

2014

# Swimming in a Sea of Shame: Incorporating Emotions into Explanations of Institutional Reproduction and Change

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## Citation/Publisher Attribution

Creed, W. E. D., Hudson, B. A., Okhuysen, G. A. & Smith-Crowe, K. (2014). Swimming in a sea of shame: Incorporating emotion into explanations of institutional reproduction and change. *Academy of Management Review*, 39(3), 275-301.  
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amr.2012.0074>

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Forthcoming in *Academy of Management Review*.  
July 2014

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We would like to thank Peter Cebon, Rich DeJordy, Ricardo Flores, Elizabeth Goodrick, Jaco Lok, Lakshmi Ramarajan, and Marc Ventresca for their helpful comments on several drafts of this manuscript. We would also like to thank participants in seminars at the Australian School of Business at the University of New South Wales, the University of Melbourne, the Rotman School of Business at the University of Toronto, and the Anderson School of Management at the University of New Mexico for their feedback. We especially thank Roy Suddaby, our Editor at AMR and three anonymous reviewers for their continued and interested engagement with this project.

## ABSTRACT

### SWIMMING IN A SEA OF SHAME: INCORPORATING EMOTION INTO EXPLANATIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL REPRODUCTION AND CHANGE

We theorize the role in institutional processes of what we call the *shame nexus*, a set of shame-related constructs: *felt shame*, *systemic shame*, *sense of shame*, and *episodic shaming*. As a discrete emotion, *felt shame* signals to a person that a social bond is at risk and catalyzes a fundamental motivation to preserve valued bonds. We conceptualize *systemic shame* as a form of disciplinary power, animated by persons' *sense of shame*, a mechanism of ongoing intersubjective surveillance and self-regulation. We theorize how the duo of the *sense of shame* and *systemic shame* drives the self-regulation that underpins persons' conformity to institutional prescriptions and institutional reproduction. We conceptualize *episodic shaming* as a form of juridical power used by institutional guardians to elicit renewed conformity and reassert institutional prescriptions. We also explain how *episodic shaming* may have unintended effects, including institutional disruption and recreation, when it triggers sensemaking among targets and observers that can lead to the reassessment of the appropriateness of institutional prescriptions or the value of social bonds. We link the *shame nexus* to three broad categories of institutional work.

Key Words: Institutional Theory, Emotion, Shame, Institutional Microfoundations, Inhabited Institutions, Institutional Work, Power, Institutional Reproduction, Institutional Change, Conformity.

As institutional theory has emerged as a dominant perspective in organizational studies ([Greenwood, Oliver, Suddaby, & Sahlin, 2008](#)), critics argue it has also become disconnected from its phenomenological roots in social interaction (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Calls for exploring the microfoundations of institutions ([Powell & Colyvas, 2008](#)) point to the need to better understand how people make sense of themselves relative to their contexts, how passions and interests are implicated in institutional enactments, and how daily enactments and practices can transform institutional arrangements. Such calls notwithstanding, there remains the risk that “passing references to micro sociology” are little more than ceremonial invocations and hand-waving and that too little attention is actually paid to the role of persons: “Contemporary institutionalism finds itself grappling with the important question: What are we to do about people” (Hallett & Venstresca, 2006:214, 230).

In this paper, we offer one response to this question by focusing on the role of emotions in institutional processes. We present an argument that contributes to institutional theory by complementing and extending the emerging inhabited institutions and institutional work perspectives, which aspire to reinvigorate institutionalism’s phenomenological roots by populating institutional processes with emotional and socially embedded people. We focus on a single emotion, shame, using it to deepen our understanding of institutional inhabitants’ social relations and participation in institutional processes. In our analysis, we begin with a definition of *felt shame* as a persons’ experience of negative self evaluations based on anticipated or actual depreciation by others due to a failure to meet standards of behavior ([Tracy & Robins, 2004](#); [Turner & Stets, 2005](#)). We then integrate the individual level construct of *felt shame* with other analytical constructs in what we refer to as the shame nexus. These additional constructs include: a person’s *sense of shame*, an internal mechanism of intersubjective surveillance and self-

regulation; *systemic shame*, an intersubjective form of disciplinary power comprising shared understandings of the conditions that give rise to felt shame; and *episodic shaming*, a form of juridical power aimed at preventing or extinguishing transgressive enactments by inducing felt shame. As these interrelated constructs suggest, the shame nexus operates across levels of analysis, from the macro level systems of meaning that underpin prescriptions of what constitutes shameful behavior to the micro level internalization of those prescriptions in ways that animate persons' intersubjective surveillance and self-regulation. Below, we elaborate on the elements of the shame nexus and explain how its components animate processes of institutional reproduction and change.

We contribute to the literature in several ways. First, in theorizing the shame nexus we present a unique, multilevel, interdisciplinary integration of constructs related to the operation of shame. Through our theorizing of the shame nexus we show an important way in which emotional bonds shape persons' commitments to institutional prescriptions. More importantly, we show how, under different circumstances, the lived experience of the shame nexus plays a central role in shaping institutional inhabitants' motivations to engage in the work of institutional maintenance, disruption, or creation (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Based on our arguments, we call both for further empirical exploration of the role of the shame nexus in the intertwined processes of institutionalization and subjectification and for the examination of the role of other social emotions – emotions that pertain to the state of the social relations ([Sayer, 2005](#)) that hold communities together – in institutional processes.

Below we begin by briefly framing the theoretical context and underlying assumptions we rely on in our analysis. We then highlight the ways in which the omission of emotions from dominant cognitive perspectives limits our understanding of how persons participate in

institutional processes. Having established our background assumptions, we then present our theory in two steps. First, we argue for the particular relevance of *felt shame* to institutional processes by invoking notions of social bonds, disciplinary power, and subjectification. Because persons' ongoing anticipation and avoidance of felt shame are key mechanisms in preserving valued social bonds ([Scheff, 2000, 2005](#)), we argue that such self-regulation ([Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007](#); [Sheikh & Janoff-Bulman, 2010](#)) is the mechanism that animates *systemic shame* as a form of disciplinary power. We then theorize the particular role of *episodic shaming* as a related exercise of power, deployed to reassert and strengthen institutional norms and suppress transgressive behavior. We argue that while episodic shaming is primarily deployed to ensure conformity to institutional prescriptions, thereby contributing to institutional reproduction, it can have the opposite effect in cases when the sensemaking it triggers leads to rejection of institutional prescriptions or to the reconsideration of the value of social bonds. We also discuss specific ways that the lived experience of the shame nexus can motivate different types of institutional work. We close with a discussion of the implications of our analysis.

### **THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

In institutional theory, the social structures and systems of meaning that shape persons' choices and actions have phenomenological roots; social interactions give rise to shared understandings of reality ([Berger & Luckmann, 1967](#)). That is, through social interactions, a process referred to as "reciprocal typification" renders elements of social life into "types" and categories of meaning ([Berger & Luckmann, 1967](#)). The product is shared meanings that take on the objective qualities of exteriority and facticity. These seemingly objective, shared meanings channel individual and collective action by making particular behavioral choices meaningful and desirable ([Friedland, 2002](#); [Meyer & Rowan, 1977](#)). These actions, in turn, provide opportunities

for the retention and accumulation of human experiences and constructed meanings that are “sedimented” in a common stock of knowledge ([Berger & Luckmann, 1967](#); [Friedland, 2002](#); [Weber & Glynn, 2006](#)). Consequently, institutional theory has long emphasized the importance of the practical rationality seen in the premises, rule-following, and cultural routines characteristic of institutional processes. Thus, much of the literature on institutional processes has been concerned with the ways practices and meanings are encoded, enacted, replicated or revised, and made objective ([Barley & Tolbert, 1997](#)) and has emphasized the constitutive and constraining nature of cognitions that reflect shared understandings about the way things are done and what they signify ([Zilber, 2002](#)). In this view, institutional maintenance and reproduction come full circle when individuals engage in rule following and enactments, guided in their habituated behavioral routines purely by tacit or explicit mental schema that have encoded institutional expectations into the meaningful scripts that shape future enactments ([Barley & Tolbert, 1997](#); [Berger & Luckmann, 1967](#); [Hallett & Ventresca, 2006](#)).

Several scholars critique this emphasis on rule-following and the cognitive constraints on action as overly structural ([Bowring, 2000](#); [Hallett & Ventresca, 2006](#)), arguing that institutional theory has become decoupled from its symbolic interactionist and phenomenological underpinnings ([Hallett & Ventresca, 2006](#)). Such an emphasis is said to depict the people who inhabit institutions as “cultural dopes” ([Garfinkel, 1967](#)), as it deemphasizes the social skills persons use in the course of their daily lives as they participate in the intersubjective processes that build, maintain, defend, challenge, or change institutions ([Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997](#); [Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006](#); [Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009](#)). Consequently, many scholars have called for more research on the important microfoundations and embodied practices that underlie institutions ([Barley, 2008](#); [Bechky, 2011](#); [Powell & Colyvas, 2008](#)). Two perspectives



that have emerged to shed light on these microfoundations – the inhabited institutions and institutional work perspectives – call for a greater attention to social interaction and the purposeful actions of the persons who inhabit institutional processes. In the next section we explain how they provide the essential assumptions underlying our analysis.

### **Inhabited Institutions and Institutional Work**

At the center of the inhabited institutions perspective is the call to give greater consideration to the social, symbolic, and interactive nature of the action that underpins the social construction of institutional arrangements. Hallett and Ventresca (2006) set out the theoretical and empirical agenda for the inhabited institutions perspective by demonstrating how employing a symbolic interactionist lens provides a way for institutional theory to bring persons, their interactions, and their meaning making more fully into depictions of institutional processes. Their analysis relies on Blumer's three core precepts of social interactionism: "human beings act towards things based on the meanings that the things have for them; the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interactions that one has with one's fellows; these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he [or she] encounters" ([Blumer, 1969:2](#)).

In their rereading of Gouldner's *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* ([1954](#)), Hallett and Ventresca (2006) focus on interactions among actors, thereby shifting attention from what persons do (enact prescriptions), to what they do together (negotiate practices and their meanings as they concretize institutionalized forms of behavior). For us, one particularly noteworthy aspect of their analysis is its attention to how institutional arrangements are rooted not solely in shared cognitions, but rather also in the social "connective tissue" ([2006:224](#)) of kinship relations and shared histories of accommodation, indulgence, loyalty, and the "magic words of condolence and

congratulation.”

With its focus on how social interaction and shared interpretation “suffuse institutions” with locally negotiated meanings and power, the inhabited institutions perspective has, according to Bechky (2011:1158), the potential to uncover “fundamental mechanisms” that link the micro with the macro and to respond to the “paradox of embeddedness.” We argue that for this potential to be realized, scholars need to wrestle with the implications of the evocative images of emotional connections – kinship, loyalty, condolence, and praise ([Hallett & Ventresca, 2006:226](#)). The great strength of the inhabited institutions perspective is that it accounts for the ways meanings and enactments are doubly embedded, for example, in macro logics and in the social interactions that give “contour” to those logics, establish local meanings, and shape action. As Bechky (2011) reminds organizational theorists, people do not *directly* respond to social structures, but rather to their local situations and their interpretations of them. So an underlying assumption we take from this perspective is that the contours of meaning that provide the bases for human action emerge through interactions which are embedded in the social “connective tissue” of various types of emotional bonds.

Another perspective that seeks to redress the dominance of structural arguments in institutional theory is that of institutional work ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006](#); [Rojas, 2010](#); [Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010](#)). The institutional work literature seeks to focus attention on “the purposive actions of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006:216](#)). Built on the works of [DiMaggio \(1988\)](#) and [Oliver \(1991, 1992\)](#) as well as the sociology of practice ([Bourdieu, 1972/1977](#); [Wayne, 2009](#)), this perspective argues that institutions are perhaps not as self-perpetuating as some earlier characterizations of institutional theory suggest and that individual and collective action is

required for sustained reproduction. To bring “individuals back into institutional theory,” they argue, institutional theory needs to examine the self-awareness, skill, and reflexivity of actors ([Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011:53](#)). Lawrence and Suddaby ([2006](#)) critique, in particular, the overly cognitive view that dominates institutional theory and advocate for the recognition and analysis of emotion in research on institutional work. While they have spawned a stream of subsequent work, few studies have picked up on their call for institutional explanations that go beyond the common invoking of cognition to a more full attention to emotions and the “interplay of emotional impact (pathos) and logical content (logos)” ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006:239](#)). ([For exceptions see: Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Lok & De Rond, 2013; Voronov & Vince, 2012](#)). Some critical scholars suggest that this failure may stem from the fact that it is human beings, not individuals or actors, who need to be brought back into institutional theory ([Cooper, Ezzamel, & Willmott, 2008](#)). The point in distinguishing human beings from individuals is that the concept of the individual is itself a sociocultural formulation – an institutional construct vested with rationality and powers of creation – that should not be taken for granted ([Willmott, 2011](#)). Following Voronov and Vince (2012) and Willmott (2011), we adopt an underlying assumption that to better understand the microfoundations that underlie institutions we need to replace the concept of the individual – with its connotations of atomized autonomy – with the construct of the person. We do so in order to keep our focus on the socially-embedded, interdependent, relational, and emotional nature of persons’ lived experiences of institutional arrangements. Following [Turner & Stets, 2005:1](#) advocates for the renewed consideration of emotion in sociological analysis, we argue that emotions should be viewed “as the crucial link between micro and macro levels of social reality” ([Turner & Stets, 2005:1](#)). Our goal then is to theorize emotional persons who act on the basis of meanings arising from social interactions that are doubly embedded in

institutions and systems of emotional bonds.

### **Incorporating Emotion**

Consideration of emotion in organizational and social processes has gained importance outside institutional theory, where theoretical and empirical work offers several useful points for anchoring our exploration of emotional persons. Fundamentally, emotions are understood to have objects (e.g., [Elfenbein, 2007](#)); these physiological reactions are always directed at something in particular. Thus, emotions are somatic and semantic ([Prinz, 2004](#)); they entail bodily sensations as well as appraisals of some person, event, object, or situation. As such, emotions are meaningfully connected with things in the world ([Barrett, Mesquita, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007](#)), including ourselves and others ([Elfenbein, 2007](#)). Importantly, emotions are what make us human beings, distinguishing us both from machines, which can be designed for impersonal calculation, and from stylized notions of rational actors, whose theoretical instrumentality shows a machine-like penchant for it. To experience emotion is to live in the world.

Emotions that connect people, that help social bonds develop and endure ([Tracy & Robins, 2004](#)), are of particular interest in our exploration of institutions. These “social emotions” emerge as reactions to our perceptions of our social standing and that of others relative to norms and standards within social structures ([Haidt, 2003](#); [Leary, 2000](#); [Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007](#); [Tracy & Robins, 2004](#)). Social emotions take many forms. For instance, negatively valenced “other-directed” social emotions like contempt, anger, and disgust are responses to others’ violations of the social order (e.g., [Hutcherson & Gross, 2011](#); [Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999](#)), while “self-directed” social emotions including guilt, embarrassment, and shame are responses to understanding that it is oneself who has violated the

social order ([Rozin et al., 1999](#); [Tangney et al., 2007](#); [Tracy & Robins, 2004](#)). In effect, both other- and self-directed social emotions provide people with feedback on their own and others' standing as persons within a social group. To the degree that institutions rely on microfoundations that entail symbolic interaction, social emotions are likely to be particularly important in institutional processes. This is because social emotions are implicated in the ways people make sense of and participate in the interactions that underpin the shared enactment of institutional arrangements.

Emotions must have implications for the sensemaking which informs person's participation in institutional processes because they are indicators of what is salient to persons and what motivates their actions ([de Sousa, 1987](#); [Voronov & Vince, 2012](#)). For example, Weber and Glynn ([2006](#)) have theorized how institutions prime cognition and trigger sensemaking, arguing that institutions provide perceptual filters that enable people to extract cues from the stream of phenomena they encounter. Emotions arguably belong squarely in their depiction of embedded sensemaking because it is emotions that can both trigger sensemaking ([Warren & Smith-Crowe, 2008](#)) and alert people to which of the myriad potential social cues are important or deserve attention ([Baumeister et al., 2007](#)). In addition, Voronov and Vince ([2012](#)) recently argued that a cognition-centered view alone cannot explain when or why persons will act to maintain a given institutional order; emotion is necessary to understand dissatisfaction and any motivation to engage in institutional change. For institutional researchers, the incorporation of emotion enables rounding out explanations of "cognitive and volitional performances" by attending to the mind's "longings, its pleasures and pains" ([James, 1884:188](#)).

To be sure, people are not exclusively emotional any more than they are exclusively cognitive and institutional theory should refuse to mischaracterize people as merely either, rather

than both. Most fundamentally, we argue that a more accurate characterization of people would push scholars to theorize more deeply the implications of calling institutional processes “inhabited” ([Scully & Creed, 1997](#)). To better realize the theoretical potential of the inhabited institutions ([Hallett & Ventresca, 2006](#)) and the institutional work perspectives ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006](#)) we need to embrace “a more integrated human being whose passions and desires are not reducible to the pursuit of rational interests” ([Voronov & Vince, 2012:59](#)). This allows us to better attend to the embodied enactments that are the micro-foundations of institutions.

There are three reasons why, in our effort to incorporate emotion into the micro-foundations of institutional processes, we focus on a single emotion, shame. The first pertains to specificity. Scheff ([2000](#)) argues that discussing emotions in general relies on rarified abstractions; in contrast, we are better able to understand specific felt emotions – shame, guilt, embarrassment, disgust, pride – because we are more able to identify differences in their origins, objects, appearances, and trajectories. Second, other scholars have suggested that shame, as it is commonly understood, is likely to figure importantly in institutional reproduction and maintenance by providing “powerful inducements to compliance with prevailing norms” ([Scott, 2007](#)). While shame, like other similar social emotions (i.e., guilt and embarrassment), can motivate compliance ([Nasaw & Saranow, 2002](#); [Sullivan, 1996](#); [Toneguzzi, 2002](#)), felt shame is distinct in that it is also associated with forms of non-compliance, including withdrawal ([Sheikh & Janoff-Bulman, 2010](#); [Tangney et al., 2007](#)) or aggression ([Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992](#)). This means that shame may be linked to either institutional reproduction or disruption. Third, shame, in its intersubjective disciplinary form, which we call systemic shame, plays a key role in self-monitoring, sensemaking, self-regulation, and the construction of the self ([Scheff, 2000](#)). However, in light of its multifaceted and multidisciplinary nature, a focus on

shame as a specific emotion requires of us that we move beyond narrow discipline-bound understandings of shame to make explicit the meaningful connections between the micro and macro levels of analysis – for example, between self-regulation and institutionalization. We do this through the development of the shame nexus, which is detailed in Table 1 and elaborated in the next sections. The different constructs of the shame nexus reflect the complexity of shame as it operates at different levels within institutions.

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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## **THE ROLE OF THE SHAME NEXUS IN INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES**

Here we begin by discussing the linkages among social bonds, systemic shame, subjectification, and persons' sense of shame. We then explain their joint roles in institutional reproduction. In essence, systemic shame and a person's sense of shame operate in concert as a form of disciplinary power to animate persons' self-regulation, normally preventing transgressive behaviors. We then present episodic shaming, in the form of shaming attempts, as a purposive exercise of juridical power. Shaming attempts trigger sensemaking among targets and observers, which shape how they respond. When either systemic shame or episodic shaming operate to induce conforming enactments, institutional reproduction occurs; when they fail to induce conforming enactments, institutional change can occur.

### **Systemic Shame and Subjectification**

Felt shame's effect on persons stems in large part from the fact that the maintenance of social bonds is a "crucial human motive" ([Scheff, 1990:4](#); cf. [Leary, 2000](#); [Tracy & Robins, 2004](#)). People maintain social bonds principally through ongoing reciprocal ratification of their

standing as valued persons within a social group ([Goffman, 1959](#); [Scheff, 1990](#)). The anticipation, avoidance, or actual experience of felt shame are critical mechanisms that animate the process of reciprocal ratification. These mechanisms alert a person to the state of his or her standing as a valued person ([Leary, 2000](#)), signaling the potential loss of valued social bonds and, in many instances, triggering renewed efforts to preserve those bonds ([Baumeister et al., 2007](#)). We argue that highlighting the centrality of social bonds to institutional processes – and the anticipation, avoidance, or experience of felt shame as fundamental mechanisms in the preservation of such bonds – adds an important dimension to existing understandings of institutional inhabitants as social persons.

The very same systems of social bonds are critical to persons' lived experience of institutional arrangements and the construction of the self. For example, Friedland and Alford highlight the role of systems of “observable social relations” in both concretizing institutionalized systems of meaning and “connect[ing] this world to the transrational order.” Through these concrete social relations, not only do “individuals and organizations strive to achieve their ends, but they also make life meaningful and reproduce those symbolic systems” ([Friedland & Alford, 1991:249](#)). For rhetorical simplicity we will refer to these systems of observable social relations using the terms social group and community in their vernacular sense.

***Systemic shame.*** We argue that the high existential stakes of life and meaning derived from important social bonds set the stage for disciplinary power. What makes felt shame, the experienced threat of separation from a valued community, and the “social dislocation” ([Willmott, 2011](#)) that it represents, an impetus for members? If persons lose their ties to valued social relations, they risk losing their connection to the symbolic systems that make their lives meaningful. We argue therefore that the role of felt shame in signaling a threat to social bonds



makes it not only a very powerful social emotion, but also a strong normative force that is exercised as disciplinary power, which we call *systemic shame*.

Drawn from the Foucauldian ([1990](#)) view that power is relational or an effect of social relationships, the concept of systemic or disciplinary power refers to a form of power that works through mundane practices to institutionalize a social reality and invest it with a quality of objectivity ([Lawrence, 2008](#)). Although the terms systemic and disciplinary can be used interchangeably, each communicates something distinctly important. Labeling power as systemic connotes its ever-present and all-encompassing nature. Labeling it as disciplinary captures its effect on people, who are disciplined into conformity with established understandings. For simplicity, we label the construct *systemic shame*, because systemic shame disciplines.

Disciplinary power operates through the construction of a seemingly objective social reality that elicits conformity. This conformity is achieved through two processes: normalization and subjectification ([Cooper et al., 2008:682](#)). The importance of normalization to institutional compliance is perhaps clear on its face: it defines what is normal and what is not, what is in bounds and what is not. Subjectification refers to the ways in which disciplinary power is implicated in providing identity and motives to persons. It operates through quotidian practices that engage persons in ongoing ways to shape their self-conceptions and desires. Both normalization and subjectification often are unapparent or invisible even as they discipline, rendering people “orderly and regimented” ([Cooper et al., 2008:682](#)). The importance of subjectification to institutional compliance and reproduction is subtler than that of normalization, however. Not only does subjectification provide the person with identity and the perception of agency (a sense of autonomy and motivation), it enlists and relies on that subject’s agency in self-regulation to have its effect ([Cooper et al., 2008:682](#)).

In describing systemic shame as a form of disciplinary power, we mean that it is a relational, distributed, and often invisible form of power operating in social groups and communities. This power works to make shared rules of what constitutes shameful (as opposed to praiseworthy) behavior seem objective, such that each rule becomes taken-for-granted as objectively correct or natural. At the same time, these rules penetrate community members' identity constructions as they strive to meet conditions for ongoing membership through enacting praiseworthy rather than shameful ways of being. Systemic shame, then, can be understood as a technology of subjectification that "categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects" ([Foucault, 1982:781](#)). Thus, systemic shame shapes the people we become: subjects equipped with a *sense of shame*. So constituted and equipped, we are perpetually preoccupied with the ratification of our standing as valued persons ([Scheff, 1990, 2005](#)). In other words, systemic shame enlists us in ubiquitous processes of self-surveillance and self-regulation that underpin its disciplinary power.

***Sense of shame.*** The *sense of shame* is the critical surveillance mechanism underpinning systemic shame's disciplinary power. Following Sayer, we see the sense of shame as

... an important mechanism in the production of social order, for through it people internalize expectations, norms, and ideals and discipline and punish themselves. [It] is one of the mechanisms by which people are ensnared by cultural discourses and norms, in all their diversity, although the metaphor of being ensnared is too passive, for the need for recognition, whose pursuit always carries the risk of failing and being shamed, drives us to seek out ways of acting virtuously from among the many possibilities. ([Sayer, 2005:955](#))

The *sense of shame* is internal to a person and we theorize that it is comprised of four components: a person's *capacity for shame*, *knowledge of the conditions for shame*,

*intersubjective surveillance*, and *self-regulation*. Like our capacity for language, the *capacity for shame* is innate; almost all persons can have the visceral experience of felt shame. Of course, the capacity for shame varies across individuals in terms of its intensity, but the inability to experience emotions like felt shame is considered pathological ([Blair, 1995](#)). In contrast, what we call *knowledge of the conditions for shame* – those normative expectations regarding what constitutes shameful behavior – is acquired through socialization in valued communities and personal history. Based on our *knowledge of the conditions for shame*, persons engage in vigilant *intersubjective surveillance*, as we assess others' possible depreciation of the self. This *intersubjective surveillance* underpins *self-regulation*, the anticipation and avoidance of the possibility of *felt shame* through the managing of our performance as valuable persons. According to Scheff, a critical implication of Goffman is that a sense of shame is “especially important for social control ... because although members may only occasionally feel shame, they are constantly anticipating it” (2000:97).

A sense of shame manifests in a form of self-monitoring that involves one's taking the perspective of others and imagining their assessment of the self. Similarly, Leary ([2000](#)) used the metaphor of a “sociometer” to refer to our motivation and capacity to understand our socio-relational standing, and particularly to attend to “relational devaluation,” or “indications that others do not regard their relationship with the individual to be as important, close, or valuable as the individual desires” ([2000:336](#)). This continuous self-monitoring relies on an intersubjectivity that is the fundamental mechanism underpinning human social interactions. Intersubjectivity refers to the sharing of subjective states by two or more persons such that it creates among them a common social and cognitive world, thereby enabling the social construction of objectivity ([Meyerson, 2001](#)). In the sense of shame, however, the concept of intersubjectivity looms larger,

according to Scheff (1990, 2005), because it implies that in order to avoid felt shame, we continuously “live in the minds of others” (Cooley, 1922/2004) often without being conscious of it. Indeed, we are constantly assessing our behaviors in the “looking glass” (Cooley, 1902) of what we imagine are others’ assessments and potentially finding ourselves wanting. The looking glass self, like the renowned panopticon, becomes the vantage point from which all can be monitored. This is the critical importance of intersubjective surveillance: everyone plays the roles of the watcher and the watched.

It is important to note that through its ensnaring of persons in a community’s constructions of the conditions for shame, the sense of shame enables self-regulation even when a person is not actively participating in the source community’s system of relations. In this way, the sense of shame becomes sedimented over time in the person so that the subjectifying effects of systemic shame can far exceed the disciplinary power of membership in concrete communities. Indeed, a person’s self-regulation need not be oriented only toward maintaining concrete relations with a specific community or specific person in the here and now. In essence, the assessments of parents, respected mentors, or valued others may shape our self-regulation after they are long since gone. We argue that the sedimented sense of shame reflects the effects of historical bonds, like a carried community; people carry their sedimented sense of shame into every interaction.

***Self regulation.*** For the purposes of our argument, the crux is that such intense ongoing intersubjectivity implies people are not atomized but rather are ever-alert members of social units, where the maintenance of valued social bonds through reciprocal ratification is crucial. Thus, neither systemic shame, the sense of shame, nor the self-regulation they engender are occasionally triggered phenomena that break into the social order; they are critical, ubiquitous

parts of that social order. As Turner and Stets note, “the monitoring of self by a person is virtually continuous, even in solitude when others are not present, and this monitoring always generates an evaluation of self” (2005:154). To paraphrase Scheff (2005), a proper understanding of the sense of shame and the intersubjective nature of the emotional/relational world implies that in fact we all swim in a sea of shame, all day, every day.

To restate our argument, systemic shame is a form of power that disciplines through the operation of persons’ internalized sense of shame. By connecting self-regulation and discipline to the enactment of institutional prescriptions, the sense of shame will necessarily play some role in the reproduction and maintenance of institutional arrangements. In other words, we suggest that to varying degrees, which we discuss below, it is the anticipation and avoidance of felt shame, together with a cognitive grasp of institutional prescriptions, which buttresses the reproduction and maintenance of institutions. We argue that systemic shame underpins institutional inhabitants’ self-regulation of their participation in institutional processes, particularly maintenance and reproduction.

The duo of systemic shame and the sense of shame also suggests an explanation for why institutional prescriptions are powerfully compelling: It is because they are rooted in social bonds. In other words, while cognitions – the powerful taken-for-granted prescriptions of social expectations – set the stage for social control, emotions and affective commitments provide the impetus for compliance. As Scheff ([1990:75](#)) notes, “we experience [expectations/prescriptions] as so compelling because of emotions, specifically, the pleasure of pride and fellow feeling, on the one hand, and the punishment of ... shame” on the other.

Our argument further suggests that to understand institutional reproduction and maintenance, we need to consider not just institutional inhabitants’ cognitive constraints and

practical awareness of institutional prescriptions, but also the emotional impetus that arises from both the threat of rejection and the possibility of acceptance. From this perspective, people respond powerfully to the anticipation or experience of felt shame because these signal when a person's actions threaten valued social bonds and whether work is needed to repair or preserve them ([Leary, 2000](#); [Tracy & Robins, 2004](#)). In addition, the internal and intersubjective nature of the sense of shame means that systemic shame's disciplinary power often exceeds that of formal rewards and punishment, which are infrequent and costly ([Goffman, 1963](#)). In contrast, imagined or anticipated experiences of social rejection are "virtually instantaneous, and invisible and cheap as dirt" ([Scheff, 1990:75](#)).

In most cases, the disciplinary power of systemic shame is such that the person quickly extinguishes or masks a transgression. The ubiquity of persons' internal sense of shame, with its ongoing intersubjective surveillance and self-regulation, means that most transgressions never reach the point where they are noticed by others; instead, the transgressor recognizes a possible breach and preemptively conforms. This implies that in situations where systemic shame is strongly implicated in persons' sense of shame, the need to police transgressions is likely to be less frequent. But when transgressions are significant and noticed, they can trigger episodic shaming.

### **Episodic Shaming and Institutional Reproduction and Change**

Even modes of disciplinary power such as systemic shame may prove insufficient to reproduce institutionalized prescriptions, especially in the face of institutional pluralism and complexity that provide alternative prescriptions for persons as they navigate the social world ([Kraatz & Block, 2008](#); [Seo & Creed, 2002](#)). Where there are contradictory institutional prescriptions, conformity with one can immediately imply nonconformity with another, thereby

posing a threat to institutional reproduction. Consequently, in some settings, ensuring the conformity that maintains institutions may become a recurring preoccupation. When nonconformity crosses the line into a level of transgression that appears to threaten the institutional order, *shaming attempts* can occur.

***Episodic shaming.*** *Shaming attempts* are instances where a community or some of its members seek to induce *felt shame* through the exercise of *episodic shaming*. These shaming attempts carry implicit or explicit threats of temporary ostracism or even the permanent sundering of social bonds. In other words, shaming attempts are situated, purposive uses of episodic power to induce compliance with institutionalized community prescriptions. As such, it is a form of agentic or juridical power because it involves more or less “discrete, strategic acts of mobilization initiated by self-interested actors” ([Lawrence, 2008:174](#)).

We describe episodic shaming as a form of juridical power for two reasons. First, we want to highlight that episodic shaming is purposively and strategically wielded by institutional guardians to enforce and reinforce community prescriptions. Second, we want to draw a clear contrast between the juridical power of *episodic shaming* and the disciplinary power of *systemic shame*. Like systemic shame, episodic shaming requires the presence of the person’s sense of shame as a core mechanism. Indeed, a person’s reaction to being the target of a shaming attempt will likely be stronger when he or she has a robust sense of shame. However, unlike systemic shame, the juridical power of episodic shaming relies on additional mechanisms embedded in concrete relations – such as active threats of social dislocation – to induce the transgressor to renewed conformity.

The specific techniques of shaming attempts will vary across settings and relationships and they are legion. As we noted earlier, in the normal conduct of life systemic shame, our

personal sense of shame, and our transgressions go largely unnoticed; we are usually unaware that we swim in a sea of shame and our self-regulation may often be unconscious. Episodic shaming, in contrast, exposes both a person's transgressions and the ambit of their self-regulation in ways that preclude turning a blind eye. Shaming attempts are indictments of the transgressor's failure at adequate self-regulation (e.g., "how could you," "you should have known better"). While episodic shaming coerces through mechanisms that can take the form of threatened or enacted degradation, stigmatization, demonization, and ostracism, the actual techniques can be as simple and specific as a reference to a shared memory, a fraught word, a disparaging tone. Shaming mechanisms are endlessly diverse because they are situated in specific relationships. This implies that in some situations episodic shaming can be a form of power that "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses and learning processes and everyday lives" ([Foucault, 1980:39](#)).

Implicit in our discussion to this point is the central role of "interested actors" ([Lawrence, 2008:174](#)), or institutional guardians ([DeJordy, 2010](#); [Goffman, 1967](#); also see [Dacin & Dacin, 2008](#)) whom we call *shamers*. Because shamers have cognitive, emotional, and/or moral commitments to existing prescriptions and patterns of social relations, they police the boundaries of acceptable behavior. What all shaming attempts have in common is that they always entail the threat of loss of standing as a valued person and social ostracism. Through episodic shaming, shamers try to highlight and enforce acceptable patterns of behavior, motivated by a desire to reinforce cherished norms and/or punish transgressors. In essence, shaming practices complement other more widely discussed judicial, regulatory, and coercive compliance mechanisms. Episodic shaming reduces the challenge to existing institutional meaning systems by either bringing nonconformists back in line or by actually excluding them from the social



system.

Further, we suggest that the power of overt shaming attempts goes beyond their ability to target a specific transgressor; they cast a wider shadow. First, the stigma of the shaming attempt can be felt by others associated with the transgressor ([Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009](#); [Pontikes, Negro, & Rao, 2010](#)). Second, the shaming attempts serve as a warning to “undetected” transgressors and any other observers who might be tempted to cross the boundary of acceptable behavior. Because felt shame typically occurs in the presence of others ([Smith, Webster, Parrott, & Eyre, 2002](#)), witnesses vicariously experience the risk of felt shame and the threat of social dislocation. This activates those witnesses’ internal sense of shame. In other words, as we watch others being shamed, we come to understand how a similar transgression on our part can have the same outcome, especially when we have the vicarious and perhaps even visceral experience of felt shame ourselves. In short, episodic shaming can make salient for the target and for witnesses the boundaries of acceptable behavior and invigorate their self-regulation, thereby preserving institutional arrangements. For example, [Dacin, Munir, and Tracey \(2010\)](#) describe how a head waiter, in his role as institutional guardian, openly scolded students who left the table between courses of the meal to smoke for their allegedly “peasant” behavior, thereby reinforcing not only Cambridge dining etiquette but also the British class structure among both targets and observers. In this manner, observing episodic shaming will tend to reinforce witnesses’ internal sense of shame, strengthen the disciplinary power of systemic shame, and also make it less likely that shaming attempts will be necessary in the future.

Yet, the institutional order is only preserved if shaming attempts engender conformity, a possibility we discuss next. Another possibility is that shaming attempts elicit rejection rather than acceptance of the underlying definitions of normativity because, as Cooper and colleagues

have noted, exercises of juridical or agentic power are “endemically vulnerable to both overt and covert resistance” (2008:683). We discuss this second possibility as well, showing how the two trajectories of acceptance or rejection of shaming attempts lead to either institutional maintenance or change.

*Acceptance of shaming attempts.* When transgression is noted, institutional guardians may seek to directly engage the target’s sense of shame through episodic shaming, which can trigger the person’s conscious sensemaking regarding the transgressive behavior ([Baumeister et al., 2007](#); [Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2013](#)). However, even when some in the community recognize a transgression, a variety of strategies are possible for calling attention to the transgression that fall short of episodic shaming. For instance, when breaking a social norm is minor, accidental or unintended, members can turn a blind eye or find ways to allow the transgressor to save face ([Lok & De Rond, 2013](#)). The transgressor may then be able to return to conformity and the community fold relatively easily. Here, transgressors are unlikely to face more severe sanctions if they also exhibit rejection of the violation, which can be done through a variety of actions – a simple apology, prosocial behaviors, some display of contrition and/or act of appeasement ([Lok & De Rond, 2013](#); [Martens, Tracy, & Shariff, 2012](#)). In many cases, actions that signal that the transgressor values the social bonds and wants to ratify his or her standing as a valuable person can expiate the transgression and sustain the bond ([Tracy & Robins, 2004](#)).

In cases where the transgression is sufficiently serious, shamers may initiate a shaming attempt targeting the transgressor. While persons’ self-regulation is often unconscious, becoming the target of a shaming attempt can trigger a sudden self-awareness and sensemaking about the transgression, one’s sense of shame, and the value of the implicated social bonds. All the cultural

resources employed in this sensemaking are, of course, institutionally derived (Weber & Glynn, 2006). However, the complex, sedimented nature of persons' sense of shame means that this sensemaking can motivate a variety of specific adaptive responses, even as those responses themselves are also institutionally derived. It is important to note, as will be detailed below, that either acceptance or rejection of shaming attempts entails the operation of the person's sense of shame, particularly knowledge of the conditions for shame and self-regulation. Moreover, episodic shaming is possible as an exercise of power only if the duo of systemic shame's disciplinary power and persons' sense of shame create the conditions for it.

One possibility is that the transgressor will make sense of the shaming attempt and find his or her performance shameful and so pursue renewed conformity ([Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011](#); [de Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2010](#); [Gausel, Leach, Vignoles, & Brown, 2012](#); [Grasmick, Bursik, & Kinsey, 1991](#); [Panagopoulos, 2011](#)). Another possibility is that the transgressor, without necessarily attributing shamefulness to the self ([Turner & Stets, 2005](#)), nonetheless conforms. In either case, if expiation of the breach and reaffirmation of the prescription through renewed compliance are within the transgressor's power, then acting to heal the social bond is possible. How likely a transgressor is to take this path may hinge on one's situated sensemaking regarding several factors: the value of the social bond, the effort and social, emotional, or material resources required for renewed conformity, and expectations of success. Given the right mix of factors, the transgressor can respond to the shaming attempt through compliance.

***Rejection of shaming attempts.*** Transgressors may also reject shaming attempts ([Combs, Campbell, Jackson, & Smith, 2010](#)). For instance, fully complying with expectations may demand too much or may not even be within the transgressor's power. This may be the case

when the transgressive behavior is associated with personal characteristics that are stigmatized in some settings, such as engaging in same-sex love ([Creed, 2006](#)) or styles of social behaviors associated with poverty or lower social class origins ([Gray & Kish-Gephart, In press](#)). One possible response here may be surface-level conformity, such as masking the offending behavior or personal characteristic, “passing” as a “normal” person ([DeJordy, 2008](#); [Goffman, 1963](#)). Surface-level conformity, understood as a form of decoupling (DeJordy, 2008), may lead to acceptance by others in the community. But that acceptance is potentially unstable as it is contingent on the continued successful repression or masking of personal characteristics, which can have great psychosocial costs (DeJordy, 2008).

The situation becomes more complicated as we consider some key implications of Friedland and Alford’s (1991) assertion that systems of observable social relations make diverse institutional prescriptions concrete and knowable to persons; each community distills distinct prescriptions for its members. However, because modern persons are members of multiple communities -- each of which can provide distinct distilled prescriptions – a given person’s enactments can comprise a mix of responses to a variety of valued social bonds and institutional prescriptions. While these diverse institutional prescriptions may cohere in some ways, they can also conflict ([Creed et al., 2010](#); [Seo & Creed, 2002](#)). In other words, persons’ multiple memberships can result not only in contradictory prescriptions but also in potentially competing pulls toward valued social groups. As a consequence, managing memberships in multiple communities is potentially difficult because different communities give their members different things about which they can experience felt shame ([Sayer, 2005](#)). In sum, not only can people experience painful competing pulls toward different communities ([Scheff, 1990](#)), people can also face situations where the institutional prescriptions of one social group conflict with the

institutional prescriptions of another, such that what is seen as shameful in one group may be judged irrelevant or even praiseworthy in another.

In the face of such competing pulls, a shaming attempt can present a person with a particularly painful situation if its prescription entails violating the prescription of another valued community. Paradoxically, at the same time, the target's multiple memberships in valued social groups can also provide diverse resources for navigating those contradictions. For example, through multiple memberships, persons may learn strategies for passing or for enacting partial, situated conformity ([DeJordy, 2008](#); [Goffman, 1963](#)). Regardless of whether it actually elicits felt shame or it simply alerts the target to threatened social bonds, what is important is that a shaming attempt can induce sensemaking ([Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2013](#)), which is the first step in navigating such contradictions.

A shame attempt's triggering of sensemaking may have several important consequences. First, sensemaking can affect the person's sense of shame, potentially altering its scope and content; for example, the person may cease to feel a particular behavior is shameful. Consequently, the target may reject a shaming attempt by attributing it to a fault in the institutional prescriptions, perhaps concluding that they are trivial or wrongheaded ([Turner & Stets, 2005](#)). Second, a shaming attempt can also alter the value one places on a social bond. For instance, targeted persons may reject the shaming attempt by rejecting those doing the shaming ([Combs et al., 2010](#); [Hutcherson & Gross, 2011](#)), perhaps coming to believe that the shamers do not speak for the broader community, or by the target concluding that he or she no longer values the broader community. Each of these effects enables the target's possible rejection of the shaming attempt.

The rejection of a shaming attempt can have implications for the juridical power of

episodic shaming and the disciplinary power of systemic shame. First, the disciplinary power of systemic shame is weakened if, as a consequence of the sensemaking triggered by episodic shaming, a person's sense of shame ceases to encompass a particular norm or prescription or if the value of the social bond is diminished. We argue that such changes in the value of bonds or in a person's sense of shame are less likely during the routine and often unconscious self-regulation associated with systemic shame, but are more likely when episodic shaming triggers sensemaking. Such counter-normative sensemaking is made more possible by the availability of cultural and emotional resources arising from multiple memberships, which can provide alternative institutional "building blocks of sensemaking" ([Weber & Glynn, 2006:1644](#)). These resources can be drawn upon to resist or discredit the shaming attempt because they provide alternative prescriptions of socially approved ways of being.

One possible route that the rejection of a shaming attempt can take is for the person to exit the social group, severing the social bonds. Under conditions of multiple memberships, the threat of social dislocation ([Willmott, 2011](#)) or the loss of other benefits associated with membership motivates a search for and possibly a "move toward" ([Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville, & Scully, 2010:394](#)) alternative social relations. These alternatives may be groups in which a person already has membership or groups in which the person sees the possibility of meeting psychosocial, emotional, or instrumental needs. A person can imagine movement or changes in memberships because his or her memberships in more than one community have already exposed him or her to alternative social groups and the different prescriptions for ways of being that they offer. Exit may be particularly likely in situations where bonds with the shaming social group are weaker, and the threat of social dislocation is less.

Exit as an option pertains only to concrete social groups. For example, GLBT persons can

choose to reject the heterosexist teachings of the churches of their youth and either give up church membership entirely or join more inclusive religious groups ([Creed et al., 2010](#)). Leaving the church one was raised in, however, does not mean that one thereby escapes the disciplinary power of systemic shame, as the quip that one is “in recovery” from one’s religious upbringing suggests. Even lapsed community members are likely to carry aspects of abandoned communities with them; this is another example of the sedimented nature of the sense of shame.

Another possible route that rejection of a shaming attempt can take is voice ([Hirschman, 1970](#)). In the organizational literature, voice has referred to efforts to communicate grievances and propose actions to improve working relations or practices ([Hoffmann, 2006](#); [Zhou & George, 2001](#)). Here, we use it to refer to a person’s remaining in the social group and embracing some elements while rejecting or challenging others. Possibilities for voice stem from and are amplified by heterogeneity in institutional prescriptions and community memberships. Consequently, it is likely that some members of a particular group may feel stronger cognitive, instrumental, and affective commitments to some of the institutional elements in the group’s distinct mix of prescriptions than to others. Such blends of commitments and attachments enable voice. In practice, this allows for the transgressor’s rejection of a shaming attempt (and the institutional prescriptions that underpin it) while remaining within the community, where the member can find kindred spirits with whom to attempt to transform the institutional arrangements from the inside ([Gutierrez et al., 2010](#)). We argue that such a response is more likely when members feel a strong affective commitment to the social relationships and to some parts of the institutionalized beliefs and systems of meanings, even while rejecting other parts. As before, the resistance to or discrediting of a shaming attempt is possible because memberships in multiple communities provide members with materials to imagine new

institutional configurations and social arrangements. In other words, it is often the multiple memberships, affective commitments, and alternative sensemaking that enable or empower persons to remain a part of social groups attempting to shame them, yet resist or discredit those shaming attempts.

### **Summary**

To summarize, the shame nexus is implicated in a range of institutional processes through the subjectification of the self-regulating persons who inhabit institutions. Systemic shame, a form of disciplinary power, works in concert with persons' internalized sense of shame to discipline institutional inhabitants so that they engage in intersubjective surveillance and self-regulation to avoid felt shame. This self-regulation underpins institutional reproduction. Systemic shame and peoples' sense of shame also create the conditions for the purposive exercise of juridical power in the form of episodic shaming, which can be used to curb transgressive behavior and reassert the appropriateness of institutional prescriptions. Whether or not shaming attempts lead to felt shame, they can trigger sensemaking among community members that may result in the reassessment of community prescriptions and bonds. In the next section we address how such reassessments can shape institutional inhabitants' motivations to engage in the work of institutional maintenance, disruption, or creation.

### **THE SHAME NEXUS AND INSTITUTIONAL WORK**

So far in our discussion we have drawn attention to the intricate ways systemic shame and episodic shaming play a role in subjectifying persons through providing the critical content of persons' sense of shame, the specific knowledge of the conditions for shame. In doing so, we have offered an enhanced picture of the cross-level constitution of institutional inhabitants. Now we bring these persons into the inhabited institutional processes (Scully & Creed, 1997) that



have been called institutional work ([Lawrence et al., 2011](#); [Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006](#); [Lawrence et al., 2009](#)), to suggest more concretely how consideration of the shame nexus can enhance institutional analysis by helping to explain institutional maintenance, institutional disruption, and institutional creation and change ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006](#)).

### **The Shame Nexus and Institutional Maintenance**

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) define the work of institutional maintenance as supporting, repairing, or recreating the mechanisms that ensure institutional stability. Examinations of mechanisms of stability at the micro-foundational level, however, have so far focused primarily on cognitive ([Zucker, 1977](#)) and normative ([Friedland, 2002](#); [Scott, 2007](#)) processes. A focus on the shame nexus opens a window to additional mechanisms.

***Systemic shame and conformity.*** As institutional persistence requires conformity with institutional prescriptions, an important question is the manner in which such conformity is elicited in institutional inhabitants. That is, what are the micro-foundations of conformity to institutional prescriptions? The interdependent operation of systemic shame and persons' sense of shame helps explain one way in which conformity is elicited. As persons engage in processes of reciprocal ratification of their standing as valued persons, they internalize the expectations of others as well as the knowledge of the conditions for felt shame. This learning unfolds within the context of systemic shame and becomes sedimented in persons' sense of shame in ways that reinforce their joint disciplinary power. Systemic shame, working in concert with persons' sense of shame, is ubiquitous and constant, and has a central role to play in explaining the self-regulation and resulting conformity to institutional prescriptions that is one micro-foundation of institutional maintenance.

While the ubiquitous disciplinary nature of systemic shame may seem conceptually

inconsistent with the notions of personal effort and intentionality that are emphasized in the institutional work perspective, we nonetheless argue that systemic shame's operation in institutional maintenance relies on important forms of institutional work. Intersubjective surveillance, self-regulation, and shame avoidance entail persons' constant application of cultural knowledge and vigilant effort. Lok and De Rond (2013) argue that such effort marks self-correction as a form of institutional work. Although the behavioral regulation is perhaps more often self- than other-directed, it is not exclusively so. The ideas of intersubjective surveillance, of living in the minds of others, and of the "looking glass self" all speak to a form of mutual regulation where persons' self-assessments reflect the imagined assessments of others; again, we are all both the watchers and the watched. In addition, whether unconscious or intentional, shame avoidance is intricately intertwined with other forms of institutional maintenance, including the preservation of community bonds and the construction of the self as a community member in good standing. Finally, some manifestations of self-regulation likely have important indirect effects that may be intentional, such as affirming community prescriptions and modeling and validating compliance. Together these features of persons' complicity in the operation of systemic shame's disciplinary power suggest that living subject to one's sense of shame is a distinct but fundamental form of institutional work that extends across a wide spectrum of institutional orders in ways that discrete strategic acts of maintenance do not.

***Episodic shaming and conformity.*** In addition to being a product of the joint operation of systemic shame and the sense of shame, conformity can also be a possible response to exercises of episodic shaming. Conformity in the wake of shaming attempts, in all its guises, can have important consequences that can maintain and strengthen institutional arrangements, including systemic shame. For the transgressor, for instance, renewed conformity may lead to

continued flows of material and emotional resources associated with community membership or strong social bonds. From an affective perspective, continued interaction with others in the community can generate positive emotions for the members ([Cialdini et al., 1976](#)), enhancing feelings of emotional solidarity ([Scheff, 1990](#)), thereby leading to greater emotional commitment to institutional prescriptions ([Voronov & Vince, 2012](#)). But in conforming after a shaming attempt, targets engage in institutional maintenance work through the proper reenactment of previously transgressed institutional prescriptions, thereby strengthening institutional arrangements through repair of the breach, reaffirmation of the prescription, and reinforcement of members' sense of shame. Importantly, conformity contributes to maintenance of the institutional order regardless of whether it is genuine and simulated.

While it is possible that in many cases of episodic shaming enhanced self-regulation and institutional maintenance are relatively unthinking, in other cases the return to conformity is more deliberate. One example mentioned earlier is passing, or the surface-level simulation of conformity, to mask transgressive behavior or stigmatized identity ([DeJordy, 2008](#)). For example, [Hudson and Okhuysen \(2009\)](#) find that customers of men's bathhouses avail themselves of the anonymous membership cards, hidden locations, and nondescript architecture of bathhouses to keep their patronage of these sex venues hidden. In patronizing the bathhouses while keeping that patronage as secret as possible, these customers mask their sexual practices as a form of self-regulation; they take advantage of the structures of anonymity that the bathhouses provide to avoid episodic shaming and stigmatization in the broader community. Curiously, this makes passing a complex form of praxis ([Benson, 1977](#)) in which customers effectively perform institutional work to maintain two seemingly contradictory institutions: the bathhouse as a hidden institution of gay culture and the broader community's institutional prescriptions that

judge patronizing men's bathhouses to be shameful.

Conforming in response to shaming episodes contributes to institutional maintenance in ways beyond the behavioral changes of transgressors who conform. The transgressor's renewed conformity also validates the shamers' standing in the community as guardians of institutionalized notions of appropriateness, thereby reinforcing community members' use of juridical power in the work of institutional defense ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006](#); [Maguire & Hardy, 2009](#)). Moreover, the drama of transgression, episodic shaming, contrition, and conformity also serves a didactic purpose for the broader community. Through the performance of defense work ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006](#); [Maguire & Hardy, 2009](#)) the symbolic meaning structures around the threatened institutional prescriptions and roles are re-negotiated ([Hallett & Ventresca, 2006](#)) but ultimately reaffirmed in the interaction between the shamers and the transgressor. In such situations the sequence of transgression, episodic shaming, and repair provide opportunities for both individual and collective institutional work that reinforce institutional practices and symbolic constructions.

***Boundary conditions for the shame nexus in institutional maintenance.*** Naturally, there are also some boundary conditions to consider when using the shame nexus to understand persons' conformity as an instance of institutional maintenance work. In general, systems of social control, such as the shame nexus, can vary in terms of the intensity of approval or disapproval different communities attach to institutional prescriptions ([Gelfand et al., 2011](#)) and the degree of consensus or consistency with which a norm is shared across members ([O'Reilly, 1989](#)). The greater the consensus, the greater the number of potential shamers. Where there is less consensus regarding the definitions of what constitutes shameful behavior or the commitment to those definitions is less intense, there will likely be greater tolerance for various

forms of nonconformity and even for transgressive behavior. In addition, shaming attempts which are designed to enforce or reinforce a prescription with low consensus or intensity may not only prove fruitless but may further weaken the force of the prescription. Each of these conditions would make the shame nexus a weaker mechanism of control.

The viability of intersubjective surveillance, self-regulation, and episodic shaming as mechanisms will also vary across groups based on patterns of interaction and shared cultural standards; the more dense the patterns of interaction and the stronger the hold of common cultural backgrounds ([Douglas, 2013](#); [Lawrence, 2008](#)), the more likely the shame nexus will figure strongly in the work of institutional maintenance. In contrast, the shame nexus is likely to operate at lower intensities in communities where social bonds are weaker and a sense of belongingness is less central to members' sense of self; together these could cause persons' sense of shame and self-regulation to be less robust ([O'Reilly, 1989](#)). This could be the case in settings where membership is transitory, anonymous, or more transactional than relational. Wherever widespread self-regulation is less dependent on either embeddedness in social bonds or the degree to which persons' sense of shame reflects consensus on prescriptions, other forms of coercive mechanisms ([Dacin et al., 2010](#); [Hallett & Ventresca, 2006](#)), such as formal laws and rules, may be more important to elicit conformity and, consequently, play a stronger role in enhancing institutional maintenance.

### **The Shame Nexus and Institutional Disruption**

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) define institutional work as disruption when it involves attacking and undermining institutions, and when the goal is to subvert or replace existing institutions. Our analysis of the shame nexus suggests one explanation for why people engage in disruption work relative to specific institutional prescriptions. As mentioned earlier, institutional

guardians ([DeJordy, 2010](#)) use episodic shaming as a tool in policing a community's boundaries of acceptable behavior ([Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010](#)). However, shaming attempts do not automatically result in renewed conformity, especially when they lead the targeted transgressor to engage in sensemaking regarding the basis for the shaming attempt. When the targets of shaming attempts have memberships in multiple communities, they are more likely to have access to alternative prescriptions or definitions of the conditions for shame that can serve as lenses for evaluating the appropriateness of their own behavior. Such a reassessment of a shaming attempt is made more possible by the reduced risk of social isolation arising from membership in multiple communities; memberships in other communities provide "plausibility structures" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) that enable targets to envision alternative enduring bonds and social arrangements. When these alternative lenses contradict the shaming community's evaluation of a transgression, the target may reject the shaming attempt rather than renewing conformity.

Moreover, the availability of alternative prescriptions as resources for sensemaking can lead the targets of shaming attempts to go beyond mere rejection of institutional prescriptions to making negative external attributions that can produce feelings of anger ([Brickley & Drunen, 1990](#); [Lewis, 1992](#); [Tangney et al., 2007](#)). If the target judges the shaming attempt as unjustified, that anger may then be directed at the shaming community and its institutional prescriptions, and/or the shamers who initiated the shaming attempt. Possible actions may include subverting the community, attacking it from within or from outside. It is the availability of alternative prescriptions due to multiple memberships that lays the foundations for the work of disruption ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006](#)) aimed at the shaming community and its prescriptions.

[Gould \(2002\)](#) provides an important example of disruption work in her account of the

formation and activities of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP). She describes the process by which those who were both gay and infected with HIV responded to shame, stigma, and rejection. In contrast to the lesbian and gay rights movement's prior dismissal of direct action as potentially counterproductive, ACT-UP became notorious for its highly disruptive use of direct action to challenge the institutions that had minimized the importance of HIV/AIDS ([Elsbach & Sutton, 1992](#)) because it was perceived as primarily a gay men's disease. Through highly symbolic actions such as widespread "die-ins," mass public protests in which activists fell down as if they were dying from HIV, and the disrupting of mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, ACT-UP challenged the inactivity, complacency, moralizing, and indifference of government officials and the general public to the HIV epidemic. These attacks eventually led to changes in policy and activity at important institutional agencies such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, and hospitals and clinics, as well as city and state governments throughout the U.S. The motivations arising from GLBT persons' lived experience of the shame nexus ([Shiltz, 1988](#)) are central to this case of institutional disruption.

***Boundary conditions for the shame nexus in institutional disruption.*** As with the work of institutional maintenance, certain conditions pertaining to heterogeneity within and across communities are likely to bound the role of the shame nexus in institutional disruption. These boundary conditions have to do with the density of interactions, the intensity with which specific prescriptions are embraced ([Gelfand et al., 2011](#)) or rejected, and the level of community consensus regarding the appropriateness of those prescriptions ([O'Reilly, 1989](#)). For instance, if the operation of the shame nexus is ubiquitous and constant, an important question remains: Under what conditions will it lead persons to engage in disruption? The ACT-UP case enables

some tentative answers. For persons with stigmatized identities, prevailing institutional arrangements are always disadvantageous, if not painful and enraging. The negative effects of the lived experience of the shame nexus can accumulate until some point of discontinuity, like the HIV/AIDS crisis. Such discontinuities can create the conditions for a reassessment of dominant institutional conditions for shame – and for the intensification of collective mobilization in shamed communities. As we have argued before, multiple memberships and the presence of plausible institutional alternatives (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) will likely play a role. Such a reassessment of the dominant conditions for shame can crystalize different sensemaking resources and, as the rapid increase in ACT-UP's use of direct action shows, new institutional practices designed for the work of disruption.

### **The Shame Nexus and Institutional Creation and Change**

An additional form of institutional work pertains to the formulation of institutions, either through the creation of new institutions or the change of existing ones. (Change in this context is distinct from disruption, which Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) use to refer to the work of undermining and replacing institutions, as noted above.) The role of the shame nexus in the creation of new institutions and the change of existing ones can be most clearly seen through the lens of voice, which we have used to refer to persons' vocal rejecting or challenging of particular community prescriptions while remaining within a community. In addition, episodic shaming in particular may be a key mechanism in the micro-foundations of institutional change when persons who have been the targets of shaming attempts remain members of the community while challenging both shamers and the prescriptions they represent. In voice, transgressors refuse either to be silent or to go away.

As noted, shaming attempts can serve as triggers for critical sensemaking on the part of



targets and other community members. In situations where targets with strong affective commitments to a community not only question the validity of the shaming attempt, but also conclude that the flaw lies not with themselves but with the shamers or the community's prescriptions, they may choose to remain within the community and engage in change activity from within. This work can be done by finding allies within the community and by forming coalitions that contest particular prescriptions and engage in the work of reconfiguring the community's belief systems. Staying and finding other kindred spirits sustains some aspects of the community while reforming others, making voice in this case more a form of institutional change than creation ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006](#)).

While institutional disruption may involve a wholesale rejection of a social group's institutional prescriptions, and entail exit, and attack from outside, voice represents a selective reengagement with what we have referred to as a social group's distinctive distillation of diverse – and perhaps conflicting – institutional prescriptions. This selective reengagement can involve careful and deliberate consideration and evaluation of the different institutional prescriptions as separate strands in the social fabric. This suggests that as a form of institutional work, voice may have less to do with institutional boundaries, behavioral conformity or disruption, and more to do with the institutional core beliefs, which may be subject to active renegotiation through voice ([Creed, 2003](#); [Creed & Scully, 2000](#); [Meyerson & Scully, 1995](#)).

Creed, DeJordy and Lok's ([2010](#)) research on the identity work of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) ministers provides an illustration of how the shame nexus and voice figure in the work of institutional change. For the GLBT ministers in their study, church definitions of the conditions for shame had existential impact because the widely held institutional claim that GLBT people were unfit for Christian ministry reached beyond the

alleged shamefulness of specific sexual behaviors to GLBT identity more broadly. The ministers in the study initially internalized heterosexist prescriptions, constructing self-narratives rife with felt shame, compartmentalization, and denial, even as they tried to pursue their deeply felt callings to Christian ministry. Many also tried to pass as heterosexual, even marrying opposite sex partners to hide their stigmatized identities, in order to sustain their ties to their church communities. Unable to sustain the painful contradictions between their understandings of the inclusiveness of the Christian Gospel, on the one hand, and the deeply internalized felt shame fostered by definitions of the conditions for shame prevailing in their denominations, on the other, they engaged in the work of reconciling their sexual identities with their faith. In this process they drew on a variety of sensemaking resources, including but not limited to liberation theology and emerging directions in biblical scholarship, feminism, and the histories of diverse civil rights struggles, including the contemporary GLBT rights movement. Consequently, the ministers came to believe that nothing inherent to GLBT identity or sexual expression excluded persons from the love of God and further, came to believe that heterosexism is antithetical to the core messages of the Gospel. Ultimately, these strong rejections of the conditions for shame they had grown up with enabled them to claim and use ministerial roles for change within their denominations and their local congregations, affirming inclusive tenets of Christian theology while challenging the shaming heterosexist orthodoxies of their denominations.

***Boundary conditions for the shame nexus in institutional creation & change.*** Several factors suggest some boundary conditions for the role of the shame nexus in institutional creation and change. First, to the extent that valued social bonds or affective commitments are strong, persons may see exit from a community as too painful an option, strengthening their motivation to engage in voice. At the same time, persons who are stigmatized due to the operation of

systemic shame or are the targets of episodic shaming must have access to diverse sensemaking resources, likely stemming from membership in multiple communities, if they are to be equipped to reject the shaming attempt. Moreover, to the extent that others who are not the objects of stigma or targets of episodic shaming also reject the same institutional prescriptions, the presence of allies may strengthen the transgressors' resolve. Under such conditions, persons may be more motivated to remain and work for change within the community, rather than exit. This implies that the shame nexus may be more likely to lead to institutional change in communities where persons have diverse sensemaking resources for reassessing contested institutional prescriptions, where potential allies are present, and where strong affective commitments make exit unappealing.

Although our three illustrations happen to show the institutional work of what appears to be the same stigmatized group, these illustrations show distinct heterogeneity: proprietors and customers of businesses (men's bathhouses), movement activists advocating changes in health policy and access to health care (ACT-UP), and professionals negotiating their fit within organizations (Christian ministers). Our illustrations also span several institutional realms – organizational, political, and religious – and types of institutional work. We believe this heterogeneity shows the broad applicability of the shame nexus in institutional processes.

## **DISCUSSION**

Despite an increased emphasis on people, social interaction, and work, institutionalism has yet to adequately answer the question of “what are we to do about people” ([Hallett & Ventresca, 2006:230](#)). In response, our work contributes to institutional theory by expanding and elaborating the embryonic emotions in institutions perspective (e.g., [Creed et al., 2010](#); [Voronov & Vince, 2012](#)) by bringing whole persons into better focus through attending to the role of a

single emotion, shame. Through our theorizing of the shame nexus, we offer a cross-level account of the mechanisms through which shame affects persons' participating in institutional processes. Our analysis also points beyond the shame nexus to the potential importance of other concrete emotions, particularly the social emotions that underlie and animate persons' social bonds ([Leary, 2000](#); [Tangney et al., 2007](#); [Tracy & Robins, 2004](#); [Turner & Stets, 2005](#)). In this section we present some implications of our analysis for institutional theory and suggest some areas where further work is warranted.

### **Subjectification, Institutional Inhabitants, and Institutionalization**

The nagging question of “what are we to do about people” suggests that one way to advance institutional theory is to dwell more attentively with a key implication of the inhabited institutions perspective: both the negotiation of institutional meanings and practices and the constitution of institutional inhabitants are embedded in systems of social bonds. Deeper attention to social bonds and their effects on persons' sense of shame and self regulation matters because institutional inhabitants are not merely carriers of institutions, but rather are persons, with affective commitments and emotional stakes, who together instantiate and reproduce institutions through their symbolic interactions. It bears repeating that in institutionalization “it is not simply what people ‘do’ that matters, but what they do ‘together’” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006: 216). To understand the dynamics and processes of what they do together, we need to have a better understanding of the nature and effects of the social “connective tissues” that bind them (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006: 224).

Our theorizing of the sense of shame and systemic shame also makes clearer some key linkages between the constitution of people and what they do together, between subjectification and institutionalization. We argue that while enacting institutions, persons intersubjectively live

in the minds of others, self-regulate, and avoid shame. This implies that inhabiting an institution requires work on two fronts, shame avoidance and institutional enactment, with performance of one intertwined with performance of the other.

In this vein, our analysis responds to broader concerns about the ways in which institutionalism conceives of actors, subjectification, and power. Cooper and colleagues (2008:675), building on (Hasselbladh & Kalinikos, 2000), argue that institutional theorists have largely ignored how institutionalization as a process actually relies on “its capacity to constitute distinct forms of actorhood;” better explanations of institutional reproduction and change will hinge on attending to the constitution of actors as subjects whose commitments to institutionalized practices and beliefs are both the product and engine of institutionalization. By exploring the joint operation of systemic shame and the sense of shame, we identify them as core drivers of the subjectification and the self-regulation that animates persons’ participation in processes of institutionalization.

As a result, we show institutionalization as accomplished, at least in part, through ongoing patterns of subjectification that are manifested in a person’s sedimented sense of shame, the distinct internalization of his or her communities’ conditions for felt shame. Rather than either the atomized, autonomous individual with a discrete consciousness who is allegedly doing institutional work (Willmott, 2011) or the already familiar social person of the inhabited institutions perspective, we find a person’s whose subjectivity has at its heart the personal sense of shame and who continuously lives in the minds of others (Scheff, 1990). The institutional inhabitants who engage in the symbolic interactions through which the contours of institutions are negotiated have not only shared cognitions about institutional prescriptions, but also strong emotional impetus to preserve valued social bonds and their standing as valued persons within

the communities constituted by those bonds.

If institutionalization indeed relies on the constitution of distinct forms of actorhood, as Cooper and colleagues (2008) suggest, institutional theory needs to attend explicitly not only to the cognitive content of persons' systems of self-regulation, such as shared beliefs and assumptions, but also to the affective content ([Creed et al., 2010](#); [Voronov & Vince, 2012](#)). In particular, this means the nature of their social bonds and their sense of shame. If a sense of shame is a crucial facet of the constitution of institutional inhabitants, then wherever there are persons inhabiting institutional arrangements, some aspect of the shame nexus should operate. Therefore, one of the things institutionalists could do in response to the question "what are we to do about people" is to conduct further research on when, how, and to what degree persons' sense of shame, their ongoing self-regulation, and their vigilant shame avoidance shape their enactment of particular institutional prescriptions and their inclination to engage in institutional work.

### **Sedimentation of the Sense of Shame and Institutional Work**

A key concern in institutional theory focuses on accounting for differences in persons' inclination and capacity to engage in institutional work ([Lawrence et al., 2011](#)). Our investigation suggests that one important factor in shaping persons' inclination is the lived experience of the shame nexus. We believe future work should also explore how a person's capacity for institutional work might also bear the mark of one's history of self-regulation, shame avoidance, felt shame, and sensemaking in the wake of episodic shaming, whether the latter is as shamer, target, or observer.

We also argue that persons' sense of shame will be complex in its content due to their membership in multiple communities. For example, our analysis of alternative responses to episodic shaming hinges on the argument that persons who are members of multiple systems of

relationships can face contradictory prescriptions such that what one community sees as acceptable enactments another might see as transgressive. It is widely argued that such institutional contradictions may make room for choice and alternative forms of action ([Friedland, 2012](#); [Friedland & Alford, 1991](#); [Seo & Creed, 2002](#)), that the lived experience of institutional contradiction somehow creates the conditions and may even equip the person for institutional work ([Creed et al., 2010](#)). Yet, when prescriptions rooted in valued social bonds conflict, choosing among those affective ties or reconciling their competing demands is not merely an instance of cognitive problem-solving; choice and action may entail considerable social and emotional cost and effort (Creed et al., 2010). Although some choices may reflect purely instrumental calculations, other choices may also involve changing or breaking valued affective ties.

The different values placed on those affective ties suggest how a person's sense of shame is sedimented; it is the product of persons' unfolding histories in multiple, diverse systems of social relations, of varying weight and importance, and the particular patterns of subjectification and emotional commitments that such social relations entail. We have shown how systemic shame serves as a linkage or tie to the various communities that anchor the processes of subjectification through which we emerge as persons. We suggest that the inclination and capacity to engage in specific types of institutional work are tempered through the lived experience of sedimented solidarities and commitments ([Meyerson & Scully, 1995](#)) which the person can experience as an irreconcilable tension between the promise of ongoing kinship and the threat of social dislocation ([Willmott, 2011](#)). Such lived experiences of competing memberships and institutional contradictions shape one's participation in institutional processes.

Our analysis leads us to conclude that persons' capacity to engage in the work of

institutional disruption or change in particular may be particularly limited by valued social bonds and commitments to the enactments that sustain those bonds. Therefore, a second thing institutionalists could do in response to the question “what are we to do about people” is to study the sedimented sense of shame of the inhabitants of particular institutional settings and communities. One possible avenue could be the explicit incorporation of the shame nexus into studies of institutional biography, “the exploration of specific individuals in relation to the institutions that structured their lives and that they worked to create, maintain, or disrupt” ([Lawrence et al., 2011:55](#)). We contend that scholars using institutional biography as a means for accounting for the motivation and capacity to engage in institutional work will need to look not only at a person’s sedimented beliefs and shared systems of meaning, but also his or her lived experience of the shame nexus across time. Several recent accounts of socialization processes in complex institutional settings offer promising models for this approach ([Anteby, 2013](#); [Dacin et al., 2010](#); [Lok & De Rond, 2013](#)).

### **The Sense of Shame, Reflexivity, and the Conditions for Work**

Another important implication of the shame nexus pertains to the issue of reflexivity as a condition for critical assessments of institutional prescriptions and agency. We argue that a sense of shame is a key element of personal reflexivity. In the institutional literature, the issue of reflexivity has figured both in discussions of the nature of agency ([Emirbayer & Mische, 1998](#)) and in theorizing of the role of institutional contradiction in dialectical processes and praxis for institutional change ([Seo & Creed, 2002](#)). For example, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conceive of agency in terms of a combination of three temporally-rooted action orientations. The backward-looking, “iterative” orientation fosters the unreflexive reproduction of institutional arrangements. In contrast, the “projective” and “practical-evaluative” orientations require an



agentic reflexivity regarding what is imaginable in the future, given knowledge of multiple existing arrangements, and what is currently practicable, given present conditions and constraints. Emirbayer and Mische argue that what enables actors to move from unreflexive institutional reproduction to the more reflexive orientations of critique and pragmatic action for change is encountering problematic situations – that is, situations that both require a reflexive distance from established patterns and enable greater imagination and conscious choice. Linking this argument to dialectical analysis, Seo and Creed (2002) argue that the lived experience of social contradictions makes a shift in personal and collective consciousness increasingly likely. However, in theorizing the role of reflexivity in embedded agency, institutional theorists have mostly framed the necessary contradictions in terms of conflicting institutional logics ([Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009](#); [Friedland & Alford, 1991](#); [Seo & Creed, 2002](#)). Recently, however, scholars have begun to address how persons experience such contradictions emotionally as well (e.g., [Creed et al., 2010](#); [Dacin et al., 2010](#); [Gray & Kish-Gephart, In press](#)).

One consequence of conceptualizing contradiction largely in terms of institutional logics, we argue, is a limited understanding of how emotions and persons' memberships in multiple communities figure in the development of reflexivity. Our analysis points to several ways of expanding this understanding. First, we believe that competing social bonds and affective commitments are essential features of the contradictions that make up the dialectical totality of social arrangements in which institutional inhabitants are embedded. As the various communities in which persons are members simultaneously mediate and distill competing institutional prescriptions in their distinctive ways, they set the stage for interconnected patterns of subjectification, and enable heterogeneous, “divergent, incompatible productions” of prescribed ways of being within the larger totality of social relations ([Benson, 1977:4](#)). Importantly,

persons' sense of shame is a contradiction-ridden product of this dialectical process; we argue it is a key motor of the reflexivity that underpins the work of disruption and creation.

We believe that under varying conditions, but perhaps especially in response to episodic shaming, a sedimented sense of shame can bring the iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative orientations to bear in critical reassessments of prescribed ways of being. Ensuing actions potentially affect changes in institutional arrangements and patterns of subjectification, in a renewed dialectical cycle. Conceptualizing both the human experience of institutional contradiction in terms of competing social bonds and the sense of shame as a driver of reflexivity suggests that notions of institutional agency and work that do not attend to the valued social bonds put at risk by institutional change may systematically underestimate the role of shame avoidance, social dislocation, and anomie in impeding institutional work ([Willmott, 2011](#)). Therefore, a third thing institutionalists could do in response to the question “what do we do about people” is to study heretofore unaddressed affective dimensions of the links among reflexivity, agency and institutional work, examining how persons' efforts may be conditioned or constrained not only in terms of sedimented logics (Seo & Creed, 2002), but also in terms of sedimented subjectivities and affective commitments.

### **The Shame Nexus, Power, and Social Emotions in Institutional Theory**

Lastly, our analysis may hint at deeper epistemological challenges to institutional theory. Our theorizing of the role of systemic shame in institutional processes is one attempt to address what has been a persistent gap in institutional thinking, an inattention to disciplinary power ([Lawrence, 2008](#)). Likewise, our analysis of the sense of shame challenges the privileging in our depictions of institutional processes of the imagery of logics, scripts, and schema over the imagery of social bonds, emotional commitments, and subjectification. These two contributions

are linked because, according to Cooper and colleagues ([2008:683](#)), attention to the role of disciplinary power requires a focus on subjectification and the social and institutional construction of the individual. Such a focus is difficult, they argue, because it is “far removed from the normal science value-orientation of institutional theory, which focuses upon ‘enduring elements of social life,’ such as ‘logics’ ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006:215](#)) rather than on the particularity of their subjectifying effects.”

More difficult still is how attending to subjectification challenges what Cooper and colleagues (2008) decry as the implicit assumption of an unforced and balanced reciprocity in processes of social construction; they call for a rich incorporation of power into institutional analysis as a corrective. Our analysis of the shame nexus suggests that if continuous self-regulation and shame avoidance animate the intersubjectivity that underlies social construction processes, then the resulting realities must bear the mark of the shame nexus. In other words, the intersubjective processes of reciprocal typification that are the basis of objective reality are filtered through persons’ ubiquitous anticipation and avoidance of felt shame (as Hans Christian Anderson’s allegory, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” illustrates through the characters’ collective avoidance of shame by refusing to acknowledge their emperor’s nakedness). This implies that systemic shame and subjectification manifest in persons’ sense of shame are implicated in the construction, institutionalization, and maintenance of cognitions, prescriptions, and practices. In addition, through highlighting the disciplinary power of systemic shame – as well as the ways that conformity and transgression animate institutional guardians’ exercise of episodic shaming—we offer a view of institutionalization mediated by endogenous power relations, which need to be understood as historically specific and asymmetric, rather than universal and consensual.

One of our goals has been to use a single emotion as a springboard for exploring the

larger relevance of emotions to institutional theory. Based on our analysis, we believe that future research needs to examine the ways a variety of distinct social emotions are implicated in institutionalization by way of subjectification and the impetus to preserve valued social bonds. Our integrating of the shame nexus helps advance our understanding of the social underpinnings of persons' motivation in institutional processes because it emphasizes affective bonds to other persons and communities as an important mechanism through which commitments to institutional arrangements emerge ([Voronov & Vince, 2012](#)).

The shame nexus also represents a rare cross-level, cross-disciplinary perspective on emotion. By incorporating research on shame from sociology, psychology, and philosophy, we have constructed a broad and encompassing perspective on shame, one that can account for the person's inner emotional life together with the social environment in which it unfolds and which helps produce it. In other words, the shame nexus represents unique theorizing on shame, in that it is both an articulation of a set of shame-related constructs, and an explanation of how these constructs interact across levels of analysis. Other social emotions – those self- and other-directed emotions that pertain to the evaluation and preservation of valued social bonds, such as pride, empathy, guilt, embarrassment, disgust, contempt, and anger – are also likely to figure in processes of subjectification and therefore in institutional reproduction and change. These emotions too could be considered from a cross-level, multidisciplinary perspective that would allow for theoretical development similar to what we present here regarding shame, rendering them useful and usable in explanations of institutional processes.

As we have shown, using the shame nexus, examination of the role of discrete social emotions in what we see as the twin processes of institutionalization and subjectification would advance our understandings of the micro-foundations of institutions ([Powell & Colyvas, 2008](#)).

We have argued that a primarily cognitive view leaves us with a flat picture of institutional inhabitants, devoid of any sense of what is at stake for them. We have shown how one social emotion, shame, animates self-regulation, directs attention, and triggers sensemaking, with the possible effects of either reinforcing or disrupting institutionalized prescriptions. The logical conclusion is that the cognitive processes underpinning institutional reproduction and change are fraught with emotional dynamics because they unfold in the context of sedimented systems of social relations that inform what we think, believe, value, attend to, and aspire to.

### CONCLUSION

Through the exemplar of the shame nexus, our work shows how scholars can incorporate concrete emotions into institutional theory and the value of doing so. Perhaps the most important contribution of this work lies in our effort to dislodge the *doppelgänger*s currently inhabiting much of organizational institutionalism either as “disembodied minds” or “mindless bodies” ([Crites, 1971:309](#)). Our work presents people as both cognitive and affective, as animated by both shared understandings and passions ([Friedland, 2013](#)). Such people live life as members of communities and thrive by preserving valued social bonds through ongoing enactments that ratify their belongingness. The importance of these social bonds causes persons to care about what others think and to live in the minds of others, to meet expectations and avoid breaches. These activities are fundamental to institutional reproduction. Moreover, this intersubjectivity is essential to constituting personhood. Membership in the systems of social relations that concretize institutions is not equal or democratic. Instead, such communities are shaped by power, both disciplinary and juridical; systemic shame, the sense of shame, and episodic shaming are integral to sustaining them. Subjectification animates persons’ various emotional commitments ([Voronov & Vince, 2012](#)) and self-regulation. In combination with multiple

memberships and competing social bonds, these create the conditions for how institutional inhabitants participate in institutional processes. It is only through a deeper engagement with these emotional, embodied, and socially embedded persons that we can begin to understand the inhabited processes of institutional stability or change.

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