For love and money: Organizations' creative responses to multiple environmental logics

Amy Binder

Abstract The recent "inhabited institutions" research stream in organizational theory reinvigorates new institutionalism by arguing that organizations are not merely the instantiation of environmental, institutional logics "out there," where organizational actors seamlessly enact preconscious scripts, but are places where people and groups make sense of, and interpret, institutional vocabularies of motive. This article advances the inhabited institutions approach through an inductive case study of a transitional housing organization called Parents Community. This organization, like other supportive direct service organizations, exists in an external environment relying increasingly on federal funding. Most scholars studying this sector argue that as federal monies expand to pay for these organizations' services, non-profit organizations will be forced to become ever more bureaucratic and rationalized. However, I find that three key service departments at Parents Community respond in multiple ways to this external environment, depending on each department members' creative uses of institutional logics and local meanings, which emerge from their professional commitments, personal interests, and interactional, on-the-ground decision making. By looking carefully at these three departments' variable responses to the external environment, we have a better map for seeing how human agency is integrated into organizational dynamics for this and other organizations.

Over the past 20 years, the United States has witnessed explosive growth in the amount of federal money flowing to free-standing, nonprofit social service organizations, also known as supportive direct service organizations, public benefit service organizations, and the nonprofit human services sector (Gronbjerg 1993, 2001; Smith and Lipsky 1993; Salamon 1995, 1999; Chaves et al. 2004). The result of both the devolution of federal assistance to states and municipalities, as well as the privatization of poverty services to third parties (Lipsky and Smith 1989; Salamon 1995, 1999; Marwell 2004), this new "nonprofit

A. Binder (✉)
Department of Sociology, University of California-San Diego,
9500 Gilman Drive, 0533, La Jolla, CA 92093-0533, USA
e-mail: abinder@ucsd.edu

federalism" (Salamon 1995) funds not-for-profit organizations to deliver social services to clients in dozens of domains, including child care, housing, hospice care for people with HIV/AIDS, and food distribution. The enormity of this funding change is striking: where, once, government provision was made almost exclusively through income transfers in the form of direct cash payments to individuals (such as welfare, social security, and veterans administration checks), now more than 20% of US federal social provision dollars flow to intermediary organizations, which then provide in-kind services to individuals (Marwell 2004).

Political scientists and sociologists have studied the consequences of this change at the macro, political-economic level, as well as at the meso organizational level (Salamon 1995; Gronbjerg 2001; Chaskin 2001; Marwell 2004)—the latter of which is the focus of attention in this article. Political scientists have taken a mostly pessimistic view of this shift, arguing that the reliance on federal monies fundamentally changes organizations' procedural routines, moving helping organizations away from their traditional identities and practices in the informal sector to more professionalized, formalized, and bureaucratized systems (Lipsky and Smith 1989; Smith and Lipsky 1993; Frumkin 2001). Increased public spending on supportive direct service organizations, this argument goes, results in increased federal oversight that, in turn, demands organizational accountability to the new federal standards, as well as universalistic application of those standards (Keating and Frumkin 2003). In Weberian fashion, local organizations are said to "[lose] control over the central aspects of the way they provide services" (Smith and Lipsky 1993, p.120; see also Gerstel et al. 1996; Stone 1996), reducing individuals—staff and clients, alike—to cogs, trapped in the machinery of bureaucracy. Both the independence of these organizations, as well as the human touch, it is argued, decline precipitously in a more monetized environment (see Zelizer 2005 for a critique of what she calls this oversimplified view); the "moral work" that organizations do is sacrificed in large measure at the altar of the resource flow (Hasenfeld 2000).

While Lipsky and others have argued that the new funding environment compromises the independence of supportive direct service organizations, a few scholars have been more sanguine about the effects of federal funding, arguing that organizations' autonomy depends on how the government-relationship is structured (Salamon 1995; De Hoog 1990), and how narrowly or broadly organizations define themselves and their missions (Minkoff and Powell forthcoming). They counter a priori assumptions about federal funding and point out that the predicted effect of "undermin[ing] the independence of these organizations" (Salamon 1995, p.101; Brown and Troutt 2004) is, in fact, variable, and does not inevitably result in the wholly patron-serf relationship Lipsky and Smith decry. Rather than "divert[ing organizations] from their basic objectives," to the detriment of their historically poor clientele, researchers have found that increased funding may focus organizations' efforts on disadvantaged populations (Salamon 1995; Marwell 2004), promote organizations' political activity (Chaves et al. 2004), and even lead to mission radicalization and resistance (Minkoff and Powell 2007).

The disagreement in the field of nonprofit organizations about the effects of the external funding environment on organizational forms leads to several research questions for sociologists who study all types of organizations. How do people in organizations go about the work of coupling their practices to environmental pressures? To what ends do people make their decisions, and with which tools do they craft their ideas about the ultimate goals of their organizations and their practical, everyday procedures? Are these tools used similarly and evenly across departments within the same organization or, following Scott's insight that "organizations are opportunistic collections of divergent interests" (1967, p.23), do different departments within the same organization vary in their responses to the environment? If

departments' orientations do vary across departments, what impact does this variability have inside the organization: what frictions and conflicts might they produce?

Answering this list of research questions sheds new light on classic concerns about how organizations and their members interact with their environments. Resource dependency theory and contingency theory make fundamental assumptions about the rational action and efficiency goals of organizational actors, in their bids to secure resources from their environments. New institutionalism, meanwhile, parts company with the rationalist assumptions of its predecessors and emphasizes, instead, organizations' ceremonial adherence to scripts as they stake claims for legitimacy. All three approaches give us some leverage for understanding organizational dynamics in complex organizations facing complex environments, and I find, with some surprise, that they are not altogether incompatible in studying the effects of increased federal spending on nonprofit service organizations. However, I also find that all three fall short in accounting for the human creativity that goes into determining what, precisely, the environment actually does demand, and how people go about squaring those demands with their own local meaning systems, personal commitments, and professional obligations. What we need is an account of organizational action that pays proper attention to, and appreciates, that institutions are "inhabited" by agentic, creative people, who have background knowledge and interests of different types (Hirsch and Lounsbury 1997; Scully and Segal 2002; Hallett and Ventresca 2006a,b). Organizational actors viewed in this light neither purely rationalize their action nor seamlessly follow institutionalized scripts. Rather, they combine and generate practices that are intended to satisfy multiple demands, and they do so in interaction with others. In the following, I look more closely at these major organizational theories and ask how each one would make sense of the research questions I have laid out above—paying particular attention to what each would see most importantly and what each would not be able to anticipate. I then describe how an inductive case study of one nonprofit service organization—composed of three uniquely situated departments—helps in the development of a more robust accounting of organizations' responses to their environments.

Three major approaches in organizational theory

Resource dependency theory is a useful starting place for thinking about how nonprofit organizations adjust to increased federal funding. One of several approaches to give primacy to materialist forces shaping organizations, resource dependency theory argues that organizations which depend heavily on external actors or organizations for resources (federal granting offices, suppliers, etc.) will be responsive to the demands of those external actors and, in doing so, will enhance their survival (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Pfeffer 1982). In the case of nonprofit federalism, the argument is that organizations would strategically implement more elaborate "coordination and control structures"—codified rules, designated positions or offices, and accountability systems—to satisfy their new federal benefactors (Scott 1994, p.115). Then, as actors make these adjustments, their organizations become more efficient in carrying out their tasks. Clearly, resource dependency theory closely resembles the "political science" model of nonprofit service organizations outlined above, in terms of the seamless bureaucratizing effect that federal funding has on organizations. What it overlooks is that increasing bureaucratization is not always actual or efficient (e.g., that, instead, it may be implemented to perform "ceremonial" purposes), and that it may be both contested and carried out variably by organizational members.

Contingency theory advances our inquiry by focusing on a different unit of analysis. Rather than taking the entire organization as the unit to be studied, as in resource dependency theory, contingency theory breaks down environment-oriented action into the organization's component parts, asking how subunits specialize differently to their unique resource environments (Thompson 1967). While it is still a materials-oriented, rationalist model of organizational action, contingency theory builds in the possibility for variation across different organizational departments—a subtle, yet important, step in acknowledging that all parties' interests inside organizations are not unified. In the case of nonprofit service organizations, contingency theory would predict that a nonprofit organization's accounting department would be more tightly coupled with the federal funding environment than its adult-counseling department, for example, since accounting has formal processes for measuring income and outlays, while adult-counseling engages in "the people business" and may not have to report firm outcomes results to funders at all. Such sensitivity to departmental differences marks an improvement over resource dependency theory for addressing the research questions above. Yet, despite these inroads, contingency theory also ultimately sees organizational action as rationally and strategically based, designed to maximize goods provided in the environment. This approach also misses the work that staff in all departments must do to craft meaning out of their practice and to generate hybrid responses to their funding environments.

A third way to think through federal funding's effects on supportive direct services is to look at it through the lens of new institutional theory, which points to the role of meaning in the production and reproduction of organizational practices, and away from a rationalist basis of action (Westenholz et al. 2006; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Organizations, in this view are "patterns of meaning, values, and behavior" (Meyerson and Martin 1987, p.623), and the institutional environment is seen to be the ultimate source of those meanings for organizational entities. New institutional theory suggests, iconoclastically (at least vis à vis more economistic models), that organizations incorporate elements of the institutional environment into their practice for reasons that often have little to do with technical rationality and strict efficiency concerns, or minimizing the uncertainty of resources and information. Rather, because environments are uncertain and people's interests are ambiguous, organizations seek to incorporate these elements into their practice as a way to signal their legitimacy in a cultural meaning system (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983a,b; Zucker 1988; Dobbin et al. 1993). By this model, supportive direct service organizations would bureaucratize their boards, professionalize their staff, and implement formal tracking systems not primarily to carry out their technical tasks more efficiently, but to participate in culturally legitimated action, or "rationalized myths" (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Although new institutionalism deserves credit for departing from rationalist assumptions of resource dependency and contingency theory, critics find the approach lacking in a few critical respects (Fine 1984; Hirsch and Lounsbury 1997; Scully and Segal 2002; Hallett and Ventresca 2006a,b). By prioritizing the institutional logics that get *carried into* organizations by script-following actors, new institutionalism has a view of action that deprives people of generative creativity in their responses to their environments. Because it assumes that coercive, mimetic, and normative forces are so strong that people in organizations have little choice but to adhere to these institutional scripts, it overlooks those actors' multiple and local meanings, which also shape their practices (Hallett and Ventresca 2006b). Organizational members, in new institutional theory, are carriers of institutional scripts, not active adapters or creators of practice.

Part of this oversight, I would argue, comes from looking for "*an* organization's" *single* response to the environment rather than seeking to find a multiplicity of responses in an organization's different subunits—particularly in complex organizations that have multiple departments, with differently professionalized staff, local departmental interaction styles, and differently structured dependencies on the resource environment. There may be contentious subunits of the same organization (Friedland and Alford 1991; Clemens and Cook 1999; Creed et al. 2002; Coburn 2004; Spillane and Burch 2005), which lead to different decisions about how to couple practice (Weick 1976; Meyer and Rowan 1977) with the funding environment. Rather than finding a single organizational response to the environment, we should expect to find that there are "pockets of discretion and autonomy and local ecologies of power and influence" amongst organizational members across departments in the same organization (Ventresca 2006). This argument is not foreign to organizational theory; in fact, there are many reminders in the field that organizations are heterogeneous, not homogeneous (Gouldner 1954; Selznick 1953; Perrow 1972; Pfeffer 1978; Scott 1987; Morrill 1995). But we must foreground this fact as we study organizations' responses to environmental pressures. Key questions then become: How and why would dramatic contrasts coexist amongst departments in the same organization, and are there any frictions that arise because of these differences?

Pushing further with "inhabited institutions"

All of the above leads me to fully embrace a new research stream that imagines institutions as "inhabited" (Hirsch and Lounsbury 1997; Scully and Creed 1997; Hallett and Ventresca 2006a,b). Reaching back to the symbolic interactionist tradition in the work/occupations and organizational subfields (Gouldner 1954; Blumer 1969), contemporary authors are combining key insights of both the new and "old" institutionalisms to reorient organizational studies toward the understanding that "while institutional logics carry meaning, it is also true that meaning arises through social interaction" in concrete settings (Hallett and Ventresca 2006b, p.213). Organizations are not merely the instantiation of environmental, institutional logics "out there" (including technical rational logics), where workers seamlessly enact preconscious scripts valorized in the institutional environment (Fine 1984; Lounsbury et al. 2003). Instead, they are places where people and groups (agentic actors, not "institutional dopes") make sense of, and interpret, institutional "vocabularies of motive" (Fligstein 1997), and act on those interpretations—the central premise of symbolic interactionism. They are places where institutional logics combine with local, embedded meanings to produce particular variations of local action (Binder 2000, 2002). They are places where local line staff, or "street-level bureaucrats"— ironically, Lipsky's (1980) indelible phrase from his ethnographic work on government agencies—gather and interpret information about their clients and make decisions that sometimes depart from official policy, but also sometimes embrace institutional logics for all variety of reasons, and in all variety of ways.

Hallett and Ventresca (2006b) argue for seeing individuals and groups in organizations as both locally and extra-locally embedded in meaning systems, as opposed to any *single* meaning system. It follows that organizations with multiple subunits are likely to be home to multiple and negotiated local meaning systems, which means that staff, management, funders, and clients will have varying interpretations of the definition of the organization's purposes, the organization's intended outcomes, and even what the services of the

organization "actually 'are'" (Joffe 1979, p.252; see also Brown and Brown 1983). Furthermore, individuals within any one subunit are, themselves, not systematic or necessarily unidimensional interpreters: they have "rival normative systems" (Heimer 1999, p.18), "transposable schema" (Sewell 1992), "distinct interpretations" (Meyerson 1991), or complex "repertoires" (Swidler 2001) for thinking about the tasks they are expected to perform. When we consider what happens when an organization assembles individuals "to do things together" (Becker 1982) in sometimes ambiguous contact with one another, we easily imagine situations where legalistic requirements do not penetrate organizational departments uniformly.

To get back to the research questions animating the empirical case in this article, all of these ideas taken together generate skepticism around the "political science" contention that supportive direct service organizations, in toto, become highly bureaucratized in response to the increased federal funding environment they now find themselves in. Organizations are complex places; their inhabitants' uses of institutional logics and local meanings; personal interests and professional commitments; and interactional, on-the-ground decision making must be taken under consideration. Human agency must be integrated into organizational dynamics to understand this and other empirical cases.

The site

To study these theoretical and real-world questions, I examine three separate, but interdependent, subunits from my case study of Parents Community, a national model of the supportive direct services field called transitional housing.[1] The goals of transitional housing are to help very low-income single parents and their families transform their lives from dependency to self-sufficiency or, as the organization puts it, be the place "where single parents write their own success stories." Parents Community is a 100-unit apartment complex located in a large city in the interior west of the United States, which provides a trio of services to single, homeless parents and their children for a period of up to two years: housing, comprehensive family support services, and early childhood education for their children. All residents at the time of entrance are below the poverty line; have between one and four children; are between the ages of 18 and 45; and have at least a high school degree or its equivalent upon entering residency. While not restricted to mothers, 95% of residents are women, and 80% have suffered domestic abuse in their past. There is racial and ethnic diversity.

This complex is a textbook example of a supportive direct service organization. Established in the 1970s, its founders—a local physician and his church colleagues—combined private donations and federal funding to create an organization that today has an annual budget of $3.7 million. Its most significant funder is the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), through its "project-based" Section 8 program—a program that provides vouchers to specific program sites, rather than directly to tenants, as its more well-known tenant-based vouchers do. One of the first federally subsidized transitional housing programs in the nation, Parents Community receives mortgage assistance on the building, proper, but much more significantly, it receives approximately $700,000 per year—about a fifth of its budget—in the form of rental subsidies to each of the tenants in the building's units.

---

[1]The names used in this article for the facility, its departments, and staff are pseudonyms.

Residents who earn income are required by HUD to pay rent at the rate of 30% of their gross adjusted income, and the federal agency then pays the difference between that amount and market rate. For residents who do not earn income—who instead receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), or who are students—HUD reimburses Parents Community for the total amount of the apartments, less a minimum of $25 paid by the tenant. These funds are managed by Parents Community's Housing department.

The second largest stream of federal funding comes in the form of child care payments to the facility's on-site child care Discovery Center, at approximately $500,000 per year. The state's Child Care Assistance Program, a state-level program funded through the federal welfare program, disburses these funds for children whose low-income parents work, while the state-administered (but federally funded) TANF program provides funding for children whose parents do not work. Unlike the HUD subsidies paid to the Housing department, which are distributed throughout the organization's other programs, the monies paid to the Discovery Center flow exclusively to the early childhood center's budget. The Discovery Center also receives approximately $100,000 per year from the US Department of Agriculture to provide lunch and snacks to children. Other federal funding reaches Parents Community, both directly, through the state's child care contribution credit (funded through federal TANF monies), and indirectly, through TANF and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments paid to residents and their children. Remaining sources of revenue include the "bewildering array" documented by Gronbjerg (1993) in other supportive direct service organizations.

Parents Community staff and management seek to help poor parents begin a path to "successful transformation and self-sufficiency" (Parents Community newsletter) during the time they are in residence and, toward that end, offer assistance to clients in nearly every facet of their lives. Staff in the Housing department, governed by HUD policy, assign apartments to families, based on family size and child gender and order, and "manage residents' housing subsidy"—determining their monthly income and coordinating HUD's contribution to their rental payments. Case managers, or "family sponsors," in the Family Support department provide solutions-oriented counseling and case management services to help residents obtain assistance from government agencies,[2] as well as offer career and education contacts, and access to other community resources. Staff in the Discovery Center provide early childhood education and after-school care for residents' and alumni's children. The Volunteers department coordinates individuals and groups to offer classes, mentorships, and technical assistance to residents and the organization more widely, raising approximately $300,000 per year in in-kind contributions.

While the amount of assistance made available to residents is substantial, Parents Community expects residents to be proactive about changing their own lives. These expectations are formally written as requirements into every resident's lease, and govern behavior in all three department areas. In the Discovery Center and Housing department, contracts stipulate behavior that matches federal regulations on child health/welfare and tenant responsibilities, respectively (discussed below in greater detail). The Family Support department requires residents to adhere to internal program requirements, such as attending regular meetings with their family sponsors, participating in three "life skills" evening

---

[2]Family sponsors help residents secure TANF, SSI, food stamps, child care subsidies, and subsequent subsidized housing slots.

classes per month, volunteering two hours a month, refraining from drugs, having their apartments inspected for cleanliness and upkeep, and filling out monthly status reports. Finally, residents are required to be in a "full-time activity" while residing at Parents Community, which means full-time work, full-time school, or some combination of work and school. Those who do not have jobs and are not in school are required to attend semi-weekly job club classes, and to be actively seeking work or education opportunities.

Data and methodology

The detailed, nuanced case study method is ideally suited to answer questions about organizational responses to environmental pressures left largely in a black box by "large N" studies (those typically carried out by new institutional researchers). From 2003 to 2005, I did research in three departments at Parents Community, relying heavily on field work and interviews. Ethnographic field work included attending evening life skills classes for adults and other sponsored events, including awards dinners, holiday programs, and board meetings, as well as "shadowing" of residents and staff during data collection. I conducted semi-structured interviews with several different Parents Community constituencies, including 44 residents or former residents, 10 volunteer instructors, and virtually all staff and management, some multiple times. I also interviewed several people who have other types of connections with the organization, including board members, founders, and ongoing funders. All together, I conducted 89 interviews.[3] In addition to these qualitative sources, I also was given access to Parents Community's own quantitative and qualitative systems for tracking current and past residents.

In studying these data, I see a complicated picture in which parts of Parents Community are, indeed, highly bureaucratized, professionalized, and tightly coupled with the newly increased federal funding environment, but where other parts of the organization are more improvisational, particularistic, informal, and loosely coupled with the resource environment—"We have a database, but we don't keep a point system!" the manager of one department said to me. The different departments, furthermore, are sometimes loosely coupled with one another over some policy rules, but at other points or for other rules, they are tightly coupled. The larger point I draw from this within-case comparison of these three subunits within a single organization is not that organizations with federal funding are *always* bureaucratized, or *never* bureaucratized, or that they are always coupled in the same way. Rather, the point is that internal processes within organizations are variable, and that the question of why and how they come to be that way, and how such situations are both maintained and altered, are the questions that must be studied to better understand how organizations work, vis à vis institutional logics. I assay an answer in the sections below, placing emphasis on the inventiveness and activities of different organizational actors, as they deal with the environmental pressures that face them.

---

[3]The interviews covered a range of topics, depending on the interviewee's role in the organization. When I interviewed staff, management, and volunteer instructors—the main data sources for this paper—I asked general questions about their roles and responsibilities within the organization, their educational and work backgrounds, their contacts and obligations to outside funding sources, their work with other social service agencies and organizations (state and non-state), as well as their more philosophical views on working in the supportive direct services sector. I coded and analyzed the qualitative data using ATLAS.ti.

The Discovery Center: Actors' blend of institutional scripts and funding demands in creating bureaucratic forms

The Discovery Center at Parents Community illustrates a stunningly complex blend of action, guided heavily by federal funding regulations and professional logics of action, both of which are put into play through the creativity of people on the ground. On the one hand, the department is wedded to the rules and regulations of the funding environment and, in turn, implements strict internal rules for staff and clients that reflect those federal guidelines. On the other hand, the department is steeped in the discourses of its institutional environment: on a daily basis, one hears articulations of the professional concepts of child advocacy and welfare, in "giving voice" to those who are innocent, and in "education, not day care"—all of which have typified the deeply institutionalized field of early childhood education for decades. What is unexpected—at least by resource dependency, contingency, and new institutional approaches—is that the department's staff creatively blends the funding demands and institutional discourses through a process of bricolage. Describing Discovery Center staff's creative responses to their environment—and later comparing these responses to responses made by staff in the Housing and Family Support departments—raises serious questions about both the mere "application" of scripts in an organization, and the uniformity of responses within an organization to the external environment.

Tight coupling with funding demands

Located in the basement of the seven-floor Parents Community complex, the Discovery Center is the recipient of half a million dollars in federal funding, administered through this western state. Under the 1996 welfare reform law known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), states now have total discretion for how their federal block grant monies are spent, although federal law provides significant incentives to move single parents from welfare to work, and to fund child care as part of this initiative. This western state does not spend lavishly for child care benefits, relative to other states of its wealth level (Capizzano et al. 2001). This basic fact, when combined with the economic downturn of the early 2000s—which led to cutbacks in spending—means that in the past few years, child care funding through the Department of Social Services has fluctuated, sometimes causing budgetary shortfalls in organizations that provide child care.

  In an uncertain environment like this, resource dependency and contingency theories predict that organizations, or their subunits, will concentrate their energies on two key activities to minimize uncertainty: (1) staying compliant with their ongoing resource base, and (2) seeking new supplementary funding sources in the environment. According to the two approaches, organizations use these strategies to create better systems for task performance (educating children, in this case), and at a base level, to survive. Does this happen in the Discovery Center?

  It does. On the first of these tasks—staying compliant—the deparment director, Anna, is quite clear:

  We are regulated by the Department of Social Services, bottom line. I mean, we do not have much freedom as to what our ratios should be in the classroom or to what qualifications of teachers we should be bringing on board, or what rules parents and staff need to follow regarding children's health... When it comes to regulations, they need to be met..., and I will not take a chance [of not meeting regulations]. I will not take that risk (interview with Anna, the director of the Discovery Center, 2005).

This conformity to federal regulations is articulated in staff's rules for parents, which reflect government policy. When residents enroll their children in the Center, they must sign a contract that stipulates that children must have yearly medical examinations (whose records are reviewed by staff and submitted to the state child care program). The rules also dictate that parents must immediately retrieve their children from the Center if they have a contagious illness; pay late fees of $5 per every five minutes that they are tardy in pick-up; pay for their children's attendance in the Discovery Center even when on vacation; keep the child in the Center for a set number of hours per week; keep a change of clothes on hand for their children; provide formula for babies every morning at the time of drop-off; and remit payment to the Discovery Center if their bill exceeds state or federal subsidies, among other agreements. Staff in the Discovery Center say that they try to accommodate clients' needs against these federal regulations when and where they are able, but the director also makes it clear that "I don't have a choice" when it comes to enforcing the basic regulations that keep her department funded (interview with Anna, 2005). Federal funding also comes with numerous rules governing staff qualifications, staff ratios, and facilities.

On the second of the activities predicted by the two rationalist theories—minimizing uncertainty by seeking other sources of income—Anna, with the support of other managers in the organization—is prodigious. Efforts to supplement ongoing federal support include seeking accreditation from a quasi-public entity known as Quality Child Care Accreditation, which then provides technical support to the organization to improve its service; and applying for federal funding from the state's Preschool Program, which provides money to centers that prepare low-income children for kindergarten. Anna admits that seeking such support creates a good deal of anxiety and work, but, she says, "the madness" is worth "securing the resources" the Discovery Center badly needs.

The institutional environment

While resource dependency and contingency theory clarify why funding regulations have a large impact on the Discovery Center's routines and rules, it would be reductionist to say that the materialist framework fully explains this department's bureaucratic forms. It also is important to lay out the institutional and interactional components of this department's work and, even more importantly, to see how funding pressures combine with the institutional aspects of the environment to inform staff's work. Particularly interesting, as seen below, are the ways that the director of the department sometimes marshals the logic of technical funding rules to legitimize the actions she wants to take, anyway, for institutional reasons. The director of the department crafts ways of doing things that ensure the smooth flow of resources into her department, but she also has to make sure that she and her staff feel good in carrying out those funding-oriented activities. Professional logics make this possible. Rather than seeing the two aspects of her environment as being at cross-purposes with one another, and as fundamentally uncoupled, funding demands and professional logics interplay with one another in fascinating ways.

With a top-down management style in a centralized department, Anna sets the tone for what happens in her department, and she is a force to be reckoned with. Anna is steeped in professional discourses about child advocacy and education. Armed with a bachelor's degree and coursework toward her master's degree in early childhood education, Anna is involved throughout the state in professional early childhood education organizations. She serves on the board of directors for the 5,000-member Mountain State Child Care Association, and she was a founding member of an organization that advocated for higher

early childhood workers' salaries. She also has taught early childhood education at the community college level. Coming to the organization with this level of expertise, she is tough with other adults who ask her to compromise, and she describes her commitments as unflinchingly geared to protecting the interests of her young charges, even if those interests clash (as they frequently do) with the parents of those same children, or with staff from other Parents Community departments.

Since Anna joined Parents Community in the early 2000s, the Discovery Center has undergone significant changes. Although always called the Discovery Center—with that name's emphasis on cognitive development, as opposed to "mere child care"—the Center "has become much more about early childhood education"—a place "with teachers who teach, and who have standards"—since Anna came aboard (interview with Trish, chief program officer, 2003). This change in activities reflects legitimate practices in the larger institutional field, as academics, children's advocates, and practitioners have called for greater academic preparation for poor children in preschool settings (Jencks and Phillips 1998). Citing "hundreds of studies," that make her a "strong proponent that you cannot have child care without early education," (interview with Anna, 2003), the change in orientation has led to real, though sometimes gradual, changes in Discovery Center practices.

Staff qualifications, for example, are rising, as Anna seeks to hire college-educated teachers—whom she calls "the right people for kids"—for new openings, and encourages current staff to engage in ongoing professional development. Anna puts her money where her mouth is, urging management to implement higher pay scales to reward teachers' increased educational attainments. She does this even when it means that she will have to work extra hours to complete time-consuming applications for external funding to cover her costs. She has made the work environment more formal, instituting firm rules about staff absences and break times. She has paid greater attention to classroom curriculum than her predecessors did, and has worked with staff to create "developmentally appropriate" curricula for each age group—taking "a little bit of mandatory, a little bit of high school curriculum, a little bit of the British primary approach, and all of the others I have come in contact with through the years"—and teachers must show her their weekly lesson plans. Commensurate with research on parent involvement—and often to the chagrin of the parents who enroll their children in the Discovery Center, and who do not like to be told how to parent their children—Anna goads parents to participate in after-school activities, student performances, and field trips; to talk with their children in educationally and emotionally productive ways; and to have "personal accountability" to the child care center rules (field notes, Senior Management Team meeting). Anna has put together a Parent's Handbook, which explains to parents that the Discovery Center is "not just a depository for children, where you can come, drop them, and leave them," but instead a place with "a philosophy and goals for your children" (field notes, Outside Consulting contract).

The director also draws attention to her tireless commitment and advocacy on behalf of the children in her charge as her motivation for enforcing rules that protect children. In one interview, she says:

> The bottom line is that I have to think about the children [because] children don't have a voice of their own....The child for me always has to come first. Perhaps I advocate strongly, which may or may not be well received. I will go out on a limb and say again and again, "Children can't speak for themselves." They did not put themselves in this mess. Their parents did. The parents are making the choices they have made in their lives. Perhaps [the parents] didn't have any other choice. Perhaps they weren't taught

any better. But the bottom line is that these children did not choose to be where they are at (interview with Anna, 2003).

Anna represents her goal of protecting children as her institutional mandate—a goal that she believes in, but which she also uses strategically when she is at odds with her colleagues in other departments. Anna often spars with the director of the Volunteers department, for example. In these conflicts, she refers to academic research on consistency and structure in caregivers' relationships with young children to insist that she won't take any volunteers in the Discovery Center who will not commit to at least a year of 2-hour weekly visits. This places the Volunteers director in an unhappy position, since she, then, cannot place dozens of volunteers who cannot (or will not) make such a commitment. Anna also frequently tussles with the Fundraising department, which seeks to bring all potential major donors on tours of the Discovery Center, since such visits often soften up visitors to open up their checkbooks. Anna calls this practice disruptive when the groups are too big, and she has been known to put a moratorium on the visits, by fiat, when she feels that they are disturbing children's learning environments. Anna also frustrates Family Support staff when she insists, bureaucratically, that sick children be picked up immediately by their parents, as written in federal law. Her insistence on enforcing this rule, no matter how minor the illness, annoys family sponsors, since this often creates a burden for their adult residents, who are trying to hold down jobs with employers who are not always compassionate about poor single parents' plight. The organization's chief program officer is not alone among staff when she says, only part-comically, "99% of the time [Anna's] *right*. But you say to yourself, 'I can't believe I have to deal with that too!'" (interview with Trish, 2003).

How people combine legal funding requirements and institutional commitments

Anna's organizational initiatives lend themselves to institutional analysis, resembling, as they do, the larger world of legitimate practice set forth by education schools and professional associations. But her department's practice must be seen as a response to different parts of her environment—that which concerns ideas about what constitutes legitimate practice (what we think of most obviously as the institutional environment) and that which concerns the financial resources provided for compliance with these ideas—not to just one or the other. Neither one is the master force field. Anna ends up relying on both— sometimes strategically, sometimes seemingly beneath the level of consciousness—to move the Discovery Center in the direction she wants, often counter to colleagues' and parents' preferences. She believes that children *should* have low teacher-to-child ratios, and that her staff *should* have educational credentials and teach age-appropriate curricula. She believes that parents *should* prioritize their sick children over their own needs, and remove those children from the Discovery Center when the kids have a contagious illness. She thinks that parents *should* have to bring enough formula for their children at the start of the day, not bring it by "later" when it is convenient for them, and she refers to federal regulations on child health to stake her claims. She believes that adults *should* ensure that children have regular schedules in the Discovery Center, not haphazard ones that meet parents' timetables, and she impresses these beliefs on parents by referring to federal law governing regular participation. These are bureaucratic practices that the funding environment mandates, but they are also practices that Anna pursues because they seem right and appropriate to her, given her experiences as an early childhood education professional. The

department's environmental pressures condition activity and partly constitute action, but Anna and her staff actively combine these pressures to take action.

While Anna and her staff are not fond of the enormous amount of paperwork and energy that are required to signal compliance with federal, state, and private-source guidelines, such guidelines also can be used to their advantage—a point that Heimer (1992) also makes. Anna's actions and rhetorical devices make it plainly clear that the rules she finds in the funding environment can be used as powerful resources in her interactions with other staff and clients. Making her practice tightly coupled with these rules has become part of her tool kit, or repertoire, for addressing the needs of her young clients (Swidler 1986, 2001). Anna often refers to federal guidelines and the program's internal rules as the ultimate arbiter in disputes with her colleagues in other departments, as well as with parents. Describing the basis of many of her decisions as motivated by her obligations to her funding source, Anna is able to stay true to what, institutionally, is her commitment to her professional ideology: children's health and wellbeing. Money and ideas may be analytically distinct, as described in new institutional theory, but Anna combines them in inextricable ways in real settings. Anna's department is both technically and institutionally committed to the rules.

The Housing department: Actors' strict loyalty to funding rules

Whereas staff in the Discovery Center rely on funding rules and institutional logics to legitimate their department's bureaucratic structure, staff in the Housing department talk almost exclusively about the latter. Of all the organizational units that collectively constitute Parents Community, the Housing department would provide Lipsky and Smith with their most dystopic nightmares of what happens to the nonprofit sector when it must satisfy federal sponsors. In the universalistic criteria it uses to select clients, its adherence to even those federal rules that it considers punitive, its issuing of "infractions" when those rules are broken, and its yearly verification process for reporting clients' funding eligibility to HUD, this department stands out as the organization's most highly rationalized and bureaucratic unit. It is no surprise that it frequently earns residents' criticisms for being "cold" and "inflexible" (field notes, Alumni Association meeting).

The Housing department occupies conflicted terrain in the overall Parents Community mission. On the one hand, Housing has always been what makes the entire Parents Community enterprise possible, both spatially and financially. With no housing units, there would be no place, literally, in which adult residents could be "committed to the program" and children could "discover" knowledge; without the federal subsidies that flow through the building's apartments, there would be substantially less of an operating budget for other subunits to carry out their missions. On the other hand, Housing is seen by management as "a support to our mission, not our core mission" (interview with interim CEO, 2003) of helping single parents become self-sufficient. Although the service the Housing department renders to residents is highly valued by those residents—putting a roof over their heads and alleviating one of their most basic material insecurities—management and staff try to demote Housing's standing, relative to the organization's core identity as a program. The Family Support department, not Housing, is emphasized as the technical core of the Parents Community mission, and even the selection process favors applicants who convince staff that they are "not just here for housing, but are ready to 'do the program'" (field notes, Intake Assessment meeting).

Housing's status as a sub-core service is reflected in its historical loose coupling with the rest of the organization. Until 2005, the Housing department had been run administratively by a management company contracted by HUD, rather than internally by Parents Community managers. Management set up this arrangement, according to Trish, the chief program officer, "to keep the jobs separate and maintain everybody's sanity, including HUD's" (interview with Trish, 2004). The Housing department's director and staff of one worked largely independently of the daily operations of other Parents Community subunits, sharing little information on residents and attending few meetings with colleagues in other departments. Housing staff also have had relatively thin relationships with professionals outside the organization. Directors and staff typically have completed some college (and the current director holds a BA), but unlike the Discovery Center's director, Anna, who has a vast network in the early childhood education world, Housing department staff have little or no specialized training in the housing world; and, often, they have had no prior experience in the nonprofit field. Staff's connection to institutional logics of action have been low, as are their internal connections to, and interactions with, other staff in the organization.

Housing's technical tasks

What the department *is* high on is its degree of conformity with its revenue source, making it tightly coupled with the demands of the federal funding environment. The Housing department carries out a number of tasks over the duration of each client's residency, starting with their application and selection into the program. Selection is a two-part process: one part universalistic, which Housing carries out; one part much more highly personalized, which the Family Support department carries out. Housing's role in selection is prescribed by HUD, and the procedure it follows has all the paperwork typical of federal oversight. According to the Housing director, named Laurie:

> Going though the process of applying for a program like this can be really intimidating. [Applicants] have to provide all kinds of documentation. They have to fill out an application....It's not an easy process....It is HUD's stuff. It is highly regulated. It is very wordy....It is hard for many applicants to understand what we are really asking for.

Governed exclusively by federal guidelines, the Housing department checks applicants' eligibility by running background checks on their credit rating, criminal records, and past housing experiences. If applicants have been evicted from any property, have a felony in the past seven years or a misdemeanor in the past five years, or have been reported to a collection agency for failing to pay subsidized housing rent, their applications are immediately terminated. The Housing director says that she does her best to make the process "accommodating," "encouraging," and "less intimidating," but in the end, she reports that the criteria are non-negotiable, and approximately 40% of initial applicants are turned away (interview with Laurie, director of the Housing department, 2005). Only if approved by Housing staff in the first round, do the other 60% of applicants enter the second round of the selection process with Family Support department staff, where applicants are interviewed to see if they "fit with the program," and have the right "attitude," "motivation," and "chances for success"—all much fuzzier criteria than Housing's.

Once approved for residency by both departments, residents continue to be subject to Housing's verification and accountability systems. According to Laurie, much of this process is bewildering to new residents:

[New residents] have to sign a lot of stuff. There is consent to releases of information in there. There is an effective maintenance program in there. There is a lead-based paint disclosure in there. I mean things that kind of strike people, or are a little bit startling....

I had one resident who wanted to refuse to sign some of the paperwork in our lease. I said, "Well, unfortunately, I count that as a refusal to accept an apartment, and you can't move in unless you sign it, because otherwise we can't do our job for you." So eventually she signed it.

After the selection process is complete, Housing continues to have a predominantly bureaucratic relationship with residents, enforcing HUD rules on rent remittance, guest stays, income verification, and facility management. Describing a variety of verification processes, the director says:

[Residents] have to report certain things, and they have to sign certain paperwork, and we forward it to HUD. We have to verify everything. [Residents] have to report at least once a year to us.... Once a year they have to come in and do, basically, a renewal of their lease with us. Then, in between that year period, they would also have to do an interim renewal for updated information. They are required to come in and report it to us. If we find out that they have been making more income than they reported before, then sometimes it's difficult, and we have go back and back and back, and retroactively charge rent.

When things are going smoothly with a client—when residents meet their obligations and live by the rules—Housing may meet with that client only once or twice a year in a formal capacity, in these paperwork meetings and during cleaning inspections. In cases where residents are having a tougher time, such as having short-term cash flow difficulties or problems finding a job, the director and her staff might meet with residents more frequently, and write a contract (permitted by HUD) that stipulates a 1-or-2 month easement on her obligations. When things go seriously wrong with a resident—when rent is an ongoing problem, neighbors complain about noise, or residents fail their cleaning inspections multiple times—clients begin to feel the full weight of a bureaucratic structure. The Housing department posts notices of late rental payment on residents' doors, it requires meetings for redrawing contracts and, in cooperation with Family Support, begins a long process (on average, eight months) of increasingly serious infractions, which very rarely, but highly consequentially, result in eviction.

Highlighting the formal procedures outlined above is not to suggest that the Housing department is devoid of human connection with clients. The director encourages her staff to be "genuine" with residents—to learn their names, talk with residents' children, ask people how they are doing, and "really mean it" (interview with Laurie, 2005). She wants her department to be "less clinical, less separate from the rest of the organization" than it has been under her predecessors. She feels misunderstood when she hears clients say that "Housing just wants its money," "If you don't pay your rent, they just kick you out," and "They play favorites in Housing" (field notes, Affordable Housing evening class).

But the basis for action in the Housing department is more purely bureaucratic than the other subunits of Parents Community, and this seems to derive, at least in part, from the fact that there are no countervailing institutional logics that staff in this department draw on, as there are in the Discovery Center. The Housing department's staff and director are not steeped in outside professional logics: the director's degree is in finance, and neither she nor her recent predecessors have a background in nonprofit housing, which means that normative isomorphism is virtually absent. Securing and maintaining resource flows for the organization are what staff most clearly focus on, as both resource dependency and contingency theory would predict. Although it has not always been so, and even today there are exceptions, staff rationalize their processes and follow federal rules strictly because "that's what the rules are." Bureaucracy penetrates this part of the organization thoroughly, as Smith and Lipsky's model would predict.

As individuals, Housing department staff do have emotional responses to their clients—the director tells me she is "a single parent, myself; I can really relate to the clientele in that way," and that she feels "deeply invested" in working for an organization like Parents Community (interview with Laurie, 2005). But in the absence of a strong institutional/ professional logic, Laurie understands her job as applying rules evenly to all residents and satisfying HUD's federal requirements. Unlike her colleagues in Family Support or the Discovery Center, who rely on a corpus of professional knowledge to adjudicate between the policy environment and alternative institutional logics of action, Laurie sees that her professional integrity, as well as her employment longevity, depends on remaining compliant with an eminently bureaucratized set of expectations.

Theoretically, we have more evidence that organizational actors respond to their environments in non-uniform—read: creative—ways. Whether bureaucracy penetrates a department in response to resource dependency pressures (as in the Housing department) or in response to both institutional and resource dependency pressures (as in the Discovery Center), it is always people with particular kinds of interests, backgrounds, and aspirations who are making sense of the environment that surrounds them.

Family Support: Where actors largely ignore funding logics and prioritize institutional logics instead

The third subunit to be discussed here, the Family Support department, departs significantly from the other two departments, in terms of both its relationship to federal mandates and its relationship to institutional logics. Family Support's work is the bread and butter of Parents Community's core identity, the "center of the program." When people think about what Parents Community does, it is the work of the Family Support department that comes foremost to mind, making this department the capstone of the organization. This is not to say that the Discovery Center and Housing department are unimportant components of Parents Community's work; on the contrary, they form two parts of the trio of services that the organization does. But where management regards the services provided by the Discovery Center and the Housing department as "tools" of the program, it is in the social work milieu of the Family Support department where management and staff expect their disadvantaged clients to find the supports they need to change "their self-defeating attitudes," as orientation materials describe; to learn to be "appropriate" in "mainstream, middle class society" (field notes, Family Support staff meeting); and to "write their own success stories," as the organization's logo declares. It is here that residents "really do the program" (field notes, Paid Consulting Contract).

Family Support is also the subunit of the organization whose practices are penetrated least by the prescriptions of federal funding. Where both Housing and the Discovery Center

are structurally coupled with federal funding streams, drawing most of their revenues from a variety of federal programs, Family Support is more buffered from the demands of federal funding, getting most of its direct funding from individual, corporate, and foundation sources, rather than from the state. In addition, this subunit has access to an influential institutional logic of action governing professional social work practice, which emphasizes particularistic relationships with clients—different from both the Housing department, where the director has few institutional logics in her repertoire, and the Discovery Center, where the director significantly combines institutional logics with funding demands. What is particularly interesting about this department for the purposes of this article are (1) that the department coexists in reasonable harmony with the other two organizational subunits, despite the fact that the three have strikingly different relationships to both the federal funding environment and institutional logics, and (2) that in this era of increased federal constraints on funded organizations, supportive direct service providers, as whole organizations, find ways to continue delivering individually tailored services in autonomous departments like Family Support, even as the overall organizations take in hundreds of thousands of dollars in federal monies.

Relationship to funding pressures and institutional logics of action

Family Support staff do not adhere to the authority of funding logics nearly to the same extent that the staff of the other two service subunits do. One key reason is that the department has a different relationship with a variety of funding streams. While federal funding flows strongly through Housing and the Discovery Center, virtually every dollar spent in the Family Support program is derived from a funding source besides the federal government. As written in its project-based Section 8 agreement, no HUD money is to be spent on Warren Village's "program"; only building facilities (and related expenses, such as landscaping and playgrounds in the Discovery Center) are to be funded through HUD. While this proscription also applies to the Discovery Center, Anna's department applies for and receives monies from several other federal funding programs and, as we have seen in the previous section, duly satisfies federal regulations. Family Support is different from both of these other departments in that its staff choose not to apply for federal funding but, instead, receive all of their resources through the coffers of private and corporate donors, church groups, and other funders, such as the United Way. While the department must then be accountable to these other funders, none of them has strictures as coercive as federal requirements, and not one of them represents the one overriding funding source for Family Support activities.

   Insulated to a large extent from the pressures of the federal funding market, Family Support staff are able to act more improvisationally than their colleagues in the other two departments: they can debate the rationale and feasibility of their different organizational components, rapidly incorporate new ideas from those discussions into novel ways of conceiving their practice, and actually try to change practices that don't work. Being protected from the long reach of funding strictures means that departmental staff do not have the same "difficultly juggling fidelity to a mission and achieving fiscal stability" (Minkoff and Powell 2007, p.5) that their colleagues face in other departments, and that their treatment of clients is not held to the same inflexible accountability standards. This difference results in relationships with clients that are usually less formal, more intimate, and deeper—hallmarks of the social worker's profession. Given these possibilities, it would seem that the Family Support department is an ideal typical example of the "old form" of particularistic nonprofit structure and culture that Smith and Lipsky celebrate.

What is fascinating about this freedom, though, is that bureaucratic norms are in no way absent from the professional social work logic present at Parents Community. As others have noted, social work is a profession built on the central contradiction of "managing the dissonance between personhood and casehood" (Heimer and Stevens 1997, p.135; see also Joffe 1979). The "psychosocial model" of social work, writes Meyerson (1991, p.138–9), comes into conflict with a bureaucratic model of measuring the effectiveness of the organization's treatment. On the one hand, social workers are expected to:

> ...treat the whole person, including her psychological, social, and economic condition; empower the client by giving her as much control as possible; value emotions and behave empathically; and focus on process as well as specific outcomes....Given the occupation's respect for empathy and emotion, and its belief in the importance of the individual client relationship, social work theoretically accepts that its technologies and goals are subjective, idiosyncratic, and loosely connected to each other (Meyerson 1991, p.139).

Or, as the former director of the department (and now chief program officer for the entire organization), Trish, says:

> We are not really a bureaucracy....I think we're respectful. We try to be responsive to people.... not use a point system, not expect them to move linearly. Our goal is to support them, not to evaluate them all the time (interview with Trish, 2004).

Even the nomenclature used in the department—the use of the staff term "family sponsor" to replace the more clinical and alienating "case worker"—is an indication of the empathic and emotional content that staff and management expect these jobs to entail.

On the other hand, despite staff's allegiance to individual treatment and respect, techno-bureaucratic language about universally administered treatment and measurement of outcomes, and "hitting benchmarks," is also present in Family Support discussions, a reflection of both the profession's "casehood" model and the Parents Community departments' immersion in discourses of accountability. Despite their emphasis on personhood, social workers in this nonprofit organization are surrounded externally and internally by the cultural valorization of accountable behavior and standards of practice, and are influenced by their colleagues in other departments who must meet high accountability standards. There is the sense among Family Support staff members and, particularly, the director of the department, that Family Support should be held to certain standards of practice that are predictable, efficient, appropriate, and applied evenly across all cases. So, for example, while family sponsors often question whether it is reasonable to try to measure residents' accomplishments of becoming "successful" in "transforming" their lives to "self-sufficiency" (the organization's bedrock goals), they also purport to being "held accountable." In a conversation I observed between the director of the Family Support department and one of her staff, Sarah, the director, stated:

> We don't want to be really super controlling but, yet, we are accountable to ourselves, our residents, our funders, the program. I mean, it's not optional at some point (field notes, shadowing June).

As Heimer and her co-authors also find for the NICU nurses they studied (Heimer and Staffen 1995; Heimer and Stevens 1997) and Meyerson describes in the social work setting

she observed, the family sponsors at Parents Community are "caught in between" (Meyerson 1991, p.139) competing models of action.[4] Being located at this institutional juncture situates Family Support Staff differently from their colleagues in other departments toward legalistic requirements. Having the autonomy to play with these meanings is made possible by their distance from strict funding regulations, yet that distance and autonomy also creates ambivalence about whether they are "being held accountable" for their practice.

Ambiguity of practice

Perhaps no set of practices in the department captures the extent of family sponsors' ambivalence over the competing models of their profession as well as the dilemma posed by what staff call "consequenting," or the practice of giving residents penalties (consequences) for failing to meet their obligations. One of my interviewees from the Volunteers department says that the past director of the Family Support department:

> ...has a problem with the "C" word...."C" as in "consequences." Trish doesn't like consequences! She would say, "We don't want to *consequent* people." That was her favorite line. "We don't want to *consequent* people"....So, she didn't want to consequent anybody! She would track residents' [failure to meet program require-ments, such as attending evening classes], but then she wouldn't do anything about it! So now, we have a great tracking system in place,...but she didn't want to use it! [emphasis in the original] (interview with Caroline, director of Volunteers, 2003).

Whether or not to "consequent" leads to constant negotiations amongst family sponsors, who argue whether a consequence is justified in any particular case, or whether consequences should be applied universalistically whenever a rule has been breached. This uncertainty and deep ambivalence over the meaning and effects of consequences has the resultant side effect that family sponsors' work sometimes feels "squishy" to them, because it's not aligned with formal rules. During one Family Support staff meeting that I attended, this was the topic of a 30-min conversation, portions of which were captured in my field notes:

> Family sponsors are doing their monthly rundown of every resident in the building, describing who's doing well, who's not doing so well, and who is "screwing up" sufficiently to warrant receiving a "10-day infraction," which is a warning that the resident is not meeting her obligations, designed to set residents on the right path again. One family sponsor, Karen, complains to the group that one of her residents, Trina, scares her. This topic had come up before—several times—and the staff discuss

---

[4]Family sponsors encounter the competing models of their profession in all the usual places that new institutional scholars write about: school, professional associations, and in their ongoing interactions with others in the field. This is a more thoroughly professionalized—institutionalized—subunit than those found in either the Discovery Center or the Housing department. Composed of three family sponsors and a director, each of the professional staff members of the Family Support department are steeped in the logics of the profession. The director of the department has a masters degree in social work and an additional credential to provide mental health therapy, and she serves on a variety of boards in the mental health field. Two of her three professional staff also have advanced degrees (one in education, the other in social work), and all three participate in work-related associations outside Parents Community. All professional staff in the department use the language of the profession fluently.

the resident's problems: that Trina might be bipolar, she might be addicted to prescription drugs, that there's a man back in her life who she might be sneaking into her apartment, and that she doesn't tell the truth about her monthly income. The family sponsor, Karen, admits that she's afraid that Trina "might turn physical on me," which makes her reluctant to "call her on missing her classes and the other stuff," since Trina just yells at her, "That's bullshit." So she has let Trina slide for several months now. But she doesn't feel good about this practice, and now she's asking the director to step in and issue an infraction, which the director agrees to do, saying, "Trina's getting a 10-day."

The conversation moves on to Donette, who serves as one of the officers on the organization's Resident Council, but who just can't seem to "get things done," like keep up on her evening classes, meet regularly with her family sponsor, or stick with her job search. The team agrees that Donette also is due for an infraction (which means that she is going to get warned that she's not meeting her obligations), but this gives *her* family sponsor pause, saying, "I know I am her sponsor, and I should be advocating for her, but she hasn't done anything for three months." Some talk ensues that a 10-day seems appropriate, that it's not going to hurt the resident, and might even help to motivate her. But they put it off for another month.

They discuss several more residents, a few more receive infractions, but a few residents whom I would have thought would receive infractions, don't get them, and vice versa. I ask the group about this, saying I can't quite figure out who does and who doesn't receive a warning. June, one of the family sponsors, tells me her rules of thumb, which the other family sponsors seem to agree with. She says she's much more likely to give residents an infraction:

• If they "don't do stuff because of an attitude, rather than, say, mental health reasons"
• If the "situation seems to be getting desperate, like they are running out of TANF time, or they are moving closer to eviction"
• If "they always have excuses for why they're not going to school or going to work, or not coming to meetings"
• If they're "victims, victims, victims"
• Or, if "they're dangerous, themselves, or they have dangerous boyfriends"

   These rules of thumb aren't written anywhere, and listening to the conversation, I got the impression that however reasonable these rules sounded on this afternoon, June's list might have looked different if I had asked on another day. Family sponsors and the director of the department sometimes worry that there is no firm footing that they can find in their jobs; that they sometimes act unevenly, or arbitrarily, toward different clients; that clients will criticize their actions as "playing favorites"; and that their practices are not conforming to the organization's formal rules. But at the same time, all staff in the department believe, fundamentally, that their practice must be flexible—based in solid, professional practice, but always molded to individual persons.
   The multiple dilemmas faced by family sponsors are indications of how fundamentally different practice is constituted in the Family Support department, as compared to practice in either the Housing department or the Discovery Center. This difference can be explained

both as a matter of resources and as a matter of institutional logics. Unlike the Discovery Center and the Housing department, which adhere to uniform standards of regulation to satisfy federal oversight demands (though by different means), the Family Support department enjoys more autonomy from outside pressures. This fact, combined with social workers' cross-cutting definitions of professional action, makes its routines considerably more personalized. Even as the department takes on increasingly rationalized forms, family sponsors are informed by an institutional logic of action that encourages them to see nuance, weigh the person against the case, and negotiate with each other over the rules. No matter how extensively "consequences" are endowed with value in the department, or how "accountable" the new director says she would like the department to be to standards of practice, this is a department that is ambivalent about taking on overwhelmingly rationalized organizational forms. While it is true that even this department seeks to make its practices more rationalized (partly as they look to the other two departments' practices), the rationalized processes are everywhere questioned, contested, and subverted in the service of providing particularistic selection and treatment to clients.

Lessons from the case

This inductive case study has produced findings that are informative for how we think about supportive direct services, specifically, and how we theorize organizations, more generally. Contrary to the "political science" model of the inexorable bureaucratization of supportive direct service organizations, as reviewed in the opening pages, we see evidence that different subunits of this organization find heterodox ways of responding to the accountability demands of its environment, even as the organization draws nearly half of its operating budget from the federal government.

   To date, resource dependency theory and contingency theory have been the favored approaches to studying these types of organizations (Gronbjerg 1993). These approaches argue that organizations, and subunits of organizations, respectively, strategically try to manage environmental uncertainty by adopting and adapting structures and forms that ensure their survival. As I have indicated, these rationalist models simply cannot capture organizational members' creative responses not only to the technical requirements of their environment, but to the institutional logics that exist in some parts of the organization, as well. Yet new institutionalism also falls short as a satisfying explanation for organizational practice at Parents Community, insofar as it asserts that organizational actors' interests and activities are fundamentally "derivative from institutions and culture" (Jepperson 2002). Rather, this case study clearly demonstrates that staff in different departments are inventive, and that their action is not merely guided by broader rationalist and institutional scripts, but is created through local meaning systems, as well. The new inhabited institutions approach (Creed et al. 2002; Hallett and Ventresca 2006a,b) points us in the direction of correcting this short-sightedness. This interactionist-invigorated body of organizational research suggests that organizational scholars must refocus their lenses and emphasize the agency of actors in organizations; note that these actors possess varied, and sometimes cross-cutting logics of action; document that their departments are often differently related to the funding environment; and study how these actors are idiosyncratically endowed with interests. In this article, I push the inhabited institutions research stream to account for the incredible creativity that workers bring to their jobs, where people are engaged with not just one or two prevailing logics, but with multiple logics ("casehood," "bureaucracy," "children's welfare" informal and ad hoc rule of themes), and with multiple ways of

encountering those logics, on a continuum of almost purely universalistic to almost purely institutional. To study a place like Parents Community, and its responses to its environment, means to study it in its composite parts, where local ideologies and action are seen to flourish, which spring from ground-level interactions, managers' and staff's skill sets and commitments, and the proximity of different aspects of the external environment. Externally derived logics—material and institutional—by this last model, do not enter supportive direct service organization practices uniformly, as most new institutionalists implicitly assume, but are imported into them in a multiplicity of ways, though of course still shaped by the environment (Davies and Binder 2007). Tight and loose coupling with the external funding environment—as well as with the internal environment, across subunits—are seen to be dynamic, not static; variable, not uniform. No one institutional logic is "matter of fact" for everyone in the organization; rather, several different logics are common-sensical for different organizational departments and their staffs. "Protecting children" animates one professional group, while "seeing the whole person" rouses another, while what we might call "keeping the money stream flowing" motivates the third. These logics come into contact with each other and with funding rules, and they must be negotiated—by people with strong commitments, not simply cool cognitive scripts.

Logics are not purely top-down: real people, in real contexts, with consequential past experiences of their own, play with them, question them, combine them with institutional logics from other domains, take what they can use from them, and make them fit their needs. These locally situated people engage not in automatic script following, but in what Mary Douglas calls bricolage, combining and "recombining already available and legitimate concepts, scripts, models, and other cultural artifacts that they find around them in their institutional environment" (Campbell 1998, p.383; Douglas 1986). We must look to people's creativity at the local level, as well as at the "rules of the game" to understand how organizations work.

References

Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Binder, A. (2000). Why do some curricular challenges 'work' while others do not? The case of three afrocentric challenges: Atlanta, Washington DC, and New York State. *Sociology of Education*, *73*, 69–91.

Binder, A. (2002). *Contentious curricula: afrocentrism and creationism in American Public Schools*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Brown, D., & Brown, J. C. (1983). Organizational microcosms and ideological negotiation. In M. Bazerman & R. J. Lewicki (Eds.) *Negotiating in organizations*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Brown, D., & Covey, J. (1987). Development and organizations and organization development: Toward and expanded paradigm for organization development. *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, *1*, 59–87.

Brown, L., & Troutt, E. (2004). Funding relations between nonprofits and government: A positive example. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *33*, 5–27.

Campbell, J. (1998). Institutional analysis and the role of ideas in political economy. *Theory and Society*, *27*, 377–409.

Capizzano, J., Koralek, R., Botsko, C., & Bess, R. (2001). *Recent changes in Colorado welfare and work, child care, and child welfare systems*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Retrieved 2005 from http://www.urban.org/publications/310299.html.

Chaskin, B. (2001). Building community capacity: A definitional framework and case studies from a comprehensive community initiative. *Urban Affairs Review*, *36*, 291–323.

Chaves, M., Stephens, L., & Galaskiewicz, J. (2004). Does government funding suppress nonprofits' political activity. *American Sociological Review*, *6*, 292–316.

Clemens, E., & Cook, J. M. (1999). Politics and institutionalism: Explaining durability and change. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *25*, 441–466.

Coburn, C. (2004). Beyond decoupling: Rethinking the relationship between the institutional environment and the classroom. *Sociology of Education*, *77*, 211–244.

Creed, D., Scully, M., & Austin, J. (2002). Clothes make the person? The tailoring of legitimating accounts and the social constuction of identity. *Organization Science*, *13*, 475–496.

Davies, S., & Binder, A. (2007). *Importing school across societaldomains: Frames, hybrids and institutional effects*. San Diego: Unpublishedmanuscript, Department of Sociology, University of California.

De Hoog, R. H. (1990). Competition, negotiation, or cooperation: Three models for service contracting. *Administration & Society*, *22*, 317–340.

DiMaggio, P. (1988). Interest and agency in institutional theory. In L. Zucker (Ed.) *Institutional patterns and organizations: Culture and environment*. Camridge: Ballinger.

DiMaggio, P. (1997). Culture and cognition. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *23*, 263–288.

DiMaggio, P., & Powell, W. (1983a). Iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, *48*, 147–160.

DiMaggio, P., & Powell, W. (1983b). Introduction. In W. Powell & P. DiMaggio (Eds.) *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dobbin, F., Sutton, J., Meyer, J., & Scott, W. R. (1993). Equal opportunity law and the construction of internal labor markets. *American Journal of Sociology*, *99*, 396–427.

Douglas, M. (1986). *How institutions think*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Fine, G. A. (1984). Negotiated orders and organizational cultures. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *10*, 239–262.

Fligstein, N. (1997). Social skill and institutional theory. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *40*, 397–405.

Friedland, R., & Alford, R. (1991). Bringing society back. In P. DiMaggio & W. Powell (Eds.) *Symbols, practices and institutional contradictions. The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Froelich, K. (1999). Diversification of revenue strategies: Evolving resource dependence in nonprofit organizations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *28*, 246–268.

Frumkin, P. (1996). Review of Lester Salamon's partners in public service. *American Journal of Sociology*, *101*, 1451–1453.

Frumkin, P. (2001). Sector at work: Identity under construction. The Nonprofit Quarterly 8. Retrieved from http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/section/88.html.

General Accounting Office (1991). *Transitional housing shows initial success, but long-term effects unknown*. Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office. Retrieved from http://161.203.16.4/d18t9/145180.pdf.

Gerstel, N., Bogard, C., McConnell, J. J., & Schwartz, M. (1996). The therapeutic incarceration of homeless families. *Social Service Review*, *4*, 543–572.

Gouldner, A. (1954). *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Gronbjerg, K. (1993). *Understanding Nonprofit Funding*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gronbjerg, K. (2001). The U.S. nonprofit human service sector: A creeping revolution. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *30*, 276–297.

Hallett, T., & Ventresca, M. (2006a). How institutions form: Loose coupling as mechanism in Gouldner's patterns of industrial bureaucracy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *49*, 908–924.

Hallett, T., & Ventresca, M. (2006b). Inhabited institutions: Social interaction and organizational forms in Gouldner's patterns of industrial bureaucracy. *Theory and Society*, *35*, 213–236.

Hasenfeld, Y. (1972). People processing organizations: An exchange approach. *American Sociological Review*, *37*, 256–263.

Hasenfeld, Y. (2000). Organizational forms as moral practices: The case of welfare departments. *Social Service Review*, *74*, 329–351.

Hasenfeld, Y., & English, R. (1974). *Human service organizations*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Hasenfeld, Y., & Schmid, H. (1989). The community center as a human service organization. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Service Sector Quarterly, 18*, 47–61.

Heimer, C. (1992). Doing your job and helping your friends: Universalistic norms about obligations to particular others. In N. Nohria & R. Eccles (Eds.) *Networks and organizations: Structure, form, and action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Heimer, C. A. (1999). Competing institutions: Law, medicine, and family in neonatal intensive care. *Law and Society Review, 33*(1), 17–66.

Heimer, C., & Staffen, L. (1995). Interdependence and reintegrative social control: Labeling and reforming 'inappropriate' parents in neonatal intensive care units. *American Sociological Review, 60*, 635–654.

Heimer, C., & Stevens, M. (1997). Caring for the organization: Social workers as frontline risk managers in neonatal intensive care units. *Work and Occupations, 24*, 133–163.

Hirsch, P., & Lounsbury, M. (1997). Ending the family quarrel: Toward a reconciliation of 'old' and 'new' institutionalisms. *American Behavioral Scientist, 40*, 406–418.

Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (Eds.) (1998). *The black-white test score gap*. Washington: Brookings.

Jepperson, R. (2002). The development and application of sociological institutionalism. In P. Berger & M. Zelditch (Eds.) *Contemporary sociological theory: New directions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Joffe, C. (1979). Symbolic interaction and the study of social services. In N. Denzin (Ed.) *Studies in symbolic interaction*. Greenwich: JAI Press.

Keating, E., & Frumkin, P. (2003). Reengineering nonprofit financial accountability: Toward a more reliable foundation for regulation. *Public Administration Review, 63*, 3–15.

Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: The dilemma of individuals in public services*. New York: Sage.

Lipsky, M., & Smith, S. (1989). Nonprofit organizations, government, and the welfare state. *Political Science Quarterly, 104*, 625–648.

Lounsbury, M., Ventresca, M., & Hirsch, P. (2003). Social movements, field frames, and industry emergence: A cultural-political perspective. *Socio-Economic Review, 1*, 2–33.

Maines, D. (1977). Social organization and social structure in symbolic interactionist thought. *Annual Review of Sociology, 3*, 235–259.

Marwell, N. (2004). Privatizing the welfare state: Nonprofit community-based organizations as political actors. *American Sociological Review, 69*, 265–291.

Meyer, J., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology, 83*, 340–363.

Meyer, J., & Rowan, B. (1978). The structure of educational organizations. In M. Meyer (Ed.) *Environments and Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Meyer, J., Scott, W. R., & Deal, T. (1981). Institutional and technical sources of organizational structure: Explaining the structure of educational organizations. In H. Stein (Ed.) *Organization and the human services*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Meyer, J., Scott, W. R., & Strang, D. (1994). Centralization, fragmentation, and school district complexity. In W. R. Scott, & J. Meyer (Eds.) *Institutional environments and organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Meyerson, D. (1991). 'Normal' ambiguity? A glimpse of an occupational culture. In P. Frost, L. Moore, M. Reis Louis, C. Lundberg, & J. Martin (Eds.) *Reframing organizational culture*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Meyerson, D., & Martin, J. (1987). Cultural change: An integration of three different views. *Journal of Management Studies, 24*, 623–646.

Minkoff, D., & Powell, W. (forthcoming). Nonprofit mission: Constancy, responsiveness, or deflection? In The Nonprofit Sector 2nd (ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Morrill, C. (1995). *The executive way: Conflict management in corporations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Perrow, C. (1972). *Complex organizations: A critical essay*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.

Pfeffer, J. (1978). The micropolitics of organizations. In M. Meyer (Ed.) *Environments and organizations: theoretical and empirical perspectives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pfeffer, J. (1982). *Organizations and organization theory*. Marshfield, MA: Pitman.

Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. (1978). *The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective*. New York: Harper and Row.

Salamon, L. (1995). *Partners in public service*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Salamon, L. (1999). *America's nonprofit sector: A primer*. New York: The Foundation Center.

Schmid, H. (2004). Organization-environment relationships: Theory for management practice in human service organizations. *Administration in Social Work, 28*, 97–113.

Scott, R. (1967). The selection of clients by social welfare agencies. *Social Problems*, *14*, 248–257.

Scott, W. R. (1987). *Organizations: Rational, natural and open systems* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Scott, W. R. (1994). Institutions and organizations: A theoretical synthesis. In W. R. Scott & J. Meyer (Eds.) *Institutional environments and organizations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Scully, M., & Creed, D. (1997). *Stealth legitimacy: Employee activism and corporate response during the diffusion of domestic partner benefits*. Paper presented at the Academy of Management Meetings, Boston MA, August.

Scully, M., & Segal A. (2002). Passion with an umbrella: Grassroots activists in the workplace. In M. Lounsbury & M. J. Ventesca (Eds.) *Social structure and organizations revisited*. Oxford: Elsevier.

Selznick, P. (1953). *TVA and the grass roots*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sewell, W. H. Jr. (1992). A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation. *The American Journal of Sociology*, *98*(1), 1–29.

Smith, S., & Lipsky, M. (1993). *Nonprofits for hire: The welfare state in the age of contracting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Spillane, J., & Burch, P. (2005). Policy, administration, and instructional practice: 'Loose Coupling' revisited. Working paper, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University. Retrieved from http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/publications/papers/2003/WP-03-04.pdf.

Stone, M. (1996). Competing contexts: The evolution of a nonprofit organization's governance system in multiple environments. *Administration and Society*, *28*, 61–89.

Stevens, M., & Roksa, J. (2005). Symbols and substance: Institutional pressures and diversity practices in selective college admissions. Unpublished paper, New York University.

Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review*, *51*, 273–286.

Swidler, A. (2001). *Talk of love: How culture matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thompson, J. (1967). *Organizations in action*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Ventresca, M. (2006). Personal communication with the author.

Weber, M. (1946). Bureaucracy. In H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (Eds.) *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Weick, K. E. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *21*, 1–19.

Westenholz, A., Pedersen, J. S., & Dobbin, F. (2006). Introduction. Institutions in the making: Identity, power, and the emergence of new organizational forms. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *49*, 889–896.

Zelizer, V. (2005). *The purchase of intimacy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zucker, L. (1988). Where do institutional patterns come from? Organizations as actors in social systems. In L. Zucker (Ed.) *Institutional patterns and organizations*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.

Amy Binder is Associate Professor of Sociology, University of California, San Diego. She is the author of *Contentious Curricula: Afrocentrism and Creationism in American Public Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), which has won awards in the areas of sociology of culture and education. She has several projects underway, including work with Scott Davies on how staff and management import school forms into the transitional housing complex they call Parents Community.