire certified, unionized teachers), the school retains considerable authority over its curricular approach and its staffing structure.

Hollins School is operating within the domain of a long beleaguered city school system. The city itself has experienced several decades of economic turmoil, high crime, and

declining population. The school system has struggled within this environment, with below average test scores, low graduation rates, and frequent budgetary difficulties. In 2003 the state passed its first charter school law (making it a relative latecomer to the charter school movement). In 2005 the city established three new charters and converted several existing alternative schools to charter status.

Charter schools are controversial. Champions argue that school autonomy and parental choice will produce healthier and more innovative educational experiences. Critics claim that charters can drain resources from traditional public schools even while preliminary research suggests that charters under-perform traditional schools in standardized testing. Some of the strongest resistance to charter schools comes from teacher's unions (though this resistance is not universal). Initial local resistance to charter schools in Hollins School's city had an additional political cast. Charter legislation had been championed by the Republican state governor. The city itself is strongly Democratic, and there is a long history of contention between the city and the state with respect to educational policy. Many local school officials saw charter schools as just one more way for the state to interfere with the city's educational approach, particularly when the state ruled against the city by disallowing the school board's attempt to cap the number of charters that it would issue. (Each charter application must now be reviewed on its own merits.) All of which is to say that despite certain freedoms that they enjoy, charter schools are not necessarily favored siblings within their political and administrative environments. They often have to struggle to receive proportionate funding, infrastructure, and voice.

Hollins School faced these struggles, as well as the more general struggles facing any school operating in a difficult economic and social environment. The school is located in one of the poorer areas of the city, and though it is able to draw students from throughout the city, the majority of students come from the local neighborhood. More than eighty percent of Hollins students are eligible for lunch assistance, meaning that their families fall into the lowest income brackets.

The school's charter is built around parental involvement, neighborhood connection, and curricular commitment to Choice Theory. Choice Theory is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes intrinsic motivation and helps students to take an active role in understanding and meeting their own needs. The school began its first year with two sections each (with approximately 20 students per section) of kindergarten and first grade and has added a grade level in each subsequent year. During the current year, the school enrolls 200 students from kindergarten through fourth grade. The plan is to keep adding a grade level annually, until 2012-13 when the school will cap out at eighth grade. The school does not plan to expand into the high school grades.

### **External Indicators of Potential Engagement**

I had spent a day with Hollins School staff in August of 2005, just before the school was to open its doors for the first time, and found the staff to be excited and energized by each other and by the school's mission. But at that time there was no way to say whether this excitement was simply the result of the creative energy required to start any new endeavor or whether it was rooted in deeper dynamics that could be sustained. The school is still very new, but over its first four years there have been a handful of external indicators of potential engagement.

- Teacher turnover is very low when compared to other city schools.
- The school has received external foundation support for its work.
- The senior school system official most familiar with the city's charter schools says that Hollins School is among the few that have most closely adhered to their original vision.
- The city school superintendent (who is relatively new in his position, having been recruited from an even larger school system) was so impressed with what he saw on an early tour of the school that he offered to relocate one of the grade levels to the school system's central administration building a few miles away to serve as a demonstration. (This flattering but ungainly offer was politely declined.)

### *Experiential Indicators of Engagement*

The external indicators above are suggestive, but far from convincing. When I returned to the school in the middle of its fourth year for focus groups and observation, however, a high level of engagement was very evident.

27 people were included in focus groups and interviews including:

- 15 (out of 17) teachers
- 7 (out of 7) teacher's aides
- 4 (out of 4) administrators
- 1 external administrator/consultant

Of these, 21 spoke in terms of high positive experiential contrast with other organizations, five spoke in terms of positive experiential contrast, and one spoke in neutral terms. No one that I talked to spoke in negative terms. (See Appendix B.)

When contrasting their Hollins School experiences with other experiences, participants tended to focus on:

- A sense of community, connection, and friendship shared among the entire staff
- A feeling of participation
- A feeling of being accepted and of interacting as whole people
- A shared professional excitement around pedagogical experimentation
- Opportunities for personal and professional growth
- The high level of engagement and growth among the students
- The possibility of and hope for larger social effects (e.g., on parents, on the neighborhood, on the school system)

A notable difference in the overall Hollins School conversation from the Food Cycle conversation is that Hollins school staff had considerable experience of the broader institutional environment within which they were operating. They had professional

training, had worked in other schools, and had interacted with multiple levels of school administration. They almost always framed their experiences at Hollins in very stark contrast to the institutional patterns they had experienced in similar settings. This gave their reflections a particular power and poignancy, as the quotes below will show.

In addition to the above formal focus group work, I observed a board meeting, spoke informally with board members afterward, observed a parent meeting, spoke informally with parents afterward, held an unstructured parent roundtable (attended by 15 parents), spoke with three additional outside consultants to the school, and interviewed a senior official in the city's central school administration. All of these conversations and my field own observations buttressed the more specific experiential comments made by focus group participants. Parents in particular emphasized not only their satisfaction with their children's development (which appeared to be universal in the small group I talked to) but their happiness with the overall peaceful and engaged atmosphere of the school and their feeling that school staff really listened to them and were willing to make changes based on their feedback.

The following comments are examples of the kinds of observations people tended to make, particularly when asked to compare their organizational experiences at Hollins School with other organizational experiences they had had. (The detailed examples that followed many of these comments are not included, as they are explored in the ensuing three data analysis chapters.)

#### Examples of Comments made in Contrast to Other Organizational Experiences

*For me, the difference here is always the relationships. In the first school where I taught, there were no strong relationships with anyone – kids, parents, faculty, principal, nothing. Here it is completely different. I feel like everyone is together doing the same things and we all believe in the same purpose and realize that the things we've experienced in the past have not necessarily worked to make people happy or satisfied or really produced anything that's meaningful. Aide*

*I'm from the Philippines, and I've had wonderful experiences in my old school [there]. Very caring. Very much similar to what I have here. So it*

*seems like when I come here, it feels like I'm also at home. But hearing from my friends who came to the States with me . . . We were 50 teachers from the Philippines, and most of their experiences are so different. Whenever we have get-togethers, I'm the only one who has positive things to say. And they are like, "Are you sure you're in a city school?" They can't believe that I am feeling great about my work and about my school.*  
Teacher

*[Responding to previous comment.] That's exactly how my colleagues are. I'm in a residency program. I see the [other participants] once every two weeks. And they're all at different city schools, and when they talk they just get so mad, because they're all at different schools around the city and none of them have really any positive things to say. It's a lot of complaining, and it's really sad. And I feel like I don't even like talking much, because I feel like when I do, I'm gloating, and I'm not trying to but I'm just being honest, you know . . .* Teacher

*It's pretty much like coming to work but not coming to work. It's like you come to work because you want to make sure that everything else runs well, whatever your role might be, and that everybody else that is here is okay, as well. Like, she's having a hard day – she needs help. I feel like if I'm not here somebody might need something, and I can't help them get it. It feels like a family. It is like no other experience that I've had in any job. It's totally different. You love being here. You love doing what you do.*  
Administrator

*There is something here that feeds me when I have low energy or am sick or whatever. I come back here, because this is just like home. It's not just a job.* Teacher

*I've learned about relationships here. I can engage in healthy, meaningful relationships, even if they don't always go my way. I've learned to lessen control over my life with this job, to be a little less controlling in my relationships and take them for the joy and good that they give me . . . To see the trust that is put in me here is mind blowing to me, man. I have told them every once in a while that they really saved my life.* Aide

*This is the first job I have ever been on that I hang out with my coworkers, period. And trust me when I tell you that 85% of my co-workers are 100% different than me in terms of what we like, what we do, how we talk when we are out of school.* Administrator

*I don't think of anybody here as my co-worker. I think of everybody as my friend. I never wanted to teach in a public or charter school. [From my student teaching experience], it seemed awful. But I really, really have enjoyed it here a lot. I like it so much that I talk about it all day long. My*

*friend and boyfriend said, “You know, you really, really like this school, and you really like your kids. You just talk about it all the time.” And I was like, “Yeah. I do.” Aide*

*This is my 16<sup>th</sup> year of teaching (and first year at Hollins), and this has been one of the most openly inviting environments that I’ve ever worked in. I noticed from day one that it was building a sense of community among teachers. At first, I was kind of reserved about that, because I tend to want to be in my little box and do my own little thing. But I began absorbing what others were doing, and the environment was very inviting. You know, “Let’s get to know each other, because are going to be with each other for a long period of time.” That took some adjusting for me, because in other settings I’ve worked in, they were kind of, “This is what we want from you, and you do your thing. We don’t really care about you as a person. We only care about your test scores. In the meantime, if you have some issues, they’re your issues.” It was different here. I thought meantime they wanted to know not just me but everybody as an individual, and then I thought it was my responsibility to get to know others. Teacher*

*I would describe this as home away from home for me – my extended family. Teacher*

*Everyone on staff has a real part in what the school is going to be. They listen to our voices and everyone has input, and we try as much as we can to come together and not compete. People on the staff feel like our voices are heard, and I guess it’s the same thing with the kids who also make up rules and [help create] the classroom contract, as opposed to you just coming and putting everything on the board. Teacher*

*I feel a trust from supervisors and administrators that I’ve never felt as a teacher before. If I have an idea, I’m allowed to implement it. If I need help with something I can come to them. If something is expected of me, there is also support given to follow that expectation. It isn’t ever what I experienced in other schools. Teacher*

*A lot of people on staff have come from other public schools, and so we’d experienced a lot of the same things where your voices are not heard. A lot of people just going in, doing their time, and leaving as soon as they can. You don’t have any say. You don’t have any buy-in. Here we are able to communicate and build together how we want the school to be. You care more. Teacher*

*Most of what I do is to create a product that’s going to be executed by other people for extended periods of time. And I think one of the most meaningful parts of my relationship with this place has been that I have had real partners in seeing that through to completion. It’s nice to be able*

*to bring concerns to the table and to sort things out and be heard. Outside Administrator/Consultant*

*I feel like there is so much positive energy, and I feel so comfortable going to the executive director. I was terrified of my other principal. I would stay away from her as much as I could, because I always felt like everything I said and everything I did was something wrong. I don't feel like that here. Even when they tell me something that I might do better, it's like I already know it and we know it and they know it, so it doesn't make you feel bad to hear it. Teacher*

*This place is like heaven. Where I was before, it was top down with a more bureaucratic way of running the school. Here it's kind of like the leaders are also in the classroom and take in what the teachers need or what they are talking about and their expertise. Teacher*

*Everyone here is so friendly and so smart, and they all know what they are doing. At first I was intimidated. But I felt like this is a community that cared that I was successful. So I went from being intimidated right off the bat to thinking this is kind of cool. We are on the same page. Teacher*

*There is a level of comfort here. I can be myself. You are able to express yourself. Aide*

*You're welcomed through these doors. You always just feel the love and atmosphere. You always want to learn more and have a chance to participate, because this is a place you can be yourself and learn all you can and be able to be heard. Aide*

*I felt like I belonged here right away, from the very first meeting that we had. I didn't feel like I was a stranger going in. What immediately turned me on to this school was the administration and their attitude. Their viewpoint was just so different. I was in my previous school for two years, and I student taught at three different schools. At any of these schools it was so completely different. Teacher*

*I feel like this place is here for me. I was in such a bad place last year – worst place in my life really – and just being here has changed that feeling. I've wanted to become a better person since I've worked here. Teacher*

*I don't think you can survive and thrive in the school unless you are on a path of growth. Just being here requires stretching yourself. It requires such intense personal honesty. Teacher*

*This is an educational program that is head and shoulders above traditional education, whether you are comparing us to other city public schools or any other school. There is a . . . there is a professionalism . . . I don't know the right word, but there is a . . . It's an educational institution that is very high quality, because what we produce are whole people.* Teacher

*I'm finally learning how to teach. This my ninth year teaching [and first year at Hollins]. I'm finally learning how to teach.* Teacher

*There was a field trip to New York, and people were really impressed, asking, "How old are these kids?" They were in the museum and they were sketching, and there was a woman who was an art professor just so impressed with the drawings and with how focused the kids were.* Teacher

*What makes this fulfilling for me is I feel like I'm really making a difference and that my contributions have weight.* Teacher

*I think there are so many problem schools, where parents are hopeless. They wonder why a certain segment of society can't succeed from day one. It's because you don't do anything to help them. And this is the first school I have been in where I can say, "This year, we gave them a chance." We're teaching them to rely on themselves, how to be resourceful.* Aide

*What's most meaningful to me – I'm going to cry – is having a voice and being part of something that is so much bigger than just me or the staff. We have such consistency and community and support. And whatever we are doing gets translated into what the kids are doing – into the relationship between us and the kids and the kids and the class.* Teacher

*What is most meaningful to me is knowing when I come to work every day that the children are just so excited to be here. They just love to come to school. They love learning.* Teacher

*This is a special, special, special thing that's happening here.* Teacher

*It's just the best place I've ever worked.* Teacher

## **The Homestead Project**

### **Organizational Overview**

The Homestead Project grew out of the work of an interfaith group that met regularly in the 1980's to work on social issues. One of the issues the group identified was a regional

shortage of housing for the mentally ill. Operating with a small seed grant the organization established its first residence in 1991.

Homestead leases single apartments from private residential proprietors. Each homestead apartment houses three people with mental illness. The residents live independently with the support and friendship of Homestead volunteers and the consultation of one of Homestead's coordinators. Volunteers are largely drawn from faith-based groups, but may come from anywhere. An apartment typically has three to five volunteers associated with it. Volunteers pursue weekly social activities of many kinds with the residents, and the organization hosts a number of inter-apartment activities for volunteers and residents.

After the first residence was established, Homestead added a new apartment roughly each year, until reaching ten total apartments with 30 residents. There are currently one full-time coordinator and two part-time coordinators on staff, a large working board of around 20 people, and approximately 60 volunteers in the organization, with a budget of \$260,000. In 2003, the organization made the decision to stop expansion at ten apartments to keep the personal, community feel it had come to value. Instead of growing internally, the organization began focus on disseminating its experiences and helping similar projects to start up in other locales. It also increased its focus on different forms of advocacy work.

### **External Indicators of Potential Engagement**

There are two main external indicators that Homestead is engaging.

- All types of organization members – residents, staff, volunteers, and board members – tend to stay with the organization for a long time. Many organization members have been with the organization from five to ten years, some even longer.
- A major national foundation (the same foundation that selected Food Cycle) has selected Homestead as one of its “applied dissemination” organizations. These are organizations that are seen as social innovation leaders. The foundation is funding

and facilitating a process through which these organizations can share their experiences and insights to catalyze more widespread change.

### ***Experiential Indicators of Engagement***

I spent less time at Homestead than I did at the other two organizations, and talked to only a cross section of the members. When I added the organization to my study, I mainly wanted to test out some the findings that were emerging from my work with the other two field sites in a context that was quite different from them. Homewood is smaller. It has been in existence longer. Its volunteers, staff, and board are older, mostly in their 50's, 60's, and 70's. The Homestead members I talked to tended to be less voluble and emotive about their experiences at Homestead than Food Cycle and Hollins School members. They did not articulate as many direct contrasts with other organizations (though they still offered some), and had to be prompted more fully to reveal their personal, subjective experiences of the organization. Nevertheless, everyone I talked to was very positive about Homestead. The most commonly expressed emotions involved a sense of gratefulness that Homestead existed and a contentment that they were able to participate in it. Formally, 11 people participated in focus groups and interviews including:

- 3 (out of 3) staff
- 5 (out of 30) current residents
- 3 (out of 60) volunteers including current board members

In addition, I attended a board meeting, a game night, a dinner, an outing with residents and volunteers from one of the apartments, and the annual general meeting. During these events I was able informally to talk to an additional 20 or so members of the Homestead community and record my observations and conversations in my field notebook. These informal encounters supported the impressions I got from the focus groups. Homewood members are very proud of the organization in their quiet way. They were happy to share their experiences with me, and they interacted with each other in a consistently interested and present way. They paid a great deal of attention to whoever happened to be around them. They laughed quite a bit, and seemed to be having fun at every event I went to.

Of the 11 people who participated in the three focus groups, four spoke in terms of high positive experiential contrast with other organizations and seven spoke in terms of positive experiential contrast. No one that I talked to spoke in neutral or negative terms. (See Appendix C.)

When contrasting their Homestead experiences with other experiences, participants tended to focus on:

- The sense that everybody is accepted
- The way that everyone is treated as an individual, not as someone in a particular disease category
- The experience of a real, warm, participatory community
- The meaningfulness of watching other people grow and develop and thrive
- An intellectual excitement in collaboratively learning about and advocating for mental health issues

The following comments are examples of the kinds of observations people made, particularly when asked to compare their organizational experiences at Homestead with other organizational experiences they had had. (The detailed examples that followed many of these comments are not included, as they are explored in the ensuing three data analysis chapters.)

#### Examples of Comments made in Contrast to Other Organizational Experiences

*There's a tremendous feeling that you're accepted here. It's very supportive. We have rich, quality days. It's all about what you put into it.*  
Resident

*There's no pressure to be someone I'm not. When I spend time with the volunteers, I get an energy, a high, that years ago I would only have gotten from a glass of alcohol.* Resident

*I'm thinking of when I read the description of coming to work here. It said that it was in a family atmosphere and I thought that was interesting. It was completely different. And the day I came for an interview, it was in a*

*nice room like that, and I was offered tea, and already that sets up what to expect and how others are treated also. Staff*

*At the group home where I was before. I couldn't decide things for myself. They decided for me. I slept all the time. After I ate, I went to bed. I slept all the time. Now I eat much better. I go out. I go to the library. We know a lot of people. We talk a lot. I enjoy my life much better now than before. Resident*

*I was lucky enough to sit in on an interview with a young friend of mine – a lovely young guy who had some psychosis. He was interested in Homestead. So I came with him to introduce him and I was ready to leave, but he said that I could stay so I sat and listened. It was so astonishing for me to hear the warmth of the interview. I knew that they were nice, but I didn't know they were so nice! And then he talked about wanting to become a writer, a writer about travel, and they got a magazine out for him and talked to him about that. It was very inclusive. Rather than focusing on your illness, it was, "What is your life all about?" It was very nice. Volunteer*

*It is an intangible kind of a little spark that you see, because sometimes we have people who walk in with their head down and with quite a serious history of problems, but sometimes, there is something in the smile and eyes that tells you that, with the right kind of help and effort, she could be much better than she is. And that is who we want to help and take . . . because it is really rewarding to for us to see them do well. Staff*

*And then the working relationships have been terrific and to work with a staff as peers and exchange competencies and all of that, to see that coming along, is very satisfying. Staff*

*Intellectual stimulation and emotional gratification - you really have both. There are lots of challenges you can take on. You can think about things and you can study and learn and add advocacy to service and branch out in various ways. You can be motherly too. It has a very nice range of aspects and roles and connections. Volunteer*

*I will say that as a community it is a powerful thing for people to come into, and they are attracted to the community and how it works when they come in. It's why they come in. Volunteer*

### ***Institutionalized Engagement at the Three Organizations***

I used three criteria to assess the plausibility of the claim that engagement practices are institutionalized at these three organizations. Again, I will use Giddens' (1984) definition

of an institutionalized practice as one that is widespread across a given social space and sustained over time.

1. Are engagement patterns widespread? In all three organizations, I talked to the entire staff (except for two people at Food Cycle and two at Hollins School). I also talked to the entire board in the case of Food Cycle. Responses were very consistent. Though I only talked to a cross section of other organization members, the experiences of those members strongly supported what I heard from staff. The experience of these organizations as unusually engaging is shared almost universally by organization members.
2. Are engagement patterns sustained over time? For Food Cycle I am able to draw on seven years of participant observation; earlier rounds of interviews (2002 and 2004) with staff, volunteers, and clients; primary interviews with people who have belonged to the organization as far back as 1999; and secondary interviews with people who have belonged to the organization from inception (1995), including one of the two founders. For Hollins School, 10 participants have been with the school since it began. For Homestead, the majority of participants have been involved in the organization for more than five years, with key staff and board participants (including one founder) stretching back to the early days of the organization. I was able to demonstrate longitudinal consistency for Food Cycle, as participants from all historical cohorts use consistent language describing their experiences. Hollins School is only four years old, so claims about endurance must be qualified, but according to participants, the experiences they describe as currently engaging have been consistent from the beginning. (I also see no major differences in the levels of engagement based on tenure.) For Homestead, the historical comments of long-tenured members also suggest consistency over time.
3. Are engagement patterns taken-for-granted (i.e., seen as “normal,” unquestioned aspects of everyday reality in these organizations)? Zucker (1977) points out that taken-for-granted with respect to institutionalization doesn’t have to mean “subconscious.” It can simply mean “accepted as reality” whether this acceptance is subconscious or not. Stronger framings in the cognitive tradition argue that the

more institutionalized a social pattern is, the more subconscious it is (Berger and Luckmann, 1969; Dimaggio and Powell, 1991; Scott, 2001), but even this does not imply that institutionalized patterns must be totally submerged. In the case of all three organizations, what I found was widespread taken-for-grantedness in Zucker's (1977) formulation and partial cognitive submersion in the tradition of the cognitive institutional school. That is, organization members accepted the engagement patterns they discussed as simply the way these organizations worked. They were conscious of the patterns in the broadest sense (that is they were aware that there was a consistent, shared experience - the *existence* of these patterns wasn't submerged) particularly because these patterns contrasted so sharply with their experiences in other organizations. (These patterns were decidedly not seen as institutionalized within broader social change, educational, and mental health fields.) At the same time, participants were initially unaware of many of the *underlying practices* which emerged out of the focus groups. They found it difficult to articulate what sorts of schema and behaviors sustained and reproduced these patterns, often relying on fuzzy, general language: "That's just how it feels." Or, "That's just how people are here." I assumed this fuzziness would be the case going in, which is why I adopted the focus group strategy, and people were indeed able to build off of each other's insights to begin to articulate patterns at a practice level.

Overall, as I think will become apparent in the ensuing chapters, at the micro-organizational level, engagement seems to be institutionalized to a significant degree at all three sites. Why and how this is so, and what such institutionalization tells us about the nature of positive institutional work, are the questions I take up in subsequent chapters.

## Transboundary Work

At Hollins School, Alex, the executive director, and Miri, the director of instruction, share office space in a storage room. Not a former storage room that has been converted into administrative space. An actual storage room. It can be a bit disorienting for a first time visitor. The names and titles on the door are plain enough, but as you walk into the large, cluttered space, you don't see any administrators. You see ceiling high shelves undaintily loaded with paper, markers, crayons, scissors, glue sticks, rulers, folders, binder clips, Velcro name tags, a box labeled "wiring stuff," plates, Dixie paper cups, cleaning supplies, gym balls, tambourines, rhythm sticks, finger bells, a Frisbee, empty five-gallon water bottles, textbooks, and a foot-long, plastic, Volkswagen Beetle. The scuffed, light green walls are concrete. Aging ducts are visible. Dozens of computer network cables snake out from a panel on the wall. Standing in the doorway, you can't see past the shelves, but if you are plucky enough to walk beyond them, you will find the people charged with leading the school, wedged in between still more shelves of various supplies.

It is hard to say whether the anarchic placement of Alex and Miri downplays their official importance or merely emphasizes the importance of paper and crayons and glue in a place like this. Either way, a boundary has been challenged: the boundary that defines the social position and work characteristics of the "principal" people of this organization.

Meanwhile, at Food Cycle it is not unusual to see virtually anyone take a break to sweep the floor, clean the toilet, clear up coffee mugs, or take out the recycling. Everyone answers the phones. Anyone might trespass into a meeting. A volunteer, simply sitting around waiting for her delivery shift to start, might be the one to "officially" greet and help a stranger walking in the door. Getting a fix on who plays what role at Food Cycle is difficult based on observation alone. Many volunteers told me that it took them a long time to figure out who the paid staff were. When chatting with volunteers, Jenna, the executive director, is often asked what she does or how long she has been volunteering.

I found roles and positions similarly opaque at the other two focus organizations. At Homestead, it was never easy to say who was a resident (i.e., someone struggling with mental illness) and who was a volunteer. At a game night I attended, I spent three hours interacting with more than a dozen people from the organization. There was no way to sort out residents, staff, board, and volunteers (supposing one wanted to sort them out in the first place) based on how people were talking to each other or who was taking responsibility for welcoming new arrivals, moving the conversation forward, etc. It wasn't that people were guarded about their situations. As I chatted with people, they often described their history with Homestead, and some went into detail about their mental health struggles. But what would seem to be a stark role difference – the difference between those who are being served by the organization and those who are serving it – did not reveal itself in the general social dynamic in the room. At Hollins School, even after hours of detailed interviews, I often had to refer to a staff list to distinguish teachers from aides from administrators. My experience was echoed by many of the people working in these organizations, often in strong terms. Wendy, a young teaching assistant, described her surprise at how she was treated at Hollins School. In most schools there are sharp distinctions between teachers, who have received certification, and their paraprofessional aides, who may have university degrees, but who have not been trained formally as teachers. Wendy's experience at Hollins School has been quite different:

*[I came in to be] a teacher's assistant, but nobody calls me that. I'm a teacher. My kids in the classroom respect me as a teacher. All the other kids in the school respect me as a teacher. All the other paras [paraprofessionals] are called teachers. And I think that's really great. I came in knowing nothing . . . I really had to learn on the job . . . and I had the fear that I would be, you know, taking kids to the bathroom and doing snacks, and that's not true. I'm doing teaching on my own. I'm teaching small reading groups, and then when the teacher is out, I'm the teacher – the full-time classroom teacher, which is very terrifying and went awful at first. But it has become really great. (Hollins School-FG7:21)*

Experiences like Wendy's – initially difficult and confusing, but ultimately engaging – derive from what I'll call 'transboundary work.' The concept of 'boundary' in the social sciences is often used, but rarely defined. Most sociologists and organizational scholars

adopt an implicit definition of boundaries as “lines that include and define some people, groups and things while excluding others” (Lamont, 2001: 15341). These lines may be symbolic (conceptual categorization schemes) or social (objectified structural and behavioral dynamics that translate into patterns of inclusion and exclusion with respect to power and resources) (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). Both symbolic and social boundary mechanisms may operate at cultural, structural, or social-psychological levels (ibid).

In sociology, boundaries are most frequently explored in the context of broad social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, gender) and institutionalized functional groupings (e.g., professions, scientific disciplines) (ibid). In organization studies, scholars interested in boundaries generally focus on the boundaries of the organization as a whole – who/what is inside or outside of the organization – and pay particular attention to issues of boundary setting and boundary spanning (Scott, 1998). But organizational roles, routines, groups, and purposes can also be seen as boundaries in that they delimit various patterns of action, interaction, identity, and meaning-making.

‘Boundary work’ involves establishing, maintaining, and managing boundaries (Faraj and Yan, 2009). Boundary work is oriented toward the explicit cultivation of differences between groups (Wikstrom, 2008; Essers and Benschop, 2009) and/or distinctions between general categories of experience (Lamont and Molnar, 2002).

I will define ‘transboundary work’, then, as *sets of practices that explore, confront, reconfigure, and even transcend organizational and institutional boundaries*. I want to be clear that transboundary work does not necessarily mean getting rid of a boundary altogether (although it might). But it does mean lessening the boundary’s “boundedness” by expanding it, making it more pliable, or making it more permeable. Strengthening an existing boundary, or moving a boundary horizontally, would not be transboundary work according to this definition. Transboundary work challenges the very concept of ‘boundary,’ albeit in a practical, generally non-absolute way.

Transboundary work runs deeply through all three organizations in a number of ways. I will explore this work through the lens of four types of practices:

1. Practices that challenge role boundaries: Who does what sorts of work?
2. Practices that challenge task boundaries: How is that work to be done?
3. Practices that challenge group boundaries: Who works with whom?
4. Practices that challenge purpose boundaries: Why do we do this work and for whom?

I will begin by simply outlining the transboundary work practices I have observed on their own terms and illustrating the effects that they seem to have on individuals' experiences of organizational life. I will then place these practices in a theoretical context by exploring their possible connections to the four dimensions of engagement: attunement, mutuality, growth, and meaning.

### ***Practice: Role Transboundary work***

An organizational role is the set of boundaries that define what activities or functions a given organization member will take part in. It is the organizational space the member is asked to – or allowed to – occupy. At first glance, Food Cycle, Hollins School, and Homestead all seem to have relatively conventional role structures. Food Cycle has an executive director, an operations coordinator, functional directors, and some functional coordinators who assist them. Hollins School has an executive director, a director of instruction, classroom teachers, classroom aides, various instructional specialists, and administrative support personnel. Homestead has a small staff of one full-time and two part-time coordinators, each of whom is responsible for managing resident and volunteer activity for a given set of residences. In none of the three organizations have there been major efforts to make formal structures flatter or more amorphous by self-consciously altering job titles, job descriptions, or explicit lines of authority. Through interviews and archival work, I explored the founding of each organization and subsequent key moments of stress and transition, but I never found a whisper of any ambitious structural change

program. If these organizations are distinguished, it is not for the creativity of their organigrams.

Still, the vast majority of study participants described roles in their organizations as remarkably flexible and non-hierarchical. For many people, this flexibility was unprecedented in their organizational experience. And it was clear that they were not talking about the ways that roles were formally defined, but about how they were lived in daily practice. When asked to describe the differences between Food Cycle and other organizations she had been involved in, one member spent some time describing the lack of hierarchy. When I pointed out that, on paper, Food Cycle actually had quite a number of clearly defined functions, levels, and supervisory or coordinating positions for such a small organization, she chuckled and said that it never felt like that. Several types of practices contribute to creating this feeling.

### **Role Alignment**

Virtually all roles are treated as loose structures that need to be adapted to the people inhabiting them rather than the reverse. Consequently roles are understood to be always evolving. At any given moment, a role is a process of exploration, not a fixed domain. A Food Cycle board member frames this as “building a relationship over time as opposed to the relationship being defined ahead of time.” A number of staff members made similar comments, describing their paths through Food Cycle as motley affairs of transitory, shifting titles (sometimes self-invented) and/or areas of responsibility. Some staff find it difficult even to list the numerous, and often now altered or extinct, formal roles they have filled over relatively short periods of time. The current sustainability coordinator, who has filled many roles in the organization, says, “I like my job, because I can guide it into new places . . . reinventing or programming my work every cycle, every year” (Food Cycle-FG6: 9). Other roles, such as volunteer coordinator or kitchen manager, seem more stable on the surface, but what a given role involves and particularly how the work is shared with other staff members and volunteers evolves over time according to the specific person occupying that role and the organizational context.

Volunteers also experience this kind of role flexibility. A volunteer in general is not seen as someone who fits a particular, circumscribed niche. Though Food Cycle has an unyielding daily schedule of meal preparation, meal delivery, and garden maintenance, and though volunteers do most of this work, they are not asked to commit to a defined time period of participation or a specific number of shifts. Some volunteers show up several times a week. Others drop in to sign up for a shift every now and then. For some, there are months, even years, between shifts. And a significant number of volunteers move quickly away from the basic kitchen/delivery entry point, often creating roles – or even entire activities – that didn’t exist before them. Scott becomes the default computer support person. Colin spends most of his time working on governance and membership issues. Jasper, a writer and artist with a flare for performance, becomes one of many people primarily focused on the organization’s more creative pursuits. He tells his story this way:

*When I first volunteered here actually, I thought I was bad. I messed up a couple of meals. I forgot a delivery, I got the wrong meal, I threw out the bags. I said, “This is turning out to be a stressful job. And I’m a volunteer. I’m not even paid.” And I’m screwing up and people are getting upset, although not necessarily Food Cycle people, but I was feeling I was letting people down. And so actually I shied away for three weeks, and I remember I lived nearby and I bumped into a staff member. And I remember feeling totally ashamed because I hadn’t been around for three weeks, and I really felt that I was letting down the gang. And I remember how gracious she was to see me, and I said [to myself], “Maybe it’s okay that I haven’t been around. That’s cool.” So then I came back. (Food Cycle-FG5: 9)*

On his return, Jasper doesn’t become a regular delivery person or cook, but because he feels accepted anyway, he begins getting more and more involved in planning events, which often involves the kind of theatrical and artistic skills he wants to exercise and develop.

*As a cultural, creative person, that’s where it came in for me . . . the fundraising and the chances that we had to band together and create stuff – and not only that, but of really top quality, with top, famous people in the arts community. And it certainly changed my career outside of here . . . My whole world has changed in terms of what I actually make a living doing, and that started here in this room, planning the fundraisers and being allowed to come on board and have input and show that kind of self-expression as a newcomer to the city. That played itself out lots of times, not just with me. I know there’s hundreds of people who can say,*

*“Wow, I was able to just . . . I couldn’t deliver meals well, but I could write a nice menu sign.” That’s their contribution. (Ibid: 8)*

Despite its apparently standard, teacher-based role structure, Hollins School too is replete with stories of individualized role evolution. Doug starts out as a classroom aide, but as his skills and interest in math instruction develop, he becomes a cross-classroom math support person (a position that didn’t exist when the school started). Dante’s first connection with the school is as a parent. His daughter is doing well there, and he finds himself spending more and more time volunteering and even just hanging out and talking with the kids. He has a way with them. He’s smart, teasingly empathetic, and funny. He’s grown up in the same neighborhood. He’s also good with the other parents. At the end of the year, the school creates a new, full-time staff position for him as Student Support Coordinator. Bronwyn begins her Hollins School career as a music teacher, then becomes a classroom teacher, and then becomes half of the only team-taught classroom in the school. The team teaching experiment does not represent a generalized role policy shift. It arises out of the particular combination of the two teachers: Bronwyn – soft-spoken, gentle, musical, earnest; and Karen – energetic and versed in a daunting array of pedagogical theories and approaches. The classroom seems to come to life in a particularly lovely way when they work together, so the school creates a specific, one-off role structure for them.

The above role shifts are dramatic and visible, but there are many subtler shifts happening regularly as staff strengths and curiosities are developed or revealed. Role alignment is a conscious and continual pursuit at the school. Doug says, “They ask us at the end of each year what we would like to do, and do you want to do this next year, and how comfortable are you doing this, and most people will pretty much get the things that they want to do next year, and if it kind of doesn’t work out perfectly then it might actually work out better after they see what your talent is and what you can and can’t do” (Hollins School-FG1:9).

Homestead’s approach to roles is similar. While it is natural for Homestead to exhibit a degree of role flexibility, given its small staff of three people, as at Food Cycle, that same

flexibility is infused into volunteer roles, as well. The basic volunteer model at Homestead is for a volunteer to be assigned to a specific apartment where she can develop a relationship with the residents and participate in weekly get-togethers. But there are a number of Homestead volunteers who don't do this and instead offer their contributions in other ways, such as accounting or apartment upkeep. Some volunteers primarily go to larger events like game nights or retreats. And even the volunteers who work primarily with one apartment vary greatly in how often they visit, what activities they do, and how they form relationships with residents.

All three organizations seem to see functional role boundaries as temporary scaffolding, always open to being questioned and re-imagined in light of specific people and specific relationships. When existing functional boundaries don't allow room for the particular talents and enthusiasms of someone who obviously has energy to bring to the organizations, entirely new role spaces may be carved out.

All of the examples above are representative of the frequent boundary challenges the three organizations make to the ways that functions are combined with each other and aligned with specific individuals. Many SPOs have some degree of role flexibility. What makes these three organizations unusual is that roles aren't simply tweaked here and there. It's that basic role practices are oriented toward the uniqueness of each individual. In terms of practice, the individual is what drives and defines the role and not vice-versa.

Ellen, a young Hollins School teacher, frames these individually driven role practices in stark contrast to her experience as a teaching aide at a Montessori school.

*Last year, I taught at a private Montessori school in Colorado. That was my first real job out of college . . . Every classroom has a teacher and assistant, and the assistant is treated like dirt pretty much by everybody. Even though I had a college education . . . you're not called by name. You're just referred to as the assistant. You're not really given a name. And I guess at the time I didn't realize the effect of that – not having an identity. Just the lead teachers in the classroom were called by names. It was their class. It was their everything, and you were just there. (Hollins School-FG9: 8)*

The assistant role was so rigidly inscribed at this school that even when Ellen temporarily took on the function of the teacher, it didn't change.

*The lead teacher I worked with was out a lot of the time. She was getting her Montessori degree. So I would be teaching for weeks just by myself, and it was still like, "This is the assistant who has no name." So I realized coming here [to Hollins School] how included everybody is and how everyone feels welcome. You don't feel like you're just this person doing this job and not given an identity. So I feel like I really have a purpose. (Ibid)*

Ellen's story begins to hint at the negative effects that rigid role boundaries can have on one's ability to feel valued by and connected to an organizational community. Role boundaries are usually driven by a functional view of the organization, but they have significant subjective effects, as well.

### **Cross-functional Conversations and Multidisciplinary Space**

Another way that role boundaries are challenged in the three organizations is that functions themselves (apart from the individuals performing them) are not seen as strictly and clearly distinct. While the kitchen manager at Food Cycle, Emile, may spend most of his time focused on food purchasing and meal preparation, it would not be unusual for him to become involved in a conversation – whether at a formally convened meeting or during an informal encounter – about volunteers, or clients, or building plans, or fundraising, or the rooftop garden. Often, a cross-functional conversation will take place because someone happens to overhear two or three people discussing an interesting issue and decides to jump in to the discussion. At other times, someone wrestling with a problem might simply grab whatever sympathetic ear or insightful mind is within reach. At Food Cycle, there is no sense that a conversation about a particular function should be off limits to anyone. Even volunteers often serendipitously wander into staff conversations of various sorts. I have observed these kinds of impromptu, cross-functional conversations many times, and a number of staff and volunteers described similar experiences. (There are, of course, topics that are more protected than others, particularly those having to do with sensitive or personal issues. But this kind of protection is the exception rather than the rule.)

Part of this dynamic is due to the strongly held belief at Food Cycle that any person might have something to contribute to any conversation. But it is also due to a general understanding that all of the various functions interrelate and that functional distinctions are somewhat illusory. As the kitchen manager, Emile focuses on food preparation, but food “interacts” with every part of the organization. Clients eat it. Volunteers cook and deliver it. People write about it in newsletters and grant applications. Food is embedded in the organization’s operations and in its identity. You could say the same thing about client relationships, or volunteer coordination, or fundraising, etc. It’s not just that Emile might have personal insight about clients or volunteers. It’s that “kitchen” perspectives in general might offer insight.

This practice of participatory, cross-functional conversation is reinforced by what one board member calls Food Cycle’s “multidisciplinary” use of space. Food Cycle’s main office space is a large open room housing approximately 10 desks where the bulk of the staff work. It also includes long communal tables, a nook where books and clothing are for sale, and a central gathering space jammed with couches and stuffed chairs. The gathering space is where volunteers assemble before the delivery shift, but it is also used for meetings of various sorts, as well as general relaxing, hanging out, and eating. A small, door-less annex is shared by the executive director, the graphic designer, and the bookkeeper, and is often commandeered for meetings of various stripes. In general, the space is so open that no one area is dedicated to a particular activity, and most conversations can be overheard most of the time by most people if they decided to listen.

Hollins School and Homestead also rely largely on multi-disciplinary space. At Hollins School, classrooms and offices are clearly defined, but the lack of general meeting and work space means that people often grab whatever room is semi-empty when they need to spread out (or when they need some quiet). One of the most open, frequently breached and re-appropriated spaces, is actually the large storage room housing the school’s two administrative heads. Miri, the director of instruction, says:

*A lot of time, a two-person conversation becomes a three- or four-person conversation, because people are walking into the office, and we'll just continue, depending on the sensitivity of the topic. (Hollins School-II: 4)*

Homestead has an open office that also serves as meeting space, boardroom, etc. Interestingly, none of the three organizations has a defined reception area (or receptionist for that matter). As soon as you walk in the door you are in the organization's central hub of activity. In general, keeping spaces multi-disciplinary appears to contribute to permeable functional boundaries, both because there are fewer specific, tangible spaces helping to reify functional abstractions like "finance" and because such spaces contribute to a general culture of cross-functional conversation and collaboration.

### **Beyond the Constraints of Expertise**

So far, we have been discussing roles as they relate to functions. But another powerful form of role transboundary work has to do with roles as markers of expertise. At Food Cycle, there are many stories of people being thrown into roles for which they have little training or experience, and in general, multiple levels of expertise interact frequently and equally. At the board level, for example, there are board members who have never served in any kind of governance role before, and there are board members with very specific kinds of governance experience, but in neither case is their interaction with each other or with the organization defined by their relative or functional expertise. For Laila, her time on the Food Cycle board was her first foray into organizational governance.

*The board of directors isn't composed of just lawyers or accountants or people that know about boards. I was so amazed that board members are people that care about the organization and that can have a conversation around governance instead of having a specialty, you know, in governance. (Food Cycle-FG10: 1)*

Jack, a current Food Cycle board member with significant corporate governance experience, sees the board similarly.

*I think the main difference that I see with this board from other boards is the level of involvement. Board members are drawing on their experience within the organization more and are learning from it and have changed because of it. Board members have much more intimate knowledge and are using it, whereas in other organizations it's like, "I'm here as the accountant, and so I'm going to look at the numbers as an accountant as opposed to a member of this community." (Food Cycle-FG10: 6-7)*

Food Cycle uses different kinds of expertise all the time, of course, but neither expertise nor the lack of it seems to circumscribe just how someone will interact with other members and with the organization's various functions. The same dynamic is present at the volunteer and staff levels, as well. As Food Cycle's sustainability director, one of Pete's primary responsibilities is coordinating the rooftop garden project. The garden uses a relatively unusual, urban, organic, hydroponic approach to growing vegetables and thus requires some specific technical knowledge. Pete's first job at Food Cycle had been as client coordinator.

*I just feel struck by the fact that I'm running a garden here. I wasn't hired to do that. I had done some environmental studies, but I don't have any horticultural skills, but it's something I knew I would love, and I kind of just wiggled myself into my job. It's awesome. I picked up a whole new set of skills, but I was very raw in the beginning. I had to adjust. I wasn't a total stranger to this, but I definitely wasn't an agriculturist, and I think now I'm actually fairly knowledgeable . . . When I [held] a class [recently], I thought, "Oh yeah. I'm running a garden. How did that happen?" (Food Cycle-FG6: 9)*

One board member describes Food Cycle's approach to roles as keeping people slightly beyond their professional comfort zones.

Again, it's not that expertise is unappreciated or unused at Food Cycle. It's that it is seen as only one dimension among many, none of which can be ascribed a precise, bounded weight. Each role decision has its own particular alchemy. Hiring and board selection practices at Food Cycle reflect this approach. Hiring is done by a temporary team (refashioned for each new opening) comprised of people who are interested in participating and people who are most likely to work directly with the new person. In the seven years I have been studying Food Cycle, a number of hiring decisions have involved wrestling with whether to select a candidate with considerably more experience or a candidate whose passions and spirit seem to be more aligned with the organization. The latter perspective has always won out, as far as I know, though not in a pre-programmed

way. It is, after all, not easy to understand a candidate's spirit in an interview process. But that is the intention that team members take into the process.<sup>8</sup>

What has been especially interesting to me is that such an intention has not led to hiring only a narrow range of personalities or backgrounds. The staff of a dozen, which I have seen turn over at least three times, always includes a mixture of the gregarious and the shy, the loud and the quiet, the visionary and the practical, the teasing and the earnest. Staff members have arrived from large corporations, small businesses, large service organizations, international NGOs, grassroots community groups, arts organizations, business schools, environmental studies programs, and a host of other educational settings.

The board has an equally broad range of experience levels, backgrounds, and temperaments. Food Cycle members appear to elect the board in a fashion every bit as eclectic as the hiring process. At the most recent annual general meeting, Amos, an unemployed, pierced and black-clad political firebrand who spoke movingly about his love for the organization and its clients was elected over Will, a perfectly charming Australian accountant. The decision wasn't simple. Amos had years of volunteer experience with Food Cycle. He was well known as a lovely, but sometimes feisty, personality. Will was a newcomer, having volunteered for only six months. In his speech, he emphasized the technical skills he had to offer. The overall make-up of the board was closer in style to Will than to Amos. (Amos is currently the only unemployed, pierced, black-clad political firebrand on the board.) I spoke to some people who struggled with their voting decision, and what it came down to was both a recognition of Amos's deep connection to certain parts of the organization that didn't always have the largest voice and a desire to keep the board united in spirit while making it even more diverse in style and approach. The decision was challenging, because in many ways, Will would have been a safer, more comfortable choice.

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<sup>8</sup> See Baker and Dutton's (2007) discussion of "relational selection" as a key practice for institutionalizing positive relationships within organizations. Relational selection is participatory and prioritizes interpersonal strengths of candidates.

The willingness to involve people with less experience may seem natural at Food Cycle. Part of its explicit mission, after all, is youth development. Hollins School, on the other hand, operates in a highly professionalized environment where pedagogical and administrative expertise are clearly important. Nevertheless, Hollins School too has a highly flexible relationship with expertise. The executive director has never worked in any kind of school before. The director of instruction taught in the city school district for several years but has never been an administrator. There are a number of teachers with substantial experience, but there are also many who are early in their careers. The role revisions and new positions created have had less to do with expertise than personality and interest. The question is less, “What do you know now?” and more “What do you want to know? What are you likely to be great at in the long run.”

Hiring at Hollins School has also evolved toward emphasizing temperament and spirit. Miri, the point person on most of the hiring so far, says that when the school was first starting up, they were looking for people with experience in particular curricular areas, but that emphasis has shifted. Keep in mind that the school is only in the middle of its fourth year as she is saying this.

*In the first year or two, we were most excited with somebody new that had experience with certain elements of our curriculum, because it's really hard, and it's really hard to teach, because there's so much going on. . . [As we] got a little bit older and a lot stronger, it wasn't necessary for us that somebody [have] these particular experiences. (Hollins School-13: 27-28)*

Hiring became more a combination of intuition and trying to diversify or balance strengths, personalities, and important demographics like race.

*If we [had] a lot of . . . “out there” creative types and we wanted some really great organization at a grade level or something, we might look for somebody with tremendous organizational skills . . . [Over time, we became] very careful to really throw a wide net and be as inclusive as we could. And definitely we have a more diverse staff because of it. (Ibid: 29)*

The school strayed from this approach when it added grade three and began preparing students formally for the politically charged state assessment exams.

*When we started worrying about [state assessment] scores . . . we wanted to bring some people in who had had experience with the city . . . so they were familiar*

*with the more concrete stuff we were going to have to get done . . . I actually think that backfired. That was sort of fear-based, and I don't think ultimately the best decision. And now I think . . . we're looking for people who have the same sense of collaboration, willingness to work hard, and are really motivated to do the right thing for kids and have their own academic agenda, so that this will be personal growth for them as well. That's important. (Ibid)*

As at Food Cycle, another feature of this permeable relationship with expertise is that the experts in the school are not confined by their own expertise. Barbara is one of the most experienced teachers in the school. She has taught at public and private schools in a number of areas. She is extremely well versed in the theory and practice of different pedagogical approaches. Currently, her mandate is to focus on arts integration – how to include artistic dimensions throughout the curriculum in a variety of core subjects and activities. She reflects on the role that her own expertise plays in the school.

*I think I have a certain level of skill related to facilitating children's learning. And it's more than just knowing how to teach art but it is my whole bag of . . . it's everything I know about kids . . . It's everything. And I feel my expertise is very respected, [but] it's not elevated. From my point of view, I do have more to learn, and it's very exciting to be with people who also are interested in learning. (Hollins School-FG9: 15)*

Farah, who handles various administrative tasks, responds to Barbara's comment.

*I think it's kind of nice. . . It's the acknowledgement of what you have accomplished, but it's not the definition of you are. Because yes, you have expertise in one area . . . but [you] have all of these other qualities that matter just as much as your expertise in that area. And yes, we can come to you and say give me some information in your area of expertise, but we're not going to cut you out of all of the other things where you don't have expertise. We're still going to include you because we want your input. We still want to know how you can contribute in all of these other areas, because you never know where that key piece is going to come from. (Ibid)*

Homestead, while operating in quite a different context, shares something of Food Cycle's and Hollins School's approaches to expertise. Mental health treatment is highly professionalized and Homestead's small staff is experienced and shares information with the various mental health experts who work with individual residents. But Homestead's focus is not on mental health treatment per se, but on community building, and much of the work of the organization is driven by volunteers who support the apartments and

board members who sit on a variety of working committees. Little volunteer recruiting or role selection is done on the basis of expertise. As at Food Cycle and Hollins School, the emphasis at Homestead tends to be on energy, compassion, and interest. Those qualities, in fact, turn into a kind of expertise. Recently when Yves, a resident, began to show signs of a returning manic phase, it was volunteers and housemates who first noticed the initially small changes in his behavior and then helped to make sure that Homestead coordinators and Yves' doctors knew what was going on. In many cases in all three organizations, attention and compassion – relational expertise, if you will – complement or even replace more formal sorts of expertise.

### ***Practice: Task Transboundary work***

One of the things that surprised me when I arrived at Hollins School was how engaged people were in the craft of teaching. From my preliminary assessment, I expected to find an open, warm, relationship-based culture, and indeed I did. But what I wasn't expecting was the practical, intellectual fervor with which by and large the staff seemed to approach education. This fervor manifested in different ways, depending on the temperament of the person I was talking to. Some people articulated explicit pedagogical theories that they were exploring individually (or that the school was exploring as a whole). Others cast their explorations in more personal terms. But almost everyone talked excitedly about how much their teaching skills had developed and how much they loved sharing ideas with colleagues. I heard many stories of people exchanging tips and articles. People frequently talked about getting advice from those around them. And the overall sense of conscious, collaborative experimentation was much higher than in most SPOs I've encountered. Lowell, a fourth-grade teacher in his first year at the school, talks enthusiastically about his own professional growth since arriving at Hollins School. (Note that when I talk to him he has been at the school less than five months.) He is especially excited about the opportunities he's had to co-design curricula with Vandana, the other third grade teacher.

*It was really neat for me to watch the curriculum that Vandana and I created . . . seeing all those things flesh out and pan out at the end of each assessment period. And to me that was amazing – something that we created, our own curriculum.*

*I've always had textbooks or scripts – you say this, the students say this . . . Basically you were told what to teach, when to teach it, how to teach it. You weren't given a whole lot of leeway, yet you had to have your standards on the board, and you had to teach to the standards. It was really mechanical . . . And at first it was very overwhelming to me here. But it was neat, and it brought excitement. It was a challenge, and then I rose to that challenge . . . Here, I'm finally learning how to teach. This is my ninth year teaching, and I'm finally learning how to teach. It's just been amazing for me. Now I think if I wanted to I could go back to one of my schools in the past, I could rock as a teacher . . . I would be so much better because of the experience here already. (Hollins SchoolFG2: 5, 9)*

Like Lowell, most people at Hollins School associate their professional growth with the rare degree of freedom they have over how they pursue their work. This task freedom is not absolute in the abstract. The school does use two well-defined models for its work – Choice Theory and Expeditionary Learning – and both models offer a number of specific teaching approaches and strategies. But both models also offer substantial room for individual creativity, and in any case, while the school is currently committed to these models, it is not particularly dogmatic about their purity. As a result, Hollins School staff feel able to test the boundaries of previously established routines, and initiate new, untried ways of doing things. I will describe themes that contribute to the practice of task transboundary work at Hollins School and briefly discuss analogues of these practices in the other two organizations.

### **Personal Work Design**

As Lowell's comment illustrates, the foundation of Hollins School's approach to task design is that tasks are shaped by the person doing the work. Like roles, tasks are not seen as abstractions meant to be routinized, but as evolving interactions linked to specific human beings; work does not stand apart from the person who is doing it. In practice, this perspective does not demand absolute freedom and autonomy for each individual in the organization. Tasks evolve through an ongoing conversation that generally includes peers and formal leaders. But the individual is the starting point.

Teachers and aides strongly, and sometimes amusingly, contrast their work freedom at Hollins with their experiences at other schools.

*Callie, a teacher at my old school, left and came here. That's how I found out about this place. Callie would talk to me all the time last year like, "Guess what they're doing? I'm able to make my puppets!" Because we would sneak and do arts integration at my old school - seriously, like hide the stuff because there was no place and no schedule for it. We didn't want to get in trouble. And Callie's like, "I have puppets all over the place. You've got to come and see it." (Paula: Hollins School-FG8: 12)*

Respect for a person's own understanding of her work runs deep at Hollins, even when someone appears to challenge one of the school's core principles. For example, one of the tenets of Choice Theory, the child development model the school has used from the beginning to inform its pedagogy, is that motivation should be fostered intrinsically not extrinsically. The school generally avoids using rewards (treats, gold stars, special privileges, etc.) as a motivational tool. I've spoken to Miri, the director of instruction, at length about her philosophy of child development, and it's clear that intrinsic motivation is one of the issues she feels most strongly about. There isn't a question in her mind that relying on external rewards undermines a child's ability to discover her own strengths and passions and to cultivate the ability to realize those strengths and passions in a disciplined way. In addition, the founding teachers and staff members underwent intensive training in Choice Theory during the weeks before the school opened, and many of them describe this period as an especially powerful bonding experience. So for Miri personally and for the school as a whole, Choice Theory is a strongly held and unifying paradigm.

When Gabrielle arrived at Hollins School at the beginning of the school's fourth year, however, she was not entirely comfortable with the purely intrinsic approach. She had been teaching for a number of years and felt that sometimes a simple reward was the most effective way to keep students focused. In general, I think it's fair to say that Gabrielle found a number of the school's philosophies challenging. She is one of several examples I encountered of people who didn't immediately and easily fit into the school's culture. I ask Gabrielle about her experiences with Choice Theory at Hollins School.

*I had done my masters on constructivism, so I was sold on the constructivist approach. However, there were some aspects of Choice Theory that I had to make the choice to buy into. (Hollins School-FG7: 11)*

She chuckles good-naturedly and calls herself “old school.”

*I'm all for that intrinsic motivation, I really am . . . but sometimes we need the extrinsic to bring about the intrinsic. Not that I think, “You need to behave, and I'll give you a piece of candy,” because I don't feel that way. . . . But I might plan a weeklong writing institute for kids and I might say “Look, your extrinsic motivation, if you attend seven out of the nine classes, at the end, you'll be part of the celebration.” And you know they're getting what they need, but, I know part of the motivation is that celebration. And for me, I don't see where that's such a bad thing, Because I think that, in the end, they will [realize], “I would have done it for free.” Sometimes I think extrinsic motivation is needed in order to help kids understand, so I kind of struggle with that aspect of Choice Theory, because they're still kids, you know. (Ibid: 11-12)*

Knowing how strongly many people at the school, including Miri, would disagree with Gabrielle's perspective, I ask her whether she has discussed her views openly.

*Yeah, actually, umm, I shared that. At first, because I was new, I [wondered], “Should I?” But I did share it, you know, and Miri said, “Interesting . . .” (Ibid)*

She laughs again, imitating Miri's polite, hesitant demeanor.

*She never said, “No, that's not how we do things here.” She said, “Well, we are a Choice Theory school and that is something we hope that you would find your way to buy into, and pick and choose what works for you. But at the same time, I trust your decision and your judgment.” There was always a mutual respect for each other's values and opinions regarding the whole idea of Choice Theory. And I remember bringing something to her in the beginning of the year. I do this thing with classroom jobs where they have a job and I give them “Gabrielle Dollars.” I remember . . . I could see it in Miri's face [that she was uncomfortable with it], but she never said, “OK Gabrielle is this really choice theory?” She really genuinely said, “Let's talk about it. Let me hear what you have to say about it.” And, she was ok with it. I was able to do it and so I didn't feel like it was something I was doing behind her back. I didn't feel like I was not buying into the whole idea of Choice Theory. She really genuinely listened to my feelings about this program that I wanted to institute in my classroom and she was open to it. (Ibid)*

As Gabrielle talks, I get the feeling that what was shaping her interaction with Miri was not simply the open exchange of different pedagogical ideas, but the underlying respect she felt from Miri. Consequently, Gabrielle seems very comfortable at the school. Since the school's philosophy was not forced on her, she seems to have no defensive reaction against it. She is experimenting with it at her own pace in her own way, and perhaps is buying into it much more strongly over time than she would be if had been forcefully indoctrinated or controlled.

Many Hollins School teachers and assistants emphasize how much more classroom autonomy they have than they have had in other settings. Laura describes the interplay of diverse teaching approaches at the school:

*We are the people in the classroom, so we have a say of what is appropriate for the kids at our planned time – what's more comfortable for our teaching styles. Karen and I have different teaching styles, so what works for her won't work for me. I think the directors understand that, saying, "You guys are doing two different things, but you're getting similar outcomes." And sometimes we are allowed to prepare together, to observe each other, and so even if I want to teach like Karen I'll say, "Okay, she did this really well, and I would like to try to work on that." And I'll talk to her about it. (Hollins School-FG6: 5-6)*

Food Cycle too has created an organizational culture in which task boundaries are rarely taken as given. Newcomers there are often surprised by how much room they have to define their work and to propose new ideas. Polly, a board member and client, contrasts the "organic enthusiasm" that she sees at Food Cycle with the forced involvement she has seen in other organizations. She says that because the organization is not micromanaged at any level, it has a striking vibrancy and dynamism, in which people take on "what they feel inspired to take on" (Food Cycle-FG7: 10). And though Food Cycle's work is more diffuse than Hollins School's work, there is a similar intellectual excitement. In recent years various groups of people have enthusiastically pursued research and experimentation around issues ranging from sustainable agriculture to regional food security to family volunteering to senior citizen policy to community arts to the relationship between organizational development and social change – an ambitious agenda for any SPO let alone a small meals-on-wheels outfit.

At Homestead task boundaries are also constantly evolving. Each coordinator develops her own approach to supporting the apartments, and each apartment with its residents and volunteers defines its particular way of working together (frequency and type of activities, etc.). The many board members on working committees also have a great deal of latitude. Indeed, there is really no operational line of authority to automatically constrain task boundaries. Coordinator Gretchen says that it was not always this way. Homestead has evolved over the years in its capacity for task flexibility.

*If I were to give someone advice starting out I would say, be flexible. Listen to what people are saying they need, instead of having your ideas and saying this is our program. Because we've had to change quite a lot and we still change because the residents who come to Homestead are really healthy, really autonomous, and really well. That's thanks to better medications and more knowledge about medication. So Homestead has changed a lot. For example, we used to have very rigid regulations that there would be a cleaning check once a week in every apartment. Each person was required to do their budgeting with volunteers and a coordinator. But we want people to take on these jobs and handle them when they can handle them. So we have had to let all of that go. Whereas when I first started, it was very structured what was to be done each week. Now there is a lot more time for fun, for social time, which I think is much healthier anyway. We started with a cleaning check. It turned into just the volunteer coming over and talking. And they took care of the apartment so well that why not use the time, because everyone has limited time, to go out and use it for fun. (Homestead-FG1: 6)*

### **Understanding Tasks as Experiments**

Returning to Hollins School, another notable implicit attitude informing their approach to task structuring is that all the work they do is essentially an experiment. Each task is an iteration of an ongoing development process. Any alteration in a task routine, even if it looks like a failure on the surface, might yield new understanding of how to do the difficult work the school has set out to do. Many organizations talk about creating this sort of innovation-based, learning approach. But Hollins School has managed to enact such an approach. The foundational practice seems to be that conversations about the school's work are generally focused on growth rather than on success and failure. An experience is mined for what it has to teach rather than evaluated as to whether it is good or bad.

The growth-oriented, experimental approach has its roots in the way that the school was founded, as Alex explains:

*The thing that is different about this place is that there is no illusion that anybody really knows what they are doing. I mean everybody has their various degrees and their areas of expertise, and truly, they all have more than I do in what we're doing here. . . This whole school started with an idea of what the place would be like, [but] without any expertise or knowledge about how to actually implement it. I can't tell you how many times Miri and I looked at each other and we'd say, "Do you know what to do? I don't know what to do?" In those first years, with those founding teachers, we were really building the plane as we flew it. We really didn't know how you put together a handbook, and we really didn't know how to discipline . . . and we really didn't know how to do data entry . . . I don't mean this in a sort of philosophical sense. We really didn't know the procedure . . . So I think there was a spirit of, "Can you guys help us run the school, because many of you have more experience than we have. You've had different experiences. You are bringing all this stuff to the table, and God help us if you don't bring it, because we really need it." We didn't do it intentionally. It's not like we were manipulating the situation. We genuinely came in and were like, "Help us start this school." (Hollins School-FG4: 3-4)*

The early spirit of humility came to define the culture of the school. Alex continues:

*And it really has lasted . . . At any point if we start to feel that we have the answers, it's time to move on. (Ibid)*

Barbara (who was in an entirely different focus group) talks about the school quite similarly, casting work in terms of experiment and discovery.

*There is no perfect school. We don't do everything perfectly . . . [Say] we want the school to get better math scores. Then a conversation ensues about what that might look like. And then a plan is created, and then the plan is enacted, and then, it's evaluated. And [we ask] did this work . . . The result of that evaluation may be that there is a new plan that we have to try. . . And we call on . . . all these things that we know and they're building blocks . . . We call on Glasser [the founder of Choice Theory], [say], and so everything we've learned from our Glasser training . . . that's a piece of what gets called on as opposed to, you know, "We are the best Glasser school in the world." It's a piece of who we are. We explored math last year. We explored reading and how best to do that a couple of years ago. We've now embarked on this Expeditionary Learning. And it's never . . . we don't just become the thing that we're being trained in. And it is not a static process. It is a dynamic process. Once we meet a bar, we raise the bar. (Hollins School-FG9: 13)*

The shared humility of seeing the activities of the school as a continuing experiment seems in turn to lead to an individual feeling of safety. People at Hollins School are not generally driven by a fear of failure. The failure of any given experiment is seen as part of the process. Anna's experience at her previous school was quite different. She says she almost broke down from the stress of having to be right all the time.

*I was so terrified of the principal. I would stay away from her as much as I could, because I always felt like everything I said and everything I did was wrong.*  
(Hollins School-FG4: 2)

At Hollins School her outlook has changed.

*I don't feel bad when I don't know how to do something, whereas before, I would be freaking out if I didn't know how to do something or didn't quite understand what direction I was supposed to take. [Here] I don't feel that at all, because I know we are kind of all learning and going with it and doing what we need to do. So that takes a lot of pressure off me when it comes to . . . It's going to work out. I don't know how. I don't know when. But it will work out, or I will find the answer, or we will find the answer together.* (Ibid: 5)

Despite the stress associated with teaching in an economically challenged urban environment, Anna's sense of optimism is generally shared. As worry about failure is released, that optimism can even turn into a sort of courage, a desire to keep moving forward, trying things, discovering things, even in the face of taxing uncertainty.

Farah has a son at Hollins School, and she makes an interesting connection, in this light, between her experience as a staff member and her son's experience as a student.

*I don't want him to finish school like I did, thinking, "Oh my God, that was the worst experience of my life." I want him to feel like, "I learned this, and I want to keep learning more." I want him to keep asking questions. I want him to keep being inquisitive about everything. When he's here – I mean he's had some challenges – but I don't think at any time during the day that he ever feels like a failure. I don't think he ever looks at his learning experience as, "I just can't get that. Nobody is trying to help me." I think he feels like, "You know, they've taught me some things, but they've inspired me to ask my own questions outside of what they're teaching." . . . And it kind of drives me to be the same way. Because you're in an environment where they don't make you feel like you're pegged into one little hole doing one little thing, or like you're not good enough to do this or do that . . . It kind of gives you the freedom to just spread your wings and keep expanding yourself and keep wanting to learn and keep wanting to thrive.*  
(Hollins School-FG9: 13)

Barbara, with all of her teaching experience, shares Farah's drive to keep learning and growing.

*I could say, "I'm only going to teach five more years." But as someone who is approaching the end of their career and not feeling like I know everything or wanting to be perceived as someone who knows everything . . . From my point of view I do have more to learn and it's very exciting to be with people who also are interested in learning. (Hollins School-FG9: 15)*

For her, the whole school is alive with and oriented toward the possibility of endless growth.

*We are never finished. We've never reached the best that we can be, and when we get really good at something, then the next step is always in front of us. And that actually keeps me here. (Ibid: 13)*

While Hollins School is still quite conscious of its experimental thrust – perhaps because the school is young, perhaps because that thrust runs so counter to the staff's previous institutional experiences – Food Cycle almost takes its own relationship to growth and experimentation for granted. It's been fifteen years since the original boundary-breaching experiment of combining youth development and meals-on-wheels began, but most of the staff seem to take the permission to try new things (and sometimes fail at them) as a matter of course. It takes a few months for this permission to sink in perhaps, but once it does it informs action from then on. Ex-staff member Chelsea says,

*I think a part of that is not being micromanaged, so you can just like have an inspiration and go, and some of them fail horribly, and that's okay and other ones are going to really work well. But I think, you know, to do factory work is not inspiring. It's not engaging and this is kind of like the opposite. A little inspiration, a little idea, generally the go-ahead, and go and try it. . . (Food Cycle-FG7: 3)*

When Miles first arrived at Food Cycle, he took on the new and hazily defined role of "special projects coordinator." His main project early on was to develop a way to productively use the kitchen during times when it wasn't needed for meals-on-wheels, so he set about creating a canning project. The idea was to use volunteers to can vegetables and fruits and then to sell the products as an additional source of revenue.

*When I started to look at what would make the canning feasible in terms of an autofinance initiative and to try to plug it into how Food Cycle worked, and as I started to get to know Food Cycle over the course of a six-month period, I started to realize that it wasn't really a fit. That what kept people coming in and coming to do our meals-on-wheels shift was that it wasn't like a production line. People were coming in part for themselves and to have that opportunity to be around other people and that sort of thing. And the canning was just not conducive to that. It's a pretty long process from start to finish. And it might have required some shifts – like two different shifts to get it done if you didn't want to have people sticking around for seven hours. So it started to not make sense, and I spoke to a few volunteers at the time, and they were like, "Yeah, that wouldn't be so great." And having some conversations with the volunteer coordinator and realizing that wasn't how the placed rolled. And I sat on it for about a month, in silence, not knowing what to do . . . I finally got up the courage to go talk to Anna [the executive director at the time], and I framed it more as, "These are some questions I have." I don't think I came right out and said it wasn't going to work. But she made it very clear that it was OK if it didn't work, and I was very relieved. I think that she was happy to see that I was starting to take enough confidence in the place to come up with that courage to say I didn't know what was going on. And that was encouraged. In seeing other people get used to the space, that's usually a big turning point – when someone at a meeting says, "I don't really know what to do next. I've absorbed what's going on." And it's usually around the sixth to eighth month period where people have that public freak out at a staff meeting. And that's when the team steps up, and we usually identify in a very informal way what that person needs. And it's different for every person. That's usually the point where as a staff member I actually start to feel that I can let go of watching out for that person –when they start to ask those questions and feel the confidence to come up and say, "I don't know what's going on." (Food Cycle-I4: 3)*

### **Evaluation as Sensemaking**

It's one thing to have an experimental culture, but clearly not every idea that anyone comes up with is put into action. How do these organizations judge which ideas should be pursued? And once pursued, how are ideas evaluated in such a way that staff continue to feel safe to try new things? The organizations are obviously not relying on implacable, pre-set standards to define appropriateness and success. Each idea is judged on its own terms both before and after implementation. But how are those terms understood?

Evaluation at all three organizations involves an ongoing and very explicit process of reflection. At the heart of this reflection is a very simple question: "Does this idea/activity/policy make sense?" But this simple question has many facets. There are

many ways to “make sense.” It is a very contextual criterion having to do with time and place and the specific people involved, and it raises any number of sub-questions. Is the idea practical? Does it align with the organization’s current understanding of itself (an understanding that is subject to questioning and refinement each time)? Is there energy behind it?

Sometimes these questions can be answered up front. But often they cannot be answered until at least preliminary action has taken place (as in the example of Miles’s canning project above). In neither case do people in any of the organizations tend to fall back on pre-set guidelines or screening processes or precedents based on historical successes or failures. The conversation is open to every topic. Though ideas might be abandoned over time, nothing is shot down out of hand. At Hollins School, Laura says:

*Our directors don’t have a final product [in mind]. They are really open to the ideas we have and listen to us and try to get us to think. [They don’t say], “That’s not a good idea.” [They say], “Well, explain that to me. I still have final say, but we’ll talk about it. We’ll figure it out. We’ll see why you are thinking that and how it can fit in.”* (Hollins School-FG6: 4)

For Miri, creating an environment where policies and practices would always be open to reconsideration based on their actual effects was part of her initial vision.

*I wanted to create a school where things made sense. I just wanted a place where you didn’t follow something just because it was assigned and waste time writing things on the board that weren’t really relevant to the kids and just an incredible amount of bureaucracy . . . [In previous schools, I had been] personally frustrated by a lack of power and freedom . . . I remember just sitting in meetings hating the idea that somebody would think because you work for them and these are the hours you agree to work that they could bore you to death and it would be okay. Like, “You’re mine for that hour.” And I had to sit through so many things that felt that way.* (Hollins School-I3: 3)

Now, as Charlotte says, even when suggesting ideas that will require the commitment of financial and other resources, “If you can make a case for its value, that’s all you need to do” (Hollins SchoolFG9: 22).

At Food Cycle, there is a long history of openness to unlikely ideas. Many of these ideas don’t in fact turn out to work in the end. But many of them do, and the winnowing is

patient, gentle, and highly participatory. When a project needs to be altered or abandoned, there is generally consensus. When a project is working, the momentum it gathers is shared and tangible. Volunteer and board member Malcolm reflects on this dynamic:

*There seems to be a real openness for fun projects that people want to lend their energy to, and you can get involved and come in one day, and you can say, "I have this idea." Or members of Food Cycle will ask, "How do you see it? What would you like to do?" And then they'll say, "Well, okay, here's a space and here's a table and here are some tools." And you can modify the growers in a way that you want, or you want to try growing a different kind of seed, or you want to try growing something that grows up the wall, or you want to experiment. And it's never like, "No somebody else tried that, and it didn't work." And it's not, "I don't think that's a good use of our time." It's always like if you have the energy and if it's your idea and you want to give it a try, they'll enable you to do that. There's always this invitation. And that's amazing, because if I think about my work experience or if I think about another organization that I was on the board for... it's like a committee structure and you have to eliminate all the reasons why it's a bad idea, and then you get stuck working with somebody who definitely wants to see this not happen. Whereas, I find with Food Cycle it's like, "You want to give this a try? Give it a try. Show us." And if you can actually make it make sense and you come away with something, then it's kind of incorporated and it evolves. I've seen people who come in to Food Cycle who have these crazy ideas, like they want to start a friperie [used clothing store] in the basement . . . And this person has a vision and they're there for a time and they really make it work and it thrives. And then, when they leave the organization it may take wings and continue or it may not, but then the bike shop takes over . . . And I think that openness to see what evolves just because it's going to add to our experience; it might add to our enjoyment; it might add to the level of fundraising that we can do – I think that openness is really special. That's something I really treasure, because every time I go in there I never quite know what to expect. But it's always interesting. I'm always laughing . . . I feel when I enter that space, whether it's on top of the rooftop or when I'm delivering meals or when I'm cooking, that I can really be creative. And no one ever tells me, "That's a really stupid idea." That's something I really appreciate because it's not always that way, even in my own family.*

One of the Food Cycle focus groups, in thinking about how various actions and projects are begun and evaluated, gets into a long discussion about rules. Volunteer Scott says that in his experience many organizations are beset with rules that no longer serve any real purpose. He is happy but bemused at the relative lack of constraints at Food Cycle. Staff

member Pete responds that one of the reasons for this might be Food Cycle's high turnover (which is quite purposeful – linked as it is to the organization's origins as a youth development project). Pete says that often the people in the organization simply don't remember why a rule was created, or even that it exists. And little energy is expended in trying to encode things too carefully in order to control future generations of staff and volunteers.

*Rules are usually put into place after something happens. There's a situation, and we decide we need a policy around it . . . We have so many long conversations about how we deal with this and that. Then there's a big turnover in staff and it kind of gets lost. It's not really meaningful any more. It's not really serving its purpose, because the people who came up with the rules aren't there anymore . . . The people who are there don't remember the crisis of '95 or '99 or whatever.*  
(Food Cycle-FG6: 14-15)

Each rule or evaluation criterion must pass a kind of current test. It must make sense to the people who actually inhabit the organization at the moment, not simply to their distinguished forbears.

At Homestead too, while there are certainly rules – particularly concerning apartment living – those rules constantly evolve in conversation with residents and volunteers. Great care is taken not to unnecessarily bind people in living contexts with a-contextual, generalized prescriptions. At a Homestead board meeting I attended, a conversation about how to eliminate second-hand smoke from the apartments began with a preliminary written policy being passed around. One of the rules in the proposed policy mandated that smoking now be done in bedrooms with the doors closed. The two residents on the board took the lead, and the conversation quickly shifted from the abstract to the actual smoking situations in various apartments. Many didn't have smokers. Some that did had smokers who only smoked outside. Some were struggling with the second-hand smoke issue. Many people felt, however, that smoking in bedrooms would do little to solve the problem and would be dangerous in other ways and unhealthy and unpleasant for the smoker. Everyone at the board agreed in spirit that the issue was serious and needed to be addressed. But the draft policy was quickly set aside in favor of each apartment's being asked to come up with its own guidelines to address the issue. A further discussion, to be

based on the apartments' ensuing experiments, was scheduled for a few months down the road.

What I'm describing has many of the qualities of what Weick (1995) describes as 'sensemaking'. Sensemaking is a social process of giving meaning to action and interaction. We create coherent narrative explanations of our experiences, categorizing them and ascribing cause and effect. But underlying our seemingly clear, abstracted vision of reality is a process that is far from clear or abstract. Sensemaking is retrospective; we don't understand things until we do them, so action often precedes thought or even what we later come to think of as motivation. Sensemaking is ongoing; it is not something that just happens at discrete times of conscious reflections. Sensemaking is a social process; our experience is that we are seeing things from our own personal vantage points, but in fact we are seeing things from a shared vantage point we have built together. And sensemaking is rooted in identity; meanings are derived not just from apparent functional consequences but from the identity processes through which we locate ourselves in the social world.

For Weick, all social interaction involves sensemaking. It is the chief cognitive mechanism of social construction. But sensemaking is often unconscious. In truth, we may act first and make sense later, but we tell ourselves stories as if the reverse were true. And sensemaking may always be a dynamic social process, but we often think of our plans, strategies, and evaluation criteria as abstracted, a-social phenomena. What is notable at all three focus organizations is not that sensemaking occurs (it occurs everywhere) but that it is accepted and understood, at a practical and emotional level, very much as Weick describes it. At these organizations, there is little need to mask the murky shared process of sensemaking with supposedly clear guidelines for action and evaluation. There is little need to act as if strategy-making isn't intimately tied up with personal and organizational identity. Individuals in all three organizations seem comfortable with making sense of their experiences *as* they live them out together. The chief strategic orienting mechanism at each place is not planning or evaluation. It is community.

### **Practice: Group Transboundary work**

At the center of all three organizations I studied is a marked yearning to foster a spirit of universal inclusion. Like many SPOs, each of these organizations was born out of concern for specific marginalized or excluded groups. But what is striking in all three cases is that that concern has gently morphed into a more general challenge against many types of exclusion. Inclusion here is not simply a philosophy, an objective, or a buzzword. Instead, the spirit of inclusion comes to life as a commitment to a set of practices. That these practices are effective is attested to by the number of people in each place who speak passionately about how unusually free of internal divisions and cliques they find their organization to be.

For Chelsea, a former Food Cycle staff member, this practical inclusiveness is one of Food Cycle's defining features.

*What I really appreciate about this place is the inclusive aspect. In other jobs – if you can compare them to high school, for example – there are always forms of cliques or whatever, but I never felt them here. I never felt on the outside . . . It was such a breath of fresh air that there was no ganging up against people who are not cool, so to speak. (SRFG7: 3-4)*

The spirit of acceptance Chelsea is describing is not confined to some inner core of very active Food Cycle members. Most people talked about how welcomed they felt from the time of their first entry into the organization. Former volunteers and staff members who aren't around much any more frequently describe their continuing sense of comfort whenever they do happen to return for a visit or an event. Board member Malcolm says:

*I could go there every day for a month, and then I could not show up for four years, and I feel like I would be received the same way. No one would be like, "Where the hell have you been for the last four years? How come you haven't delivered a meal." (Food CycleFG10: 10)*

People talk in similar terms at Hollins School. Teacher Anna:

*I felt like I belonged right away. I felt [that] from the very first meeting that we had . . . I didn't feel like I was a stranger going in. (Hollins SchoolFG4: 4)*

A number of Hollins School staff remark upon the lack of cliquishness at the school, the difficulty one has in trying to figure out who is new and who is not, who is friends with whom and who is not. My own observations bear this out. I observed gatherings of various sizes (including the whole staff at a workshop) and never found myself noticing distinct, fixed groups, or people with especially central social positions. Small clusters of people formed and broke up easily, with people comfortably moving from one array to another. The tone of conversation didn't seem to change as clusters were rearranged, even when one of the directors joined in. Laura, a teacher, says that the culture of the school actively guards against the formation of clique boundaries.

*We have had people who haven't worked out for various reasons, and they kind of were, I think, more of the clique-forming type. They were used to cliques and talking about people. And our whole faculty was kind of like, "That is not okay. It is not okay for you to come in and talk to me about Karen. I understand you're upset with her, but you can't come and talk to me about her that way." (Hollins SchoolFG6: 7)*

I had less chance to observe and discuss these dynamics at Homestead, but certainly in the large group gatherings I saw, and in the general sense of belonging people expressed, there didn't seem to be a great many sharp divisions between different kinds of groups.

Clearly there are still people in each organization who are closer to some than to others. There are groups of friends. There are power dynamics. No one at any of the organizations is making claims of perfection. But the majority of members *are* explicitly claiming (at least in the cases of Food Cycle and Hollins School) that, compared to other organizations they have known, these organizations more consistently challenge group boundaries of various kinds – challenge these boundaries to such a degree, in fact, that the overall feeling of inclusion and belonging is quite powerful. How does this happen? What are the specific practices that accomplish this form of transboundary work?

One primary practice associated with bridging individual boundaries involves frequently shifting and changing working teams and social clusters. At Food Cycle, the organization has developed a pattern of working primarily in temporary formal and informal teams.

Some of these teams might be focused on long-term projects. Others might simply involve a conversation for a short period of time about a particular issue. Over time, people find themselves working in many different groupings with many different people. Halely, the director of operations, says:

*“There is a lot of opportunity to work with everyone . . . We are very focused on having teams work together, and you are never working with the same team. You really have the opportunity to get to know everyone in a pretty unique way. And someone said to me that it’s cool because it allows each person to build unique, one-on-one relationships with everyone they are working with and with the volunteers and the clients. You have the chance to get to know people who you’d never think that you would get along with and it usually works out pretty well . . . because cliques can form when you are used to just working with a small group of people and you start group thinking with them. (Food Cycle-FG7: 4-5)*

In addition, there is a widely shared and finely tuned attentiveness at the individual level to people who might feel excluded from a conversation. You can frequently observe someone in a given conversation physically open that conversation up by making eye contact or turning her body so that a person lurking on the margin is essentially invited in.

At Hollins School, work groups are more fixed as they largely revolve around grade levels or subjects. But informally people make a conscious effort to connect to others outside of their immediate work team. One teacher remarks that during lunch staff members will actually seek out colleagues whom they know less well or haven’t talked to in a while and go to sit down with them. The school also prevents grade-level or subject boundaries from being too strong by bringing everyone together regularly. On Friday afternoons, the staff gather for professional development meetings and workshops. Academically, Hollins School is now structured around shared themes in any given time period. At the end of that time period, the school holds a “culminating event” during which the classes share with each other what they have been working on.

Food Cycle too relies to a great degree on collective gathering times. A few years ago, the difficult decision was made to stop meal delivery on Thursdays in order to create one full day a week for shared reflection. (Clients were involved in the decision making

process, and Food Cycle does deliver double meals on Wednesday so that people still have food on Thursdays.) I have yet to run into another SPO that literally shuts down operations a full day out of the week in order to create the space for staff to think and work together with a different sort of rhythm. This has been a powerful practice at Food Cycle and I'll delve into it more fully in Chapter 7, but bringing the staff together this fully and frequently does seem to eat away at some of the natural functional group boundaries (e.g., office vs. kitchen). In addition, Food Cycle spends a lot of time and energy creating different sorts of events throughout the year that are not directly connected to the meals-on-wheels mandate, but that bring various parts of the community together (e.g., galas, street fairs, birthday parties, picnics, game nights, pumpkin carving, etc.). To have such events is not unusual in the SPO world, but to have so many diverse events so frequently, to invest such care and creativity into many of them, and to involve so many different sorts of organizational members is unusual in my experience and according to Food Cycle participants themselves.

Homestead faces a different sort of group challenge in that its structure is essentially built around groups. The ten residences, with three residents and three to six volunteers each, form the core, working units of the organization. The coordinators interact with several apartments, and some volunteers do more generalized work, but most people in the organization spend most of their time interacting with a smallish subset of the organization. When people talk about Homestead as a whole or about residences other than the one they are associated with, however, they do so with a general tone of solidarity and appreciation. No one I talked to described the organization as fragmented or clique-ish, and I saw no evidence of such a dynamic myself. In a very unusual practice for a social service organization, Homestead also publishes an internal phone directory that includes home phone numbers of all residents, volunteers, and staff. The directory is distributed to all organization members, and a number of people mentioned this directory to me. They saw it as symbolically significant, and they also used it in a practical way to facilitate cross-residence relationships and to draw on the support of coordinators and volunteers in times of crisis.

Like Food Cycle, Homestead also hosts several cross-organization or full-organization events and retreats throughout the year. And a number of people cite these events as among the high points of their Homestead experience. I suspect that the more general reason that boundaries between groups are not particularly strong is the shared experience of trying to combat social isolation and stigmatization that brings people to Homestead in the first place. In fact, all three organizations were essentially formed with a broader social idea of group boundary crossing in mind: Food Cycle to bring together people from different generations; Hollins School to bring together people of different races and economic backgrounds; and Homestead to bring together mainstream volunteers with people struggling with mental illness.

***Practice: Purpose Transboundary work***

Perhaps the subtlest but, in the end, most powerful form of transboundary work I have noted at the three organizations has to do with organizational purpose or meaning. It centers around the questions of *why* the organization is doing the work that it is doing and *for whom* it is doing it.

Again, we can think of ‘purpose’ as the shared meanings and goals that organizational members ascribe to the things they actually do (Warriner, 1965), rather than as an abstraction or ideology explicitly encoded in words. At the end of each focus group, I asked participants how they would describe the purpose of the organization. When pressed to clarify what I meant by purpose, I simply said, “Define it however you like.” Most people started by saying something about the organization’s explicit mission (e.g., food security or education or housing, etc.), but then, without prompting from me, would say that the mission didn’t capture the real purpose of the organization and would begin to try to put that purpose into words. The array of responses for each organization was rich and wildly diverse in language: “to be a fountain of youth for everyone;” “to break isolation;” “to grow goodness;” “to create a miniature society;” “to give kids a sense of wonder;” “to produce whole children;” “to bring each individual as far as they can come;” “to create authentic community;” “to listen;” “to combat stigma;” “to enrich the community;” “to facilitate and innovate;” “to create a haven;” “to set an example;” “to

bring people together;” “to experiment with community.” The language people used mirrored many other themes that ran through the focus groups as a whole. Notice that people are speaking in quite general, even poetic, terms. They are using words that can be interpreted in any number of ways, words that do not themselves have particularly fixed and clear boundaries, leaving open many different kinds of activities and explanatory narratives for those activities. As one Food Cycle staff member put it:

*It’s difficult for me to pinpoint what the most important thing is here. The purpose is different for everybody involved. The reason they get involved is different, and what they feel that they’re contributing at the end of it is different, and what they feel that they are getting out of it is different. (Food Cycle-FG3: 15)*

Two practices are at work here, both of which challenge the traditional boundaries of how SPOs usually frame organizational purpose. First, purpose is framed by members not as something fixed and clearly understood, but as something to be discovered and explored over time. Second, purpose is framed not as a vector aimed specifically at a particular clientele, but as a diffuse field that affects all who come within its reach.

### **Framing Purpose as an Exploration**

While on the surface, all three organizations have clear answers to the question of why they are doing the work that they do, in practice, members treat that question as open. Typically, the longer someone interacts with the organization, the more broadly she will come to understand the organization’s meaning. A person’s initial contact with the organization will often involve a concrete activity (e.g., chopping vegetables) with a clear purpose (e.g., so someone who can’t cook for herself can eat dinner). Over time, the broader implications of that work and the multiple relationships and effects it engenders expand one’s experience of purpose. Here is how Phoebe, a Food Cycle client and board member, attempted to describe the organization’s purpose:

*To create community – a sense of interconnectedness at different levels, with different communities but also in terms of the climate and ecology – that whole sense of being interconnected. And tapping into a natural sense of engagement. To me that’s a very big part of Food Cycle. I’ve heard the word ‘organic’ used around here a lot, but I really feel it now. Like somehow finding the way to tap into people’s vital energy very naturally. (Food Cycle-FG7: 21)*

This is someone who began her relationship with the organization simply by receiving a meal, and who now has difficulty expressing the rich and varied purposes she sees at work. One board member put it nicely when he said that the meals-on-wheels program was Food Cycle's foundation but not its purpose. A number of people described their gradual evolution from seeing Food Cycle as a service provider to seeing it as something working toward social change in a wider way – something akin to a social movement in which food was the vehicle. Over the last five or six years the organization has also been increasingly taken up with issues of ecology and sustainability. Homestead similarly is undergoing a gradual broadening of its mission, as people increasingly get involved in advocacy and dissemination work. Hollins School began its charter process with a vision of the school as a community development project, not simply a school, but when I asked people about that aspect of their work, it was clear that they were just beginning to explore what that might mean conceptually and programmatically.

Two sorts of sub-practices help ground the overall framing of purpose as exploration. First, the organizations structure themselves around *activities*, not ideologies or explicitly articulated values. No indoctrination is ventured or needed. When you enter the organization what you will be doing is quite concrete, its meaning is not. At Food Cycle I know I will deliver a meal, or weed the garden, or help organize the gala. At Hollins School, I will be teaching children math or reading. At Homestead I will be visiting an apartment and doing activities with the residents. Why I will be doing these things and what they will mean is left for me to discover in my own way. Secondly, fixed articulations of goals and purposes (e.g., strategic plans, policies, mission statements) tend to be used to structure current explorations rather than to place strict boundaries on future work. For example, Food Cycle went through a lengthy strategic planning process several years ago. The people who participated in it mostly felt that the process was very helpful and rewarding. Hardly anyone, however, looked at the plan or made much use of it once it was written up. And this neglect seemed to trouble no one. A long-time staff member says that this is very typical of such processes. The organization has had many rich teams working on research, policy-making, visioning, etc. While some of the principles that emerge from these teams do indeed permeate the organization, the specific

language and paperwork rarely make much of a mark. And this is seen, by and large, as healthy, if a bit baffling. The processes themselves are meant to be rich and fulfilling, and they are. But the idea of controlling the future inhabitants of the organization too carefully with last year's words never seems quite to fit.

Purpose boundaries are loose and exploratory because purpose in these organizations is understood as experiential. Purpose is not primarily something to be described; it is something to be lived. Descriptions of purpose are helpful only insofar as they deepen the experiences of that purpose. This underlying stance is why people tend to talk about purpose in subjective and interpretive terms. And that conversation is not reserved for research focus groups or planning sessions. It is ongoing. Interestingly, when I asked about times of conflict and struggle, people at all three organizations said that when they are faced with conflict they frequently return to discussions of purpose. Why are we here? How can we move through this situation in a way that is aligned with who we are and that feeds our overall purpose? They did not mean that organization members simply referred back to mission statements. They were describing rich, sometimes long-lasting, conversations in which members struggled to understand purpose anew in the light of the particular issue they were dealing with. Often, in these cases, purpose would be cast not in terms of organizational goals, but in the same sorts of overarching terms that people used to answer my focus group questions. These terms generally have both a moral and an experiential dimension. They do not lead to simple prescriptions for action but to deeper questions. Miri, Hollins School's director of instruction, describes a decision making process she often goes through with Alex, the school's executive director:

*If something tough happens, something uncomfortable, we used to just try to avoid it, you know. How can we get rid of something that we don't feel fits in, or make something we're uneasy with go away? But lately, we much more often have the practice of having conversations. We will think about this or that, and look at different options. But what we usually come back to is: "What would be the kindest thing to do?" Or, "What would be the bravest thing to do if we are our best selves?" (Hollins School II: 1)*

This quotation may not seem like it has much to do with organizational purpose, at first glance. But in it we can read a shifting away from either simple personal reactions or

explicit missions as guideposts and toward broad, experiential virtue frames that carry the conversation in a different direction. It would be easy for Miri and Alex to think in more mission-targeted ways, e.g., “What is best thing to do for the education of the children with whose care we’re charged?” But words like ‘kindness’ and ‘courage’ draw on (and create) a much broader purpose frame, leading in turn to a wider-ranging exploration in which new possibilities for action are raised.

### **Framing Purpose as a Field**

The signal practice that differentiates these organizations from other SPOs that I am familiar with is the way that they think about whom the work they do is for. Typically, social purpose work is vectored. It is directional, aimed at a particular group of people (e.g., women, immigrants, students, patients, the poor), a particular geographical region (e.g., community ‘X’ in city ‘Y’), or a particular issue (e.g., the environment, nuclear arms). The work that SPO does is for those who are in the specific target category or for the issue itself. People involved in the organization who are not part of that target category or issue are not seen as recipients of that purpose vector. They may be *in* the organization, but the organization is not *for* them. They are there to deliver, not receive.

At all three organizations, on the other hand, there is a widely shared understanding that the work of the organization is not simply for clients or students or residents. It is for everyone with whom the organization has contact. If a traditional bounded view of purpose can be thought of as a vector, then this wider view can be seen as a field, something radiating in all directions simultaneously and with equal force. This frame is not a reflection of the generic rewards of altruism (still fundamentally a vectored construct), where one group of people gets to feel good because they are giving to another group. Here, everyone is seen as contributing, and everyone is seen as receiving. This may sound like too strong a statement, but such a stance permeates the three organizations, albeit with varying strength.

The “field” view is strongest and most embedded in Food Cycle, where almost everyone talks passionately and specifically about what they receive from their interaction with the

organization. This may be because the organization began with an explicit, dual commitment to serve both the people who were receiving meals and the youth who were cooking and delivering them. The idea that everyone can be served in one way or another is in the organization's DNA. People often talk in terms of community, as if in fact in the organization is an intentional community in which people are living, even though, apart from staff, people interact with the organization a few hours a week at most.

*The purpose of this place is to ensure that everybody that comes into contact with the organization ends up a little happier, a littler fuller, a little bit more curious or desirous of fulfilling their potential. (Board Member: Food Cycle-FG1: 19)*

*We're having an impact on ourselves. (Board Member: Food Cycle-15: 1)*

*The purpose here is to build a resilient, inclusive, creative community that is centered around a notion of well-being and that individual well-being is connected to the well-being of others. What we're experimenting with here is another way of people being in community with each other, a different way for communities to nourish themselves. (Staff Member: Food Cycle FG8-23)*

*[During events], the clients, and staff, and volunteers are all together in the same room. No has an assigned seat, and everyone is free to wander. There are volunteers helping out and staff helping, but they are also eating and interacting with clients. It's not like something that's put on by staff for the clients. It's put on by the staff and volunteers, but they also benefit from it as well. (Staff Member: Food Cycle-FG4: 8)*

*I became a member, because I broke my leg. I was afraid of being a beneficiary of a service kind of thing and having the giver and the taker and that type of model. I realized almost instantly, though, that here I was part of a community as opposed to some service organization. I get the sense that everybody who comes here is both receiving and giving something. It is not just the client who's receiving. Everybody is receiving something, which makes everybody equal. (Client: Food Cycle-FG7: 6)*

*I feel like one of Food Cycle's purposes is to build a community that people may aspire to – to set an example for people who might walk away or move away and go somewhere else and then want the same sort of thing – to set an example for the larger community. (Volunteer: Food Cycle FG-3: 14)*

*Food is the excuse to connect – to build community, but also to connect to the self, because I think people who work and volunteer here connect with themselves. Our purpose is to live what want to see, to live the connection that we want to feel. (Board Member: Food Cycle FG-2: 19)*

The field view is also quite strong at Hollins School, though it seems to be more of a newer, growing realization. The school began with the traditional, institutionalized view of the school as serving students, although there was certainly also a desire to make it a pleasant place to work for teachers. But the understanding that teachers' and students' (and increasingly parents' and neighborhood residents') growth and well-being are intimately connected has become widely shared.

*I think the mission of the school when we started of course was for the kids. Every kid deserves this. This is what rich kids get and every kid here, my kid, every other kid, deserves it in this neighborhood. So that's the first priority. But I think as time has gone on, you know, the ability of this organization to sustain itself is really about getting the people, giving them what they need, and keeping them. And so while I wouldn't say that's the mission, that is really so important. Because teachers across this country are overworked and underpaid, overwhelmed, burning out, leaving the profession. And if we can create a model where teachers want to stay, I think that's really important. We take seriously how we are treating our teachers and how they are growing and how their needs are being met, because that's going to trickle down to the kids. (Administrator: Hollins School-FG4: 22)*

*We're not just teaching students how to understand what their quality world is and what their highest needs are. It's that for the faculty too. It has to be that alive for the purpose of this place. The purpose of this place is self awareness, so that the vital questions are asked and anyone who comes through the doors – faculty, student, or other – feels that the quality of their life is raised. It's about making a good life, and the awareness and understanding of what that means to you. (Teacher: Hollins School-FG1: 22)*

*The ultimate purpose is for our students to develop curiosity and empathy and caring and sensitivity, but I think along the way we want all people who are involved – whether its staff or families – you want that to kind of permeate the community, as well. You don't want it to just be happening in the school building, but once the kids leave for them to carry that on and teach someone else about it, or for it to kind of spread in this neighborhood, or for staff to take it, or for families to embrace those kinds of values. (Teacher: Hollins School-FG2: 13)*

*It's about creating – creating community, creating relationships, creating curriculum. I'm so engaged and excited at being able to create with people here. I know it's for the kids, but I get just as much out of it. (Administrator: Hollins School-FG6: 23)*

*I feel like this place is here for me. (Teacher: Hollins School-FG4: 22)*

*The purpose includes the neighborhood too, to improve the neighborhood, because all of these kids are coming from this neighborhood pretty much and the neighborhood could use a little help. (Teacher: Hollings School-FG3: 27)*

*The purpose of this place? I think what's interesting is, you know that phrase, "The students are learning, but we're learning too as teachers." That's so lame, but to be honest I think it's as much a learning environment for me as it has been for the students, maybe even more. I think it really has been. It really is a wonderful home environment, you know. I've had my entire first grade class call me on the phone to see how I was doing, which brightened up my day. I'm always excited for the weekend when Friday comes, but at the end, when Monday comes, when I come back to school, I just really missed everyone. I missed the staff. I missed the kids – some more than others, just kidding, I love them all. Did I answer the question? (Aide: Hollins School-FG7: 35)*

The idea that the organization's purpose is to serve everyone is much less shared and articulated at Homestead. There is a sense of joy in the work among the volunteers and staff, and when prompted, people will talk movingly about their own growth in the organization, but explicit discussions of purpose tend to revolve very strongly around residents. This may be because Homestead was born out of a more charity-focused mindset than the other two organizations. At the same time, the core relationships between residents, volunteers, and staff are experienced as mutually enriching.

*You can tell the volunteers are having a great time. They're loving it. At some places when you volunteer you do it and go. But here the volunteers get as much out of this as anyone else. They enjoy the outings. They enjoy the dinners. That's what the difference is. (Staff: Homestead-FG1: 11)*

*It's unbelievable. We have a community life. It's a very inventive thing. We've been all around, I've been to places in the city I didn't know existed. It's been a very enriching experience. (Volunteer: Homestead-FG1: 5)*

*Volunteers get a tremendous amount of love, a sense of community. (Resident: Homestead-FG3: 2)*

*What happens is that we want to make them happy. And what we don't know is that they want to make us happy. So it is a both way, win-win situation. (Resident: Homestead-FG1: 4)*

*I've learned a lot of patience. I can be a very impatient person. But I've learned from the residents, who have had to accept something in their lives that they didn't plan for, that wasn't the way it was supposed to be, and to handle it so well*

*and with such courage and humility. The residents that have come to Homestead have gone through really rough times, so they are not superficial. They usually know what is important in life, and are happy to share, and don't waste a lot of time with a lot of fake behavior. It is very relaxing and down to earth. They have taught me a lot about that. I think I am a much better person for it. And the volunteers too. When you sit at the edge of a beach or a campfire and people start to talk you can hear things that you don't usually hear because life in the city is so impersonal and rushed. (Staff: Homestead-FG1: 12)*

*It has opened a whole aspect of life and reality and society to me – knowledge of it, empathy for it, that has been very enriching. It is a privilege to be connected to lives that you wouldn't normally be connected to without being in a profession that was connected to it, but just as a person. I've found that it has been fantastically awareness expanding. (Board Member: Homestead-FG2: 14)*

### **Transboundary Work and Engagement**

The transboundary work practices I outline above are sustained patterns in all three organizations, and almost everyone I talked to describes those practices in subjectively positive ways. In general, positive psychological capital, positive emotions, and mindfulness have been shown to facilitate the kind of organizational change associated with transboundary practices (Avey, Wernsing et al., 2008). But how might we link those practices more precisely to the four dynamics of engagement: attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning?

#### **Attunement and Transboundary work**

Attunement refers to a dimension of engagement that has two signal qualities:

1. A feeling of being deeply absorbed in an experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). One is energized (Schaufeli, Bakker et al., 2006) and physically, cognitively, and emotionally present, or mindful (Kahn, 1990), without being distracted by anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Kahn, 1992).
2. A feeling of self-efficacy (Bloch, 2000). One is confident and subjectively equal to whatever challenges the experience seems likely to present (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

A key condition for attunement is that the demands of an activity be in *alignment* with a person's understanding of her own capacities. If the activity is not experienced as challenging enough, one slips into boredom; if it is experienced as too challenging, one begins to feel anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Both boredom and anxiety produce distraction, interfering with focus and the overall state of flow. It is essential that capacities be fully used (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) but not overtaxed.

The need for this kind of alignment suggests that rigid role and task boundaries are a significant barrier to engagement. Engagement demands that a person find the particular mix of activities, responsibilities, and relationships that will invoke her abilities without overwhelming her. This kind of alignment is highly specific. It cannot be programmed into a generalized role or task structure, since what is important is the subjective experience of alignment, not some reproducible objective version of it. A person must experience both variety (for challenge) and routine (for competence) (Kahn, 1990). The specific mix of the two that will lead to the alchemy of absorption and self-efficacy is unique to each individual. What's more, since neither our capacities nor our subjective interpretation of those capacities is static, that alignment is unique to a specific point in time. Engagement in this sense is a constant, ever-changing state. Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990) shows that one of the critical enablers of flow is direct and immediate feedback. A person in flow must make continual adjustments based on feedback about her own relationship to the activity she is pursuing and/or the environment she is in. Rigid role and task boundaries prevent such adjustment.

Another key aspect of role (and related task) alignment is "identity relevance" (Britt, 1999). To feel attuned, one must perceive roles as congruent with one's values and identity. Engagement requires that a role be aligned with one's "preferred self" (Kahn, 1992). If I see myself as an 'artist,' I might find it difficult to invest myself fully in my role as a 'social worker' (unless, of course that role is flexible enough for me to find ways to be artistic – to be an artist *as* a social worker). And even within a given role, different people will identify with different aspects of that role (ibid). One professor might think of herself as a researcher, while another thinks of herself as teacher, and still another thinks

of herself as an activist. Kahn (1990) quotes a receptionist as a good example of the sort of disengagement one feels when a role is misaligned with identity:

*The role I'm required to perform, sitting up here in front and smiling and typing and being friendly, it's all bullshit. It's just a role, and there isn't any satisfaction in it for me . . . This eight or nine hours is a waste, damaging, I think, to my growth and what I think about myself. (706)*

Here the role doesn't fit and is also perceived as unimportant. (Perceived importance is another key factor in role engagement/disengagement (ibid).) Rigid role boundaries make it much more difficult for people to discover and perform the kinds of functions that align with their identities. And again, identity perceptions are unique to each person and fluid, which seems to call for a highly customized approach to roles.

We should not draw the conclusion, however, that each person merely has to find *a* single, aligned customized role. One important aspect of attunement is that people are able to integrate the different aspects of themselves (Kahn, 1992). They engage in their work and with each other as whole persons. When role structures are highly segmented, "People are more likely to respond by fragmenting their personal selves as well, splitting off and absenting those dimensions that are structurally excluded" (ibid). From this perspective people need to engage not in a perfect role, but in multiple roles.

And in fact, to feel engaged, it's important that people understand themselves and be understood as more than any given role or set of roles. Though the characteristics of role boundaries play a key role in fostering or inhibiting attunement, attunement is fundamentally a trans-role phenomenon in that drawing upon and integrating all aspects of the self invokes psychological qualities and energies that do not fit neatly into any role or task whatsoever. The receptionist quoted by Kahn above says, "I want to be seen as a person apart from the work I do." One of the dynamics I observed at all three organizations is that people interacted as individuals more than as roles. They rarely referred to themselves or each other in terms of roles (this was less true at Hollins School where the teacher/grade identity is referred to frequently). More importantly, conversations I observed tended to include a rich mix of role references, personal

references, and trans-role references related to the organization as a whole (this was very much so at Hollins School, as well as at the other two organizations).

Identity Theory (McCall and Simmons, 1966) suggests that role identities function as mediating concepts between social structures and individual experiences of the self. People “perform” roles that are “salient” in any given social situation. (I might be primarily acting from my ‘father’ identity in one setting and my ‘banker’ identity in another.) Typically, people evaluate themselves and each other based on how well they perform their roles (according to their own interpretations of socially given role criteria), making self-esteem and self-efficacy directly related to role performance (Hogg, Terry et al., 1995; Stets and Burke, 2000). Engagement literature suggests that evaluation based on fixed role salience is a barrier to attunement, since attunement requires investment of the whole self, or at least of a varied, multi-dimensional version of the self. The organizational contexts that I’m describing then, where people shift in and out of multiple role orientations very frequently, would seem to prevent any given role from becoming overly salient in a fixed way. This in turn allows organization members to see themselves, and to be seen, as whole people, even in pressure-filled circumstances. If my interaction with you shifts fluidly from you as teacher, to you as an artist, to you as a mother, to you as an organizer, to you as counselor, etc., I am less likely to confuse any one of those roles with you as ‘Amanda’, and you are less likely to similarly confuse yourself.

What of attunement with respect to status roles like ‘leader’ or ‘newcomer’? Kahn (1990; 1992) points out that for a role to be engaging it needs to be experienced as having status or influence. When people have more voice and power to shape their own role experiences, they are more able to be fully present. So clearly if roles are stratified in terms of respect, decision-making power, and ability to take initiative (essentially turning them into ‘classes’), those in the lower strata will experience some alienation or disengagement. At the same time, Kahn also notes that the pressures of high-status roles (because of their “higher stakes”) make it increasingly difficult to be focused and authentically aligned as more and stronger distractions present themselves. Thus status

boundaries are disengaging for high status roles as well. At the three organizations I studied, status boundaries are loose and frequently breached. The newcomers and veterans, the formally “high” and “low,” all experience themselves and each other as having worth, voice, the ability to shape their own work. This pattern suggests that it is not relative status that leads to engagement, but the underlying experience of respect, participation, and agency that we usually only associate with roles of a certain status. When these experiences are widespread, so is the possibility of attunement.

It is reasonable then to argue that attunement requires a gentle, customized approach to role and task boundaries – not one in which they are done away with, but one in which they are pliable and permeable, allowing each person to discover where she is most aligned at any given moment. The descriptions of role relationships at Food Cycle, Hollins School, and Homestead bear this out. One might argue that this perspective is simply a reaffirmation of what many scholars have argued about job enrichment and work role fit, and indeed May, Gilson, et al. (2004) explicitly associate those sorts of structural role and task patterns with engagement. But job enrichment and work role theories are typically framed from a design perspective in which managers construct role and task boundaries in ways that are meant to be generically more fulfilling for workers. The structures are relatively static in the intermediate term. This approach is a far cry from what I have observed empirically and what the engagement literature seems to call for deductively. From the engagement perspective, since we are concerned with individual subjective alignment, role and task patterns need to be largely *self*-aligned. And since efficacy and challenge are ever-shifting dynamics, those patterns need to be subject to frequent adjustment and intermediate-term evolution.

One might also worry that multiple, shifting roles would draw too heavily on one’s energies and powers of attention, leading to depletion and burnout, despite the fact that engagement can be framed as the “antipode of job burnout” (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008). However, May, Gilson, et al. (2004) demonstrate that role relationships are much more complex than that. Roles are not in contest with each other in a zero-sum energy game. A role may deplete or enrich another role, depending on a wide variety of situated

personal and cultural factors. It is how the role is experienced subjectively that will determine whether or not it feeds engagement in other, concurrent roles.

### **Growth and Transboundary work**

Engagement is not a static state. It is rooted in continuing personal growth. Growth here is related to competence – increasing one’s abilities and capacities (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), but it also involves expansion of the self in a broader way, what Callois describes as transcending one’s previous conception of self (in Csikszentmihalyi, 1975: 26). Thus growth has not just a developmental cast, but an exploratory one. It is a process of discovery or “going beyond the known” (ibid: 33), specifically in relation to the self’s identity boundaries.

In the engagement literature, growth is not a self-contained process. It happens through encounter with the world via activity and relationship, stemming from “an intense concentration on the task at hand” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 58). In a work setting, this means that personal growth is not some parallel process, extraneous to role and task. I don’t grow *while* I am at work. I grow *through* work, or more precisely, through the tasks and relationships involved in that work. I immerse myself in the moment, merging action and awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Consequently, personal growth through engagement requires deeply respecting the work at hand without absencing other dimensions of the self. It involves “maintaining the integrity of the person and the integrity of the role simultaneously” (Kahn, 1992: 327-328). This general stance of respect and its contribution to growth was borne out by my research, as shown above. People at all three focus organizations often described being intensely interested and immersed in the details of their work, and often talked about this immersion in conjunction with how much they felt they were growing.

Clearly, then, attunement via role alignment is an important contributor to growth. Being challenged but not overwhelmed by one’s role is necessary for immersion and development. But how might other forms of transboundary work facilitate growth?

There are two important patterns, both related to task transboundary work:

1. Growth that is engaging is not externally motivated or controlled. It is intrinsically motivated (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and autonomous (Kahn, 1992; May, Gilson et al., 2004). It is connected to control and the feeling that a person has originated her own actions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) and has “a sense of participation in determining the content of life” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Task autonomy is crucial, because when tasks are highly prescribed and guided (even if these prescriptions change frequently), they structure experience “without the interplay between internal thoughts and feelings and external requirements that characterize moments of personal engagement” (Kahn, 1990: 701). People become “custodians rather than innovators” (ibid: 702). In general, intrinsic motivation decreases as centralization, hierarchy, standardization, and formalization increase (Sherman and Smith, 1984).
2. The exploration associated with growth requires uncertainty. One cannot explore the known. A key dynamic to engagement involves experimentation, venturing into new and challenging territory. One needs to be invested in an experience with a “doubtful outcome” and without the “safety of protective routines” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 61). Thus not only do people need to feel control over their work, but they need to use that control to journey onto unfamiliar ground. That journey may involve task transboundary work, but it may also involve group transboundary work. The “difficult conversations” provoked by encounters across group barriers allow “individuals to learn and grow and their systems [to] become unstuck” (Kahn 1992: 332).

In an organizational setting, the fostering of self-directed, exploratory work patterns requires an unusual relationship with success and failure if those patterns are to be truly engaging. Success must be seen in terms of the exploration itself and one’s concomitant growth, not in terms of whatever end-points or goals are guiding that behavior. This is not to imply that engagement is antithetical to goals. Quite the contrary, the literature is clear that goals are a crucial aspect of engagement in that goals help to focus attention. However, valuing the work and oneself based on whether or not one is achieving those goals is disengaging; it distracts people from their immediate experience. In other words,

goals are structural, not motivational. They are a tool for organizing work, not a reason for doing that work (from an experiential, subjective standpoint). “The addition of spurious motivational elements to a flow activity (competition, gain, danger) makes it also more vulnerable to intrusions from ‘outside reality’” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975: 38). Increasing self-efficacy, on the other hand, *is* engaging (Bloch, 2000). That is, developing the ability to more effectively meet goals is an important aspect of engagement, as long as one’s attention and identity aren’t transferred to the goal itself.

The equally disengaging corollary to focusing on success is focusing on failure. To be engaged, one needs to feel psychological safety (Kahn 1990). As noted, this safety cannot come from protective routines (which might be comforting, but not engaging), so experience must be structured in such a way that it reconciles the need to explore the unknown with the need for psychological safety. There are number of practices that reconcile those needs, and I will take them up in ensuing chapters. At the moment, it’s simply important to note that fear of failure is a significant barrier to growth, and that rigid task boundaries (which include not only how to do things, but the criteria by which those things are to be judged as successes or failure) interfere with the psychological safety needed to explore and experiment in an engaged way. The above excerpts from my data are representative of the overall approach the three focus organizations have to failure. Upon arriving at their organization, many members described experiencing a shift in which confusion, failure, and unknowing – previously things to be avoided or hidden – were now seen as fruitful topics of conversation and collaboration.

Overall, organizational engagement appears to require a movement away from summative evaluation practices (retrospective judgments of success and failure) and toward formative and developmental evaluation practices (real time explorations of learning and growth) (Patton, 2002). Such evaluation practices are inscribed in activity boundaries. Defining clearly *how* something is to be done implies a particular, summative, external vision of *why* it is to be done and what success and failure would look like. Loosening those boundaries begins to make room for more formative and developmental perspectives. Note that this formulation runs counter to the usual view that

psychologically safe spaces are created by clear and consistent boundaries (see e.g., Kahn, 2007).

### **Mutuality and Transboundary work**

Mutuality, as I've synthesized the concept from various threads in the engagement literature, involves the relaxation of boundaries between the self and others. The experience of the self as a separate, isolated identity weakens, and action takes on a relational cast, giving way to a feeling of unity or being part of a "collective subject" (Bloch, 2000). Part of this experience results from the diminution of self-consciousness, brought about by presence or absorption (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). But the chief psychological mechanism is empathy (Kahn, 1990; Kahn, 1992): the feeling that one sees, understands and resonates with the inner subjective experience of another. This empathy is mutual. I must feel that I see and understand the full inner life of my companions, but I must also feel that I too am "known and appreciated" (Kahn, 1990: 707) – that I can express myself fully and authentically.

In that they limit self-expression to a narrow range of inner dimensions, rigid role boundaries interfere with mutuality. Mutuality requires a "looseness" of the boundaries separating the personal and the professional (ibid). Otherwise, hidden dimensions of the self can undermine "individual and systemic wholeness (Kahn 1992).

Rigid group boundaries are a starker barrier to mutuality. It may seem obvious that such barriers interfere with empathy toward members of the out-group. But while they may create superficial cognitive identity bonds with members of the in-group, they interfere with deeper intersubjective empathy toward members of that group as well. Social Identity Theory provides a helpful framework for understanding why this is so.

Social Identity Theory and the closely related Self Categorization Theory are social-psychological explanations of the identity dynamics of people in groups (Abrams and Hogg, 1990; Hogg, Terry et al., 1995; Stets and Burke, 2000). Whenever a person perceives herself to be part of a particular group, she begins to identify with that group

and the group identity takes on something like an objective existence (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). That is, she perceives group characteristics, however they might be defined, as comprising an essential part of who she is (her fundamental nature, her place in the world, etc.). Being a Smith, or a woman, or an IBM employee, or an accountant, becomes a central dimension through which the self is understood. Social identification has three key features (Turner, 1999; Deaux and Martin, 2003):

- *Homogeneity*: The social category is perceived as exaggeratedly homogenous. Empirical studies show that as identification with the category becomes stronger, the perceived similarity of group members increases. One of the major motivations for group identification appears to be uncertainty reduction; another is to increase relative self-esteem (Hogg and Terry, 2000).
- *Comparison*: Identification with the social category is further reinforced by comparing it with other social categories. Psychologically, we seem to reinforce our social identities not only by exaggerating homogeneity within the group, but by exaggerating the homogeneity of other groups and the differences between those groups and our group. Groups are not seen as complementary or relational. They are seen as fundamentally distinct and disconnected. Moreover, comparisons are made along dimensions that favor the self-identified group and diminish the out-group. People reinforce their identification with the in-group by negatively evaluating out-groups. In a sense, Social Identity Theory is not just a theory of social groups or social categories, it is a theory of social classes, in that the groups or categories are always evaluated against each other vertically. A given group will be seen as more attractive, powerful, etc. than another and people will make the mental effort (and often the political/institutional effort) to place their category in the highest possible position. What's particularly striking about this comparative/evaluative mechanism as it has been tested empirically is that it kicks in right away with even the first movement toward group identification. In one laboratory study, people were divided into random groups with no obvious shared connection within the given groups. Despite the lack of a pre-existing, observable social category, people began to create such a category.

They identified with their group, began to exaggerate its homogeneity and compared it to other groups primarily along dimensions that were favorable to their group (Tajfel, 1970). In other words, the simple fact of being placed in a group created an immediate and fairly severe social-psychological barrier. In Social Identity Theory, a group is not simply a way of relating to fellow group members or feeling good about ourselves, it is a way of disconnecting from and feeling negatively toward other groups. The more people interact via their group identities (inter-group) and the less they interact as individuals (interpersonally), the more extreme and reductive the social identity dynamic becomes (Turner, 1999).

- *Stereotypicality*: Power springs less from functional ability or network centrality than from the degree to which an individual embodies the stereotypical characteristics of the group. The more representative of the group one is, the more one is esteemed, since the stereotypical dimensions of the group have been psychologically exaggerated and given positive evaluative content. For example, suppose that “engineers” are seen (by themselves) as preferring simple, practical clothing to stylish dress. Even though dress has nothing to do with engineering ability, engineers will hold a person who dresses “like an engineer” in higher regard than a person who dresses differently.

Rigid group boundaries, then, provoke a competitive stance toward members of the out-group, in which real or imagined differences are emphasized. Since mutuality is developed through empathic connections, this focus on and exaggeration of differences substantially interferes with empathic possibilities toward the out-group. Rigid group boundaries also provoke an evaluation of *in-group* members based on outward conformity rather than on inner experience. Empathy, in contrast, involves connecting precisely with those inner experiences, which, far from being stereotypical, are likely to be quite divergent. The paradoxical result of this dynamic is that the more one connects with a group, the less one truly connects with its members. Conversely the less one identifies with group membership per se (that is, the more inclusive one’s basic relational outlook is), the more one is able to empathically connect with the people who might

ordinarily be seen as making up that group. Group transboundary work is a way of expanding possibilities for experiencing true mutuality, even toward those who are already inside a group with us.

### **Meaning and Transboundary work**

Engagement is not simply the experience of being present, energized, growing, and connected. Sustained engagement requires that that experience be meaningful, that it be perceived as valuable and significant not simply because it is personally fulfilling, but in some broader sense (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; May, Gilson et al., 2004). It would seem, then, that a strong, clearly defined purpose (i.e., a purpose with explicit boundaries) in an SPO would foster engagement. But, for a number of reasons, that is not necessarily the case.

For meaning to contribute to engagement, it needs to be emergent not fixed. It “emerges out of an extended relationship with an object (including symbolic domains)” (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003: 95), in which “proximal goals arise out of the interaction between person and object” (ibid: 92). Meaning must “unfold” from moment to moment if one is to stay in the present (ibid: 90). The temporary experience of flow can occur in a self-contained meaning system (e.g., a game, a technology, a closed ideology) (Bloch, 2000). But the sustained state of engagement, in order for meaning to be truly emergent, must involve interacting with an open, evolving meaning system. Flow, in a sense, can be single loop, but engagement, because of its growth dimension, is double loop (Argyris and Schon, 1978). It is embedded in a system that can reflect on and alter its own meanings.

The emergent quality of engaged meaning is developed through an interplay between immersion in a subjective experience and reflection upon that experience’s relationship with larger meaning patterns. One considers one’s positive, flow-like moments of enjoyment against the backdrop of one’s values and questions (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Kahn, 1990), and explores various possibilities for deepening that enjoyment while evolving those values and pursuing those questions. Meaning, then,

has to be lived. Studying soldiers stationed in the Balkans, Britt, Adler, et al. (2001), demonstrated quantitatively that perceived meaningfulness and overall engagement increased when soldiers had richer contextual experiences (i.e., when they interacted with more aspects of the mission and were closer to the conflict).

Because of this emergent, exploratory, lived quality, broader meaning systems are understood as communities of practice rather than as abstracted ideologies (ibid). That is, they are ongoing, practical systems of meaning to which one can contribute. Enacting rigid meanings is no more engaging than enacting rigid task routines. Engagement involves contribution, a feeling that one is shaping the external world (Kahn, 1990). (Note: the term ‘community of practice’ is used in its broadest sense here. A community of practice doesn’t have to be explicitly defined as such, nor does it have to revolve around a craft or a profession. It simply involves a loosely shared sense of a collaborative undertaking that involves exploring and developing meaning through practice. Thus people involved in social justice work or a religious faith can be thought of as participating in communities of practice.)

Again, rigid purpose boundaries in SPOs are typically framed in terms of meaning vectors. One group of people is seen as delivering a specific service to or for another group. This implies that the lived experience of the people doing the delivery is not actually part of the meaning system. If my purpose as a teacher is simply to educate children, my own experience is not important in terms of why the work is necessary, what kinds of values it serves, who it is for, etc. But this perspective of course, excludes me from engaging in the kind of experiential, iterative meaning-making necessary for engagement. As people at the three focus organizations move toward an understanding of purpose in which meanings are not vectors but fields, their own experiences – indeed the experiences of all who come into contact with the organization – are increasingly understood to be implicated in the organization’s purpose and part of the ongoing exploration of meaning. This perspective allows the kind of emergent, experiential approach to meaning that nourishes engagement.

## 6

### Inscaping

*The weak link isn't necessarily the person who doesn't do the job well. It's the person who doesn't do the job from within or truthfully. (Baron: Hollins School-FG2: 7)*

It is a startling stance to take, in any organization, that one should work not well but truthfully. Baron is the only person I talked to who put it precisely like that, but he is not alone in his general outlook. The idea that work should draw on all dimensions of the self and that people should relate to each other authentically, not merely functionally, is widely shared in all three organizations. That idea is a necessary precursor to engagement, if we understand engagement as a subjective experience. To speak of organizational engagement is to speak of the inner life of organizations<sup>9</sup>. If we want to know how engagement is sustained we need to know how that inner life is made manifest. How do we share our interior experiences with each other in such a way that they become the stuff out of which organizational patterns are forged? And how do we ensure that those patterns feed the work of the organization instead of drain it? The simple problem is this: in order to discover how subjective experience can be institutionalized, we first need to know how it can be seen at all by the people involved. Institutionalization requires that a pattern be visible, in order that it be typified, imitated, legitimated, given meaning, etc. So if organization members are unaware of each other's subjective experiences – if those experiences aren't part of the ongoing conversation that produces sustained patterns – they can't be institutionalized.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins used the term 'inscape' to describe the unique pattern of each thing, living or inanimate– the inherent, underlying dynamic structure that makes that thing itself. Inscape is not directly visible. It must be intuited. While inscape is the design pattern that individuates a thing it also paradoxically connects that thing to everything else. That is, in its uniqueness it reveals an even deeper pattern that is universal. I borrow Hopkins' term for my chapter title (and turn it into a verb while I'm at

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<sup>9</sup> By 'the inner life of organizations' I mean the intersubjectivity – the shared subjectivity – that people experience through the organization.

it) to evoke a process that occurs empirically at all three organizations – very strongly at Food Cycle and Hollins School and to a lesser, but observable, degree at Homestead. This process involves making visible, attending to, and honoring the inner landscape of each person. By inner landscape, I don't simply mean emotions or feelings<sup>10</sup>, but the entire range of subjective structures including belief, identity, temperament, aptitude, aspiration, and associated elements of one's life narrative (family, friends, experiences, etc.). Nor do I mean that this landscape is fully revealed. That would be impossible. It is partially revealed as it is lived out in context, and that partial revelation opens the organizational conversation up in many ways.

The inscaping process is grounded in three sets of practices:

1. *Checking-in* – Gently surfacing aspects of the subjective states of oneself or others during the normal course of organizational work. Checking-in is the fundamental process of making the inner life visible in an organizational setting.
2. *Paying Appreciative Attention* – Attending to and honoring the unique characteristics and growth possibilities of each person. Whereas checking-in simply allows us to see something of the inner life of those around us, appreciative attention invokes a *specific way of seeing*, one that is tinged with reverence and support for what is truest and most alive in us.
3. *Shifting Focus from Behaviors to Intentions* – Seeking to understand the words and actions of others in terms of their underlying motivations and intentions. What do they really mean by this behavior? Why are they doing it? Where is it coming from? Shifting focus in this way involves an act of imaginative translation wherein we try to understand people from *their* inner perspectives not our own. This practice seems to be especially important in situations of potential conflict.

We know that an important part of engagement involves being seen, known, and appreciated (Kahn, 1990; May, Gilson et al., 2004). The sets of practices above revolve

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<sup>10</sup> In this sense, inscaping is distinguished from a focus primarily on emotional expression as in the work on 'bounded emotionality' (Martin and Knopoff, 1998) and in critiques of managerial approaches to emotional expression (e.g., Hochschild, 1983).

around seeing, making sense of, and honoring the inner lives of those with whom we work. My fieldwork suggests that, taken together, these practices unlock considerable vitality, create a widely shared feeling of psychological safety, and lay the groundwork for a deep sense of connection to the organizational community as a whole (a connection I explore at a practice level in Chapter 7).

To illustrate these effects, I will return to Gabrielle's story at Hollins School. I've already referred to her amused struggle to come to grips with Choice Theory, but here we'll explore her journey more fully. I will then consider each of the three inscaping practices in turn, clarifying them with concrete examples.

Although Gabrielle had spent the early part of her career in the city where Hollins School is located, she had lived and taught in the south for many years before her mother's ill health caused her to return and take the job at Hollins. She took the job somewhat reluctantly, uneasy about her new surroundings, which were in sharp contrast to the well-to-do school where she had previously worked.

*When I pulled up to interview with Miri and I looked around and, you know, coming from, such an affluent community, I sat in the car for a minute, and I said "God, are you serious?" It was just simple things like, "Oh my goodness, there are mice here." (Hollins School-FG7: 22)*

Her experience at the school, though, was quickly defined by the way she was treated.

*For me, this has been one of the most openly inviting environments I've ever worked with. From day one it seemed like it was about building a sense of community amongst teachers. At first I was kind of reserved about that, you know, because I tend to want to be in my little box and do my own little thing, absorbing what others are doing, but the environment was very inviting. There was respect for just my overall well being, even to the point where sometimes people ask how is your mom doing and how is your other mom doing, you know, and it just makes me feel wanted and needed here . . .*

*That took some adjusting for me because of the other settings where I have worked in. They were kind of, "This is what we want from you and you do your thing. We don't really care about you as a person. We only care about your test scores and the end results you have to give at the end of the school year. In the meantime, if you have some issues, they're your issues." (Ibid)*

Hollins School became not just a pleasant experience for Gabrielle but a nurturing community.

*I would describe this as, my home away from home, you know, almost the same as my extended family. And I don't call everybody family. (Ibid: 35)*

Gabrielle had originally meant to stay at the school only long enough to deal with her family situation, but her plans soon changed.

*You know, little things just made me feel like wow, even to the point where I was just spiritual praying like, "God, I know that you sent me here, and I wasn't feeling it at first, but I understand. Can I stay?" (Ibid: 4)*

Many people at all three organizations described their experiences to me using similarly general terms: welcome, community, family, caring, etc. The interactions I observed were also consistently warm and personal, and people talked in a precise and deeply appreciative fashion about their co-workers' ways of seeing the world – their beliefs and strengths, their quirks and histories. I pushed people in the focus groups to reflect together as specifically as possible on concrete practices that they associated with these experiences of knowing and being known.

### ***Practice: Checking-In***

By 'checking-in,' I refer to the practice of asking for or offering glimpses into subjective states. Checking-in shifts the conversation from apparently objective, exterior, functional frames to interior frames. Questions or remarks center around how people are feeling, both in general and with respect to specific work issues that may be on the table. In the three organizations, checking in has the following notable features.

- It is part of the work, not external to it. It is integrated into the organization's normal work rhythms. Although I observed moments where people separated themselves from work to talk about personal issues with a co-worker, this was rare. Checking-in usually happened during meetings and during the normal course of unscheduled work interactions.

- It may be part of a formal, regular process, but it also arises in an informal, ad-hoc way.
- It is generally brief. Checking in does not involve a comprehensive assessment of how people are feeling. It simply offers a quick glimpse, a momentary look at *something* about the person's interior state.
- These brief glimpses tend to create a pattern in which ensuing conversation is opened up to include personal states as well as the more usual functional topics. The simple acknowledgement that people *have* inner states and that these states matter seems to normalize the idea of including subjective experiences in a work conversation. The meeting or encounter does not then become all about inner states – the normal course of business is pursued – but it includes those states. Checking in widens the conversation; it doesn't subsume it.

Checking-in can be initiated via a specific questioning process – a kind of “pull” strategy. For example, Food Cycle starts most of its formal meetings with an actual “check-in” in which each person in turn says a bit about how she is feeling right at that moment.

Comments are usually brief and taken together can be quite wide-ranging:

- *I had a great morning working with Elizabeth, and I'm looking forward to this meeting.*
- *I feel a little foggy today for some reason.*
- *I've been totally crazy working on this grant so this meeting will be a nice break.*
- *I'm really distracted and sad because my friend is going through a rough breakup.*
- *I just ate the most delicious strawberries.*
- *I feel good. I don't have much to say.*
- *Can't wait to go on my ski trip this weekend, but I'll try to concentrate.*

Everyone gets a chance to speak, but no one has to, and often one or two people will say just a word or two, or even nothing at all. The whole process, in a group of eight to ten people, typically takes less than five minutes. Although it can be awkward when someone

is first exposed to it, it seems to become natural very quickly. Most of the comments are simple and unassuming. There is little attempt to be witty, or come up with something unusual or striking, though people generally smile and chuckle quite a bit as they listen to each other. Food Cycle often ends its meetings with a brief “check-out” as well.

Hollins School uses a variety of check-in approaches to begin meetings, particularly at their regular, Friday, full-staff professional development meeting:

*We don't just walk in and sit down get down to business. We'll do a little activity. Everybody will go around and talk, just talking about our week. I don't really know what goes on in the fourth and third grade world during the week. I just know what goes on in the first, second, kindergarten world. So I think that helps a lot too. Or somebody will talk about how they're having a bad day, or tell a little joke, say something funny. (Wendy: Hollins School-FG7: 8)*

One of the check-ins the school uses regularly is “highs and lows” – asking each person to talk about one of their high points and one of their low points during the day or previous week. These can range from heartfelt to entertainingly down to earth. Dante:

*My high? Getting my car radio fixed. I was back to pumping and jamming.  
My low? Apparently getting my radio fixed caused some confusion in my ignition.  
My car is back in the shop. (Field Notebook)*

Another check-in practice at the school involves the students. Wandering the halls in the early mornings, I would see the students lined up, waiting to go into their classrooms for “morning meeting.” The atmosphere was surprisingly peaceful – no shouting or drama or enforced silence – just the gentle buzz of relaxed conversation. (I often had trouble believing there were two hundred elementary schoolers nestled into that handful of rooms and those few short hallways.) As the students waited, teachers moved down the line smiling and chatting with each child in turn, shaking hands or hugging, asking how they were doing that morning.

At Homestead, I saw less focus on formal checking-in at the staff and volunteer levels. This may be in part because the staff is so small that informal checking-in occurs quite

naturally. But I think it is fair to say that the organization as a whole does work to open up the subjective experiences of staff, volunteers, and residents. Weekly apartment meetings begin with an un-hurried general personal update from each of the three residents. Coordinators may ask a number of follow-up questions and co-residents may jump in as well. More broadly than at these meetings, though, the organization understands itself as a place where people with mental illness – a group that is not generally listened to except in a clinical way by professionals – can be listened to and heard in an authentic, non-judgmental way. The spirit of the organization is alive with this sort of checking-in. And authentic listening requires authentic speaking. Staff and volunteers share their own lives with residents.

*I had one of the residents once when I was really stuck come to my house to look after my cat when I had to go out of town. It saved my life. My dad was ill and I had to go. They have just been there when I have a problem and I happen to mention it...which is different I guess from other places, but I would say that in a meeting. And they would say, "Maybe I could help." (Gretchen, Coordinator: Homestead-FG1: 15)*

Checking in can also be combined with problem solving in a way that allows people to dig more deeply into issues where the personal and the functional untidily intersect. (One could argue that all important issues contain such intersections, whether they are acknowledged or not.) In this vein, Food Cycle uses “triads,” at times. Triads are longer, more formal breakouts of three people. Triads create a space that is conducive to deep reflection and openness about issues that might be harder to bring up in a larger group. Again, though, I want to emphasize that check-ins of any stripe are not therapeutic. They are focused on work, not focused on personal development. They simply acknowledge that a person’s inner life and an organization’s outer functional demands are mutually implicated.

In addition to the more formal check-in practices outlined above, checking-in can happen informally whenever anyone asks a check-in-like question. During her initial job interview, for example, Anna was startled and encouraged by Miri’s check-in approach.

*I was planning to be really sheltered about my previous experience, because I didn't enjoy it, I didn't think it was good, I didn't have positive things to say about the school, and the school didn't have positive things to say about me. But when I went in there, the first thing Miri said was, "I want to know. Be honest. I'm not going to judge you I just want to know what your past experience was like. And if that means maybe you are going to say something bad, then that's what is going to happen." And for some reason I found that after that I really didn't feel like I had to keep any barriers or walls up. (Hollins School-FG4: 8)*

Here the check-in was retrospective, but the practice is the same: asking questions that offer glimpses into interior states.

Informal check-ins don't have to be the result of leaders posing specific questions. The shared space at Food Cycle encourages a healthy eavesdropping during which people often pick up each other's enthusiasms and struggles. Justin talks about having a rough time on the phone with a difficult client.

*When I hang up, people in the office feel it. They are aware of it. They hear me having the conversation. Or they hear the way I hang up and mutter to myself, or hear me sigh. And like instantly, everybody is attentive. It's like, "What's going on?" Not, "Hey can we meet in five minutes." And everyone has had those experiences. Everyone knows a bit about everything. And you can explore it and vent it. It's not like, "Go talk to human resources." (Justin: Food Cycle-FG4: 19)*

Another sort of check-in is when someone simply reveals interior information on her own. The examples above all begin with questions, but check-in can likewise begin with an offering. Making a personal or extra-role statement can cause a shift in the tone of a conversation and contribute to the overall inscaping dynamic of the organization. The unlikelier the context for this type of check-in – that is, the more dramatic the dissonance between the normal role-driven behavior and the personal comment – the more powerful the shift. Vandana describes a new Hollins School colleague contributing to this practice.

*I walked in the office the other day just to say Happy New Year, and a new teacher was in there talking about how she had a date this weekend, like she saw Miri as a friend and colleague, not as director of instruction. Everybody pretty much does that. It was a new faculty member, so it's not just the people who were here that first year moving furniture and sweating tears. (Hollins School-FG1: 6)*

Teachers at the school also work to discover their own ways of opening themselves up as real people to their students, who normally would see any adult, let alone an authority figure like a teacher, in more archetypal terms.

*I went through period of time when I was feeling homesick. I was going through this really awful situation with an ex-roommate of mine, and when it first started happening I would come in here and just be so cloudy. And I can see how this affects my kids and how my class was. So finally one day I just talked to them about it at kind of an appropriate level. Like, "I'm really sorry I have been cloudy. This is what's going on." And then they started advising me, "Miss Anna, I hope everything is okay. I hope it works out, and it's not fair that your roommate is doing this to you," and that sort of thing. I do that a lot with my kids. [Another time] I was really upset that my football team lost, and I was expecting them all to make fun of me. But one of the little girls who I thought was going to give me the hardest time was like, "I'm really sorry that your team lost." She was so sincere. And I said, "Thank you, but I'm not quite sure I want to talk about it." And she said, "I understand. I just want you to know they had a really great season."*  
(Anna: Hollins School-FG4: 13)

I have observed a number of meetings at Food Cycle where a conversation in which people were struggling to reconcile various points of view was opened up and harmonized by one person simply stating what she was feeling at the time (as opposed to championing a particular perspective on an issue). An interesting example of checking-in occurred during Food Cycle's recent annual general meeting, an event attended by several dozen people. During presentations by candidates running for the board of directors, Adam, a private donor, asked the candidates to reveal whether they gave to the organization personally and, if so, whether their donation was substantial according to their own estimation of their means. This struck many veteran organization members as an un-Food-Cycle-like thing to ask, and an interesting, slightly tense, but friendly conversation ensued. Some candidates answered the questions. Others declined. Various organization members talked about the importance of different modes of giving (e.g., donating time vs. donating money). And then the meeting moved on. Half an hour later, the meeting broke for a vote count. As people milled about chatting, a woman charged toward Adam, who was now talking to Tara, a friend of his on the board. She interrupted their conversation, and without acknowledging Tara began excoriating Adam for the "inappropriateness" of his question. She said that she had been involved in the nonprofit

sector for years, was a major donor herself, and would never ask people to reveal such a thing. She was shaking with anger and went on for some time.

Tara was taken aback by the woman's manner, but sympathetic to her perspective. The board, in fact, had been wrestling with the issue of personal donations, and had begun to understand the many divergent perspectives on the topic. Tara thought she could intervene and shift the conversation away from a one-on-one attack. But when she tried to speak the woman cut her off, spitting out, "I wasn't talking to you. Who are you, his girlfriend?" Meanwhile, Adam seemed to be struggling to hold himself back from saying anything that would provoke the woman even further. Tara was shaken.

*I'm not used to violent interactions happening in that space. I started to feel myself shaking. I had something that I wanted to share that I felt would help nuance the question a lot. She just kept shutting me down every time I tried to add something. I felt a mixture of being personally attacked, and also as if Food Cycle was being attacked. It made me sad that this was happening, and I wondered how to respond in some way that was in line with the values of this place. (Field Notebook)*

As the woman went on browbeating the man, with occasional snipes at Tara ("Who are you? Why are you speaking?"), Tara kept trying to add some perspective to the conversation. She grew increasingly frustrated.

*My whole body was shaking. I thought, "I can't just sit by and not talk about how I'm feeling." I remember being really nervous to say anything about my feelings, because I didn't know her, but I felt like there was nothing else for me to say. (Ibid)*

Finally, Tara shifted out of argument mode and simply said, "I'm feeling really attacked right now." (Check-in number one.)

Adam said, "Yeah, I'm feeling like you're coming at me pretty strongly." (Check-in number two.)

The woman paused, and then said, "Well, I just want to have a dialogue." (Check-in number three.)

The conversation shifted almost immediately. Bodies relaxed. Voices took on a friendly tone. All three people were able to explain their perspectives and attend to what the others were saying. Later, Tara reflected on the experience.

*The energy changed. It just kind of released the tension. Our perspectives immediately shifted to the process – to how we were talking to each other. In the end, I felt really good about it. (Ibid)*

Note that the check-in was very brief, and that the resulting conversation wasn't itself about process. It was about the original topic. But because of the check-in two things happened. People started individually paying attention to process, and they were now able to integrate their feelings throughout the remainder of the conversation. The conversation became richer and more authentic. It still included the various topics and ideas provoked by the original question, but those topics and ideas were no longer abstract. They were explicitly grounded in the feelings and perspectives of the actual human beings who were considering them. The three people felt heard, as people, and consequently were able to begin thinking together rather than simply thinking *at* each other.

A similar, though much gentler, sort of check-in occurred during the second-hand smoke discussion at the Homestead board meeting I discussed earlier. As I said, that conversation began with a proposed, written policy, which was passed around to everyone at the table. Almost immediately, though, one of the resident board members, himself an ex-smoker, began to talk about the issue from the perspective of his own lived experience, and he also shared what he knew about the way various other smokers and their roommates in the Homestead community felt. The discussion then became less about trying to define a specific policy and more about trying to understand how residents and their visitors would experience any change in the organization's current approach. The natural evolution of this discussion was away from a centralized policy altogether and toward an approach in which each apartment would draw on their particular situation (the specific people living there, the layout of the apartment and building, types of

visitors, etc.) to work toward the generally shared principle that people should not have to suffer from second-hand smoke.

The overall effect of checking-in as a practice, when it is widely shared and sustained, is that people begin to see and interact with each other in richer, more multi-dimensional ways. They experience these interactions as positive, human, and unusually honest and authentic. They experience these interactions as true.

*Being human. That is what's different about this operation. You really feel human. In so many work settings, the human aspect is just shoved to the side as not important. Like, "We have a task at hand. We have to get this out. We have to sell this," or whatever. But when people get to be a human, a full person, that's really inspiring and motivating. (Chelsea: Food Cycle-FG7: 9)*

*The children in front of me are people; they are not my job. And they get it that we know they are people. It's about respect. It's about diversity. It does not matter to me that I will have a whole different set of them next year; they are still real people in front of me. (Bronywn: Hollins School-FG1: 4)*

*We actually lose track of what the mental illness is because it is really: What is your life about? Where can you use some help? Can we offer that support? Would this be a good place for you? Their diagnosis gets lost after a little while. It's not really all that important. We always remember it in the interview. And that gives you a certain framework. But after that it often gets pushed into the background because first of all you can have 10 people with the same diagnosis and all have 10 different sets of problems because it is very varied. What we're looking for is: What are you having difficulty with in your life right now, and can we help with that? (Gretchen: Homestead-FG2: 6)*

In addition to creating an experience of authenticity, checking-in – perhaps because it is in the context of work, not parallel to that work – also seems to inspire creative, collaborative thinking.

*You need to make an effort not to start with a search for a solution, but to start with an examination of what's in people's heads at the beginning of a sit-down, before even trying to solve the problem, you know. It's like, first we need to know what everybody is thinking and what everybody is feeling and what ideas are there and what we see around us on the terrain. Then, we'll start trying to find a way to this solution. (Alvin: Food Cycle-FG10: 20)*

*I think that what you are talking about is this ability to really see people as they are. I always say that the Choice Theory training that we did in the first week before we started school [was so important]. It was the most intense week; people were just naked before each other. It was the most honest . . . it blew me away. And that kind of set the tone for this honesty and frankness and using four-letter words and comfortable joking about things. And then, you create small working groups with a common goal of figuring something out – how to design and develop something, whether it's working on a homeless shelter or whatever. And the way they interact with each other . . . pulling together trying to draw out what they can bring to the table – you are getting to know them better and you are solving the problem. It's a kinetic, ongoing process. There is no beginning and end it just keeps going and going and going, and the longer you do it, and the more you do it, the deeper the relationships become. (Alex: Hollins School-FG4: 7)*

Taken together, these examples reveal checking-in to be not only a relational process but a developmental, creative process. By tapping in not just to ideas, but to the full range of inner experiences, checking-in appears to increase an organization's ability to generate new possibilities for individual and organizational growth. Checking-in also seems to increase the probability that people will be aligned around those new possibilities, since any organizational shift will have emerged from their own yearnings, curiosities, frustrations, and hopes.

### ***Practice: Appreciative Attention***

Here is one of the most striking stories I heard during the entire course of my fieldwork. It comes from Anna, the young fourth grade teacher who had been at Hollins School for only five months when I spoke to her.

*The first time I started meeting with other teachers [at my old school], they were looking over my class list saying, "Oh, you are going to hate him, you are going to want to pull your hair out every day because of him, and you are going to want to drink every night because of her," and that sort of thing. And when I came here, teachers were looking at the list, and they were saying, "You are going to love her, you are going to love him," and, you know, "He might talk your ear off and bother you, but he just has the sweetest personality." There was just nothing negative there, and even when there was something that wasn't good, there was still something good said about it in the end. I was excited for the first day of school here, whereas at my other school, I was told every bad thing about every kid on my list, and I was terrified for my first day. (Hollins School-FG4: 2)*

This reflection is so striking to me, because it illustrates something that I think is at the heart of why these three organizations are different from most. It is not just that the inner lives of organization members are shared. It's that those inner lives are attended to with such appreciation.

I use the word 'appreciation' here in a precise way drawn from the tradition of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastava, 1987; Srivastava and Cooperrider, 1990). Appreciative Inquiry is an organizational development approach focused on the exploration of "those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems" (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2000: 4). Appreciation, in this context, is not simply an act of admiration, focusing only on what is 'good' in some abstract categorical sense. As he originally formulated Appreciative Inquiry, David Cooperrider drew the 'appreciative' metaphor from the art world. Note that art appreciation is not about *liking* a work of art. It is about *seeing* it – fully and precisely. It is about taking it in intellectually, emotionally, viscerally. It is about understanding both how the work connects to various traditions and what about it is unique. Through appreciation, we often come to admire and enjoy something, to take pleasure in its qualities, but an act of appreciation, in this sense, is not a search for pleasure, it is a search for essence. Appreciative attention, then, is the practice of focusing consciousness on the unique, essential, life-giving aspects of something (in this case members of the organization, including oneself). In the practice of Appreciative Inquiry, particular attention is paid to what is generative, what gives a system potential for growth. I will use the term 'appreciative attention' here rather than 'Appreciative Inquiry,' because 'Appreciative Inquiry' typically refers to a specific, formally structured organizational development process, whereas what I'm seeing in the three organizations is an ongoing, informal, relatively submerged pattern of daily interaction. This more embedded, systemic view is similar to Srivastava and Cooperrider's (1990) definition of appreciative leadership (though here that leadership is widely dispersed) and to Barrett's (1995) two part definition of appreciation as "a readiness to see and value and respond. . . in a certain way" (37, citing Vickers, 1968) and as "a

system's capacity to deliberately notice, anticipate, and heighten positive potential" (ibid).

### **Appreciating Gifts**

A catalyst for learning to pay appreciative attention to others seems to be the experience of having appreciative attention paid to oneself. Anna describes her job interview with Miri:

*Everything was really positive, and it was just really encouraging. I mean, she barely knew me, but just she would take little things she saw in my resume and just be like, "Oh, that's really great," whereas other people would make me feel bad about some of my experiences. I admitted I had a really bad classroom management problem, and it's something I really need to work hard on. And she kind of turned it into something positive, like "Hey, you only taught for two years and you were in a rough school." She just didn't make me feel bad about it.* (Hollins School-FG4: 2)

Isa remembers a similar experience at her interview:

*I was just so comfortable, because we were talking about little things that she noticed on the resume about me and stuff I had done way back that I didn't even remember I had done. "Oh, this is great you did this. How did this go? How would you implement it here? What changes can you make? You can give me advice anytime you want about stuff." . . . I can be myself here. Everyone understands who I am. I usually don't socialize a lot with people that I work with, but here I socialize with them and I enjoy it. It's not like staff; it's more like friends . . . You can take the negative and you can the positive and you know that with good faith there isn't anything to embarrass you or insult you. It's just to improve yourself.* (Hollins School-FG4: 3)

Like Anna, other people contrasted the appreciative energy at Hollins School with the cultures of other workplaces where they've experienced problem-focused, deficit-based mindsets as quite draining. Laura worked in a private school before coming to Hollins:

*Normally, when I was in the private school, you'd walk into a lunch room and it would be this teacher complaining about this teacher, this teacher complaining about this student. And our lunches are talking about, "Okay I need help with this person," or, "I need help with this lesson. Does anybody have an idea for this?"* (Hollins School-FG6: 6)

Farah previously worked for a large, very well-known, major medical institution.

*Everybody loves [the medical institution] ... But you talk to most people on a one-on-one basis, and lot of people over there are miserable . . . During my initial interview there, my instincts were telling me, "Are you sure you want to work here?" The office manager had this scowl on her face, her arms crossed. I just took the job for the experience. The people I worked with really didn't like outsiders in their little space. They had this really co-dependent, weird relationship. And it just was so miserable. I don't know how you can live like that every day. I went through some really horrible health issues while I was there. I don't know what it was. And here, I'm so happy. (Hollins School-FG9: 4)*

Charlotte currently shares an office with a teacher from the adjoining school (Hollins School is still housed in a subunit of this larger school), and sees a big difference between that teacher and her Hollins colleagues:

*She and I are collegial in a different way, as colleagues. But her conversation is always about what isn't happening and about how isolated she feels. Our conversations at Hollins are about what kids can do, which is not to say that we don't have our moments or our days when a particular kid is driving us insane, but the conversation is about how to make children... how to assist them in being as successful as they can possibly be in this setting. (Hollins School-FG9: 7)*

As at Hollins School, many people at Food Cycle and Homestead talk about feeling especially welcomed and understood as individuals.

*There's a tremendous feeling here that you're accepted and that not everyone will contribute the same way. (Anthony: Homestead-FG3: 3)*

*There's no pressure at Homestead to be someone I'm not. (Stephen: Homestead FG3: 2)*

*One of the things that struck me when I first came here is that it's not a place that takes into consideration where you're at in life, whether you have a Ph. D., whether you're rich, whether you're poor, whether you're young, whether you're old, and I could go on forever and ever. (Marcel: Food Cycle-FG6: 1)*

*There is an open mindedness to anyone who walks in the door . . . There is someone to greet you but who is also taking an interest in you as a person and not just as a volunteer and not just as someone who's going to help the organization . . . someone who wants to know about me . . . That personal, individual interest in each person who walks in the door here is one thing that I haven't found in other places. (Callie: Food Cycle FG-3: 6)*

At a Homestead game night I attended, much of the conversation revolved around organization members who weren't there. But it was not gossipy at all. People gave admiring updates and talked about recent interactions with absent friends. Everyone seemed to know who was being referred to and understood the personal contexts of each update. At Food Cycle everyone is full of stories about their favorite clients, staff, volunteers and these stories are shared with abandon at meetings and gatherings. The most frequent comment I have heard in seven years of interacting with Food Cycle is roughly, "I feel accepted here for who I am."

Organizations members often connect their own feelings of being appreciated with their ability to appreciate others. Farah at Hollins School makes this link explicitly:

*You're made to know that you matter. I mean, if you had [leadership] that didn't make you matter, after a while, you're going to be like, "I hate this place. I really want to make an impact and I really want to help everybody else, but who really gives a shit? I'm miserable." . . . If you have people that are not validating who you are and what you're doing, I think, over time, you'll start to be more self-focused, and [even if] you want to still focus on your job you can't because now, all your energy is all on, "God, I've to go to work today, I hate those people, I'm so miserable." I don't think you can maintain that level of meaningfulness if what you're getting is all wrong. Eventually what you're putting out is going to be all wrong. It just doesn't work out. (Hollins School-FG9: 18)*

It's easy to see Farah's perspective borne out in the way that people talk about the students at Hollins. They tend to talk very specifically about each child as an individual.

*Success is each child individually to feel successful and feel fulfilled, as far as they can come, which may be different for many different students . . . And the same with the staff – like you've done the best that you can do and, like you're always learning ... That you're really giving it all you can and that you feel success coming your way, whatever success means to you or for various levels for different students. (Ellen: Hollins School-FG9: 34)*

Appreciative attention has grown into an organization-wide dynamic at all three places. Individual acts of appreciating and being appreciated blend until they seem to become the stance of the organization itself. At Hollins School, people describe a collective sense of

knowing precisely the various strengths and abilities that can be drawn upon from everyone around them. You can even see this dynamic among the students. When I sat down to have a chat with four of the fourth-grade students, one of the first things they did was describe each other to me. “He’s a rapper.” “She’s an artist.” “She’s a designer.”

Elsewhere I have talked about this approach as a shift in thinking away from roles like ‘teacher,’ ‘student,’ ‘volunteer,’ ‘administrator,’ etc. and toward individual ‘gifts’ (Nilsson, 2006). The language of the gift suffuses Food Cycle. Chelsea, a former Food Cycle staff member, says:

*In a lot of other places I’ve worked, I felt that employers asked the question, “What can I get from you.” And I feel that here, just by changing that question to, “What gifts do you have to share?” . . . there is a big shift in the way you are thinking and in the way you’re going to behave . . . If you’re looking for a gift and you’re offering an opportunity for the person to share their gift, then it’s also an opportunity for the person sharing. (Food Cycle-FG7: 4)*

Reflecting on ways in which he has grown through his work at Food Cycle, Charles, the current board chair, places the gift mentality in a broader relational context. It has to do not only with organizational roles but with the ways that people learn to adapt themselves to all sorts of personal and social diversity. Charles talks about his increasing ability to appreciate differences in the approaches people take to work and to expressing what at the core are similar values, even when those approaches are difficult for him personally.

*I’ve learned a lot about how I want to work and how I like working, and I’ve learned to identify when I’m in sort of my own discomfort and not to think of it as a bad thing, and to just sit back and say, “OK. This is going on. Let’s ride it rather than trying to get to a quick resolution.” . . . We started off by saying that everybody has unique gifts, and it’s our responsibility and our pleasure to try and support those gifts, to try to find out what they are . . . I’ve learned how to do that, I think, within myself and then for others. But I’ve also learned to [recognize] that there are a lot of times when I’m not doing it or could be doing it more, and that I want to do it more. (Food Cycle-FG1: 17)*

There is a similar, articulated perspective at Hollins School:

*[There is a way of seeing] the gifts in each person and the talents in each person and that kind of overwhelming acceptance of a person and the honoring and cherishing of their strengths. I think that helps create a space where everyone*

*goes, “Gee this is the place where everybody has strengths,” and so it doesn’t fall into the “important teacher”[mindset] –people don’t get scapegoated as poor teacher/good teacher, which I’ve seen happen in other places. (Karen: Hollins School-FG6: 7)*

*I genuinely feel that each person here is so unique and special, and there is something unique about the fusion of these talents and they are so varied that, that there really is an opportunity to learn from each other and that really happens. And it’s not just teacher-aide, or teacher-administrator, its even the students – students teaching us. (Alex: Hollins School-FG4: 5)*

There is evidence that the kind of appreciative attention paid in these organizations energizes and empowers people as it broadens and enhances the images people carry of their “best selves” – who they are at their best (Roberts, Dutton et al., 2005).

### **Appreciating Vulnerabilities**

It is remarkable how many staff and volunteers first come to Food Cycle at transitional times in their lives when they are feeling rootless, uncertain, and alone. Story after story begins with some kind of dislocation: break-ups, break-downs, depressions, relocations, career confusions. Laila was a recent immigrant when she began to volunteer at Food Cycle. Her story is not unusual.

*I didn’t speak [the first language of the city]. I was here in winter. I was living with an old Portuguese couple, so I wasn’t meeting people of my age. When I walked in the front door of Food Cycle, it seemed like the Garden of Eden. It was a smile when I was feeling really lonely. (Food Cycle-FG10: 9)*

At first, I attributed the prevalence of these stories to the organization’s mission. Food Cycle had been explicitly designed to develop youth leadership and work with young people in transition. But as I listened more carefully and observed the organization more fully, it seemed to me that some of the organization’s vitality was coming *from* the vulnerability of the people who composed it (which included clients of course, who live with a loss of autonomy and often face social isolation). That is, food Cycle isn’t so much fixing vulnerabilities as drawing on them. I say this for two reasons. First, the acceptance of weakness, confusion, the various wounds we all carry at different times, is part of the overall experience of authenticity. To feel accepted, to feel fully appreciated, we have to

feel that even the more troubled parts of ourselves and the more difficult parts of our experience are respected somehow.

*I had a depression. One of things that kept me coming to Food Cycle was talking about the depression in private with some of the stuff here. It's a big thing to me, because this place accepts that you cannot always be happy which is not the case in other places. I had a training as a camp counselor a few years ago, and they would ask you to always be positive. (Marcel: Food Cycle-FG6: 19)*

*We are actually genuine and transparent, and there is no person on the staff that doesn't know that I'm in a whole depression here and it doesn't matter. They are, like, "It's part of you – it's part of being a real genuine human being." And it's fine. It's all right. You just fit right in. You don't have to pretend. I get to be me. All of me. (Bronwyn: Hollins School-FG1: 8)*

The second reason that vulnerabilities can become a source of strength at these places is that vulnerabilities are a locus of growth. When they feel safe and accepted, people are able to challenge themselves to explore and confront their difficulties, their weaknesses, and their blind spots. Accepting vulnerabilities not only makes people feel authentically appreciated, it gives them a kind of permission to change.

*In my second year at university I went through a little bit of a personal crisis. I guess you could call it some kind of depression. And I knew that to be myself again, I needed to live the life I wanted to be living or that I felt would be a good life to be living if I wasn't depressed. So I was going through the motions, even though my mind was completely out of them. So I needed to volunteer, and I found Food Cycle. I had gone there once before, and I really just felt something good about it, and I went back and I started volunteering. One Saturday I was doing the [western] route, which is in a car. Normally the routes are on foot, but this one's in a car. And I was responsible for getting the list of the people's names and who was diabetic and how to get everywhere. It was some responsibility, and I kept screwing up. I left the forms at the office. We had to go back, and I gave the diabetic the wrong dessert. It was just a big disaster. But the person who I was driving with didn't judge me, didn't make me feel sad or bad or less of a person because I was there. He didn't remind me that it was my first time and so therefore I was less of a person or anything like that. And so it was a really positive experience, and he shared his life with me. You know, he didn't cure me, but he helped me a lot in my process of becoming cured, I guess you could say. So I think that organizations have a healing power, because when you're with the right people in the right settings under the right pretences and energy and relationships, they can do a lot of good for the soul. (Jaycee: Food Cycle-I5: 1)*

In addition, as people in these organizations are allowed to be vulnerable about the things they are afraid of and things they are yearning for, they are able to put considerable psychological energy into play in pursuit of desired goals, even when that energy causes short-term emotional distress.

*I had no idea when I came in how compassionate everybody would be about teaching. We would have meetings where like half of the staff were crying about, you know, a student or about trying. Everybody here really, really cares. It's just amazing to think about. (Wendy: Hollins School-FG7: 6)*

*I have to agree, I'd never before seen a teacher cry about being unable to reach her students or about being compassionate toward the work that they do. [In other places] I've just seen teachers crying about [things like] the principal chastising them. (Gabrielle: Hollins School-FG7: 6)*

To pay appreciative attention to ourselves and to each other, then, is to engage the full range of human energies. These energies are untamed, perhaps, but can be fruitful, in the honesty, courage, and tenacity they provoke. There is evidence that compassion – an empathic and active response to suffering – fosters connection (Kanov, Maitlis et al., 2004; Powley and Piderit, 2008), positive emotion, affective commitment (Lilius, Worline et al., 2008), and coordination (Dutton, Worline et al., 2006), and all of these things appear to be true in these organizations. But compassion also seems to have a creative, generative power, a feature I discuss in the section on inscaping and growth later in this chapter.

### ***Practice: Focusing on Intentions***

As we reveal and work with our inner experiences, there is great potential for confusion and apparent misalignment. On the one hand, feeling accepted and appreciated fully for who we are appears to lead to a feeling of safety. On the other hand, when we interact as whole people with rich inner lives, rather than as tightly defined roles with narrow behavioral parameters, the diversity of interactive possibilities increases, and therefore so does the potential for conflict. Behavioral rules create a kind of common language. Inscaping turns each of us into something like a foreign language, unless we learn to see

past the diversity we have revealed and to find an even deeper level of common experience.

During difficult interactions, one of the ways that people seem to try to connect to this common experience is by shifting from a defensive or competitive orientation to a learning orientation (Davidson and James, 2007) and working to understand the underlying intentions of others rather than simply focusing on observable behaviors or outcomes. Jenna, the Food Cycle executive director, says that when she feels hurt or threatened by someone's actions, she has learned to take a step back and remind herself that the person is not intending to hurt her. She can then begin to think about (and even discuss with the person) the needs that are really driving the behavior and to explore whether there are healthier ways to meet those needs. I heard similar comments from others. Vandana talks about a difficult conflict she was having with a teammate who was feeling that Vandana wasn't taking responsibility for enough of their joint work.

*I always feel like I am a hard worker, and we're really good friends. It was really hard to hear. I definitely was taken aback that someone would think that I wasn't doing what I needed to do, but I knew she wouldn't be saying something like that just to put me down and call me out. There was a real reason behind it, and I had to stop and say, "Well she is not a mean person. She would never come to me and say those things because she wanted me to feel bad." She would say those things because she really felt the relationship wasn't balanced and she was feeling overwhelmingly stressed. (Hollins School-FG2: 11)*

Dante, the student relations coordinator at Hollins School, offers an interesting example of how focusing on intentions can become part of a sustained organizational pattern. In his role, Dante is responsible not only for counseling students, but often for disciplining them as well. At one point, Miri's son, Gabe, who is a student at the school, spit on another child during recess and was sent to see Dante. Dante planned to suspend him, because at the time, the school had a strict no-tolerance policy on spitting. Miri met with Dante to argue that Gabe shouldn't be suspended, because the other boy had been holding him down on the ground and wouldn't let him up. At first, Dante thought, Miri was trying to pull rank, she was so adamant. But he realized that she wasn't speaking to him as a leader of the school, she was speaking as Gabe's mother. Miri said, "I'm not saying you

can't suspend him, but can you explain to me why? Can you make me understand?"

Dante had to reframe the conversation for himself:

*When she said that, we are kind of looking at each other, and I had to sit back in my chair and take out our personal relationship. I had to really see her as a parent right now. Right now, I had to talk to her as a parent, period. (Hollins School-FG1: 19)*

Dante explained that in the culture where most of the kids were from, spitting was one of the worst things that you could do. Miri said that Gabe wouldn't understand that and that he had simply been trying to defend himself. Dante was now working hard to understand Gabe's point of view:

*In the environment they are in, it doesn't get any worse than spitting. Once you spit, that's it, you know, it's a fight. Gabe spit on a kid, but he spit on a kid in self defense which is unusual – to use spit as a defensive strategy. There was a kid that was on top of him. The kid wouldn't let him up, and Gabe said, "I didn't know what else to do. I spit on the kid." So now Miri was also explaining that, in her world, spitting is not the worst thing that you can do. "It's bad and it's foul, I agree," – these were her words – "I agree, but it's just not the worst for me." Her worst was something else, and I thought, "That's the worst?" Then I had to understand that parents are different and everybody has different extremes. (Ibid)*

Gabe was eventually sent home without being given an official suspension. But what was interesting about this incident was that it wasn't simply a one-off case of an administrator's son being let off a little easier than he might have been. It caused a policy shift, as Dante explains.

*We say that our school is about adjusting to the student as well as the parents, so if we say that, we have to be consistent with that. So if a parent comes in and says, "I don't think that my child should be suspended for this," and if that parent can articulate well enough, or help me to understand, or help Miri to understand their point of view, then it is our job to try and make adjustments to that, if we can. (Ibid)*

The school's disciplinary policy has evolved so that now the intentions and understandings of everyone involved are taken into account as fully as is reasonably possible.

*[Now] it depends on the situation. Everything is situational, whereas everything was black and white at one time. If the kid is in self-defense, yeah, he is*

*accountable for what he does, but he might not get the same consequences, as a kid that is the initiator. For example, if you and I sit at the table, and for no reason at all I just spit in your face, that is kind of blatant. The intention was to be disrespectful and nasty. Before we didn't really look at intention. We just looked at exactly what you did – the behaviors. (Ibid)*

Malcolm at Food Cycle talks about how, over time, the good spirit generated by this focus on intentions becomes a “reservoir of friendship” that can keep conflict from escalating:

*One time at a board meeting, Jenna, the executive director, got a little pissed off at me very quickly for a couple of different reasons, and I think it was basically just a kind of miscommunications. So afterwards, it was just kind of like she made a joke about how she had totally chewed my head off and snapped at me. It was like, “I even snapped at Malcolm tonight.” And we just kind of apologized, and then we both just clarified what was happening, and then that was it. Because when you draw upon a reservoir of friendship and goodwill, you can address almost all of these concerns. Whereas in my other institutions, there's not a lot of goodwill there. There's rivalries and animosities between people, so even just the tiniest little thing can become a gigantic conflictual situation. (Food Cycle-FG10: 27)*

### ***Inscaping and Engagement***

In general, mutual awareness – an experience of knowing and appreciating and of being known and appreciated – is critical element of what Positive Organizational Scholars have come to define as High-Quality Connections (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003; Higgins, 2007; Quinn, 2007). Drawing on the experiences of people in all three organizations, we can see a number of ways that inscaping practices contribute to the specific dynamics of engagement.

### ***Attunement and Inscaping***

Attunement refers to an experience of absorption and concentration (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kahn, 1992; Schaufeli, Bakker et al., 2006) in which a person is distracted neither by boredom nor by anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Attunement involves a loss of self-consciousness, a lack of worry about how one is doing or how one will be judged (ibid). Self-consciousness is negatively related to engagement (May, Gilson et al., 2004). Kahn (1990) develops this idea via his conceptualization of self-unemployment. Self-

employment is an intrinsically motivated experience of effort, involvement and mindfulness. Self-unemployment, then, is the experience of acting in an apathetic, robotic, and detached way (ibid). Kahn connects self-unemployment to defense of the self: hiding one's thoughts and feelings and acting non-authentically.

Withholding and concealing one's inner experiences and worrying excessively about how one will be judged (which in turn causes one to conceal inner experiences) interfere with the kind of fulfilling, flow-like absorption that is a hallmark of engagement. Practices that create a sense of permission to be open about one's inner experiences (checking-in) and that allow one to feel accepted and valued in an authentic and trusting way (appreciative attention and focusing on intentions), then, contribute to attunement. In a number of the examples above, people connected their ability to take joy in and be fully invested in their work with their experience of being appreciated and their feeling that that appreciation was authentic, rooted in honest and specific knowledge of their gifts and their vulnerabilities. Paradoxically, being able to share the self with others in this way seems to lower one's overall self-consciousness. It creates a sense of safety. Almost all scholars working on engagement and related topics emphasize the need for psychological safety, but many associate safety primarily with the practice of establishing clear ground rules and goals. Here, a deeper, more resilient sense of safety seems to be engendered by inscaping practices. That safety is felt even in the absence of clear ground rules and goals. (As discussed in the previous chapter, in many cases these organizations operate with very flexible and evolving ground rules and goals.)

### **Growth and Inscaping**

Psychological safety may facilitate energy, concentration, and absorption, but it also appears to facilitate growth, particularly where growth is connected to vulnerability and risk. The growth associated with engagement is not a simple progression in a technical ability, it involves venturing into new territory, stretching people's "existing capacities" (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003: 89), "testing the limits of their being" and "transcending their former conception of self" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975: 26). This kind of growth requires that we be willing to work with and from parts of the self that are less

developed and less comfortable for us. To do this in an organizational setting requires that we feel secure that any vulnerabilities we reveal won't be used against us. I will re-quote Isa from above:

*You can take the negative and you can take the positive in good faith, and you know it [won't be used] to embarrass you or insult you or say you're not good at what you do as much as to help you improve yourself. (Hollins School-FG4: 3)*

Kahn (1992) claims that it is through difficult conversations that “individuals learn and grow and their systems become unstuck” (322). Bob at Hollins School echoes this claim:

*I think we do our best teaching in the years or periods of our lives when we're growing the most. And I think it adds to your stress level, because you're not necessarily sure exactly who you're bringing into the room, or your thinking about other things. Like the year you stop drinking, or the year your sister and her two kids move back in with you, or you finally divorce your husband and you're out on your own, or something like that. Those phases of our life that we're growing in seem to be the best ones in the classroom. (Hollins School-FG7: 25)*

Inscaping practices seem to create an environment where people feel safe to tap into the growth possibilities represented by stress and difficulty, and the number of people who commented quite honestly on how the school has helped them grow through times of personal struggle suggests that these practices are a key factor in the overall feeling of engagement at the school.

### **Mutuality and Inscaping**

Empathy is the ground of mutuality (Kahn, 1990), and inscaping clearly provides more scope for empathy. Empathy involves sharing in, caring for, and even identifying with another person's inner experiences and therefore requires that one have access to those inner experiences. Empathy serves as an information carrier (Batson, Turk et al., 1995) and is heightened by exposure to the perspectives of others (Parker and Axtell, 2001). Kahn (1992) also argues that “systemic wholeness” (which we can think of as a version of mutuality) is undermined by hidden dimensions of the self. The more dimensions of the self that are brought into the workplace, the more an overall sense of mutual

connection can be cultivated. Individual and systemic wholeness are promoted by people “showing what they think and feel” (ibid). That certainly appears to be true at the three organizations, where people often associate feelings of authenticity and open communication with an overall sense of trust, connection, friendship, family, etc.

Empathy is fostered in the organizations in a particularly dramatic way when people who have been heretofore seen as ‘other’ reveal enough about themselves that one can begin to identify with them. Volunteers and staff at Homestead talk about how getting to know people with mental illness as individuals leads to a feeling of connection and oneness with them. They are able increasingly to perceive areas of overlap (a love of music, say, or a particular sense of humor) and become less taken up with the originally definitive and bifurcating categories ‘mental illness’ and ‘mental health.’ People at Food Cycle describe similar experiences as seniors come to be seen as peers and friends. Inscaping practices provoke shocks of recognition. As I mentioned above, Anna at Hollins School was especially fervent about being open enough with her students that they would come to see her as human with a life very similar to their own. She talks about her sick dog (Buddy), her favorite football team (the Colts), her family, and even simply her mood.

*I let them know when Buddy is not having a good day and they’ll ask me from time to time, “How is your dog doing?” and that sort of thing. I usually wear black pants and shirt everyday, and one day I finally wore jeans and a t-shirt, and the kids were like, “Wow, you wear normal clothes too.” And that kind of struck me because I’m a normal person like you, and it’s kind of like they had the viewpoint that the teacher sleeps at the school, like, “Where is your bed?” and that sort of thing. And so not only did I just feel comfortable from the very beginning here, but I really feel like my kids need to see me as a person. Like I’m the person they walk past at the grocery store, that they sit next to at the movies, or whatever. And so I’m sad about things and I’m happy about things . . . I told them from the very beginning [if the Colts lose], I’m not a very good sport, and that’s something I’m really working hard on – trying to be a better sport – but if you are going to come in here and get all like, “Ha, the Colts lost,” I’m probably not going to act like an adult. (Hollins School-FG4: 18)*

What Anna is describing amounts to a kind of translation, finding ways to map seemingly different experiences or social categories onto what is already familiar and recognizable. In a sense, this kind of translation is at the heart of inscaping practices,

and it is why those practices lead to a growing sense of mutuality. Dante talks about the effect this sort of translation has had on his overall all ability to connect with diverse groups of people:

*The people that I'm interacting with here talk a different language than me, and I have to figure out what language they are talking, and how I can be receptive to what they are saying, so that I can take something with me. And for me that is always fun, because everybody is different. When I'm interacting with Bronwyn or Doug - especially Doug, you know, because we have so much in common, but we are so different. Our language is so different. And at times he might say a joke, and I don't get it – not because it's not funny, but because he says it differently. And I might say a joke and he's kind of just looking at me, and I'm like, "That wasn't the response I was expecting." So I'll use a different word, and then [he'll laugh]. Those small moments for me help me to grow, so that now when I am in other new places, it's not so new. I am more comfortable in settings that I may not have been so comfortable in two years ago. It's how I know the school has affected my growth – just in my communication and my observation of how other people communicate. I have to do that here, and it's helped me. It's helped me in other areas of my life. Definitely. (Hollins School-FG1: 13)*

It might seem to be a mundane example – explaining a joke in language that the other person can understand. But it is reflective of something deeper and more unusual. What Dante is describing is the process of actively seeking to translate outer differences of language and behavior into inner similarities of experience and meaning. It suggests that people are more similar on the inside than they are on the outside, thus our scope for experiencing mutuality widens as we shift our focus from exterior life (where we will find similarities with only a narrow subset of the human race) to interior life (where we may find similarities with everyone).

### **Meaning and Inscaping**

For an experience to be ultimately engaging, it needs to be perceived as meaningful both from the perspective of broader (i.e., socially shared) meaning systems and from the perspective of an interior encounter with that meaning in a personally fulfilling context. Engaging meaning patterns are not simply about how meaning is framed in discourse but about how meaning is lived. A belief that it's important to feed people living with a loss of autonomy may be enough to motivate someone to volunteer at Food Cycle, for

example, but it is not enough, according to the literature, to make such volunteering feel meaningful in practice. Such meaningfulness arises out of an encounter with the direct results of our work, a growing experiential understanding of why that work is important (Britt, Adler et al., 2001), a sense that our contribution both fits us (May, Gilson et al., 2004) and makes a difference in the ultimate result of the work (Kahn, 1990; Britt, Adler et al., 2001), and an experience of discovering new, emergent layers of meaning as we progress (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

*Organizational* engagement, then, requires a *shared* sense of meaningfulness. Our overall understanding and experience of meaning must be rooted not just in our own interior experiences of meaningfulness but in the interior experiences of our colleagues. Emergent meaning patterns are lived out as we interact with the interior lives of others. Inscaping practices may play a crucial role in allowing such interaction.

## Expression

Most people at Food Cycle describe the organization as having a deep sense of unity and shared meaning. At the same time, there is considerable variability in how they describe Food Cycle's purpose, what parts of the organization they emphasize, how they see their own relationship to the organization, and the outward manner in which they interact with other organization members. That is, each person experiences and expresses the organization in her own way yet feels that these individual expressions comprise a larger, consistent whole. A similar pattern of individual expression and perceived wholeness can be found at Hollins School and Homestead.

In this chapter, I explore expressive practices at these organizations to try to understand how this experience of wholeness is produced. 'Expressive' in an organizational context has two distinct meanings in the literature. Scholars interested in organizational identity consider organizational expression to be the emotional and symbolic representation of the organization's core identity – what the organization is, what makes it unique, and what it stands for (Schultz, Hatch et al., 2000). Expression here is not merely a question of image; it needs to be deeply rooted in the behaviors and beliefs of organizational members (ibid). From this perspective, an expressive organization is one with a skilled and coherent ability to represent its essential, unique nature in all of its interactions.

Scholars writing about social purpose organizations<sup>11</sup>, on the other hand, have defined 'expressive' organizations as those that exist primarily to "express or satisfy the interests of their members" (Gordon and Babchuk, 1959: 25) through "acts of participation" (Curtis and Zurcher, 1974: 357). Expressive SPOs are ends in and of themselves. They are contrasted with 'instrumental' SPOs, which exist primarily "to maintain or create . . . [social] goals that lie outside of the organizations themselves" (Gordon and Babchuk,

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<sup>11</sup> As I stated earlier, 'social purpose organization' is a term I have adopted to consolidate related subcategories of organization. The literature on expressive organizations refers to a variety of these subcategories, e.g., 'voluntary associations,' 'social movement organizations,' etc.

1959). Scholars recognize that instrumental and expressive categories are not mutually exclusive, and that SPOs may pursue some combination of instrumental and expressive functions.

Building from the latter definition, but incorporating the former, we can think of expressive practices in SPOs as those practices that simultaneously express the needs and perspectives of individual members *and* the identity of the organization as a whole. From this perspective, then, expressive practices in SPOs are multi-vocal. They are not primarily explicit, unitary definitions of purpose or meaning. They comprise an array of divergent, individualized expressions of a common underlying experience.

We can reason that organizational engagement presupposes such a multi-vocal, expressive approach. “To have members who are fully present – attentive, connected, integrated, and focused – means contending with a seemingly chaotic multitude of voices, ideas, energies and feelings” (Kahn, 1992: 331).

Doug at Hollins School contrasts the school’s multi-vocal, expressive approach with the emphasis on superficial conformity at his previous school.

*I’m coming from a school where we carefully made sure everyone knew exactly what his or her job was without worrying about someone else’s job, and we believed professionalism [meant] everybody using the same kind of language and everybody interacting the same way to present a unified front . . . [At Hollins School, we don’t have a] culture that says professionalism is looking the same and focusing on your own job. [We] say, “No, professionalism is having the same spirit and interpreting it in your own way.” (Hollins School-FG1: 10)*

Note that the superficial conformity of “professionalism” at Doug’s previous school leads neither to an expression of individualized needs and perspectives *nor* to an expression of a unique shared organizational identity (“professionalism” is a generic frame meant to make the school look safely like every other school).

In this chapter I will explore three sets of expressive practices:

1. *Expressive orientation*: a multi-vocal approach to how people are welcomed and acclimated to the organization.
2. *Expressive representation*: a multi-vocal approach to how people share the organization with external constituencies.
3. *Expressive reflection*: a multi-vocal approach to how people pursue organizational decision-making and action.

I will then look at the holistic, unifying effects that these individualized practices, paradoxically, seem to provoke. Note that examples from Food Cycle are more abundant in this chapter, as expressive practices are most fully developed there, but we can also see aspects of such practices at the other two sites, as I show.

### ***Practice: Expressive Orientation***

There is a common sort of air people have walking into Food Cycle for the first time – a slightly baffled, hesitant look as they scan the room expectantly, searching for a guide who can tell them what to do. What part of the room do I go to? Whom should I be talking to? What kind of place is this anyway? The office has no designated reception area, nor does it have a receptionist. As soon as you walk in, you are in the middle of things. People are talking on phones or typing away. Different species of groups are scattered about - pairs and trios are huddled in corners; larger gatherings form around desks or worktables. There might be a handful of people chatting and eating cake on the couch. If you stand there looking puzzled for a moment or two, someone is sure to take you in hand. It might be a staff member with a moment to spare. It might be a volunteer hanging about waiting to start a shift. It might be a board member wandering through. The welcome is unstudied, and responsibility for it is widely and unassumingly shared.

The dynamic is similar in the kitchen, the garden, and the bike workshop. Food Cycle is a place where you're allowed to – even forced to – stand about in doorways a lot in order to get your bearings. Many organizations have clear pathways for entry and re-entry. Those pathways might be defined by specific people: receptionists to welcome visitors and field

phone calls, or trainers to instruct and acclimate new organization members. Or they might be defined by scripts and routines: this is how we answer the phone; this is how we teach new volunteers and staff members what to do. At Food Cycle, each entry, for veterans and newcomers alike, seems to be its own adventure.

*There's clearly a lot of activity and it's not activity that I immediately understand. We have people that are talking; people are moving around; some people are looking at boards. I was just in there, and Richard was at the volunteer sheet. Haley seemed to be in a meeting. Miles immediately came up and greeted us. There are lots of different layers of activity, and you need people to translate what's happening to new people who come in. You need people to bridge it for you . . . There's somebody there that greets you, and you're not thrown into the deep end. You can slowly sort of set one foot into the shallow end, and then somebody will be there to ask you if you want to take the next step. (Charles: Food Cycle-FG1: 3)*

That person who greets you might be anybody. There is no burden put on people to take on the role of orienting or hosting. There is no indoctrination.<sup>12</sup> Over time, each person simply seems to find his own way of welcoming and helping others. Justin is now a staff member, but he recalls puzzling through this approach to things when he was a volunteer in the garden.

*There was this blind man the first day I went, in the middle of a rainstorm. We were setting up buckets on "the stairs to nowhere" [a large set of rising, concrete platforms in the middle of the university campus where the garden was temporarily located]. . . He hadn't spoken to anybody, maybe because we were all walking around so fast . . . At one point I was standing up there, and I was just so happy to be volunteering in this really cool garden downtown in the middle of a campus. I was like, "This is brilliant." And I saw that the man was standing around, and so I went down . . . The garden coordinator was there [that day], and a bunch of volunteers . . . but no one had really interacted with him . . . I was a bit baffled, I think. I was already a little confused that a blind man was out in the rain at a gardening workshop . . . So I asked, "Are you here for the garden?" He said, "Yeah. Totally." So I just sort of pushed myself beyond the norm, maybe because I was in this super happy mood. I just invited him to walk up the stairs, and once he was up there, I tried to describe it to him. I wasn't sure if I was describing too much and, like, belittling him in a way, or if I wasn't describing enough and belittling him in that way. I just explained it to him, and he tripped on a couple things, and I realized I was a terrible guide. But once it was clear he was*

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<sup>12</sup> There is one, loosely organized orientation session that most volunteers go to, but it simply provides a general overview of the organization.

*there for the garden, every five or ten minutes someone would ask him to help with a little something, or maybe they would stop by and describe another piece of the garden, or he would ask a question. Once people realized he was in the garden, it was go, go, go. (Food Cycle-FG4: 7)*

While people tend to describe Food Cycle as a warm and inviting place, many find the initial absence of a clear path or a specific person to rely on a bit discomfiting. Louise, a volunteer, talks about her first shift:

*I felt the invitation and an open space, but my initial experiences weren't welcoming logistically as a volunteer. My first experience in the kitchen, there was no orientation. There was no, "Here's this, here's that. Welcome. What's your name?" – what I would typically consider as a welcoming experience. In the [overall organizational] orientation we had been told to sign up for something at least 3 times to give it a fair try, because you are going to have different people in the mix all the time. So I was glad that I had signed up for multiple shifts prior to my first experience, because if I hadn't, I would probably not have come back. For me it was more of an invitation than a sense of welcome. (Food Cycle-FG2: 5)*

Board member Charles initially struggled with the fact that the organization's structure – its mode of pursuing its business in an orderly and reliable way – was not immediately apparent to him:

*Now I'm comfortable in the space, whereas before I probably found it intimidating. I like boxes a lot of times. I like knowing where things fit, and so when that's not made clear it can be a little bit disconcerting. But now that I sort of understand the structure – how the structure works even though there is in the first glance a lack of structure – it makes me want to scratch the surface a little more. It makes me want to be more involved. (Food Cycle-FG1: 3)*

As with Charles, the initial sense of unease that many feel seems generally to have to do with the absence of clearly explained processes and structures, not with unwelcoming people, per se. That is, it is not that individuals aren't friendly, it is that the organization itself hasn't laid out a detailed entry route for them. And almost everyone associates a growing feeling of welcome with the early encounters they've had with specific people.

*As soon as you walked in you felt like somebody took an interest in you. Somebody prioritized you and talked to you about the organization. (Richard, Staff: Food Cycle-FG3: 7)*

At Hollins School, there is a similar dynamic, though it is less developed. There is no reception area, and visitors will have to make their way back through the storage room/office, or they will have to find a random staff member in the hallway. More importantly, while initial intake of new staff members certainly flows through Miri and Alex, responsibility for welcoming and orienting staff is widely and informally shared.

*I had the entire staff always asking what they could do for me when I had just come here, you know, in the first couple of months, wondering how I'm doing, am I okay, did I get a break. Everybody was so caring and just really looking out for my best interest. Out of nowhere, they were just coming to me and asking what I needed, without me having to ask all the time, and it was so welcoming and so supporting. (Ellen, Teacher: Hollins School-FG9: 9)*

Many members of the staff tell similar stories, often in stark contrast to experiences at earlier schools, where they were given their formal orientations by administrators and then left in their classrooms to muddle through on their own.

At Homestead, initial intake of residents and volunteers is formalized through the three coordinators, but once someone moves into or begins volunteering with an apartment, orientation takes on a more idiosyncratic and communal flavor. Each apartment develops its own patterns of relationships with new people. And throughout the organization as a whole, relationships are cross-pollinated eclectically via a number of ways from social events to the aforementioned phone book that lists everyone's home phone numbers, including staff and board members. The Food Cycle-like result is most observable in gatherings like the Annual General Meeting or Game Night, where hosting is a loose, collaborative practice.

The practice of allowing people to make their way into an organization haphazardly via the people they happen to encounter may seem simply disorganized, but it bespeaks an unusual sense of permission – a shared faith that any member is capable of expressing the organization with reasonable accuracy, or perhaps better, faith that all the various pathways people take into the organization will arrive roughly at the same place. Such a practice seems to have two powerful effects.

First, it immediately puts new organization members in a semi-autonomous, proactive mode (essentially complementing the role and task transboundary work described in Chapter 5). Right away, they know that a large part of their work in the organization will involve taking initiative and figuring things out for themselves, including what their overall relationship to the organization is to be.

*Because someone is not telling me what to do, I feel like I can just slowly make my way into the situation. I can figure out on my own where I want to go. If I walked in the front door for the first time at Food Cycle and there was a receptionist to greet me, that would change the entire way I would see the organization because suddenly I am waiting for the person to tell me what to do . . . [Things weren't] written down. It was just sort of orally [shared]. A volunteer might tell you, "You do it like this." Or you have to ask. You're not given detailed instructions about what you do when, which is actually, I think, good, because then people teach each other . . . I had to ask questions a lot to get the knowledge to make sure that I knew what I was doing. (Tara, Board Member: Food Cycle-FG4: 3)*

*I tend to like the spontaneity of coming into a place and not being sure what's going on and [knowing that] different things are possible. There is an adequate amount of structure there, and when [someone] comes up and greets you, you know you're connected at least. When I did volunteer in the kitchen, it was really pretty minimal about what I was to do, other than, you know, start chopping these things here, which again is enough information. There are a lot of things going on, but it was just enough to get engaged. It was really, "Watch and see what we do, or ask questions," versus the whole orientation of, "Here's the work. Here's what your obligation is. Here's your responsibility." There's none of that. It was a question of exploring, "Is there a match between what I would like to get involved in and what Food Cycle is about?" There was no sense of being recruited. It was strange. It was more like dating. (Jack, Board Member: Food Cycle-FG1: 3)*

When Jack says it was more like dating, he is highlighting the second important effect of expressive orientation: it seeds a pattern whereby people will have to discover the organization through direct, individualized relationships with others rather than through more generalized, abstracted texts and policies. Relationships, fleeting or longer-term, are the only real way to navigate. They are the only way to learn. The result is that people feel an immediate sense of authenticity in their connection to the organization. They feel

that their encounters with the people in the organization are real and mutual, and over time they come to take for granted that everyone there is learning from everyone else.

*You walk into this place, and it's always this one person who comes to greet you. And generally when they are coming to you it does feel authentic. It doesn't feel like it's trying to make you feel good if you're not feeling good. They kind of take you where you're at. And if you ask them how they're doing, they are honest. I mean, if they're having a rough day, there's no point in saying, "Oh, great. I'm feeling wonderful." They'll say, "Hey, it's been a long day, you know." (Amar, Former Staff Member: Food Cycle-FG9: 2)*

*There is something unique about the fusion of these talents, and they are so varied that there really is an opportunity to learn from each other. That really happens, and it's not teacher-para, teacher-administrator, its even students – like students teaching us. (Alex, Administrator: Hollins School-FG4: 5)*

*I felt when I was working at Food Cycle that there was an exchange of energy and learning and even happiness . . . There was an exchange between the volunteers and the staff. Sometimes I would talk to the volunteers or listen to them a lot, but sometimes it was the opposite . . . When I was a paid driver, sometimes they gave me new volunteers so I could explain how it works. But some days I had totally amazing new volunteers, and they would tell me about their lives and I would learn so many things just by doing the route, even if I knew the route by heart. One Monday I met this girl who told me she was doing train hopping, and she was a hippie. She made me dream so much. And the next week it was somebody in the army, and he wanted to go to the frontlines in Afghanistan. I was so amazed that these two people were brought together because they wanted to do good for their community, but they were so different – totally opposite. That was just amazing, and it still makes me laugh. (Phoebe, Former Staff and Current Board Member: Food Cycle-FG9: 10)*

While the above effects seem positive, expressive orientation can also create tension, as people have varying abilities to transmit the organization's essential mode of relationship. In a sense, the organization is constantly reinventing itself through new, un-regimented interactions. Food Cycle staff member Ingrid talks about an early bit of unpleasant "orientation" she had from a volunteer:

*My first day on the job, I was peeling an orange in the kitchen, and I threw the peel in the garbage, because I had never been in a place that had composting. And I got yelled at so bad by a volunteer from the bike workshop for throwing away the orange peel. He was like, "How can you be throwing that in the garbage? You know that should be composted! We do composting here. How can you not know that – are you stupid?" And I was just like, "Whoa, I am not going*

*to fit in here at all.” This is my very first day on the job. Meanwhile, you can’t actually compost orange peels here, so I don’t know why he was yelling at me for that. That was a challenge. (Food Cycle-FG5: 17)*

Ingrid goes on to discuss the difficulties and benefits of having even well-established relationships continually rebuilt as people with little knowledge of the organization’s history take on authoritative, if informal, roles.

*I think it’s sometimes a challenge for the organization as a whole, because people who’ve been here for a long time realize the history of a relationship with a person . . . but someone who’s on the first day of the job isn’t going to realize all the history, and how we share that, and how we make new people understand the history and importance of every relationship and the details of all those relationships. I think it is a challenge, but I think there’s also something special about the fact that we don’t share all of the history, and so there’s freedom for it to come out as people develop their own relationships. (Ibid: 18)*

I heard a few stories like Ingrid’s orange story, but the consensus was that the same expressive authority that can lead to the occasional mishap generally creates a consistent and shared way of relating to people while at the same time allowing each new person to discover the organization organically via the relationships that best suit them.

### ***Practice: Expressive Representation***

Food Cycle takes a similarly expressive approach to the way it represents itself to the outside world. Any number of people with varying degrees of experience, from longtime staff members to relatively new volunteers, might find themselves speaking for the organization in various ways: offering workshops, sitting on roundtables and coalitions, consulting with government agencies, preparing materials for big events attended by supporters, etc. There is little attempt to control or coordinate these voices and no attempt at all to craft a standardized message. The organization’s basic stance is that people are not speaking *for* the organization exactly; they are speaking about and from their own perspectives on the organization. This contrasts with the instrumental representation that is more typical of SPOs, particularly when they are doing any sort of advocacy work, as staff member Miles explains. He was participating in a community of practice with people from other organizations exploring government community development policy.

The group invited three members of a federal agency responsible for significant community development funding to attend one of their dialogue sessions.

*At the break, I was talking to one of [the government officials] about my difficulty getting used to this job compared to others. [Typically] when you're doing advocacy work, you're working for the organization. It's not really about you. It's about doing charity work for someone else. It's really hard to feel the freedom and the power to speak on behalf of someone. My experiences early on with any kind of activism were that if you weren't the expert activist it was really hard to feel free to speak, because there was always someone who had read another paper and was one up on you. You weren't free to be speaking on behalf of yourself. Whereas at Food Cycle I felt really free, because you're speaking about Food Cycle on behalf of your experience, and that's a legitimate part of the mission. So you can always be your own case study in your work. You don't need permission. And this person in the Federal Government was saying, "Oh my God, that would be a dream come true, because I have to know the official position from above. I have to know what people are working on below. I have to know the context of the specific piece of work, so there's no freedom to do that." You've lost the power of the individual to contribute to the work, you know. You have the work that's being done everywhere, but it's all piecemeal, because the engagement is being factored out, and you can't be authentic. I believe that's [the case] in [most] advocacy work at a certain level. You always have to check in with your constituency to be able to be moving forward. Whereas here I think, because it's community care, it's healthy for me to be part of this community the same way it's healthy for our seniors, meal-service members, board members, and funders to be part of this community. Whatever we say is all right. When we are asked to contribute to something like a project table or board, it's [typically framed as], "You guys can be the lead on meal services or community sectors." [But from our perspective], it's actually like, "How about I come as Miles, who has been working at Food Cycle and who has also volunteered there." We're offering ourselves in our roles. We are never really going to speak on behalf of the membership. It's our experience within the organization that we're going to bring. (Food Cycle-FG8: 10)*

I think Miles is describing a powerful shift in thinking that is deeply embedded at Food Cycle: that one always represents one's experience of the organization, not the organization itself as some disembodied whole. I have attended numerous workshops and events and seen many people "representing" Food Cycle, and, just as Miles describes, they invariably anchor their presentations in their own histories and feelings about the work. It is interesting that in Miles' view, it is "more piecemeal" to have a centrally

coordinated message than to have people speaking from their own experiences. The paradoxical implication is that speaking personally is somehow more holistic than trying to cobble together and align various abstracted perspectives.

More collaborative representations of Food Cycle are also anchored in the various experiences and perspectives of the people participating. Former staff members Gwyneth and Amar describe the process of putting together a video for the annual gala – a video that would be seen by most of the people interested in the organization including major funders:

*Gwyneth: We were telling our story, so it was very close to home, like, “How can we share the heart and soul of what we are doing with people out there?” It was serious – we’ve gotta raise money, we are inviting people, there is this kind of deadline. But also fun and creative with all these people coming in and out and contributing whatever they could . . . It was playful and silly and serious. I love that balance.*

*Amar: I had no idea what we were going to do. And then it just became this organic thing, and I realized that all the principles that I saw that existed within Food Cycle on a day-to-day basis were actually manifesting in this little project we were doing.*

*Gwyneth: Right, it was like in the process of making the film we lived what we were trying to tell.*

*Amar: And it wasn’t so conscious that we were doing that. We just felt a sense of joy. I don’t even know how it happened, but we made it happen. We’d come in every day at 8 AM and then we’d finish at 5. I think every day we came in over four weeks we did that. There were moments of tension, but it never felt insurmountable. You always felt supported, and everybody was there - volunteer wise . . .*

*Gwyneth: Waiting for hours because we weren’t ready.*

*Amar: But we took care of them and we took care of each other, and we were supportive. There was no ego really . . . I learned so much in that whole thing, just about working with people, and also being in charge of something, and being a facilitator and not an authority - that whole idea is really important. And then to celebrate it at the end, to share it with people, and then let it go. (Food Cycle-FG9: 8)*

I will return to the idea raised by Gwyneth and Amar here – that every expression of Food Cycle is in some ways a living replication of the relationship patterns at the heart of the organization. But again, we can see how a critical organizational representation – the gala video – is allowed to develop out of the interaction of a number of idiosyncratic voices and experiences.

Expressive representation is less developed at the other two organizations. Homestead has become increasingly involved in dissemination of their model and in more general advocacy work around de-stigmatizing mental illness. So far, this work has largely been the province of a small group of leaders, but there is increasing participation in public outreach by residents, who share their own stories of mental illness and their own perspectives on Homestead. And the organization is moving away from a univocal approach to dissemination towards a more collaborative model in which much sharing is done simply by having people visit the organization and interact with a variety of members. Hollins School, still in its early years, is focused primarily on internal development. What little external outreach there is (to community groups, other schools, politicians, funders, etc.) is generally handled by the school's formal leaders and board members. But it is easy to imagine the school evolving toward expressive representation, given the increased use of multi-vocal approaches internally (e.g., involving staff in hiring processes).

### ***Practice: Expressive Reflection***

Expressive practices seem to be based on the notion that an organization is too complex for any one perspective to capture it. We can see such practices not only in discrete instances of orientation and representation, but also in the general mode of reflection and decision making and action at the three sites. Attempts are almost always made to include multiple voices in the thinking leading up to a decision, not necessarily in order to arrive at a formal consensus (although this may be the goal as in the new hiring process at Hollins), but to create conversational spaces where multiple perspectives and experiences can interact.

At all three sites, people talk repeatedly about how much more consulted they feel on issues large and small than they have felt in other settings. This feeling seems to stem partly from an informal pattern in which people routinely ask each other for input and partly from more formal patterns in meetings and gatherings of various stripes. The “consulting” in question is always conversational. That is, it is not a matter of a leader or a working group simply surveying the opinions of people on a given issue. It takes place through dialogue.

The instinct to informally bounce ideas off of others can easily be observed in all three organizations. At Hollins School, people regularly bustle each other off into corners and rooms to discuss things. At Homestead, coordinators, board members, volunteers, and residents, are very consultative, frequently turning statements into questions, (“Does that sound right?”). At Food Cycle, there is a steady flow of impromptu meetings on top of the regular weekly staff meetings. This dynamic can be seen even by the casual eye of a volunteer wandering in for a shift. Here’s how Callie, a volunteer who’s only been around for a few months describes what she sees:

*From a volunteer’s perspective, I get the impression that there is a very strong respect for each individual staff member . . . I’ve heard about the weekly meetings, but it’s obvious just when I pass through the office that there’s constant communication . . . There are often tiny little two- or three-person meetings. Just at someone’s desk or on one of the couches. [Someone will say,] “Can I grab you, or could we talk about this now?” And everyone always seems very willing to. So even though I’ve never attended the weekly meetings, it seems obvious to me that there are very open communication lines between all the staff members, which is different from my work experience in other places where there was no communication or very limited or dysfunctional communication. It’s really nice to see it, and it comes through, as a volunteer. It comes through that it works well and [that people have] complete faith in each other. (Food Cycle-FG3: 3)*

When a conflict arises, the organizational instinct is not to find the offender and lay blame (though that may be the initial human instinct). It is to alter the relationship dynamic, often by bringing another person into the mix, explains former Food Cycle staff member Chelsea:

*I can think of like three or four people at different times that at least had some kind of not good chemistry with other people on the team. One that I remember quite strongly was somebody who I was [helping closely during his first six months], and I couldn't work with this person. I feel like I can work so easily with everyone, but just the way he was working and I was working, it was like oil and water – really not good. And it was obvious. So Miles ended up working with him . . . In any of these little conflicts, there's always this intention of "How do we make this good?" It's not just like, "Oh I don't like this person. This is not working." It's just like, "What can be done?" So I had a conversation with this person and I had a conversation with Miles and Jenna. It's a big enough team that we don't all have to get along on everything all the time, so he and I just worked less together. And in other instances too when other people haven't had good working chemistry with someone, it seems like other people just kind of fill in. (Food Cycle-FG7: 14)*

Interestingly, all three organizations were founded by more than one person. Food Cycle and Hollins School were each initiated by two people who then came on as staff and led the organization together for several years. Homestead was founded by a group of people working together to explore the problem of homelessness. In none of the three cases was there a single, focal, social entrepreneur. In a sense, the organizations began via mutual, consultative relationships, and that pattern continues to this day. Structurally, all three organizations tend to rely on groupings of twos and threes for many functions.

Homestead has three coordinators, who function as a team, without an executive director. The Homestead board president is statutorily paired up with the previous board president, and they function as two-person team. Apartments each have three residents and several volunteers. There are no single residences. At Hollins School, in addition to the ongoing pairing of co-founders Alex and Miri, teachers work in grade-groups of two and are also paired with aides. At Food Cycle, fundraising, kitchen, and sustainability roles have evolved into formal pairings, and informal groupings of two or three have emerged in other functions.

It's as if the fundamental unit of organization is not the person but the relationship. And this type of structure seems to encourage people to think in relationships rather than by themselves. Laura talks about her relationship with Karen when they were both teaching kindergarten at Hollins:

*What pops into my mind are all the conversations that Karen and I have always had about students who have behaviors that we can't tackle. One day I think we spent three hours on the phone. The problem was with one of our students who was suicidal. His mom wasn't getting involved and it was just – we had a whole big mess of stuff. And you could just tell he was falling apart. I did all the things I could do, and I think I called Karen almost crying. I remember going back and forth with ideas. Karen was saying, "Have you done this, and this, and this?" "Yes I've done that. This is how it turned out. Can you think of another way?" I think at one point in time we got on the computer and were doing research together. That was four years ago. But those conversations have continued. (Hollins School-FG6: 12)*

Laura could have continued to try to handle the situation herself, or passed it on someone else with a different kind of authority or expertise, which perhaps would have been the more typical solution. But the pattern at the school was not to find (or be) the right person to handle a problem. It was to find the right person to converse with about a problem.

All three organizations also make use of larger, more formal group settings to ensure that multiple perspectives are brought to bear. Food Cycle is the most active in this respect.

As I've mentioned, a few years ago the organization decided to stop operations on Thursdays in order to have enough space for shared reflection. Now, Thursday mornings are spent with the entire staff getting together, sometimes for a general overview of what everyone is up to, and sometimes for more specific conversations or workshops.

Thursday afternoons are devoted to smaller groups and individual work. In all gatherings at Food Cycle, there is a sort of ferocity about making sure that even the quietist or the most dissonant voices are attended to. I mentioned this pattern in the previous chapter on inscaping practices. There the emphasis was on making sure to see and understand each individual clearly. Here the emphasis is on the way individual voices combine to think and make decisions collaboratively.

*There's a very strong culture here which allows lots of different personalities to emerge but not dominate. Our processes, our ways of working together, allow people to be a little bit difficult. It allows sort of positive deviances or sometimes negative deviances to emerge and just sit there. It also allows me to check my own tendencies to want to limit discussion if we're eighty-five percent there. That's good enough, right? Let's just move on right? But that's not how Food Cycle works. It works by getting towards a hundred percent, and sometimes it takes a little bit longer. (Charles, Board Member: Food Cycle-FG1: 11).*

*We take a really long time to make a decision. We really stress going over all the variables, making sure that everyone understands what's at stake and has had an opportunity to give their opinion . . . Only then do we move forward. (Adam, Board Member: Food Cycle-FG8: 6)*

*When everyone is contributing we're vibrant and it feels light. A lot of work can feel really light when it's happening in that way where everyone has had a chance to speak. And I think we experiment a lot with ways of doing that, of breaking down different structures that can inhibit people from participating . . . We have small teams. We have open spaces. We have Thursday meetings. We have teams broken down into everything. We have two people who just decided they want to "co" on something. We have so many different ways people can contribute that it never has to feel heavy. I think that's important to say, because if it feels heavy you're not going to be engaged in it and you start losing the power of the work and it just becomes like dead work. It gets done, but it's the one that ends up in a drawer . . . To get back to practices, it's experimenting with breaking down structures of contribution, because what ends up happening is it starts to feel light when you find the sweet spot, but it always changes. Whoever is in the room changes what that structure will be. And you never know going into it, but you get used to feeling what that lightness of the work is when you start to experience it in that way. And you get more done. (Miles, Staff Member: Food Cycle-FG8: 6)*

As Hollins School moves in a similar direction, they are finding it difficult but rewarding. The recent inclusion of all interested staff in the hiring process for a middle school director of instruction has been challenging. The group was excited at first and committed to consensus, but when two strong candidates emerged, the group began to polarize. They worked on the decision longer than most of them were comfortable, and in the end were able to choose a candidate, but the process surfaced a number of underlying tensions around different visions of how the school should feel (more fun-loving vs. more professional) and different experiences people had had, depending on whether they entered the school during its first year or later on. Staff are working to see the value of surfacing those intentions, and steeling themselves for further difficult work by recognizing that they are investing in a long-term process, not just making a single, current decision.

Another way that all three organizations allow many voices to come together and interact is by making regular use of celebratory gatherings and events. These go well beyond the

typical holiday party or annual general meeting. At Homestead, almost everyone I talked to listed summer and winter retreats as among the highlights of their experiences at the organization. Food Cycle has many events throughout the year: from an organizational birthday party, to field trips, to street fairs, to picnics, to garden parties, in addition to the large gala. Staff and volunteers put enormous creative and logistical energy into these events, much more than they could ever hope to recoup through fundraising or recruiting. But as at Homewood, many people list these events as highlights, focusing on the joy they take in seeing the organization come together as a whole in all of its diversity. Hollins School structures its school year around “culminating events.” These are school-wide celebrations and presentations of work that has taken place in the preceding several weeks around a shared theme. For example, several classes might be working on a particular geographical region or historical time period and threading that theme throughout the various subjects. Students develop projects around the themes, and then at the end of each section, the entire school spends the day exploring each other’s work. A number of teachers talked about the holistic perspective this gives them on what was going on in the various classrooms, and about how energizing it is to hear from so many students and teachers at one time.

### ***The Holistic Effect of Expressive Practices***

Perhaps the strangest and most revealing paradox about these organizations is that even as they nurture a diversity of expression they engender a deep sense of unity. When this sense of unity is strongest, people feel connected to and compassionate toward each other and connected to the organization as a whole. They experience a sense of shared meaning, despite the fact that that meaning has many different articulations.<sup>13</sup> Mona, a former Homestead coordinator, says that whenever she returns for a visit she immediately

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<sup>13</sup> In study of how a sense of community can be cultivated among temporary workers, Blatt and Camden (2007), show that rather than relying on traditional, formalized and centralized expressions of organizational unity (which may cultivate shared identity among longer-term workers), community among transient workers is dependent upon positive connections developed via informal interactions with co-workers. These “momentary acts of inclusion” (254) create bonds that are strong but that do not damage either the workers or the organization when people leave. Of the three organizations in this study, Food Cycle particularly relies on transient volunteers. Expressive orientation, which is a very unusual approach to volunteer engagement, may be one of the strongest reasons that Food Cycle has such unusual, consistent success with volunteers.

taps back into and is refreshed by the organization's "we-ness." Barbara at Hollins School has a similar feeling and describes the shift from an individual to a communal sense of responsibility for the school's development.

*There is no perfect school. We're not perfect. But it's the universal 'we.' It's not "Barbara, you do this well, but you need to improve on this or do this differently." It's not a mandate at the individual level. It is the universal 'we.'* (Hollins School-FG9: 10)

Many people at the three organizations talk about their growing sense of faith in the whole – an experience of being able to relax and let go of having to carry things by themselves while at the same time feeling collaboratively energized and empowered. They have come to trust that the organization as a community will ultimately pursue a fruitful, if not always easy or comfortable, course<sup>14</sup>. For most people, this is a novel experience. Gabrielle at Hollins School captures the seeming contradiction of feeling more intensely involved in her work while feeling less individually burdened with it:

*This is the very first year in my fifteen years of teaching that I haven't thought about the word 'accountability,' but I have probably taken it on the most. Does that make sense?* (Hollins School-FG7: 15)

Miri, the Hollins director of instruction, echoes Gabrielle's comment from her perspective as a formal leader:

*I've really learned the value of collaboration – really gotten it. I think before I was definitely more like, "I'm supposed to be smart. I'm supposed to be able to do this. I have to figure out how to muddle through, but somehow I'll do it." Now I've really learned the value of not thinking that way anymore, but of doing something as a team, putting stuff out together. You get more with twenty average minds working together than the lone genius can possibly do. I've come to recognize the deep truth of that: letting go of the ego, of needing to be perfect, of needing to be a people pleaser. The goal isn't necessarily to make everyone feel happy or good about themselves – that's not someone's role for somebody else – but to really be able to engage with people for the sake of what we're doing and for the kids. That's where I get the high, when we are engaging around the work and we are all doing that together. I'm better at that now.* (Hollins School-FG6: 26)

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, in a study of 96 state high schools, a shared *belief* by teachers in the *collective* efficacy of staff was shown to be a significant predictor of student performance in state-mandated testing (Goddard, LoGerfo, et al., 2004).

Miri also had some interesting things to say about the relationship between collaboration and authority. From the beginning of her work at the school, she has felt moved to make things as participatory and collaborative as possible. Every year, the school seems to find new ways to involve people in formal and informal decision-making processes. At the same time, Miri is experienced and has many strongly held beliefs about child development and pedagogy. She was worried that by ceding her authority to more participatory groups, she would not be as able to effectively wield the expertise she had around certain key issues. She has found exactly the opposite to be the case, however. When she has given up the power of direct decision-making, she has been more able to speak as herself, not as the director of instruction. This has left her feeling freer to articulate her positions passionately and to advocate for them strongly. Since she knows people are free to concur or not, she has to worry less about her passions being perceived as autocratic. And since people are not being forced to follow her opinions, they have tended to listen to her even more closely in areas where she is perceived to have particular wisdom. In a sense, her formal authority was a club that actually dulled her ability to deeply influence the school's policy in many areas, although of course it gave her an easier way to influence that policy superficially. She could change the letter of the law but without necessarily having persuaded people of its wisdom, leaving them perhaps to apply it with little passion or wisdom of their own.

Charles, the Food Cycle board president, found himself struggling at first with the organization's commitment to expressive reflection, particularly with respect to the ambitious undertaking of securing a new location for the organization. But after two years as president, he has come to appreciate and trust the organization's collaborative intelligence.

*There was discomfort at first – now I'm going with the flow. A year ago, I was not at all convinced about it. The process of looking for a building and raising the money and all of that was driving me insane, because I didn't think we were doing it properly. It seemed like it was taking us forever to get to a point where we were going to be ready to start looking for a building, and at the end we actually ended up having to buy the building too soon because the opportunity just came up, but in my mind I thought we should be ready for it much sooner, and so getting going and figuring out how we were going to do this in a way that made sense at Food*

*Cycle seemed to me interminable. But even though I was in the leadership role, the organization was smart enough to push back at me, so I couldn't push things forward, regardless of my role. So, in relation to how I'm feeling today, there's a little bit of that nervousness when I think of that lease expiring in six months . . . but there's a greater part of me that is optimistic that we will figure this out in a short amount of time. And that's based on previous experience with the organization. (Food Cycle-FG1: 14)*

As people come to experience a greater sense of unity and trust, they feel even freer to voice problems and alternative perspectives. The more they feel that they are pursuing work in common with others, the less they seem to worry about being judged individually. Their first instinct when confronted with an issue appears to be not to mask it, but to bring it out into the open so that other people can work on it too. Bob, who works for a nonprofit organization that develops customized after-school and weekend programs for a number of schools, including Hollins, feels this dynamic, even as someone whose contact with the school is limited:

*In other schools where I've worked, especially when I was a teacher, I always had a rule for myself that you never went to the administrator with a problem. You went to the administrator with a problem and at least one potential solution that you were just asking permission for. Like, "I'll need these resources; I already have a plan." It's interesting [that here] you can walk into Miri and Alex's closet and just have the problem and even say, "I don't need an answer today, but I want to broach this and when I come back up next month, why don't we discuss it some more." Hollins School-FG7: 23)*

Bob calls this kind of dialogue "comforting." Teacher's lives are filled with stress, he says, because they have to make "extremely important decisions in extremely compacted timeframes," and they know that the mistakes they make can resonate throughout the classroom culture they are working to create.

*To be able to set that whole dynamic aside and just have a legitimate dialogue . . . is very refreshing. And it sort of de-escalates what the teacher has to [dance] around, because it often means that those few mistakes you did make you can find real solutions for. (ibid: 24)*

Anna at Hollins feels similarly:

*[You can feel stressed because] you have got so many people depending on you, but at the same time, you have such a good support system that it really doesn't*

*affect you, and it doesn't stay long. You can always call on somebody to help you. It's never to the point where you feel like, "I'm not coming back tomorrow. I just can't deal with this anymore." It's like I breathe, and it passes. Because you know you can always go talk to somebody. You can share so much with everybody here. (Hollins School-FG4: 13)*

People can find this experience of trust and collaboration affecting other areas of their lives. After working at Food Cycle, Chelsea started a dance studio:

*I have an increased feeling of relaxation, trusting that things will present themselves. I have my own dance school now, and I notice from the learning that I've done at Food Cycle that I don't need to be in charge of everything and I'm more open. Like the belly dance teacher is proposing ideas for this and that, and I can see she's got the enthusiasm for it, so [I just say], "Go for it." So much has come back to me from experiencing this openness and trusting that other people have great ideas too, and that if I work with other people and stay a bit more open, then the combination of ideas is going to be greater than one person having their perfect little world, you know. (Food Cycle-FG18: 20)*

Baron at Hollins School talks about openness and letting go of control in his personal relationships:

*I've learned that I can engage in healthy meaningful relationships even if they aren't always going to go my way. I've learned to lessen control over my life with this job, to be a little less controlling in my relationships and take them for the joy and good that they give me, even if it's not what I initially wanted, but to see that in the end it's for my greater good. (Hollins School-FG2: 13)*

The sense of confidence in the whole that people have doesn't come from a perfectionist vision in which everyone is assumed to be working at their highest levels at all times. Quite the opposite, it comes from an appreciation for cycle and flow in which people complement each other's rhythms. The image is not a well-oiled machine, with every part playing its role. It is more akin to a living, reciprocal ecology in which the temporary weakness or decay of one is borne up by the temporary strength or growth of another. Here is how Alex sees such an ecology at Hollins School:

*I think we have sort of realized over the last four years that everybody kind of has their time. And there are times when people need to step out for five minutes and catch their breath when somebody just said something that really pissed them off. And then people have their six months where they are really struggling, and we*

*all collectively share that burden. Because sometimes it really sucks, and sometimes you have somebody who is coming in perpetually late, or they are suffering from something personal – depression or something that you know is going on in life that is terrible. And they are just not on their game for a long period of time and it really, really, really sucks. But I think my worldview is that everybody is going to have their time, that shit happens to everybody. Somebody is going to need something at some point, and sometime it's going to be me, and sometimes it has been me. So when those days happen when you get six calls in the morning and this many people are going to be out and this person's running late and someone's parent died and someone is depressed, and someone else had diarrhea all night, you have to give them their moment. You have to give them their time, whether it's five minutes or five months. (Hollins School-FG4: 16)*

Amar at Food Cycle takes a similar view.

*Collaboration here is at a very deep level – deep in the sense that if you don't have an idea right now, if you are just not in it, and you just let everybody sort of pick up and carry you, your time will come. All of a sudden something will happen, just by listening. There's a power in listening to people and not feeling as if you have to be so engaged, or as if, "I'm not engaged right now, so I'm not being fully, one hundred percent Amar." [Instead], you just let it find its way on its own – living life on life's terms as opposed to your terms. And you learn so much that way, and there is no pressure on you. And then you do shine when you need to shine, and you learn to let go of that as well. I think this place is very good on the whole cycle of creation, maintenance, and destruction. You learn that in such a big way here. (Food Cycle-FG9: 21)*

The experience of wholeness in these organizations is not static. It is rooted in an understanding of the way that human beings move, develop, flourish, fail, and recover through time.

## **Coherence**

This is how Gretchen defines the purpose of Homestead: "I think the purpose is to provide an opportunity to people [with mental illness] who haven't had the opportunity before to be fully engaged in life and the community and friendships" (Homestead-FG1: 14). And here are some quotes from people (including Gretchen) describing their experiences at Homestead:

*It is the first time in my life that I'm doing social life. I was always working. I worked for 40-something years, and always with duty and things to do. [Here] we*

*share, we talk about what is going on and what we're going to do, we go for a coffee, a sweet. I gain weight with this. For the first time in my life I'm engaged in full-time social activity. (Carlos: Homstead-FG1: 11)*

*Just being here is quite comforting. I'm able to be part of a community organization. Even going out many times during the year and being able to do that with no fees at all, and it is all covered and you're enjoying yourself as well. (William: Homstead-FG1: 8)*

*Before [I came here], I slept all the time. After I ate, I went to bed. I slept all the time. Right now, I go out. I go to the library and go out to eat. There are outings. We know a lot of people. We talk a lot . . . It gives me a chance to socialize . . . I enjoy my life much better than before. (Arlen: Homstead-FG1: 2)*

*I know that when I go to (Homstead's) camp every September, with all of the fantastic people, with the connections I make with people, I'm more at ease and more relaxed there than I am pretty much anywhere. They are very accepting. (Gretchen: Homstead-FG1: 4)*

The above quotes all support the idea that one of the purposes of Homstead is to provide meaningful social life and community. The language in each quote is similar. What is striking is that Carlos is a volunteer, William and Arlen are residents, and Gretchen is a coordinator on staff. I mentioned in Chapter 5 that transboundary work around organizational purpose included shifting away from the idea that one group of people (staff and volunteers) is serving another group of people (clients) and toward the idea that all of the people involved in the organization are being served. I described this pattern as shifting from a purpose vector to a purpose field. And the field-based view is implicit in the idea of expressive practices. But the quotes above illustrate something more precise that I found in all three organizations. It's not simply that the organizations are benefiting everyone involved, it's that they are benefiting everyone involved in fundamentally *the same way*.

There is a deep coherence running through the experiences of everyone who encounters these organizations. At Homstead, staff don't benefit only by having good jobs, or developing professionally, or even feeling happy that they are able to help someone. They do benefit in all of these ways, to be sure, but at a deeper level, they are receiving the gift of authentic community – a gift that is precisely the same thing the organization

was created for with respect to residents struggling with mental illness. At all three organizations I heard people describing what the organization was giving to others (residents, students, clients, etc.) and what the organization was giving to themselves in essentially the same terms. I also frequently heard people in different roles and in different dialogue groups echo each other when talking about what they got out of their organizational experiences. Despite the diversity of roles, the parallels in language were often dramatic.

For example, I met with a group of fourth grade students at Hollins School. One of the things they emphasized was the difference between how Hollins teachers talk respectfully to students and how teachers in the neighboring elementary school that shares the building with Hollins often shout at their students in the hallways. Here is how Terrell describes what he appreciates about his interactions with his teachers:

*When we do things wrong sometimes, or things we shouldn't be doing, the teachers don't [yell] "What'd you do that for?!" and stuff like that. They say, "Could you not do that again?" And it just feels like, hey, I made a mistake. And you just fix it. (Hollins School-FG5: 2)*

And here is how Baron, a teaching aide, describes, in an entirely separate conversation, what he appreciates about school administrators:

*You can function in your daily routine at work, knowing that someone is not breathing over your shoulder and saying you are doing this wrong. And if there is something wrong, Miri is going to let you know about it, but she is not going to talk down to you about it. She is going to talk to you as a professional, not like an army boss: "Do this! Do this!" [That's the] kind of experience I had with my old jobs. (Hollins School-FG1: 15)*

In General, Hollins staff describe the school's purpose as helping students develop their curiosity, their ability to direct their own learning, and their sense of community, compassion, and respect toward others. When staff describe their own experiences at the school, they touch on similar themes. Here are two passages about learning, one referring to students and one to staff.

*We want to help kids to become lifelong learners, you know, to feel so inspired by what they are learning and able to find information when they want to pursue*

*interests and passions, and know how to go about doing, and know that they can do it. (Heidi, Teacher: Hollins School-FG 3: 25)*

*As a school, I think we do a lot of research. Some stuff Miri will share or recommend reading or do a professional development on, but I think people on their own [do a lot, as well] . . . [People] get so excited about some strategy and share it with the rest of us . . . I think something special about our school is that we have the flexibility to try new things and change things all the time. (Andrea, Teacher: Hollins School-FG 3: 8)*

At Food Cycle, people emphasize the organization's role in building community and decreasing social isolation for people living with a loss of autonomy. Ostensibly, this work is aimed at clients, but many staff and volunteers talk about ways in which Food Cycle has helped *them* become more connected and less isolated. This is Callie, a volunteer, describing an experience that is widely shared at Food Cycle:

*When I started volunteering here, I'd been in the city for almost two years, and I hadn't found a sense of community. I found that here . . . With the people who are here and [through] my interactions with them I often feel self-validated, and I see things in them I really respect and that I think are really admirable. To see that in a group of people in one place is a really big deal for me . . . And it's made me realize that if in the future I move to a new area and at first I feel very discouraged again about not having a support network of friends, I don't think I'll stay discouraged. I think I'll have more faith that it is probably somewhere around the corner, but I just haven't found it yet. Because it took some time for me to walk through the door here, but when I did, I realized it was here all along. (Food Cycle-FG3: 12)*

At both Food Cycle and Hollins School, not only are there strong parallels between the experiences of various constituencies, but people have become increasingly and explicitly aware of these parallels. (This is less true at Homestead, where the parallels are still largely tacit.)

*We're just not just teaching students how to understand what their quality world is and what their highest needs are. It's that for the faculty too. It has to be that alive. The purpose of this place is self-awareness so that vital questions are asked and anyone who comes through the door, whether student, faculty, or other, feels the quality of their life enhanced. (Bronwyn, Teacher: Hollins School-FG1: 22)*

*[This place is about] developing and nurturing a sense of curiosity, but it's also about how we work with one another and how we hope our kids will work with one another with empathy, caring, and sensitivity. I think the ultimate purpose is for our students to develop those things, but I think that along the way we want that for all the people who are involved, whether its staff or families. You want that to kind of permeate the community as well. (Vandana, Teacher: Hollins School-FG2: 13)*

*I think breaking isolation is really important, giving that little bit of contact with people and fostering a sense of community, not only with the clients but also the volunteers and staff. (Beth, Volunteer: Food Cycle-FG4: 27)*

*Food Cycle nourishes twice. It nourishes everyone that works on the meals and that works here on the staff – we get this spiritual or some sort of soul nourishment. And then we actually make food that nourishes people in a physical way. It's really double. And we don't really know what it's doing to us, you know, on either end. We don't really know what that nourishment is – what kinds of vitamins or minerals we're getting from Food Cycle that are also in the food for people that might otherwise be eating bread and toast. (Ella, Staff: Food Cycle-FG9: 26)*

Coherence can be thought of as a consistency not of action but of interaction. It is the relationships in these organizations that are expressing and reproducing the organization's deepest purposes. What is being carried and shared is not just a service; it is a relational experience. Despite their many-colored expressions, these experiences seem to be remarkably reliable and resilient. One of the parents at Hollins School told me that at her daughter's previous school – a relatively well-off suburban school – how positive your child's time was at that school depended mostly on which teacher the child had. There was a great degree of variability. The parent marveled at how that didn't seem to be the case at Hollins; regardless of the specific teacher involved, most students seemed to be having genuinely positive and healthy experiences. I found this coherence to be striking and tangible at all three study sites.

### ***Expression and Engagement***

It's clear that expressive practices in which people give voice to the organization in diverse and individualized ways also contribute to a sense of connection and wholeness. At these three organizations experiential meanings have come to be shared so deeply that

there is a powerful coherence in how people experience organizational interactions, even though those interactions are often quite different in terms of behavior and language. But why should this be so? Why should diversity contribute to unity and vice-versa? Returning to the engagement literature helps make the answer to this question clearer.

The four dynamics of engagement – attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning – can be grouped into two broader categories. Attunement and growth have largely do to with the individual as a unique self. Attunement involves individual alignment with role and task challenges, which results in feelings of vitality, attentiveness, and self-efficacy. Growth involves the development of individual yearnings, curiosities, and capacities. Through attunement and growth, the individual becomes increasingly individuated, or, in Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) terms, experiences 'differentiation.' "Differentiation implies a movement toward uniqueness, toward separating oneself from others" (41).

Mutuality and meaning, on the other hand, have largely to do with the individual's participation in a greater whole. Mutuality involves an empathic expansion of the self in which one feels attentive and connected to others. Meaning involves one's relationships to social, moral, and/or spiritual systems of significance. Through mutuality and meaning, one experiences increasing 'integration.' "Integration refers to . . . a union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self" (ibid).

Csikszentmihalyi frames differentiation and integration as essentially separate processes, both of which are critical to the development of a complex self and both of which can be catalyzed by flow experiences. The healthy, complex, engaged self achieves an ongoing balance between differentiation and integration. But in the expressive practices above, differentiation and integration seem to be reinforcing each other. The more individually people come to express the organization through their various interactions, the more integrated with each other and with the organization as a whole they seem to feel. The more people feel integrated with each other and the organization, the more they feel free to express the organization in individually differentiated ways. In the organizational context we are exploring here (which is different from the individually focused

developmental lens that Csikszentmihalyi is using), differentiation and integration form a spiral.

We can understand this spiral more clearly if we briefly consider the relationship between agency and engagement. Bandura (2001) defines agency as “making things happen” via intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. Spretizer et al. (2005) build off this work to show that certain “agentic” behaviors contribute to “thriving” at work. They define thriving as an experience of vitality and learning (which means we can see it here as a component of engagement) and associate it with three agentic behaviors:

1. ‘Task focus’ involves focused attention on work. It has parallels with attunement.
2. ‘Exploration’ involves experimentation and growth.
3. ‘Heedful relating’ involves understanding how one’s own behaviors relate to the behaviors of others with respect to the larger workplace system. It can be thought of as a narrowly defined version of mutuality and meaning.

The type of agency comprising these three behaviors creates an experience of thriving by generating a variety of resources including relational resources, which are ‘high quality connections’ among people (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). High Quality Connections are resilient, mutual connections that lead to an experience of “vitality and aliveness” and “positive regard” (the feeling of being known or loved). Conversely, the mutuality inherent in High Quality Connections facilitates self-discovery and growth as the positive regard of others leads to greater awareness and expression of one’s own strengths (Roberts, 2007) and ultimately to greater authenticity (Kahn, 2007).

Putting these concepts together, being free to express oneself as an agent (i.e., to engage in intentional, self-guided behavior) involves attentiveness, personal growth, and a heedfulness of larger relational and system connections<sup>15</sup>. As Kahn (Kahn, 1992) puts it,

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<sup>15</sup> Le and Levenson (2005) argue that to understand the connection between individualism, self-transcendence, and “mature love,” it is necessary to distinguish between vertical individualism and

“People who are present and authentic in their roles help to create shared understandings of their systems that are equally authentic and responsive to change and growth” (331).

We can therefore think of the differentiation/integration spiral catalyzed by engagement as working something like this: As people act in individualized ways that lead them to grow and differentiate, they become more complex. This complexity provokes a search for still wider sets of experiences and relationships in order to keep growing, thereby increasing one’s *contact with* and *understanding of* others in the system. This complexity also increases a person’s *empathic richness* by offering a greater number of possible points of connection and a more nuanced ability to express oneself. Increased contact, understanding, and empathy then create a higher degree of integration with others and with the system as a whole. This higher degree of integration, in turn, offers a wider field for self-development, as well as a heightened feeling of psychological safety (Kahn, 1990), which together lead to a greater opportunity for and willingness to pursue individual growth (i.e., differentiation). The paradox of expressive practices leading to a greater sense of unity and shared meaning turns out to be no paradox at all.

Bouwen and Steyaert’s (1999) lovely metaphor of polyphony offers a fitting way to end this chapter. They are writing about interaction at the global level across fierce national and cultural boundaries, but the metaphor works intra-organizationally as well:

*Polyphony is a metaphor from the oldest musical repertoires . . . [It] literally means “multivoicedness.” Two or more independent but organically related voice parts sound against one another. Traditional compositions consist of a melodic line and an accompaniment. In a polyphonic partiture, we find multiple melodic lines, and every line could, in theory, be performed separately. But by performing all of these lines simultaneously, the result is a rich and complex musical totality. Next to the independent horizontal lines, vertical lines emerge that also form a totality. In this way, a network of horizontal and vertical lines is created in which every voice is meaningful on its own but, at the same time, gains meaning in relation to the other voices . . . [Polyphony] suggests an organizing process that*

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horizontal individualism. Vertical individualism is competitive. Self-development comes at the expense of others, and therefore inhibits self-transcendence and mature love. Horizontal individualism, closely related to Maslow’s concepts of growth and self-actualization, involves the development of “a self that is unique and self-reliant without competition and inequality” (447). Horizontal individualism may foster self-transcendence and mature love.

*sustains the development of multiple (horizontal) voices instead of a dominant voice that creates the rest of the world to its own likeness. Every voice has its own melody and rhythm. But the vertical dimension suggests that these voices are neither apart nor loosely coupled . . . Every voice needs the other voices for its own identity. (309-310)*

## **Toward a Theory of Positive Institutional Work**

In August 2005, just a few weeks before Hollins School was to open its doors for the first time, the staff gathered to discuss a seemingly mundane question: What form of address should students use with teachers? Miri, the director of instruction, had suggested the topic, because there was growing disagreement among staff, and the “name issue” threatened to become quite contentious. Some staff strongly favored using last names (i.e., Ms. Smith). Others were more comfortable with the informal atmosphere created by using first names (i.e., Mary). Still others thought the best balance between respect and informality was struck by the regional custom of using first names with an honorific (i.e., Ms. Mary). An experienced consultant who was working with the school felt that such minor details were worth no more than ten minutes of anyone’s time – the school was brand new, after all, and had a thousand issues to work out before the students arrived at the end of the month. The consultant encouraged Miri and Alex, the executive director, simply to make the decision themselves and move on. Miri and Alex weren’t comfortable with this approach, however, so as part of a daylong professional development workshop, they convened a conversation around the topic.

As the conversation began, each person seemed to understand her own position clearly. Almost everyone in the room thought this was a simple affair: how students addressed teachers was a matter of respect. But the room grew troubled as the divergent ways in which various people understood ‘respect’ became apparent. Voices shook. Eyes reddened. Some people began to shut down. Others grew louder. One person described with reverence the importance in her culture of speaking to elders with due formality. Another couldn’t see why this was such a big issue. The children she knew simply called her Ms. Jenny, and that was how she liked it. A third broke into tears as she talked about how much her first name meant to her and how often it had been mispronounced. In order for her to relate to a child in an authentic way, she said, it was important to her that the child use her first name. For an hour or so people simply shared their feelings and histories. On the surface, the conversation seemed to be going in circles, but people

gamely tried to stay with it and, despite some frustration, eventually things took a gentler and more open-minded tone.

A major shift in the conversation occurred when someone wondered if all the teachers and staff really needed to be addressed in the same way. What if the kids just called the adults whatever they individually wanted to be called? This simple suggestion hadn't occurred to anyone before the conversation began. No one had ever been in a school environment that did not have a formal policy or a strong cultural tradition dictating how staff were to be addressed. Some teachers worried that taking an eclectic approach like this would confuse the kids. Wasn't one of the goals of the school to teach children how to interact in society in a respectful, appropriate, and consistent way? Others worried about how people outside of the organization might react. Wouldn't the school look unprofessional and disorganized to school system officials? What if parents grew upset hearing their children use modes of address that they themselves might consider disrespectful?

These questions triggered a deeper conversation about the meaning of 'respect.' People obviously had different interpretations of the behaviors and words associated with respect, but the underlying experience they were after – the feeling of interacting with someone respectfully – was essentially the same for everyone, and they all valued that experience. Eventually the group did decide to take the unusual step of letting each staff member decide for herself. They were all free to let students know what they preferred to be called, and nameplates for office doors would be ordered accordingly. Though some people weren't particularly enamored of this solution, everyone agreed that asking children to consider someone's personal preferences when addressing them was, in fact, a powerful and portable lesson in respect. And for the moment, everyone would just have to trust that however this practice initially struck outsiders, parents and officials would end up appreciating the school's overall aura of professionalism.

The story of this conversation about names is an engagement story:

- *Transboundary work practices* were readily apparent. The group challenged the strict role boundaries that define how teachers and administrators are supposed to present themselves in order to reinforce their positions and their expertise with respect to students and the outside world. Task boundaries relaxed, as teachers were further freed to shape the manner of their own interactions with students (classroom department is a central task component for a teacher), rather than have that aspect of their work centrally controlled. The sharp group boundary between staff and students was softened. And the purpose boundaries of the school were interrogated in a number of ways: Was respect an important part of the school's purpose? What was the school's role in teaching respect to students? What did respect really mean? In what ways was the school responsible for meeting the desires of parents and officials? How was an emphasis on respect to be extended to teachers and administrators so that they themselves *felt* respected (as opposed to feeling like the instruments used to deliver abstract respect lessons)?
- The conversation was replete with *inscaping practices*. As people began sharing their stories, content shifted from, "This is what we should do, and here's why," to, "This is how I feel about this, and here are the experiences I've had that contribute to that feeling." They expressed strong emotions and ideas, listened to each other with appreciation, and, as conflicts occurred, tried to understand each other's perspectives and intentions as fully as they were able.
- *Expressive practices* were embedded in the entire process. The initial decision to convene the conversation rather than move forward by executive fiat ensured that multiple perspectives would interact. The final decision to let every staff member decide for herself allowed each person to express the school (to students, parents, and officials) in her own way, reinforcing the idea that the school's overall wholeness was best accessed in rich, multi-vocal ways.

The decision to let one person be "Mary" and another be "Mr. Jones" might seem straightforward, but it had many implications and ran sharply counter to prevailing practices in similar schools. It's also important to recognize that none of the above

engagement practices was absolute. Boundaries weren't erased; they were explored, reinterpreted, and extended or softened. The conversation didn't revolve entirely around the inner experiences of its participants, but it made room for those experiences. Not all possible voices (i.e., students, parents, officials) were involved in the ultimate expression of the decision, but many voices were.

The story of this conversation about names is also an institutional story. People's strong initial reactions and feelings were not simply idiosyncratic responses based on their personalities. They were part of broader institutionalized patterns: professional practices associated with the sorts of schools the staff had taught or been trained in and adulthood and childhood practices associated with particular geographical regions, cultures, and social classes. The change in practice that the school then instituted was a new institutional pattern. Four years later, adults are still called by whatever name they choose to be. The nameplates on the doors are still varied in form. This diversity now passes without much comment or concern. It is taken for granted.

In the rest of this chapter, I will argue that not only the Hollins School naming conversation, but all the engagement practices I've explored in the preceding three chapters are examples of positive institutional work. The practices themselves have become institutionalized within the three organizations. But more importantly, the practice categories I've developed illuminate several possible general features of positive institutional work that differentiate it from the kind of institutional work that is typically portrayed in the literature. These features address my second research question and begin to fill the gaps in the neoinstitutional literature outlined in the literature review in Chapter 2. To begin, I will briefly review the concept of positive institutional work. Drawing on the literature and my fieldwork, I will then explore three features of positive institutional work: aspirational motivation, experiential legitimacy, and dialogical agency. Each of these three features is related to one of the practice categories I explored in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

### **Positive Institutional Work**

‘Institutional work’ is “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006: 215). Institutional work, then, is intentional in at least some respects and is framed in terms of practices (ongoing, knowledgeable, patterns of interaction) rather than processes (ibid). Unlike earlier conceptualizations of institutional agency (e.g., institutional strategy and institutional entrepreneurship), institutional work is understood to include the intentional maintenance of existing institutions as well as creation and disruption (Ibid; Emirbayer, 1997).

I’ve defined ‘positive’ in the emerging Positive Organizational Scholarship tradition as a quality in which a subjectively fulfilling inner experience is connected to broader external systems of social, moral, or spiritual meaning. In turn, I’ve defined ‘positive institutional work’ as intentional practices undertaken to create and maintain institutional patterns that are experienced as intrinsically fulfilling and extrinsically meaningful and to disrupt institutional patterns that are not so experienced.

As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2, most neoinstitutional scholars have focused on the external, observable dimensions of institutionalized practices, making the inclusion of interior subjective states in the discussion of practices seem theoretically problematic. But the theoretical underpinnings of neoinstitutional theory are based on an understanding of social practices as intersubjective. To recap:

- As an intersubjective phenomenon, a practice includes both objective and subjective dimensions.
- The subjective dimension of a practice – our internal experience of it – is cognitive, affective, and physical.
- The objective and subjective dimensions of a practice are mutually constitutive. Neither one causes the other, nor does either take temporal precedence.

To understand positive institutional work, both for what it reveals about institutions in general and for how it might differ from more widely studied forms of institutional work, we have to take the subjective dimension of practice seriously. Or more precisely, we have to take the experiential quality – the interaction between the subjective and objective dimensions – of practice seriously. Research Question 2 of this study is

**R2:** What is the nature of the positive institutional work that allows [engagement] practices to be sustained across space and time?

The three sub-questions I identified from gaps in the neoinstitutional literature are:

R2a: *Motivation*. How does positively motivated institutional work differ from protectively motivated institutional work?

R2b: *Legitimacy*. How is the inner, subjective dimension of positive practices incorporated into evaluations of legitimacy?

R2c: *Agency*. How is intention brought to bear on positive institutional work?

I now take up each sub-question in turn, but before I do so, I want to emphasize two things. First, the claims I am making about positive institutional work are in no way meant to be definitive. This is an exploratory study, based on three small organizations. It is meant merely to open up some questions that I believe are important but neglected and to offer a provisional framework for future theoretical development and empirical research. Second, the features of positive institutional work that I describe are exclusive neither in theory nor in fact from features more typically associated with institutional work. In all three study sites, those traditional features exist, sometimes in parallel and sometimes in opposition to the positive alternatives I explore. I don't mean my focus on positive institutional work to imply otherwise.

### **Aspirational Motivation**

Any full theory of institutionalization must rest on a theory of motivation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). What are the underlying psychological factors that motivate the types of social processes that constitute institutions? Few neoinstitutional scholars address this

question explicitly, but insofar as those scholars are theorizing in the interactionist, social constructionist tradition (Scott, 2001), they are working implicitly from theories of motivation that are rooted in anxiety (See Goffman, 1959; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). Giddens (1984) sees anxiety as the foundational motivation of human conduct, and argues that social structuring is driven by the need for ontological security. From this perspective, institutions arise to reduce psychological uncertainty more than to fulfill specific social functions (though these two things are not mutually exclusive – see for example Colomy’s (1998) attempt to integrate neoinstitutional and neofunctionalist perspectives). This view of institutional reproduction suggests that imitation (or mimesis) is a basic response in the face of uncertainty (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Haveman, 1993).

We can think of this perspective on institutions as defensive or ‘protective.’ In social settings, anxiety provokes a variety of psychosocial defenses (Allcorn, 1995). A protective stance is fundamentally a negative stance. I use ‘negative’ here not in the normative sense, but simply to refer to a stance focused on the avoidance of something rather than the seeking of something. Anxiety causes us to protect ourselves from something we don’t want – something seen as a threat. The foundational threat here is uncertainty. We talk about ‘uncertainty reduction;’ we don’t tend to talk about ‘certainty increase.’ Uncertainty is reduced by fixing actions and relationships into predictable, observable patterns.

The primary institutional mechanism, then, for uncertainty reduction is the *boundary* – a routine, rule, schema, or script that divides types of behaviors and modes of relationship that are appropriate from those that are not (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Jepperson, 1991; Oliver, 1991; Barley and Tolbert, 1997; Colomy, 1998). Despite the fact that ‘action’ can be understood as a subjective/objective duality, neoinstitutional scholars have tended to privilege objective behaviors and texts, focusing on how social boundaries give shape to and define what we may expect to see and how we will be expected to behave in a given social context. Boundaries create a consistency and predictability in the *forms* (objective, observable parameters) of social

encounters, thereby reducing psychological insecurity. When these forms are breached, our sense of everyday reality as stable, knowable, manageable, and objective is shaken (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Boundaries can be seen as outcomes of negative emotional states like anxiety. The “broaden-and-build theory” of affect posits that negative emotions narrow thinking and behavior, focusing one in on protective, or “life-preserving,” actions, whereas positive emotions broaden thinking and behavior, “facilitating generativity and behavioral flexibility” (Frederickson and Losada, 2005: 679). The flexibility associated with positive affect suggests that aspiration, insofar as it is rooted in positive emotions, will lead away from boundary rigidity and toward the kinds of transboundary practices described in Chapter 5.

Returning to the Hollins School conversation about names, protectively motivated institutional work would presumably have had different results. In the face of tremendous uncertainty (they were starting a new school after all), staff could simply have conformed to prevailing institutional norms in the school system, reinforcing the various boundaries associated with existing conventions of teacher/administrator address. They could also have given weight to the concerns raised about the perceptions of powerful external agents (i.e., parents and school system officials), using superficial conformity to buffer the organization from closer inspection (See Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In this sense, the transboundary work enacted in that conversation reflects a process of deinstitutionalization, which involves the disruption of existing institutional boundaries (Oliver, 1992).

On the other hand, the conversation laid the ground for a new, institutionalized practice within the organization, the practice of having each staff person choose her own mode of address. The conversation wasn’t framed as an attack on existing practices in other schools. No one criticized those practices as such, nor did anyone assert a need for Hollins School to be consciously different. Instead, people struggled to discover a way of relating to students that would invoke the sort of positive, respectful experience that they all agreed was important. Note that the new practice that began to emerge that day was not based only on consistent, *observable* behavior. A teacher choosing her own name is

certainly an observable behavior, but the practice was anchored in the subjective understanding of that behavior. That is, it would be a consistent evolution of that same practice if at some later point people found themselves not feeling respected by choosing their own names and raised new boundary challenges. Perhaps someone would feel that a collective sense of respect was what was important and would be better fostered by a common approach to names, or that each student should be allowed to address the teacher in whatever form the student was most comfortable with. If someone felt this way, presumably a new round of dialogue would occur. From an objective, behavioral point of view, these alternatives would constitute different practices. But such a point of view seems to me to be a misreading of the practice in this case. That is, the practice in question is not simply allowing teachers to choose their own names. *It is a sustained and ongoing inquiry into the relationship between objective forms of address and subjective experience of those forms.* The practice is essentially a transboundary practice, and it opens the door to a multiplicity of behaviors.

As typically described, new institutionalization processes are often preceded by disruptive work (which is essentially transboundary work) with respect to existing practices, but then new practices emerge that establish observable, protective boundaries of their own, restoring behavioral predictability to the social system and supposedly reducing ontological anxiety. In the case of the new Hollins practice, however, from the perspective of observable form, the school environment was made more unpredictable. The consistency that made the ensuing practice a practice now lay not in the form of interaction, but in the relationship between form and subjective experience. In a sense, the form of address was made unstable so that the underlying experience would be stable. This might seem like a minor issue – surely our psychological security systems can handle discrepancies in how teachers and administrators are addressed, given that the practice is still anchored in an intelligible, stable (if boundary-less) rule of sorts. But it wasn't a minor issue in the minds of the staff. The idea that they would go by different forms of address *did* cause substantial personal anxiety in a number of people that day. And they also worried that the underlying, experiential rule would be confusing to students: the lack of observable consistency wouldn't make sense to them, and might

interfere with their social development. Thus the staff's own initial reactions bear out what neoinstitutional scholars claim about the relationship between predictable forms of behavior and anxiety reduction. That the staff were able to move beyond this anxiety to explore a transboundary-based practice suggests that another sort of motivation was also at work.

This small issue of staff names is not an isolated practice of course. As I showed in Chapter 5, transboundary work of many sorts is ongoing at all three organizations. And as boundaries are challenged, they are not simply replaced with new, equally fixed boundaries. The overall "boundedness" of the organizations, if you will, is lessened. Thus, behavioral and relational uncertainty are increased. It is not a particular set of boundaries that is being institutionally maintained here. It is transboundary work itself, something we typically only associate with deinstitutionalization. We can draw a parallel here between transboundary work and Argyris's description of "double loop" learning (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Argyris, 1990). Single loop learning is learning that takes for granted a system's fundamental contextual assumptions and works to find solutions to problems based on those assumptions. Double loop learning involves inquiry into the contextual assumptions themselves. Argyris associates single loop learning with the kind of automatic reenactment of relational patterns that neoinstitutional theorists would recognize as institutional. He argues that single loop systems are essentially defensive, seeking to protect existing patterns, whether they are successful or not. Social relationships in single loop systems actively discourage inquiry into underlying assumptions, causes, and areas of vulnerability, seeking above all to protect people from embarrassment and threat. Since transboundary work, on the other hand, involves precisely such inquiry into assumptions, we can think of it as a double loop process. Its chief dynamic is not defense or protection; it is exploration.

Motivation here, then, is best categorized not as protective but as aspirational. It is not anxiety-based. People are searching for ways to enact a desired state rather than trying to

protect themselves against an undesired state<sup>16</sup>. The focus is not on the absence of threat but on the presence of something positive. Positive and negative states are not simply two ends of one continuum. You don't produce positive states like engagement by removing negative states like disengagement<sup>17</sup> (Roberts, 2006). A 'regulatory focus' view of motivation suggests that self-regulation related to security needs ('prevention') focuses on avoiding negative outcomes, that self-regulation related to nurturance needs ('promotion') focuses on approaching positive outcomes, and that these are two fundamentally different dynamics (Higgins, 1997).<sup>18</sup> (Note that none of this is meant to imply that there are two kinds of humans – those who are protectively motivated and those who are aspirationally motivated. Presumably all humans are capable of both types of motivation. The question then becomes which motivational stance is being enabled, either by the individual herself or by the institutional context in which she is embedded.)

Since positive states like engagement are experiential, they are unlikely to be linearly associated with specific forms of external behavior (which would then need defending). Recall that I have defined 'positive,' from the POS tradition, as a quality that combines subjective fulfillment with broader, shared meaning systems. Insofar as positive states have a subjective dimension, they can never be fully predicted. Humans are too complex and too variable. Furthermore, *shared* positive states like organizational engagement, which are intersubjective, are even more complex. As our fulfilling experiences come into contact, and perhaps conflict, with each other, we have to search out new ways to reconcile those experiences. As we interact with broader meaning systems, seeking to

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<sup>16</sup> Cf the focus in Appreciative Inquiry on moving from a problem-solving approach in organization development to an appreciative, exploratory approach (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Lest this seem like merely a semantic distinction, consider the desire for security. One could take a protective, anxiety-based approach to security by working to mitigate threats, in which case the focus is on those threats. Or one could take an aspirational, approach by cultivating skills, confidence, knowledge, etc., in which case the focus is on the desired state of peacefulness or security, not on the absence of threats to that desired state. The first perspective is defensive; the second is developmental or creative.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Walter and Bruch (2008): "Scholars have found the antecedents and consequences of positive and negative affective states to be non-parallel and asymmetrical, suggesting that positive and negative affective dynamics will follow fundamentally different patterns. Similarly, Grant and Campbell (2007) found that perceived antisocial and prosocial impacts operate along different continua. See also Herzberg's (1966) motivation-hygiene theory.

understand our own relationships to overarching values and purposes, the situation becomes more unpredictable still.

*The symmetry between objective and subjective reality is never a static, once-for-all state. It must always be produced and reproduced in actu. In other words, the relationship between the individual and the objective social world is like an ongoing balancing act. (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 134)*

In other words, experiential states embedded in complex intersubjective contexts cannot be reproduced via a set of fixed boundaries around things like roles, tasks, groups, and purposes. They can only be reproduced via ongoing inquiry into existing boundaries.

*Proposition 1:* Positive institutional work will be driven by aspirational motivations rather than protective motivations and will therefore involve reproduction through transboundary work rather than through boundary work.

### **Experiential Legitimacy**

If positive institutional work revolves around an ongoing inquiry into the contextual relationship between form and experience, how is that inquiry to be evaluated? What is the feedback mechanism through which people assess the appropriateness of a given practice? In other words, how is legitimacy defined?

Legitimacy is a shared, implicit or explicit definition of what constitutes appropriate interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; Barley and Tolbert, 1997). More precisely, legitimacy is the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995: 574). Scott (2001) defines three basic “pillars” or mechanisms for distinguishing legitimate practices from illegitimate ones:

1. Regulative mechanisms are explicitly encoded laws and policies enforced by legal rewards and sanctions.
2. Normative mechanisms are moral frameworks that define valued ends and appropriate means for pursuing those ends. Normative mechanisms are enforced through moral discourse and social-psychological rewards and sanctions.

3. Cultural-cognitive mechanisms are taken for granted beliefs about the nature of reality. They are not enforced, exactly, since their reproduction is built into the ways that people understand everyday life. They do not need to be framed in terms of legal requirements or moral goods. It is simply difficult for people to conceive of alternatives. Cultural-cognitive frames take on the flavor of natural law even though they are, in fact, social constructions.

Scott's mechanisms may be debated. Some scholars associate legitimacy primarily with normative appropriateness (e.g., Giddens, 1984). Others, like Zucker (1977), argue that the defining feature of neoinstitutional perspectives is that regulatory and normative legitimacy *become* increasingly cognitive the more a practice is institutionalized. What institutional theorists have in common, however, is that they tend to see legitimacy in symbolic terms (see, e.g., Elsbach, 1994; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). That is, external forms of behavior and language are evaluated based on *the meanings they represent*, no matter whether what they represent is a regulatory, normative, or cognitive construct. For example, a marriage ceremony may be seen as legitimate because it signals conformance to legal standards (regulatory), because it signals a religious or social good like love or commitment (normative), and/or because it represents "reality" – i.e., "All my friends get married; that's just what people do . . ." – (cognitive). It is not the experience of the people involved in the ceremony that is evaluated for legitimacy. It is what the ceremony represents. Legitimacy from this perspective is a "symbolic value to be displayed in a manner such that it is visible to outsiders" (Scott, 2001: 59).<sup>19</sup>

In the case of positive institutional work, symbolic legitimacy obviously cannot be the dominant mode of evaluation. If positive phenomena involve a certain way of experiencing things subjectively, then to be sustained, they will have to be evaluated with respect to subjective experience. The following example may make the distinction between symbolic and experiential legitimacy clearer. Suppose we are interested in inclusiveness and participation in an organization. We want everyone to have a voice and

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<sup>19</sup> This is not to imply that the three pillars can't also be experientially validated. Any of the three pillars can be symbolically *or* experientially validated. It's simply that there is no discussion of the latter possibility in the neoinstitutional literature.

to play a meaningful part in the organizational community. We might eventually (consciously or otherwise) develop the practice of going around the room in a meeting and hearing from each person in turn. Insofar as we focus on the form of interaction – going around the room – we would be sustaining the objective dimension of this practice via symbolic legitimacy. Hearing from each person in the room would signal that we are enacting ‘participation’ as a meaning, as a concept. If I notice that we have skipped over Mary, say, my challenge to the group that we neglected to hear from Mary would be a legitimate challenge to the illegitimate act of having skipped her. On the other hand, suppose, we had in fact heard from Mary, but she challenged the group, saying, “I don’t feel like I am really being heard. I don’t think people are listening to me.” If the institutional representation of ‘participation’ is sustained via symbolic legitimacy, Mary’s challenge does not carry particular institutional weight and may be countered in various ways: “You had as much chance to speak as anyone else. No one interrupted you. We heard what you said. I can repeat what you said to you if you like,” etc. In other words, we behaved legitimately according to our institutionalized definition of the meaning of ‘participation’ as an abstract concept. You were included. You were heard. Therefore, you participated.

If the subjective dimension of the practice of ‘participation’ is institutionalized, however, then legitimacy will have to be based at least in part on evaluation of the actual experiences of the people in the room. In that case, participating in a meeting won’t just involve having a turn to speak. It will also involve a *feeling* of participating, a feeling that one is included, has voice, etc. Mary’s challenge would now be a legitimate challenge. She didn’t feel heard by the group. Therefore the taken-for-granted, shared experience of participation has been breached. Responding to Mary by saying that she had been given a chance to speak would not be a legitimate counter claim. The legitimate response would be to explore Mary’s feelings and try to discover a way that she could feel heard.

One might argue that in this latter case legitimacy is still rooted in observable behavior, only now the behavior in question is not calling on people but responding to their feelings with attentiveness. Certainly an organization might slip into such a legitimating mode,

but then it would be reverting to symbolic legitimacy. Suppose, for example, that what is legitimate is the observable behavior of responding to someone's feelings by taking time out to hear them, using a respectful tone, asking people to reflect on what might be done about the situation, etc. Even though these behaviors might typically be associated with a feeling of being respected and heard, they are not invariably associated with such a feeling. Perhaps when Mary says that she has not been heard, someone interrupts her in a seemingly sarcastic tone and says, "We know, Mary, we never really hear you do we? Let's move on." Most people might be offended by such a remark, but what if Mary takes it as a convivial sign of being known and understood and appreciated as a distinct personality? What if she laughs and her original feeling of being left out starts to fade in importance to her? From a symbolic legitimacy perspective, norms of behavior have been violated. Maybe ninety percent of the time Mary *would* be offended by such a remark. But from an experiential legitimacy perspective, nothing has been violated. *This* time Mary feels soothed by the remark.

This distinction between symbolic and experiential legitimacy is not semantic. It has a direct and immediate bearing on what sort of thing is being institutionalized. If we want an organization that *feels* inclusive, institutional patterns of inclusiveness will have to be created and maintained via experiential legitimacy. If we want an organization that *looks* inclusive, symbolic legitimacy will suffice.

To collectively evaluate interaction from an experiential perspective requires that we share our subjective experiences with each other. Inscaping practices, then, would seem to be necessary not only for engagement but for positive institutional work as a whole. In the Hollins School conversation about how staff would be addressed, we can see how inscaping practices contributed to the development of what would become essentially an experientially legitimated practice. As people started sharing the various experiences they had had with different forms of address, it became clear that adopting a single form for the school would not in fact help sustain the overall *feeling* of respectful interaction they were striving for. The openness with which people shared their experiences led to the decision to allow each staff member to choose for herself. This example illustrates the

difference between symbolic and experiential legitimacy nicely. Although people in the room had different experiences and preferences with respect to their names, no one was confused about the cultural, symbolic meanings of various forms of address. No one would have said that being called “Ms. Smith” was culturally disrespectful. Everyone could read the cultural signs quite competently. The divergence lay not in cognitive understanding, but in social experience.

We can see from many of the examples in Chapter 6 that experiential legitimacy is a feature of institutional work in all three organizations. People share their inner lives through the various inscaping practices and over time develop shared ways of evaluating those experiences for their positive qualities. Relational patterns take on a consistency not so much in form as in the way they are experienced. I will offer another example from the school that shows how ingrained the experiential mode of legitimacy is there.

Paula, a first-year teacher at Hollins School with considerable teaching experience elsewhere, recounts a conflict she had in her early days at the school. She was involved in a training session with a consultant who was helping the school embark on a new curricular approach.

*I just really didn't like the way I was being spoken to. I felt very disrespected and I was just listening. When this type of thing would happen at my previous school, you know, you just take your mind to another place, you don't pay attention, and when they're done, you say thank you and you leave. And I was trying so hard to do that, and I just couldn't do it. I think it was because I had been around the realness of Miri and Alex. At that time I'd probably only been here a month, but it was enough where I couldn't even play the game I was used to playing. So I said, "You know, I feel like what's being said is very negative. I don't think it's true. I don't want to have this discussion anymore. I'd like to leave, if that's okay." And I realized that when I left, they felt awful. They didn't talk about me bad when I left. They didn't say, "She has an attitude problem." It was, you know, "We're really sorry that that's how it came across to you. That's not what we meant." That was half the battle right there, because I was expecting to be reprimanded like, you know, "We pay this person a lot of money to come in, and you didn't want to talk to her." I didn't want to talk to her, and I was honest. And everything was okay. And I still don't feel like there's been any backlash from it. In the back of my head there's still that voice saying, "It's going to come. It's coming. Something's going to happen. It's going to come back up." But so far it hasn't. I still work with that person. I don't feel like there's this big elephant in the room*

*every time we have to speak. I think that was the first thing for me. I tried it. I did it. I saw what happened. Now, I can be honest about other things. Now I can express how I feel, and I'm getting to know the other staff members too, watching what they say and seeing how, when their husband is ill, or they're going through a separation, or whatever, they feel okay to talk to me about it, or go to Miri about it, or we can all talk about it. If they can be this open with me, I can be that way with them. And you really start to see people you work with as human.*  
(Hollins School-FG8: 11)

You can see in Paula's story how existing inscaping patterns at the school encouraged her to voice a discomfort that in her previous environment she would not have felt safe enough to voice. Voicing this discomfort was perceived as a legitimate thing to do by the school's leaders, even though they were quite happy themselves with how the consultant in question was working. It would have been illegitimate to ignore Paula's experience, or to argue that the consultant was not being disrespectful and demand that Paula keep working with her in the same way. The fact that her description of her inner state was accepted had a strong positive effect on Paula's specific ability to continue to work with the consultant, on her relationships with other people at the school, and on her overall connection to the organization.

Note again that no particular action was prescribed by the kind of experiential legitimacy dynamic at work here. Symbolic legitimacy challenges<sup>20</sup> can have concrete, reproducible remedies. If Mary's turn to speak was skipped, then you return to her so that she can speak now, or institute a process whereby turns won't be skipped in the future (some kind of visual marker of who has spoken, for example). Experiential legitimacy *cannot* have concrete, reproducible remedies. You cannot order someone to feel a particular way directly, nor can you be certain that a given action will produce such a feeling in the person. There may be actions that over time seem to consistently produce certain feelings, but each case must still be judged through the lens of a particular person's actual, current experience. The subjective proof is in the pudding. In Paula's case, any number of things might have been experienced as respectful responses. Alex and Miri sat

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<sup>20</sup> I.e., legitimacy challenges made by someone with reference to the form of interaction.

down to talk with her, but they might also have arranged a meeting with the consultant, or made a joke, or simply given Paula time to cool her heels and soothe herself, etc.

Experiential legitimacy will always involve a sort of provisional experimentation with responses, each of which will be interrogated for its actual experiential effect, not its theoretical effect. The complexity of such a process is heightened by the fact that it is never simply a question of one person's experience. Here, the consultant is involved, as are the other people who are working with her (and enjoying doing so). Each experiential legitimacy claim must be explored on its own terms with no guarantee that it can be resolved, but perhaps, as in Paula's case, that exploration will often turn out to be a solution in and of itself.

*Proposition 2:* Positive institutional work will be evaluated primarily through shared understandings of experiential legitimacy rather than through symbolic legitimacy and will therefore involve inscaping practices that surface the inner lives of actors rather than encoding practices that seek to fix meanings in symbols.

### **Dialogical Agency**

By definition, an institutionalized practice is resilient. It is resistant to change. Nevertheless, institutions do change over time, and scholars have been increasingly interested in exploring both the general processes that drive institutional change and the specific role that human intention or agency plays in those processes (Clemens and Cook, 1999; Lawrence, 1999; Dacin, Goodstein et al., 2002). As typically presented in the literature, institutional entrepreneurs (Fligstein, 1997) develop interest-based perspectives that are outside the boundaries of existing institutional patterns, and then seek to enact those patterns via institutional work primarily realized through discursive and political contests. The type of institutional work observable at Food Cycle, Hollins School, and Homestead does not seem to fit the agency patterns described in the literature. Here for example are the categories of work associated with institutional maintenance that Lawrence and Suddaby (2006: 230, Table 2) outline. (In the cases where the initial description sounds like it could possibly fit what I've described in this study, I've made a parenthetical note clarifying why it does not):

- *Enabling work: The creation of rules.*
- *Policing: Ensuring compliance through enforcement, auditing, and monitoring.*
- *Deterring: Establishing coercive barriers to institutional change.*
- *Valourizing and demonizing: Providing for public consumption positive and negative examples that illustrate the normative foundations of an institution. (Involves selecting specific individuals for public recognition or shaming.)*
- *Mythologizing: Preserving the normative underpinnings of an institution via myths regarding its history. (Very little attention is paid to historical myths at these sites, though the factual story of the founding of Food Cycle – without much normative elaboration – is well known there.)*
- *Embedding and routinizing: Actively infusing the normative foundations of an institution into the participants' day-to-day routines and organizational practices. (Involves “repetitive practices such as training, education, hiring and certification routines” as well as “formal, documented rhetoric” (233).)*

These descriptions of institutional work are essentially grounded in the dialectical view (Seo and Creed, 2002; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006) of institutional change and agency that permeates the literature, in which interest-based perspectives use “binary cultural codes” (Weber, Heinze et al., 2008) to compete for primacy against other interest-based perspectives (see e.g., Beckert, 1999; Townley, 2002). An agent, whether an individual, organization, or social movement, is understood to be a discrete entity with preexisting frames and goals. The agent uses instrumental practices (practices driven by clear end goals) to manage, co-opt, or defeat alternative frames and goals, not to learn from them. At a system level, new knowledge may be created during this competitive process, but it is a byproduct of the clash between antagonists, not an intentional goal on the part of agents. That is, the institutional agent thinks and behaves as if she clearly understands the (old or new) institutional frame, not as if she has to discover it over time. Her only challenge then is to coerce or convince others to adopt that frame (see, e.g., Elsbach, 1994; Garud, Jain et al., 2002; Lounsbury, 2002; Maguire, Hardy et al., 2004; Maguire and Hardy, 2006; Goodstein and Velamuri, 2009; Green, Li et al., 2009; Maguire and Hardy, 2009; Rivera, Oetzel et al., 2009).

There are two main issues pertinent to understanding why this dialectical portrait of institutional agency doesn't describe positive institutional work practices (though it describes very accurately other types of institutional work). The first involves the problem of how actors come to be knowledgeable about the institutions they participate in and about alternatives to those institutions when the very knowledgeability of actors is embedded in those same institutions. While actors can certainly conceive of alternatives to existing institutional frames to a degree, since most of institutionalized life takes place in the substrata of tacit, practical knowledge, it is problematic to ascribe exceptional clarity or imagination to the institutional actor. How does the actor come to develop her alternative perspective – to surface previously taken-for-granted assumptions? The more deeply institutionalized a set of practices is, the more difficult it would be for an actor not merely to effect change, but to conceive of that change in the first place. This is known as the problem of embedded agency (Seo and Creed, 2002; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). The solution proposed in the literature is that agents encounter alternative institutional logics, either because contradictory logics are an inherent part of the institutional landscape (Seo and Creed, 2002) or because the actor occupies a position that bridges different institutional fields (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). There is no discovery-based perspective in this explanation of agency. That is, agency only begins once the actor has been exposed to the alternative logics. There is no consideration of the possibility that an actor might adopt a learning approach by seeking out contact with alternative logics in the first place.

A positive perspective sees agency largely in terms of inquiry (Cooperrider and Skerka, 2003). If we can presume that most of our existing institutional patterns aren't "positive" (i.e., deeply and meaningfully subjectively fulfilling), then intentionally working toward positive institutional change will require that we depart substantially from many of our most deeply seated understandings of the world. Our starting point as institutional agents will have to be that *we don't know* precisely what the new institutional patterns we are seeking will look like, let alone how to go about enacting them. Institutional agency then becomes a conscious discovery process in which we seek to surface taken-for-granted

habits and assumptions. Rather than trying to enact a clear vision of a new social pattern upon the world, we will be questioning old patterns and exploring possibilities as we go.

The second issue with the conventional neoinstitutional version of agency is that it focuses primarily on individual agents (or groups of agents) competing with other individual agents. From a discovery perspective, this is a limiting view. The more deeply submerged an institution is, and the more complexly it intertwines with other institutions, the more institutional agency will have to be understood in collaborative, multi-vocal terms. Based on their study of the spread of management fashions, Perkmann and Spicer (2008) argue that, particularly in the case of multi-field phenomena, institutional work is likely to be distributed rather than driven by a single entrepreneur. Similarly, in their study of the development of wind turbine technology in Denmark and the U.S., Garud and Karnoe (2002) find that the “distributed agency” in Denmark, relying on purposeful bricolage by many small actors, produced more rapid improvements in technology than the centralized, “break-through” oriented approach adopted by U.S. actors.

I would argue that positive institutional work is especially likely to occur via a distributed, collaborative mode of agency, since positive institutional work takes place at the level of experience. From an experiential perspective, it makes little sense to conceive of institutional agency as a dialectical contest. Social forms can compete. Discourses (e.g., policies, ideologies, explicit norms, etc.) can compete. But how do experiences “compete”? If I have an experience of engagement and you do not, we cannot pit our experiences against each other. My experience can’t coerce, convince, or co-opt your experience. (I can convince you that you shouldn’t have had such an experience perhaps, but not that you aren’t having it.) We can only explore our experiences together, searching for ways to reconcile them and to lay the ground for new, more fully shared experiences in the future.

An approach to intentional change that fosters positive institutional work could be thought of as dialogical, rather than dialectical. William Isaacs (1999) writes about Dialogue in the tradition of Martin Buber (1970) and David Bohm (1996). In this

tradition, Dialogue is a collective conversational practice in which people work together to move beyond their current assumptions in order to think in collaborative and creative ways. Isaacs calls Dialogue “a conversation with a center but no sides.” He means that Dialogue doesn’t focus on bounding the conversation in order to achieve agreement. Instead, it creates a sense of shared meaning – a center – powerful enough to hold together any number of apparently diverse perspectives. Part of this practice is the search for connections between frames and belief systems that seem to contradict each other on the surface.

In terms of institutional agency, there are several important things to keep in mind about dialogue processes (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999):

- Dialogue is multi-vocal. It is based on the assumption that there is a wholeness – a unifying thread – underlying apparent diversity, but that no single viewpoint can ever have full access to that wholeness.
- Dialogue is not consensus. It includes a great deal of conflict in that it is based on the interaction of diverse perspectives that are often diametrically opposed to each other on the surface.<sup>21</sup>
- Conflict in Dialogue, however, is not in the form of a contest. Opposing perspectives do not seek to defeat or convince each other. They seek to learn from each other and find previously hidden connections.
- Because of its focus on learning and synthesis, Dialogue is ultimately generative. It does not simply connect people; it opens up new possibilities for thought and action.

Dialogical agency then would be a collaborative discovery process. Institutional actors would work together to surface the submerged assumptions of existing institutional

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<sup>21</sup> See for example Brown and Ashman’s (1999) study of intersectoral organizational partnerships working to solve social problems in Africa and Asia. They found that a dialogic mode of decision-making (participatory, mutual) was a key factor in successful efforts, but they also found that collaborations with moderate to high levels of conflict were more successful than collaborations with low conflict. Authentic, generative dialogue invites conflicting points of view and seeks to learn from them. It does not submerge disagreement to achieve superficial consensus or harmony.

patterns and to explore new ways of interacting. Paramount to this process would be an understanding that social (or organizational) “reality” cannot be captured via one set of words or experiences. Gergen (1999) anchors his relational conception of postmodern organizing in this sort of dialogical agency:

*In this sense, there are no single individuals making autonomous decisions, but forms of relationship out of which actions that we index as decisions become intelligible. An individual, then, is the common locus for a multiplicity of relationships . . . A premium is thus to be placed on avoiding closures of intelligibility, that is, allowing any construction of the true and the good to become sedimented, or simply “common sense.” . . . Multiple logics should be encouraged . . . Furthermore, all decisions and policies may be construed as contingent, formalizations of “the conversation at this moment.” In this way space remains for a continuation of the dialogue and a revisioning of policies and practices. (265)*

Intentionality here is focused less on specific visions or outcomes and more on practices that ensure that all members of the community are able to express their own perspectives and experiences of that community, under the assumption that such practices would ultimately create a more fully realized expression of the whole, and a stronger capacity for social innovation<sup>22</sup>. In other words, dialogical agency is enacted by expressive practices as I defined them in Chapter 7.

Perhaps this description of institutional agency sounds impracticable in the abstract, but consider the Hollins School name conversation. People (particularly the organization’s leaders) entered the conversation without assuming that they knew what the ultimate outcome would or should be. They had a vague sense of the kind of shared experience of comfort and respect they were hoping to co-create, but didn’t know what that experience would involve for each staff person or how it might be anchored organizationally. Everyone had her own perspective on the issue, and many of these perspectives were strongly held, but as the conversation evolved, people worked hard to listen to and understand each other’s experiences. Everyone was heard from, and gradually, a common

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<sup>22</sup> One reason that expressive practices associated with dialogue are generative and innovative is that they include voices that might otherwise be marginalized due to their differences from mainstream voices. Innovation in general is often driven by such marginal perspectives (Christensen, 2000; Christensen, 2003) and new institutional practices are also often first introduced at the margins (Leblebici and Salancik, 1991).

experiential thread linking the varied perspectives in the room emerged. People moved away from the need to frame that thread in one particular set of words or policies, and the expressive practice of allowing each person to decide her own form of address began to take root.

We can see dialogic agency on a wider scale at Hollins and at the other two field sites. In Chapter 7, I reviewed broadly shared expressive practices that contribute to such agency, but a look at the intentional stances of people who played key entrepreneurial roles in the founding and development of each organization is revealing.

Hollins School is seen very much by participants as a collaborative and open experiment in crafting a new approach to highly institutionalized patterns of urban public education. The focus is on sharing and learning more than on installing a specific vision. Alex and Miri, as the founding administrators of the school, worked from a loosely defined and flexible vision. In Chapter 5, I quoted Alex's description of the school's founding process: "We're building the plane as we fly it." She uses this metaphor frequently, and in recalling her own part in the school's birth, she casts her intentions in broad, exploratory terms, as if she was not the driver of the project, but a participant in a process she herself only partly understands.

*I often say cavalierly that I can't believe this happened. It started out as a conversation over the fence in my backyard between my neighbor and me, and suddenly we open a school . . . I've always worked in nonprofit organizations and been sort of community minded, and [there was] a convergence of my own personal need for a school for my kids, as well as my professional background and my wanting to make the world a better place. All of that came together with the school, but I didn't set out with the intention of knowing that that was all going to converge . . . It was all kind of like figuring out the process and putting together a group of people. I think Miri must have come in maybe like six months in. A fair amount of time had gone by before we realized that this might really happen, and then I started panicking, thinking like, "Oh my God. We've got to find somebody who knows something about schools, because I have no background at all." . . . Miri was all about the curriculum and the educational design, and that sort of thing, whereas I didn't really give a shit about that. I wanted something different for this neighborhood. I wanted a good school for young, black, under-served kids in our city, so I had sort of the big macro concerns, as well as my own kids of course . . . I was thinking I want a school*

*where everybody is really nice, and the kids are really engaged, and it's really interesting, and they are having fun, and they are playing, and you know, I just didn't know enough to know more specifically what I wanted. (Hollins School-I5: 2-4)*

Alex's overall intentions about the kind of experiences she wanted people to have in the school and about the general impact the school might make on the neighborhood were clear, but there was little specificity of means or forms. Those grew out of (and continue to grow out of) her collaboration with others. And while Miri did have specific curricular ideas, her vision of the school as an organization and as a social change agent was couched in similarly general terms.

*I just wanted an alternative . . . a place that was nicer and calmer and more academically appropriate. When I met Alex at a playgroup, she was thinking about it in terms of community development, as a neighborhood person wanting a better place for her kids who live there. Her background is community organizing. Mine was more specific to the profession, and hers was more neighborhoody. And it just seemed like an exciting thing to do, and it got bigger. . . . The other thing was that I think from day one we wanted this to be a kind place. A kind place for kids, and a kind place for adults. (Hollins School-I3: 2-3)*

Though the conceptual vision was broad and general, the commitment to developing practices driven by the actual experiences of the people participating was specific and grounded.

*It took us a long time to realize what things needed to be set up so that they were kind of easier for people. But there was an absolute consciousness that when somebody had a question or didn't understand something or didn't want to do something in a certain way that that would be taken very, very seriously, whether it was me or an aide in the classroom. We really looked at what is the smart thing to do and what is the kind thing to do, instead of, "You need to do that because the director told you to do that." We just never do that. We kind of promised we would never do that. (Miri: Hollins School-I3: 4)*

Corey, one of the two founders of Food Cycle (Kirk was the other), still sees the organization as a place of learning for him, even though he now lives in a different city and has not been actively involved since 2000. He currently runs a sustainable forestry

company that he started after leaving Food Cycle, but he stills draws on Food Cycle for inspiration.

*Food Cycle allows people to activate their belief systems through actions . . . The culture of Food Cycle arose out of the first generations of participants and volunteers. It was started and nurtured by us, but it became a collective endeavor. I'm a doing person. Process never came easy for me. Kirk's contribution was that he was a very caring person and a great listener. He instinctively understood that we needed to listen to those around us. It was incredibly exciting to watch the community take ownership of the organization . . . I came to believe in process as a really exciting way of expressing leadership. It was the best way: be a better listener; be open to change; invest in people's opinions; and see the organization as an evolving and thriving community. I can remember on several occasions people asking, "How is your community organization going?" I would say, "It's not my community organization." We took something that started with one or two people and turned it into something that was owned collaboratively. (Food Cycle-Archive11F: 2)*

When Corey talks about trying to apply lessons from Food Cycle to his current business, he sounds more like a student than a founder.

*Food Cycle had done a lot of process work on how volunteers, clients, staff members, and donors experienced their participation . . . One of the benefits of Food Cycle is that it is a constant reminder from afar to invest in process. It is about action, but always about reflection – the cycle of action and reflection. In my business decisions, I have a few checks and balances, and one of my criteria is, "How would it pass at Food Cycle?" (Ibid: 3)*

Corey's sense of Food Cycle's development goes well beyond his own intentional contribution to it. He talks about Food Cycle in quasi-institutional terms, and does not assume that what has developed at Food Cycle can be mechanically replicated, even in his own business.

*My take on what underlies the culture of Food Cycle is that there are rules for how people engage with each other – unwritten rules that no one enforces. The number one rule is that everything is open for discussion. There are boundaries and expectations of respect . . . If there were challenges [in trying to create that same culture in my business], it was only because I forgot that Food Cycle has an advanced sense of organizational dynamics. It would be unfair to compare things to Food Cycle. I didn't expect that people would understand things at that level. For the most part, my experience at Food Cycle has been really highly valued by colleagues. They've wanted to learn from how we worked. (Ibid: 4)*

When Madeleine, the next long-term executive director, arrived at Food Cycle, the organization was in a difficult transition period, and Madeleine was part of a new group that stewarded the organization through its next phase of significant programmatic growth. But she too talks about her role more in terms of collaborative learning than in terms of conventional leadership.

*I didn't feel like it was my job to [answer the question], "Madeleine, what's your vision?" I felt [it should be], "What's our vision?" – to create a new kind of space here for us to begin that exploration rather than looking to the new director for everything, a space for us to be asking some bigger questions and to share the responsibility. (Food Cycle-I2: 5)*

Homestead, too, was founded by a group of people working from a clear common impulse to create change, but in an exploratory mode as to how to go about it.

*The early seed that gave birth to Homestead was planted prior to 1986. The idea for an apartment supported by church-based volunteers grew out of a failed attempt to find placement for teenagers in conflict with their families. A church group provided a furnished apartment, but soon found that the young people required more supervision than the group could provide. Since there was a housing crisis in the city for mentally ill individuals, it was decided to make this apartment available to people with mental illness. Although that apartment closed again due to insufficient structure and support, the idea was born. The planting of that first seed was, for me, the beginning of a love affair that consumed my life for the next eight years. (Sharon: Homestead-Archive4: 5)*

Although Homestead wasn't as explicitly focused on internal organizational processes as Food Cycle or Hollins School, the development of a new institutional model (a model which is now being replicated by other groups nationally) through an intentionally collaborative, exploratory process is still a far cry from the kind of dialectical contest pictured in the neoinstitutional literature concerned with agency.

*Proposition 3:* Positive institutional agency will be primarily a dialogical process driven by collaborative discovery via expressive practices rather than a dialectical process driven by political and discursive contests via instrumental practices.

	<i>Traditionally Framed Institutional Work</i>	<i>Positive Institutional Work</i>
<i>Motivation</i>	Motivated by anxiety and therefore enacted via protective boundary work.	Aspirationally motivated and therefore enacted via transboundary work.
<i>Legitimacy</i>	Symbolic – based on the meanings encoded in objective forms (behaviors, words, visible relational markers).	Experiential – based on inner experiences surfaced via inscaping practices.
<i>Agency</i>	Dialectical – structured via instrumental goals and outcomes and enacted by individuals and organizations engaged in political and discursive contests.	Dialogical – structured via expressive inquiry and enacted by individuals and organizations engaged in collaborative, discovery processes.

## Conclusion

### **Contributions**

This study contributes to both theory and practice in a number of ways. It offers a synthesis of the Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) literature, and, by adopting a practice-based analytical lens, reveals new aspects of some of the important themes that have emerged from that literature. It also offers numerous examples of engagement practices that can be adopted by social purpose organizations (SPOs) to increase their members' overall experience of vitality, community, growth, and creativity. Finally, it makes a major contribution to institutional theory and to social change practice by outlining an empirically grounded theory of positive institutional work that differs sharply from traditional theories of institutional work. Below, I describe these contributions in more detail.

### **Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS)**

This study found that three broad categories of practice seem to be important features of organizational engagement. *Transboundary practices* allow people to collaboratively shape their work so that: their work is more aligned with their skills, interests, and potentials; they experience an increased sense of connection to the people they work with; and they are able to explore the purpose of their work in ways that are personally and collectively meaningful. *Inscaping practices* allow people to know, appreciate, and interact with each other as authentic, whole persons. *Expressive practices* allow people to participate fully in defining, guiding, receiving benefit from, and sharing the organization.

As generalities, these features of positive organizational life are not new to POS scholars. Many POS articles, both theoretical and empirical, touch on these themes in one way or another. For example, Wrzesniewski (2003), in her discussion of positive meaning in work, suggests that the practice of job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) can make work more meaningful. Job crafting is in many ways analogous to the

transboundary practices I have described, in that it involves the shaping of the task, relational, and meaning boundaries that structure one's own work. The practice perspective I've taken in this study, however, offers some new insight. First, transboundary practices in these organizations are not simply about shaping an individual's experience of her work. Certainly, one of the functions they serve is to allow better individual alignment with roles and tasks, as in job crafting. But boundary work also happens at the group and organizational level. The example I gave in Chapter 8 of the Hollins School dialogue around names revolved around individual approaches to work *and* around the shared meaning of the organization as a whole. The continual boundary testing and experimentation is largely a collaborative affair.

Second, that we can see transboundary practices at work in these organizations on so many levels – from the minutiae of specific tasks to the dynamics of relationships to the purpose of the organization as a whole – suggests it is not any specific transboundary practice, but transboundary work *as a whole*, that is crucial. The overall emphasis on transboundary work seems to reflect a fundamental orientation toward the actual individuals and relationships that make up the organization. It is the experiences of those specific people and relationships that drive organizational structures and meanings, not the reverse. Consequently, because people and relationships are always changing, structural boundaries are always provisional.

Third, in terms of their engagement effects, transboundary practices cannot be understood separately from the other practices I've identified in this study. For example, transboundary practices require that people feel psychologically safe enough to continually test and transmute existing boundaries. That sort of psychological safety is often paradoxically associated with clear goals and rules, which are a form of secure boundaries. How can people feel safe enough to engage in transboundary practices if secure boundaries are what make them feel safe? In the three organizations in this study, psychological safety seems largely to derive from a feeling of being known and appreciated as a person independently of work performance (a consequence of inscaping practices) and from a sense that responsibility for performance is mutual, carried not by

individuals but by the organization as a whole (a consequence of expressive practices). Thus overall, the transboundary practices revealed in this study both support the existing POS emphasis on flexible, customized work structures and enhance our understanding of those structures by situating them in terms of broader, mutually reinforcing classes of practice.

Similarly, the inscaping chapter both confirms and extends previous POS work on the importance of surfacing inner subjectivities. Many POS scholars discuss the role that authenticity (the ability to interact as one's true, full self) plays in positive organizational relationships (see, e.g., Davidson and James, 2007). Often, these discussions focus largely on affective sharing (e.g., Walter and Bruch, 2008). The inscaping practices in this study show *how* authenticity is enacted, and they reveal that subjective sharing is much broader than just affective sharing. Yes, emotions are surfaced, but so too are beliefs, attitudes, histories, curiosities, hopes, abilities, and weaknesses. Multiple dimensions of inner experiences are shared. And notably, these experiences are not shared primarily through specific interventions explicitly aimed at surfacing them. They are shared mainly in the normal course of work.

The expressive practices outlined here also build off that part of the POS literature concerned with participation and empowerment (see, e.g., Srivastava and Cooperrider, 1999). But unlike much of that literature, the focus here is neither on formal participatory structures nor on explicit participatory values. All three organizations have fairly conventional formal structures, mission statements, policies, etc. Participation is rooted in informal collaborative practices, not in democratic structures. And there is not much *talk* about participation per se, at least not in terms of explicit value statements. People do not exhort each other to get involved or to include others in decision-making. Again, what seems to catalyze widespread and diverse participation in how the organization expresses itself is an underlying respect for each individual experience and each individual voice.

What all three sets of practices have in common, then, is that they begin with a fundamental stance of respect and appreciation toward the experiences of people as

people, not as organizational instruments. The practices are not catalyzed by formal design or by normative evangelism. They are catalyzed by experiences. It is the actual lived experiences of organization members that give rise to ever-temporary structures through transboundary practices. It is the actual lived experiences of organization members that, through inscaping practices, determine how those structures will be evaluated. And it is the actual lived experiences of organization members that define and give voice to the organization through expressive practices.

If, as I have argued, positive organizational phenomena are positive because they are experienced as (inter)subjectively fulfilling and meaningful, then it makes sense that positive organizational practices will be structured, evaluated, and defined by those experiences. Rathunde (2001) links positive psychology to the “experiential turns” of James, Dewey, and Maslow, which he defines as “turns toward immediate subjective experience, to explore questions about what makes life fulfilling and meaningful” (135). He argues that “an experiential perspective may help build a more unified psychology of optimal human functioning” (ibid) than can traditional, abstracted, positivistic perspectives. Rathunde is referring to research methods, but this study suggests that organizations themselves can adopt that same experiential perspective. Whereas a positivistic approach sees human experience as the result of objective social structures, norms, and meanings systems, a positive approach sees human experience as the nexus of subjective and objective patterns, and therefore as the appropriate focal lens for both research and action.

In summary, this study contributes to POS methodology by demonstrating an empirical approach to exploring positive phenomena through the lens of practices. The methodological assumption here is that a positive phenomenon like engagement is neither a static state nor a dependent variable subject to particular organizational conditions. It is a socially constructed, intersubjective experience that is *enacted* through ongoing practices. By treating positive phenomena as embedded in practices, this methodology opens the way to considering those positive phenomena in the light of institutional work and of broader institutional processes. This study also contributes to POS theory by

arguing that a practice approach may reveal a fundamental “experiential turn” to be at the heart of sustained, positive phenomena in organizations.

Despite the abstraction of this argument, the practices that I’ve explored are very approachable for practitioners working in SPOs. By describing engagement practices at work in these three organizations, this study offers something of a prescription for SPOs interested in strengthening their own ability to create positive experiences for their members and partners. Below is a summary of the key practices and associated mindsets outlined in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

### ***Transboundary Work – The Organization is Structured Via Experience***

***Roles are defined and allowed to evolve in ways specific to the humans who inhabit them.***

***People frequently shift in and out of multiple role orientations.***

***People may take on roles for which they have passion, but little training or expertise. Training and expertise are seen only as one dimension among many of what an individual brings to the organization.***

***Status boundaries are loose and frequently breached. Tasks often relegated to the lowest paid workers or to volunteers in most organizations (e.g., cleaning, taking out the trash, doing the dishes, greeting guests, answering the phones) are done by everyone. Tasks that tend to be relegated to the highest paid workers in most organizations (e.g., publicly representing the organization in the media, hiring decisions, etc.) are also done by a broad cross-section of the organization.***

***Cross-functional conversations happen frequently. There is a shared belief that any person might have something to contribute to any conversation. Rarely is a conversation about a particular function off limits to others in the organization.***

***The physical space of the organization is shaped more by day-to-day actions and interactions than by a need to delineate roles and status.***

***The physical space is open and multi-functional in its arrangement, making it easier for people (whether staff, volunteers, or visitors) to overhear and spontaneously join each other’s conversations.***

***No defined reception area or receptionist exists to greet people as they walk through the door. Upon entering the space, one is immediately introduced to the organization’s central hub of activity.***

***People view their work and the organization as an on-going experiment with substantial potential for learning and growth.***

***Failure, confusion, and unknowing are seen as fruitful topics of conversation and collaboration, rather than things to be avoided and hidden.***

***People have a great deal of latitude to design their tasks in a way that works for them. As a***

*result, they tend to be intensely interested and immersed in the details of their work and their professional development.*

*Fixed articulations of goals and purposes (e.g., strategic plans, policies, mission statements) tend to be used to structure current inquiries rather than to place strict boundaries on future work.*

*The process of evaluation involves on-going, participatory, explicit experimentation and reflection. This process is framed around the question: "Does this idea/activity/policy make sense?" Pre-set standards, guidelines, or screening processes based on past experience are neither fixed nor frequently relied upon. Rules are minimal. And any that are created must make sense to the people who actually inhabit the organization at the moment.*

*There is a strong spirit of universal inclusion and belonging, and there are few internal divisions or cliques.*

*Work teams and social clusters frequently shift. Over time, people find themselves working in many different groupings with many different people.*

*The organization is structured around activities, rather than an ideology or explicitly articulated values. What you will be doing is quite concrete. Its meaning however is open to interpretation and based on lived experience.*

*The work of the organization is understood to be not simply for the target group or issue for which the organization was originally incorporated, but for everyone with whom it has contact. Everyone is seen as both contributing and receiving.*

#### *Inscaping – The Organization is Evaluated Via Experience*

*The inner landscape of each person (emotions, feelings, beliefs, identity, temperament, aptitude, weaknesses, curiosities, aspirations, family, friends, histories, etc.) is considered important to the work-at-hand.*

*People ask for and offer glimpses into their interior states during the normal course of organizational work, in both formal and informal ways.*

*Collective gathering times for reflection and connection are abundant and intentionally planned.*

*Individual acts of appreciating each other's unique characteristics, vulnerabilities, and growth possibilities are wide-spread.*

*How people interact with each other is framed more by their individual personalities than by their organizational roles. People rarely refer to themselves or each other in terms of those roles.*

*There is a widely shared attentiveness to people who might feel excluded from a conversation. People often physically open conversations up by making eye contact or turning their body so that a person lurking on the margin is invited in.*

*People consciously seek out colleagues whom they know less well or haven't talked to in a while.*

*During difficult interactions, people work to understand each other's underlying intentions and motivations, rather than judging each other solely on observable behaviors and outcomes.*

#### *Expression – The Organization is Defined Via Experience*

*There exists a strongly held notion that an organization is too complex for any one perspective*

*to capture it.*

*There is a high reliance on work groups of twos and threes for many functions. It's as if the fundamental unit of the organization is not the person, but the relationship.*

*The responsibility for orienting new members is widely shared and done in an informal programmed way. Consequently, newcomers are required to quickly become proactive in order to find their way around and to rely on relationships with others, rather than generalized, abstracted texts and policies.*

*The responsibility for representing the organization to the outside world is widely shared, and there is little attempt to control or standardize the message. Each person represents their experience of the organization, not the organization itself as some disembodied whole.*

*Attempts are almost always made to include multiple voices in the thinking leading up to a decision, whether the final decision is to be made by one person, a group, or the organization.*

*Celebratory gatherings and events are a regular part of organizational life, allowing many voices to come together and interact. Many people list these events as highlights, focusing on the joy they take in seeing the organization come together as a whole in all of its diversity.*

*The sense of confidence in the whole that people have doesn't come from a perfectionist vision in which everyone is assumed to be working at their highest levels at all times. It comes from an appreciation for cycle and flow in which people compliment each other's rhythms.*

*People describe what the organization gives to others (residents, students, clients, etc.) and what the organization gives to themselves in essentially the same terms.*

Most of the participants in this study were emphatic that their positive experiences in the three focus organizations differ dramatically from their experiences in other SPOs. At the same time, there is nothing particularly unusual about the three focus organizations in terms of governance structure, funding, or staffing patterns. It is reasonable to think, then, that in most SPOs there are few legal obligations or resource dependencies that would constrain the adoption of these practices. The barriers lie elsewhere, a theme I take up in the ensuing sections of this chapter.

### **Neoinstitutional Theory in Sociology and Positive Institutional Work**

This study bolsters neoinstitutional theory by taking seriously that theory's intersubjective roots and posing a question that has not heretofore been directly addressed in the literature: What is the nature of institutional work that sustains not merely objective social forms but intersubjective social experiences? Though this study is exploratory, it suggests three important expansions to the neoinstitutional literature: a consideration of

institutionalized transboundary work driven by aspirational motivation; a definition of experiential legitimacy; and a sketch of institutional change via dialogical agency not dialectical agency.

The most important contribution of this study is that, by cross-pollinating insights from Positive Organizational Scholarship and neoinstitutional research traditions, we can begin to shed some light on one practical and important question: If organizations like the ones in this study are so healthy and attractive, why don't we see more like them? Alone, neither POS nor neoinstitutional literature answer this question.

POS research focuses on identifying positive organizational patterns but tends to underplay the difficulty of creating or recreating such patterns. Some general mechanisms are theorized, but the role of intention within complex, socially constructed systems is under-examined. And while scholars working on POS from an organizational development perspective have explored intention via the development of specific organizational interventions like Appreciative Inquiry and Dialogue, which can be seen as intentional, positive, institutional processes, these interventions are closely associated with specific techniques rather than developed as sociological or organizational theories with widespread applicability. Consequently, little is known about how to apply the underlying principles in a broader, more sustained way in organizational and community settings. How can positive practices like Appreciative Inquiry or Dialogue be sustained in the routine interactions of everyday life without specific structures of active intervention?

Neoinstitutional Theory, on the other hand, has been developed precisely to answer questions about these embedded, taken-for-granted interactions of everyday life. Neoinstitutional theory's most general answer to why we don't see more organizations like the ones in this study is that we don't *believe* in such organizations. Because of our cognitively submerged, institutionalized beliefs, they don't seem real to us. We "know," for example, that the role and group boundaries we encounter are important and must be preserved. We "know" that it is inappropriate to share too much about our interior experiences with our co-workers. We "know" that it is important to have a single vision

and a single voice in an organization if we want that organization to act consistently and to be perceived as coherent. It is a great struggle to un-know such things, even when our conscious minds tell us to try. After a visit to an unusually engaging organization, we might come away thinking that it would in fact be a good thing to share our inner experiences with our colleagues. But thinking isn't believing, not in the deepest, most taken-for-granted sense. Thus, when we try to share our inner experience, it might feel wrong, or off, or too uncomfortable to continue. Neoinstitutional theory tells us that no matter how attractive a new practice seems on the surface, it will require a chipping away at beliefs that are very deeply held in our subconsciouses.

But neoinstitutional theory also tells us that it is possible to overcome institutional inertia, and it outlines the sorts of institutional work that enable us to disrupt old social patterns and seed and maintain new ones. However, because neoinstitutional theory has not been explored specifically in terms of the kinds of positive, experiential phenomena taken up by POS, there are a number of gaps and contradictions in current versions of that theory that impede us from developing descriptions of, let alone prescriptions for, positive institutional work. I reviewed these gaps in the previous chapter, but we can now consider them with respect to the question of why we don't see more organizations like the ones in this study.

- If we organize primarily to protect or defend specific forms of practice, we will not facilitate the kind of transboundary work necessary for individuals to be consistently aligned with their activities and relationships in fulfilling and meaningful ways. The lure of rigid boundaries may be strongest precisely when we are working to enact something “positive.” We see a form of practice that is currently yielding a desired result (whether profitability or happiness), reproduce that form, and become attached to it. The form first becomes a “best practice,” a rule, a moral conviction, or an ideology. Then, it becomes an unquestioned habit. Positive institutional work seems to require not protection of existing practice boundaries, but an ongoing, aspirational questioning of and experimentation with those boundaries.

- If we evaluate practices for what they symbolize (symbolic legitimacy) rather than for how we experience them (experiential legitimacy), we may not be able to consistently reproduce positive relational patterns. It is easy to turn relationships into abstractions: smiles mean friendliness; voting procedures mean participation; non-discrimination policies mean inclusiveness. But the actual experiences of friendliness, participation, and inclusiveness are more elusive. This study suggests that positive experiences must be evaluated on their own terms by sharing our internal lives with each other as we work (inscaping).
- If we embark on positive institutional change projects with fixed visions, seeking to enact those visions as individuals and to manipulate, co-opt, or defeat alternative visions, we may interfere with both our capacity for social innovation and our capacity for social cohesion. In deeply institutionalized contexts, the ability to surface taken-for-granted beliefs may depend on rich, multi-vocal inquiry. In the absence of such inquiry, what appears to be social innovation might be nothing more than a rearrangement of visible forms that leaves underlying relational dynamics intact. And again, the more strongly we believe our visions to be “positive,” the easier it may be to fall into these univocal, even ideological, practices. In addition, a centralized, univocal approach to institutional work may paradoxically lead to more fractured social relationships, as people end up connecting to each other only through superficial similarities rather than through the discovery of more deeply experienced mutualities. Deep mutualities require that we interact as whole, individually expressed persons. A dialogical approach to institutional work depends on that sort of individualized expression.

### ***A Brief Reflection on Positive Institutional Change***

In all three organizations in this study, people consider themselves to be agents of social change, however modestly. Embedded in each organization is a vision of an altered world. At the same time, each organization pays considerable attention to meeting the needs of all of its members, whether clients, volunteers, staff, funders, or friends. In other

words, each organization has instrumental social change goals, but the people who make up the organization are not themselves instrumentalized toward those goals.

I want to reconsider now the traditional distinction between ‘instrumental’ SPOs that serve external social change goals and ‘expressive’ SPOs that serve the needs of their internal members (Gordon and Babchuk, 1959; Curtis and Zurcher, 1974). Typically ‘instrumental’ and ‘expressive’ are treated as distinct categories of organization. In exploring this distinction, however, Warner and Miller (1964) note that “all organizations are *both* means to ends and ends in themselves, and thus never fit completely into one or the other of the ‘ideal types’” (654). It makes more sense, then, to think of ‘instrumental’ and ‘expressive’ as organizational capacities rather than as organizational types. Every SPO has both instrumental and expressive capacities. The question then becomes how these capacities relate to each other.

Often these capacities are thought to be in opposition to each other, needing to be balanced out (Gordon and Babchuk, 1959; Warner and Miller, 1964). From this perspective, instrumental capacities are associated with organizational goal achievement and expressive capacities are associated with organizational maintenance (i.e., keeping members content enough that they continue to belong and contribute to the organization effectively (Curtis and Zurcher, 1974)).

Some approaches to social change, however, have involved experimenting with ways in which expressive and instrumental capacities might serve each other. These “prefigurative” approaches (Breines, 1989) essentially involve working to express the desired social arrangement (the organization’s instrumental social change goal) within the organization itself. Organization members live the change they are seeking to create. For example, feminist organizations working toward the broad *social* goal of inclusiveness and participation have developed various *organizational* models meant to distribute power and voice to all members equally (Calas and Smircich, 2002). Similarly, the new left movement in the 1960s attempted to organize itself via structures that didn’t rely on hierarchy or centralization but allowed “the equal participation of each individual in all

the social decisions that affect the quality and direction of his or her life” (Breines, 1989: 6). Breines (ibid) argues that whereas critics of this approach claimed that expressive or prefigurative organizational modes were essentially apolitical, participants and organizations in the new left movement actually had strong instrumental, political goals but struggled to reconcile the tension between forwarding those goals and working together in a way that did not simply reproduce the oppressive forms of relationship they were seeking to overthrow. Breines sees this effort not as a superficial attempt to align movement procedures and goals, but as a deep desire to institutionalize the lived experience of community.

*The notion of community is integrally connected with prefigurative politics. The new left sought community as it sought to unite the public and private spheres of life. By community I mean a network of relationships more direct, more total and more personal than the formal, abstract and instrumental relationships characterizing state and society. “Community is founded on [man] conceived in his wholeness rather than in one or another of the roles taken separately, that he may hold in a social order” (Nisbet, 1966). In saying that the new left sought community I refer not only to the desire to create a sense of wholeness and communication in social relationships, but to the effort to create non-capitalist and communitarian institutions that embodied such relationships. (6-7)*

Breines is describing the fundamental, expressive stance: to embody within the organization (or movement) the relationships one is working to create in society as a whole. Essentially, Breines is framing the quest of the new left as a quest for positive institutions, i.e., institutions that would be both intrinsically fulfilling and extrinsically meaningful. As we have defined positive here, a positive organization *is* one whose expressive capacity (the capacity to provide subjectively fulfilling experiences to members) and instrumental capacity (the capacity to contribute to broader systems of meaning) are mutually reinforcing. A positive organization is autotelic – intrinsically motivated. Its means are its ends, and its ends are its means. Breines argues that the new left movement ultimately failed because it never managed to discover an organizational form that would reconcile the tension between its instrumental and expressive aspirations.

The sort of institutional work pursued at Food Cycle, Hollins School, and Homestead suggests that organizational *form* may not be the issue. The three organizations structure

themselves around the actual experiences of their members; organizational form is continually interrogated as it relates to the subjective experience. This approach is very different from that of organizations and social movements that have attempted to develop their expressive capacities in light of their instrumental goals by concentrating on finding *the* right organizational form.<sup>23</sup> Reliance on any single form precludes transboundary work and necessitates institutional maintenance via symbolic legitimacy not experiential legitimacy.

For example, one of the forms of practice that some feminist organizations relied upon was rotating leadership positions (Calas and Smircich, 2002). Each member might serve as executive director, say, for three months at a time. In form, this is clearly an egalitarian practice meant to ensure that power and voice don't concentrate in the hands of the few. As an experience, however, this practice could have any number of effects. It might indeed make people experience the organization as more egalitarian. But, depending on the actual temperaments and relationships of the people who make up the organization, it might have the reverse effect. Perhaps someone finds herself so uncomfortable in the role of executive director that she feels less able to voice her concerns authentically than she might in another role that suits her better. Or perhaps power is simply relocated and re-concentrated based on expertise or on personality dynamics.<sup>24</sup> What begins as an attempt to foster expressive participation by all members can become locked in an unfulfilling, formal closure in which people find their expressive powers considerably diminished. In her study of a number of social movement groups, Polletta (2002) describes just such a closure in the feminist organizations that were perhaps the most innovative and sincere in their expressive experiments:

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<sup>23</sup> For an interesting example of the distinction between focusing on form and focusing on the underlying intersubjective experience, see Bushe and Kassam's (2005) work on Appreciative Inquiry. They found that Appreciative Inquiry interventions resulted in "transformational outcomes" only when they "focused on changing how people think rather than what people do" (176).

<sup>24</sup> Kasmir (1996) argues that something like this has happened at the well-known Mondragon worker cooperatives in Spain. She claims that the forms of equal ownership and participation, which are strictly adhered to, have actually made it more difficult for blue collar workers to challenge de facto technocratic leadership than would be the case in, say, a unionized environment. In other words, the form of owning an equal share of an organization and the experience of participating fully in that organization are not the same thing.

*More than any of the movement groups that I have treated thus far, feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s made the internal life of the movement the stuff of political experimentation and innovation . . . What resulted was extraordinary in charting new sites of political contention and new kinds of political relationship. Women's liberationists insisted on a democratic practice that was egalitarian in a deep and encompassing sense. Yet such advances were hard-won. When former activists talk today about their lives in the movement, pride mingles with hurt, nostalgia with bitterness. Activists remember the joy of newfound political agency and solidarity with women too long viewed as competitors. But they also remember being denounced by fellow activists for exercising initiative or leadership and being "trashed" for trying to take a feminist message to the wider public. With some puzzlement they describe what had seemed a worthy antiauthoritarianism coming to require a leveling of all talents and what had seemed an admirable collectivism producing a censoriousness that discouraged anyone from voicing a dissenting opinion. They describe feminist collectives imploding in anger and mutual recriminations that left some members traumatized for years. (149-150)*

That the three organizations in this study, despite their largely conventional forms, are experienced as so participative by members attests to the relative institutional power of experientially legitimated practices over symbolically legitimated practices. These three organizations present not just a description of organizational engagement, but a potential prescription for positive social change.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, though the three SPOs in question are diverse in terms of mission and relative size, they are all small, they are all North-American, and they are all involved in service-based work (with an advocacy component) rather than direct advocacy work. The generalizability of the findings may be limited by these similarities. In addition, many of the practices I've highlighted could theoretically be enacted in non-SPOs as well, but it is unclear from this study which practices might apply to organizations in general, and which are specific to SPOs.

Second, the high degree of subjective interpretation involved in articulating tacit social patterns raises reliability questions about this study. Even if we assume that people are accurately rendering their personal, phenomenological experiences of these

organizations, translating those experiences into organizational practices is fraught with difficulty, particularly since we are examining institutionalized practices. The more institutionalized a practice is, the more difficult it is to surface it into consciousness. I asked people to think about which organizational practices were involved with the various subjective feelings they were describing. Most people had a great deal of difficulty doing so. I attempted to increase the reliability of practice identification by: relying largely on focus groups so that people could think together dialogically; spending significant time observing organizational interactions myself; comparing practices across multiple cases; and theorizing about why an identified practice might logically be related to engagement. Nevertheless, the findings in this study are tentative and in need of support from additional studies looking at different sorts of organizations and using different methodologies.

Third, and most importantly, this study attempts to theorize about institutional work as a whole while adopting only a proto-institutional (Lawrence, Hardy et al., 2002) level of analysis. We can study micro-social systems like individual organizations in order to provisionally theorize about the general properties of institutional work, but an institution only really becomes an institution when it permeates a larger, more complex and differentiated social space. This study looks at the maintenance of positive practices only within these organizations. It is not clear that the sort of institutional work identified here – aspirationally motivated, experientially legitimated, and dialogically intended – can be diffused across organizational lines through institutional fields and the wider social system.

Take experiential legitimacy, for example. How can an experientially legitimated practice be diffused across space and over time? It is easy to understand how symbolically legitimated practices are diffused. Symbols by their nature are portable. If voting procedures signal democracy, one merely needs to diffuse that signal (that definition) across wider cultural bands. One can judge a democracy legitimate or not simply by the presence or absence of valid voting procedures. Experiential legitimacy, on the other hand, requires rich contextual knowledge of the people enacting the practice. One can

only evaluate a practice for legitimacy by knowing how people are experiencing that practice. More contextual knowledge is required – knowledge of generalized culture, knowledge of the individual person’s temperament and way of expressing herself, etc. Can experientially legitimated practices truly be transmitted across significant physical and cultural boundaries? If so, what are the mechanisms of diffusion and do they differ from symbolic mechanisms?

### ***Future Research Directions***

The limitations I’ve identified suggest a number of future research directions:

- *Field-level studies.* Can positive institutional practices be transmitted across organizational boundaries? If so, does the type of institutional work I’ve outlined here at the micro-level still hold at the field level, or are there kinds of institutional work peculiar to wider diffusion? One approach to such questions would be to study second- and third-order effects of the practices associated with a particular positive phenomenon. For example, this study of engagement practices could be extended by interviewing and observing other organizations that interact with the focal organizations, such as funders, coalition partners, government agencies, etc. Through this interorganizational interaction, can we find evidence that the practices outlined here are diffusing out into the wider fields of which these organizations are part? If so, how?
- *Studies of larger SPOs.* How limiting is size? Given the fundamentally relational dynamics of positive practices like the ones identified in this study, can larger organizations, which may depend more on formal, explicit, and symbolic modes of structuring, be similarly engaging? Are there engagement challenges and practices peculiar to larger organizations? One approach may be to study engaging units within larger SPOs (see, e.g., Dutton, 2003).
- *Studies of advocacy organizations.* What would it mean for organizations more explicitly focused on advocacy work to pursue that work through their expressive capacities? Can advocacy organizations, which often rely heavily on

symbolically framing their messages explicitly and centrally, allow expressive latitude to their members?

- *Studies of traditional businesses.* Certainly many of the sorts of practices here could be adopted by traditional businesses. But in that those practices are implicated in a broader inquiry into social purpose, for the full effect to be felt, it seems likely that a business would have to understand itself as having a primarily social, moral, or spiritual purpose of some sort. That purpose would have to be expressively defined, not simply handed down by top management or ownership. Furthermore, I believe that the single most positively catalytic feature of the organizations in this study is that, over time, they have come to understand that not only do they serve all of their members, but they serve them in essentially the same way. Even when traditional businesses take into account the views and needs of multiple stakeholders, those views and needs are often seen as representative of distinct interests (usually in competition with each other). The central question becomes something like this: “How can we make money for the owners, give the employees a healthy and rewarding work environment, minimize our environmental impact, and contribute to various social causes in the community?” Could a business adopt a more holistic view in which all of those categories of people were understood to be contributing and receiving the same kind of fundamental value (e.g., community, innovation, health, learning, etc.)? How does such a holistic perspective take root in a business? What does it look like in practice? We might also research the question of how the practices in this study might operate in a business without such a holistic vision of purpose. My own hunch is that until a business actually sees itself *as* a Social Purpose Organization, it will be very difficult to sustain the sort of deep engagement I have explored in this study.

### ***Last Words***

Occasionally over the last several years, I have given talks and held workshops about Food Cycle and about other organizations similar to the ones in this study. I would say

the general reaction has been an uneasy mixture of excitement and skepticism. People often feel initially inspired, but then come up with numerous explanations as to why such things could never be true in most places, let alone in *their* organizations, which are too old/new, big/small, bureaucratic/disorganized, centralized/leaderless, dependent/isolated, etc. The general feeling is that the organizations I am describing are special places, and that there must be good and rare reasons that they are so.

These objections are plausible enough. The organizations I have studied do seem to be especially full of grace. But in my opinion, that grace is fairly earned. They operate under much the same constraints as their institutional counterparts. They have no more money or legal freedom than others. They are peopled by much the same sorts of people, people who in one organizational context act one way, and in another act quite differently. If I grant the three organizations here a signal, unique quality, it is that they are unusually brave. But bravery is a virtue that can be acquired with a little bit of diligence. It requires no training or financial support, just will and practice.

I mean this sentiment to be encouraging to others, not to diminish the beauty of these three places themselves. They are indeed beautiful, and my life has been enriched by spending time with them. I consider Food Cycle, the organization with which I have spent the most time, to be one of the best and wisest teachers I have ever had.

Perhaps my descriptions of these organizations will seem exaggerated to some, but my own worry is quite the opposite: that I haven't done them justice enough. It is not that they are without human frailty and conflict, stress and drama. It is precisely because they have their equal share of those things and yet remain essentially engaging that they are such compelling stories. Many times I have found myself trying personally to adopt practices I have observed while visiting one or another of them. It is humbling work; mostly I fail. But when I succeed, even for a moment, I find myself much more deeply and happily engaged in my own life.

If I am proud of the work I have done in this study, it is less for any theoretical contribution I might have made, than for the simple fact that I did my best to pay sustained and appreciative attention to these generous places. To pay such attention is to receive a gift, and I am glad to have been able to share that gift in this thesis.

## Appendix A: Participants – Food Cycle

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Positive Experience</b>
1	Jack	Board	Positive
1	Charles	Board	Positive
2	Erin	Volunteer	Positive
2	Amy	Board	High Positive
2	Louise	Volunteer	High Positive
2	Morganne	Volunteer	High Positive
3	Richard	Staff	Positive
3	Callie	Volunteer	Positive
3	Emile	Staff	High Positive
4	Beth	Volunteer	Positive
4	Tara	Board	High Positive
4	Justin	Staff	High Positive
5	Ingrid	Staff	Positive
5	Jean	Former Staff	High Positive
5	Celeste	Staff	High Positive
5	Jasper	Volunteer	High Positive
6	Pete	Staff	High Positive
6	Marcel	Volunteer	High Positive
6	Scott	Volunteer	High Positive
7	Polly	Board	High Positive
7	Chelsea	Former Staff	High Positive
7	Haley	Staff	High Positive
8	Jenna	Staff	Positive
8	Adam	Board	High Positive
8	Miles	Staff	High Positive
9	Phoebe	Board	High Positive
9	Amar	Former Staff	High Positive
9	Gwyneth	Former Staff	High Positive
9	Ella	Staff	High Positive
10	Alvin	Former Staff	Positive
10	Malcolm	Board	High Positive
10	Laiila	Former Staff	High Positive
INT	Jaycee	Volunteer	Positive
INT	Adisa	Board	High Positive
INT	Madelaine	Former Staff	High Positive

## Appendix B: Participants – Hollins School

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Experience</b>
1	Doug	Aide	Positive
1	Dante	Administrator	High Positive
1	Bronwyn	Teacher	High Positive
2	Baron	Aide	High Positive
2	Vandana	Teacher	High Positive
2	Lowell	Teacher	High Positive
3	Mia	Teacher	Positive
3	Heidi	Teacher	High Positive
3	Andrea	Teacher	High Positive
4	Alex	Administrator	Positive
4	Isa	Aide	High Positive
4	Anna	Teacher	High Positive
6	Miri	Administrator	High Positive
6	Karen	Teacher	High Positive
6	Laura	Teacher	High Positive
7	Bob	Consultant/Admin	High Positive
7	Wendy	Aide	High Positive
7	Gabrielle	Teacher	High Positive
8	Rita	Aide	Positive
8	Paula	Teacher	Positive
8	Kristi	Aide	High Positive
9	Farah	Administrator	High Positive
9	Carrie	Teacher	High Positive
9	Ellen	Teacher	High Positive
9	Charlotte	Teacher	High Positive
9	Barbara	Teacher	High Positive
INT	Patricia	Aide	Neutral

### Appendix C: Participants – Homestead

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Positive Experience</b>
1	Yves	Resident	Positive
1	Arlen	Resident	High Positive
1	William	Resident	High Positive
1	Carlos	Volunteer	High Positive
2	Louise	Board	Positive
2	Ellen	Board	Positive
2	Heidi	Staff	Positive
3	Anthony	Resident	Positive
3	Stephen	Resident	Positive
1/3	Gretchen	Staff	High Positive
2/3	Beatrice	Staff	Positive

## Appendix D: Interview Protocol

### Overview

- Check to see that everyone has signed informed consent form.
- Reiterate that participation is voluntary. Anyone may leave at any time. Anyone may decline to answer a question or discuss a topic.
- Ask people to please be sensitive to each other's confidentiality needs, and to refrain from speaking about things they'd like to keep entirely private.
- Encourage people to ask each other questions and build on each other's thoughts and ideas.
- Encourage people to ask me questions if anything is confusing.

### Process

- Ask people to consider various topics.
- Group then dialogues about those topics or interviewee answers my questions.
- Ask follow-up questions, primarily designed to help surface assumptions, deepen the conversation, and illuminate specific practices.

### Guiding Questions

#### General:

- How does your experience at this organization compare to other places at which you've worked or volunteered (emphasizing- for good or for bad)?

#### Attunement:

- When do you feel most in-tune and connected to this place (most alive, energized, creative, confident, joyful, present, etc.)? When does this place feel most alive?

#### Growth:

- How have you grown since you've been here?

#### Mutuality:

- How do people relate to each other here?

#### Meaning:

- What aspects of your experience here do you find most meaningful? How would you describe the purpose of this place?

### Guiding Follow-up Questions for Each Topic (as necessary)

- Make personal and concrete: Tell me about a time when that happened.
- Dig into organizational dimensions: Why is that true? What are the organizational conditions that make it true?
- Focus on practices: What are the specific practices involved in that dynamic – behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, structures, rituals, symbols, words, etc.
- Consider long-term consistency: How often does that happen/is that true? Is it consistently true over time? How has it changed over time? What would help to create that dynamic more consistently?
- Focus on interaction/relationship: How does that dynamic manifest in the way people interact with (behave toward, talk to, think about, feel about) each other?
- Consider intention: To what degree are people conscious about that? Do they think/talk about it explicitly together? Do people create that dynamic on purpose? If not, could they? How so?
- Set in context: How would you compare what you are describing to your experiences in other contexts?
- Inquire into the negative: -Tell me about a time when you struggled around that issue? When have you felt disengaged?
- Go past verbalizations: If you had to describe that dynamic in one word what would it be? (Can also ask for metaphors, pictures, etc.).
- Facilitate dialogue among participants: What are the assumptions underlying what you just said? Can you see anything about what X just said that you can relate to/build off of?

# Appendix E: Data Analysis Codes

Appendix E: Data Analysis Codes

Descriptive Code of Contextual Experiences	Definition	Practice Code	Definition	Practice Subcode	Definition
Flexibility/ Freedom	Experience of freedom to get involved and take initiative in various aspects of the organization.	Boundary Challenges	Experimenting with structural boundaries to make them more flexible and permeable	Roles	Expanding, mixing, crossing, and rethinking roles in order to achieve personal role alignment
Experimentation	Feeling of permission to try new approaches to work tasks			Tasks	Experimenting with and customizing task routines
Inclusion	Feeling that everybody in the organization values each other, absence of cliques			Groups	Working to make divisions among groups more permeable
Purpose Shift	Feeling of organization serving people other than clients, including self			Purpose	Ongoing questioning and exploration of organizational purpose
Authenticity	Experience of interacting as a whole person, from full self	Sharing Inner Life	Manifesting one's own inner experiences and attending to inner experiences of others in the course of work	Checking-in	Revealing an aspect of one's inner experience to other organization members
Openness	Feeling that issues/feelings aren't hidden, overall sense of trust and honesty			Appreciative Attention	Striving to see inner essences, gifts, and potentials for growth in others
Appreciation	Feeling that gifts and potentials are appreciated			Focus on Intentions	Shifting focus from behaviors to intentions during conflicts
Vulnerability	Feeling that weaknesses and struggles are known				
Safety	Feelings accepted, not judged; feeling secure to take risks; undrained by mistakes				
Participation	Feeling that everyone has voice and impact on organization.	Multi-vocal Expressiveness	Including multiple perspectives/experiences in enacting and expressing the organization	Orientation	Enabling broad and idiosyncratic participation in welcoming and acclimating people to the organization
Collaboration	Feeling of not working alone; thinking, deciding, acting with others			Representation	Enabling broad and idiosyncratic participation in representing and sharing the organization externally
Belonging/Unity	Feeling of connection to the whole (the organization and people in it)			Reflection	Routinizing including multiple perspectives at all levels of organizational reflection and decision making

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