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7. Is it the 'same'? Observing the regeneration of organizational character at Camp Poplar Grove

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1. THE MIRACLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL REGENERATION

'Organizational regeneration', a phenomenon most clearly visible in seasonal organizations, such as summer camps and ski areas, is the process of reproducing an organization after a period of dormancy, often by training and guiding personnel who are largely new to their roles, or to the organization as a whole. This process presents a revealing instance of a fundamental problem facing all members of organizations and those who study them: how can we talk of an organization as being the same entity over time? How can we attribute properties today to a business, government agency, or school based on observations made yesterday? After nine months of inactivity, an established summer camp 'comes back to life'. In general, campers, parents and staff, while perhaps noticing some distinctive features of this year's incarnation, regard the camp as the same one they have known from previous years.

This is all too easily taken for granted. But looking carefully convinces us that it is a kind of small miracle, an occasion for wonder much like what one finds in the garden each spring. Our intent is to understand how such regeneration is possible. We believe that in doing so we can shed light on how groups develop and maintain the collective property of 'being organized'.

The Paradox of the [N]ever Changing World

Many have argued (for example, Cohen, 1999; Pentland and Feldman, 2002) that when studying recurring action patterns in organizations, such as routines, there is substantial truth in *both* of these proverbs:

- one does not step into the same river twice (Heraclitus);
- there is no new thing under the sun (Ecclesiastes).

From one perspective (what might be called extremely close up), no situation of action repeats itself identically. From an alternative perspective (what might be called standing far back), every action appears as but a variant on, or recombination of, some predecessors or known general types of actions.

This ‘paradox’ of the (n)ever-changing world may be more or less apparent, but it never really vanishes. Always in its shadow, an organization must synthesize the diverse, typically inconsistent, capabilities and preferences of its members into a coherent ecology of recurring actions that affects the world in a recognizable way. To continue receiving the resources it requires, it must be able to affect the world at a level exceeding some minimal competence. Indeed, if that loop is not closed we should hesitate to call the system organized.

In doing so, organizations must convert perpetual novelty into actionable similarity (Weick, 1995). At the same time, they must also avoid mistaking significantly novel conditions as occasions for mere repetition of a familiar response. The former issue is particularly acute in the conditions of our chosen case. In seasonal organizations such as Camp Poplar Grove, which is described in detail below, activity is interrupted for long periods, and most of the assembled actors for the next cycle are inexperienced in their roles or are completely new to the organization. As they gather to (re) create a summer camp together, very many of the ‘things under the sun’ seem new, and appropriate actions are therefore not obvious.

Still, the case of Poplar Grove clearly illustrates that a few weeks sufficed to regenerate a complex system of interdependent activity (what we term an ecology) that is recognizably another instance of ‘the same’ organization. The term ‘flagpole’, for example, was quickly understood by camp newcomers to refer to both a location (for example, ‘Meet me at flagpole’) and an all-camp assembly (for example, ‘We’ll have flagpole at 10:45’), despite the flag and pole having both been removed years before.

We claim that at Camp Poplar Grove there is rapid regeneration of many collective action patterns when only a few of the actors have direct prior experience. The claim that effective action patterns are generated is substantiated by the evident functioning of the Camp: it takes in hundreds of campers, guides them through weeks of satisfying activities, and sends them safely home. The claim that after the first year, despite dormancy and turnover, this has been *re*-generation is more subtle and requires some careful distinctions.

Re-generation implies sameness. In what sense is the Camp ‘the same’ year after year? Clearly, parents and campers believe it to be effectively

the same. A child, and then his or her siblings, will often be in residence for a decade or more in large part because campers and parents expect the Camp to offer a similar and valued experience. Eisner (2005), for example, discusses the similarity of camp experiences at a Vermont camp for three generations of his family. Such experiences strongly suggest that this continuity of commitment is achieved by the actions of the Camp's personnel, and is not produced by simple physical circumstances. The mere existence of a set of buildings by a lake along with equipment for a program of activities does not suffice to guarantee a consistent experience.

Although continuity of clientele and recognition by alumni testify to some level of achieved similarity, the Camp cannot be *identical* year-to-year. In the Heraclitean extreme, nothing is identical, and certainly a summer camp, with heavy turnover in counselors and staff – not to mention variations in campers and the vagaries of weather – cannot be exactly the same in any two years.

In this chapter we draw on a detailed examination of one cycle of regeneration at Camp Poplar Grove and develop the notion of 'organizational character' as an aid to understanding the ability of the participants to regenerate what we will describe as a coherent ecology of action patterns that is recognizable as another instance of 'the same' organization. We will argue that this coherent set of action patterns is recognizable as organizational character, and that it is passed on via demonstration, rapid bursts of communication, and the iterative application of generic skills in specific contexts. Note that when we refer to coherent ecologies of action dispositions, we deliberately avoid the term 'routine', except for brief mentions in our conclusions. While it is certainly possible that some of the action patterns we describe may form the core of the sequential, durable sequences of action that are often labeled as routines, we use more general terms here to avoid definitional issues and the connotations of mindlessness that often surround the notion of routine (Cohen, forthcoming; Cohen et al., 1996).

This chapter is unusual in its structure, in order to spark discussion and invite alternative interpretations of our data. In the next section we present a summary of our case data, followed by a discussion on the notion of organizational character and observations on regenerative processes observed in the Poplar Grove case.

2. OBSERVING REGENERATION AT POPLAR GROVE

Our discussion is based on experience with and observation of Camp Poplar Grove (a pseudonym), a private summer camp in northern

Michigan. Poplar Grove was founded in 1955 to foster independent thinking and decision making in children, and continues to be owned and operated by the founders' son, Richard (a pseudonym, as are all subsequent proper names), who gradually took control starting in 1975.

The Camp's facility, shown in Figure 7.1, spans about 400 acres, and includes facilities for various activities, a small private lake, cabins, an infirmary, and a main lodge with kitchen and dining facilities. There are 70–100 campers at camp during each of four two-week sessions and the Camp employs 25–35 service and program staff members each summer. Turnover in personnel is high, as is common in summer camps. Of the 33 staff and administrators we observed, 23 were new to the Camp, and 18 new to camp counseling entirely.

During the rest of the year the directors, Richard and his wife Michelle, handle administrative operations, and the maintenance director works part-time at Camp in the spring and fall. The Camp otherwise has no year-round staff.

Data Gathering and Analysis

The primary data for this study were gathered via minimally obtrusive participant observation carried out over 22 days in 2003 by Susannah Hoch. This period spanned the Camp's staff training week and the first two weeks of its operation with campers. Hoch was unfamiliar with the Camp and comparable in age and background to the counselors being observed. She worked from guidelines that were as minimal as possible, so as to reduce expectation biasing. She was asked to observe how counselors came to understand and carry out their roles and responsibilities at Camp. She was also invited to participate in training and staff activities, and to reflect on her own experience as a newcomer to the Camp. She did not identify Birnholtz, who was on-site as assistant director, as having a research interest in her work, and she did not share results with him until after he completed the year's work with the Camp.

Hoch's field notes (Emerson et al., 1995) were generally produced in three to five short writing sessions per day, yielding 72 field note documents, ranging in length from 191 to 2066 words, with a median of 758. Near the end of the observational period, Hoch also conducted semi-structured interviews with eight staff members.

One of us (Jeremy Birnholtz) also has a long personal association with Poplar Grove, over a period spanning 18 years and involving 11 seasons in residence as a camper, counselor, and eventually as assistant director of the Camp. We draw on Birnholtz's experience largely in providing historical context for and in illustrating details observed by Hoch.

KEY TO MAP:			
1 ENTRANCE	11 TORCH TRAIL	21 CAMP STORE	31 CAMPFIRE PIT
2 MAIN LODGE	12 RIDING STABLES	22 SOCCER	32 CHERRY ORCHARD
3 GARAGE	13 TO TORCH LAKE	23 SCIENCE CENTER	33 TRAIL AROUND LAKE
4 FLAGPOLE	14 GIRLS B	24 ARTS & CRAFTS	34 BEACH
5 PROGRAM OFFICE	15 SWINGSET	25 GIRLS A	35 BOATING AREA
6 GYMNASTICS	16 VOLLEYBALL	26 GOLF DRIVING	36 SNORKELING AREA
7 GIRLS' CABINS	17 TENNIS COURTS	27 SOFTBALL I	37 SWIMMING AREA
8 GIRLS' LODGE	18 BASKETBALL	28 BOYS' CABINS	38 PADDLEBOARDS
9 FOUNDATION	19 ARCHERY RANGE	29 PUMPHOUSE	39 SAILING AREA
10 AUDITORIUM	20 BARN	30 SOFTBALL II	40 LAKE

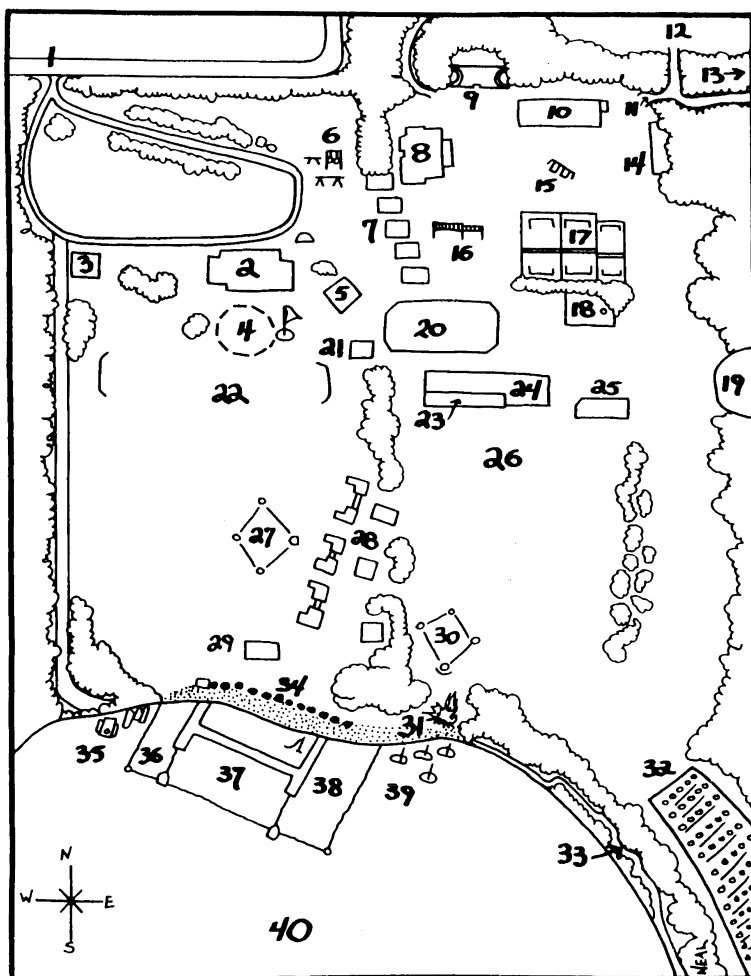


Figure 7.1 Sketch map of Camp Poplar Grove

Data analysis consisted of independent reading and re-reading of Hoch's field notes. Episodes of interest were identified and tracked, with a particular focus on three types of circumstances: 1) apparent uncertainty on the part of an individual about how to proceed and subsequent action; 2) corrections to 'incorrect' actions taken by individuals; and 3) innovative actions that appeared to take hold or be extinguished. While it was sometimes difficult to infer from field notes when individuals were uncertain about how to act or what drove them to act in particular ways, we believe we were able to reasonably extrapolate this information from the combination of Hoch's records of manifest uncertainty, her detailed reflections on her own experience as a newcomer to the Camp, her informal conversations with staff members throughout her observation period, and notes from reflective interviews with staff.

Summary of Observations

In this section, we present a short summary of Hoch's observations which is intended to orient the reader to the general setting and sequence of events.

Field observations at Poplar Grove began on Friday, 13 June, 2003, two days before the staff 'training week'. Physical reopening of the Camp from its winter shutdown was well underway, but the major effort accompanying the arrival of the first summer staff was just starting. Major tasks for these first days included bringing the kitchen into service to feed the arriving staff, and general maintenance work such as cutting grass and painting. Hoch initially spent one day helping out and observing in each of these areas.

Staff at Camp at this point included Jeremy, the assistant director; Michelle and Richard, the directors; Rick, a former head cook and counselor who was helping with the opening; and Lisa, the maintenance assistant who had arrived four days earlier and was new to the camp. With the exception of Lisa, everyone at Camp so far had experience in all its areas, and drew on these experiences in guiding Hoch and in making their own decisions.

Receiving guidance from these people raised for Hoch issues that would be seen many times among the counselors: whose advice to follow when conflicting was guidance offered; whose advice to seek when uncertain; and whether to improvise when there was doubt or to seek further guidance before acting (that is, 'whether to ask forgiveness or permission').

Another interesting aspect of these first few days was the 'one-eyed-among-the-blind' dynamic that Hoch observed. Specifically, she noticed that Lisa, despite having only been at Camp for four more days than the



Figure 7.2 'Flagpole' with campers and counselors

other staff, was someone to whom new staff (and Hoch herself) regularly turned when they had questions about where things were kept and how things were done. Thus, small differences in experience were amplified, making experts of those with only modest knowledge advantages, a process that gives rise to what we'll later call a cascade.

On the afternoon of the second day of observations, the new counselors began to arrive. The early arrivals and those experienced at Poplar Grove began filling in basic orientation for the others and making plans for the upcoming day.

On the third morning, 15 June, Hoch went to observe the kitchen and to meet Cathy, the new cook. Witnessing the first of many minor breakdowns, she found breakfast ready as Cathy had been told the staff – now numbering 24 – would come at 9:00. However, the staff believed breakfast time was 9:30, and were gathered some distance away in the area called 'flagpole' (because it was where the Camp flagpole had once been located), the area that continued to serve as the regular assembly site before each meal (see Figure 7.2).

Over breakfast, there were casual conversations about prior camp experience at Poplar Grove and elsewhere, and about a general orientation provided to some new counselors by an international recruiting agency involved in hiring some of the staff. Jeremy announced a schedule of the day's activities, including mealtimes, setting up of facilities, and staff meetings.

Post-breakfast was followed by a period of tasks getting underway. This

was a halting process as there was much uncertainty about who should do what, and a shortage of explicit direction. Counselors with prior experience, and Lisa, began giving direction and recruiting volunteers for various tasks. Much work was centered on preparation of the waterfront and sailboats. Many staff were engaged in unfamiliar tasks and asked each other for guidance ('how do I?', 'should I. . .?') or for assessment of whether a task had been done correctly ('Is this right?').

Before lunch Hoch returned to the kitchen, where there were many questions about how exactly the eating space should be set up to handle what would be a large flow of eaters when 75 campers arrived the following week. Cathy's efforts to solve this problem were ambivalent. She was an experienced cook at resorts and camps, and appreciated that each has its own methods. This she expressed by saying 'I am sure they have a system that already works, so why should I invent a new system?' At the same time, she did have ideas about common problems of traffic flow and buffet table set-up, and so did have definite preferences about some aspects of the layout. Over the course of the observations, this tension would be evident, within her and between her and other experienced Camp staff, such as Michelle.

Hoch observed Cathy making records of her kitchen management decisions that would be useful to her if she returned, or to a successor. No such records had been inherited from previous occupants of the cook role.

As the week went on, the kitchen began to function a little more smoothly in serving the staff. However, some of the work was still aided by Rick and Michelle taking part and demonstrating established practices, along with supervision from Cathy. The 'girls' (as Cathy called them) who formed the kitchen staff – three from Poland, one from England¹ – now had a clear sense of the basic mealtime procedures, and guided others who did things incorrectly. Cathy used an on-the-fly quiz approach to correcting minor discrepancies: 'oh, you forgot something. . .' followed by a pause while the staff member figured out what was missing. There were also minor, though good-natured, tugs of war between Cathy and Rick and Michelle about arranging serving stations to accommodate flow.

On day four, one major job was putting the dock into the lake. The new staff didn't have a useful overview of the eventual set-up, and there was discussion of whether 'like an "H"' meant lower or upper case. Pictures were etched in the sand, and Richard, the Camp director, came to the beach and gave a short orienting talk about the overall effort and the division of labor. Over the course of the job, he explained what the next episode would be in the task. At the end, with the pieces in their correct places, one of the counselors remarked that perhaps they should be marked so that future deployments would be easier. While this was acknowledged to be a good

suggestion, nobody marked the pieces as the counselors hurried off to do other jobs or change into dry clothes.

The predominant activities for the rest of training week were preparation of cabins, periodic group meetings to review rules and regulations, and the planning and practicing for instruction in the Camp's activity areas, such as water skiing, drama, tennis, horseback riding, and others. Each of these areas would be staffed by one or two of the counselors, who – for the most part – began considering lesson plans and asked questions about materials and procedures, often of experienced counselors, but sometimes of Jeremy or, less often, of Richard.

There were also group meetings that reviewed rules written in manuals, but which seemed to garner counselor attention principally through oral presentation. These meetings also led to restless boredom after a while, with the notable exception of water safety discussions led by Richard on the topic of how to deal with a possible drowning. This did seize attention.

Hoch noticed over the days of setting up that a pride of ownership developed, seeded from the returning staff, but also noticeable in the new staff. This atmosphere supported persistence in learning jobs, and patience in lending others a hand and answering their questions.

Another part of the scaffolding for organizing the Camp was laid down in meetings that were led by Jeremy or Richard that discussed overriding goals such as 'create an environment for the kids to have fun and be safe'. Though not especially precise, these statements conveyed priorities that were useful in later, distributed episodes of reasoning about dilemmas that arose.

By the end of the seven-day training period it was apparent that some staff more consistently knew what was going on. This may have been partly a function of personality, and may also have been related to work roles affording observation, such as office assistant. Whatever the bases, these people were recognized as better sources for information about plans and problems.

On the tenth day of observations, the campers arrived. Their presence placed a new set of stresses on the practices developed so far by the staff. Counselors gathered in the morning for flagpole² and were divided into teams of greeters, unpackers, and game players to cover requirements of moving in 75 campers over the course of the day.

Hoch's observations now centered more on the cabins for which the counselors were responsible, as the arrival of the campers raised many issues of maintaining physical facilities (such as unplugging toilets) and finding workable strategies for flexibly enforcing rules on campers (for example, bedtimes and clean-up responsibilities). This process of establishing the full functioning of the Camp was strongly affected by returning campers, who

deployed their extra experience both to gain some advantages for themselves, but also – and much more commonly – to help new campers and staff learn the patterns of a Poplar Grove summer. Counselors confronted new situations, and this renewed jokes among them about rules that were covered in the manuals but hadn't been read, or were misconstrued, not remembered, or bypassed.

The afternoon of the tenth observation day, 22 June, was dominated by initial activities for the arrived campers. First were waterfront orientation and swim tests. These introduced the campers to rules about the Camp's buddy system for swimming in pairs, and its chip system that was used to indicate campers' qualification level for waterfront activities, and to track who was in the water at any given time. Richard, as director, made a brief talk stressing the import of safety and respecting the authority of Amy and Laura, the head lifeguards.

By this point Hoch could report that staff were quite comfortable with her observer role. She had found ways to describe her research as sponsored by her university without ever having to mention that Jeremy would be part of the analysis team once the summer ended.

As the tenth and eleventh observational days unfolded, Hoch visited many different parts of the Camp to watch the counselors establish the practices, rules and rhythms of their activity areas. Horseback riding, like the waterfront, presents substantial safety concerns – for both campers and horses – and therefore involves substantial pressure on the counselors to establish rules. At the other extreme, many crafts projects can be pursued quite independently and require counselors only for intermittent advice about materials and methods.

During these days, both campers and counselors worked into the system of five activity periods per day. They learned the schedules of what they were to be doing at each time of the day, and learned to use the information board that provided schedule data.

This settling-in period contained a number of minor breakdowns that became occasions for further learning. One involved the waterfront chip system. Campers who were solid swimmers got a white chip. Red chip campers were non-swimmers, confined to the shallows. Blue chip holders had intermediate privileges that didn't include sailboats or water skiing. The campers left their chips with the waterfront supervisors when they were out in the water and picked up from a bucket when they left the area, allowing the supervisors to know if anyone was unaccounted for at the waterfront. The difficulties arose when waterfront counselors issued 'conditional white chips' to some campers who were to have one more swimming lesson before having full privileges. Procedures of other counselors then broke down as the holders of full and conditional white chips were

indistinguishable although they were intended to have different privileges. Investigating the origins of the 'innovation' and resolving the difficulties drew in many members of the staff and constituted a major learning episode for the organization. The conditional white chip turned out to be an in-the-moment invention of Richard's, meant to deal with campers who appeared to be skilled enough, but were resting during their required six-lap swim. This innovation was extinguished – no 'conditional white chips' were issued by the waterfront staff during swim tests in the subsequent three sessions of camp.

Another breakdown occurred on day 15, when a counselor assigned kitchen duty to members of his cabin as a punishment for sleeping in too late. But this caused problems for Cathy who then had to teach kitchen jobs to inexperienced helpers. The innovation was also extinguished.

Observation day 13 involved a day trip, and day 14 was marred by rain. This required shifting scheduled outdoor activities to indoor substitutes. Considerable confusion ensued as unpracticed fallback activities and locations were deployed. At one point Kelly, a returning counselor, met a group of new counselors and gave them very definite instructions: 'Go to your second activity and see if there are campers there. You must make sure you can account for all of them. You can have your activity outside if you want, but just make sure you know where all your campers are if they are in arts and crafts or something'.

The evening was devoted to a carnival, in which every cabin provided a booth that offered some kind of game or entertainment. Brian, a counselor with several years of Poplar Grove experience as camper and training staff, was in charge of the event and worked hard to re-implement practices from earlier years, such as opening the auditorium doors at the last moment to let everyone enter at once.

During days 15 until 18, Hoch spent much of her time visiting activity areas, including horseback riding, swimming, photography, canoeing, tennis, water skiing, sailing and drama. Across this spectrum, she saw great variety in a few basic processes. Activities were being shaped into regular, expected patterns by the interplay of past experience and new approaches. Novice counselors – and very occasionally novice campers – reasoned about the requirements of the activity and drew on experiences elsewhere. Returning campers and counselors mostly steered the action toward what was remembered from earlier years, though occasionally they introduced novelties by critiquing prior practices.

In many of the venues, as in the conflicts in setting up dining room service tables, there were recurring tensions over replicating prior Poplar Grove experience or following judgments of new people with experience from other domains. One at the waterfront centered on whether lifeguards

should remain standing (the interpretation of Camp practice by the assistant director) or could sit (the past experience of the counselors at prior worksites). At the horse corral, it was whether campers in each activity period should saddle and unsaddle horses, or whether that should be done only at the beginning and end of the day.

Observation day 21 was devoted to a special event, the Medley Marathon, which divided the Camp into red and blue teams for a series of competitive events. Many aspects of the day were traditions carried forward in general form from previous years. For example, there had to be mascots, flags and chants, although there was discretion in how the groups implemented these requirements. Racing with ping-pong balls on a spoon was a requisite event. (But this time wind was adjusted for by substituting golf balls.) Other standard events had to be recreated as well, such as a water-pistol candle shoot-out, and a game called 'crab football'.

The 22nd observation day, 4 July, was Hoch's last, and was the closing day of the first Camp session. After regular morning activities, special events took over, along with cleaning and packing to depart. As usual in recent years, the play developed by the drama class was performed as part of the closing celebrations.

3. EXPLAINING REGENERATION

Organizational Character

To convey the sort of non-identical sameness that actually is achieved, we reintroduce the term *organizational character*.³ We use the term to denote the coherent content of the ensemble of dispositions that generates the distinctive actions of an organization. We will argue that this ensemble of dispositions resides in the individual procedural memories of organizational participants, and is coherent, persistent and regenerative. Once the concept is developed, we will relate it to existing literature on organizational identity and organizational culture.

Our sense that organizations can be understood to have a property analogous to individual character revives a view that was advanced almost four decades ago by Philip Selznick (1957), but which has received scant attention since then. He argued that social processes in organizational work generate value commitments that shape organizational character, which is:

the product of self-preserving efforts to deal with inner impulses and external demands. In both personality and institutions, 'self-preservation' means more

than bare organic or material survival. Self-preservation has to do with the maintenance of basic identity, with the integrity of a personal or institutional 'self'. (pp. 141–2)

At both the individual and organizational levels, a concept of character focuses our attention on how the actions generated by a coherent set of dispositions (or 'impulses') are recognized as 'the same' by those who know the person or organization. At the individual level, we speak of our acquaintances as having acted 'in character' when they react in familiar ways to unfolding circumstances. We find them to be 'out of character' when their reactions are unexpected in circumstances we judge to be 'the same'. We label as 'characteristic' those specific actions of a person that most powerfully suggest the distinctive broader patterns of their behavior.⁴ Indeed, research reveals that because action patterns occur in distinctive correlated clusters we can gain enormously in our power to predict others' behavior from glances as short as a few seconds. Ambady and her colleagues, for example, have shown that 'thin slices' of an individual's behavior, presented in short video clips ranging from a minute down to as little as one second, are sufficient to allow observers to make sharply improved predictions of the actions and relationships of observed others (Ambady et al., 2000).

The critical point here is that it is possible to apprehend individual character based on limited exposure and despite the flux of circumstances because the actions of individuals reveal considerable coherence.⁵ Even if successive situations are not identical, indeed even when there may be substantial novelty that calls for actions we have never seen, we have a sense of a person – and, by the extension we propose, of an organization – as a coherent bundle of action dispositions. We can then utilize this sense of coherence in predicting likely future behavior. So in Ambady's observations on individuals, for example, predictive power comes less from particular behaviors than from 'molar' actions. Counting smiles will predict less well than counting, say, expressions of confidence (Ambady et al., 2001). There is, of course, no presumption that perceptions of character are always correct, only that we can understand enough of the correlation structure of experience for such perceptions to be possible and, on average, quite useful.

Procedural Memory and Action Dispositions

We use *action dispositions* as a general term to capture notions that writers in several traditions might discuss as traits, habits or skills. We regard an individual as developing over time a coherent ensemble of dispositions to

act in certain ways in certain situations – a persistent collection of premises, response tendencies, and structural capabilities that produce action with recognizable character. Because these action patterns are typically acquired and enacted without high levels of self-conscious analysis, and because each is to some degree co-adapted to other dispositions already developed, they normally form a quite durable and interdependent system.

The developing psychological literature indicates that action dispositions such as habits and skills are retained in individuals as procedural memory, a form that involves low conscious awareness or articulation, long retention, and distinctive mechanisms of activation and generalization (Squire and Kandel, 1999). There is also evidence to suggest that individuals' roles in organizational routines are stored in the procedural memory of the participants. Cohen and Bacdayan (1996) showed that as dyads gained experience in a recurring, joint problem-solving task they developed collective routines and stored their individual roles in them as procedural memories. The procedural memory of participating actors thus contributes some of its properties to *collective* action dispositions such as routines, practices or customs. This is the basis of our view that the concept of organizational character is more than a mere analogy to individual character, but is a genuine property of the organization.

An important implication of storage in procedural memory is that one need not be consciously aware of assumptions about partners or settings as action is taken. These assumptions are stored 'automatically' as action occurs and prove evocative the next time a similar partner or setting is in view, providing a capacity for generalization that allows an individual to reproduce a lot of what is 'in character' for the organization even if the partner or setting are substantially different in detail from previous years or encounters.

A second implication of this focus on individual procedural memory is a key point of departure for our work from that of Selznick. Where Selznick was focused largely on the character-defining impact of critical decisions made by leaders at the tops of organizational charts, we are more interested in the reproduction of character through individual participation at all levels of the hierarchy. The camp counselors we observed were constantly confronted with uncertainty about how to behave in novel situations. We believe their actions, and the memories created by these actions, contributed to the overall coherence of the camp's character. In other words, actions not identified as 'out of character' or explicitly corrected served as models for future behavior by the acting individual and any others who may have observed the behavior. It is the (only partially) coherent content of dispositions resulting from these mutually constraining actions and memories that gradually becomes recognizable as organizational character.

Mutual Adaptation and Ecologies of Action Dispositions

A further source of expected coherence in the character of an organization is the mutual adaptation within the ensemble of action dispositions that, at the organizational level, we describe as an *ecology*. The term lets us indicate that recurring actions – or, as we’ll sometimes say, ‘practices’ – within the organization are interdependent and that action dispositions must develop into a reasonably effective ensemble. In other words, one critical aspect of the process of becoming organized is a series of negotiations, both implicit and explicit, that are occasioned by actions. Individuals act based on multiple plausible action dispositions, choosing an approach based on what they feel and believe is the appropriate thing to do in the given situation. As is indicated above, this is often based on procedural memory of prior experience in situations felt to be similar on some critical dimension, either within or outside of the organization in question. As these actions are carried out, action dispositions that interfere significantly with others or that are unintelligible when combined with other actions will tend to be filtered out in the coevolution of the system of action dispositions, just as species that too often evoke negative feedback (being eaten or poisoned) will disappear from an ecology. This was the case in the observations above in the case where the counselor assigned his campers ‘kitchen duty’, to the frustration of Cathy, the head cook.

In this negotiation process, experience accumulates through both action and narrative exchange. What remains is the set of action dispositions that are reasonably effective and meaningful in the presence of other dispositions that meet the same criteria. This interdependent set then forms a coherent system, generating the organizational actions that are recognizable as ‘in character’. At Poplar Grove, the regeneration of that character is seeded to a significant degree by the minority of returning veterans. Acting on their retained dispositions, they shape the experiences of newcomers, thereby instilling similar – though not identical – dispositions, and hence regenerating the organization.

This formulation raises several interesting and difficult questions that are faced both by organizational participants and by organizational researchers. First is the problem of identifying dispositions. Even though dispositions are generally not directly observable, it is still possible to isolate specific actions taken within organizations and extrapolate likely dispositions from these. The inference processes are somewhat error prone, of course, but the ability of participants and outside observers to do this relies on the very remarkable powers of extracting the correlation structure that let us infer future actions from ‘thin slices’. Second, it is difficult, both for participants and outside observers, to articulate precisely what

constitutes a 'reasonably effective and meaningful' action disposition. One possible criterion is that a 'reasonably effective' action disposition must not interfere significantly with others, though even 'significant' can be said to be highly dependent on the organizational context. In a highly interdependent and minutely controlled organization such as a semiconductor 'clean room', the notion of a significant failure looks quite different from how it might look in a more fault-tolerant setting such as Camp Poplar Grove. This also raises the issue that different organizations will have different levels of tolerance for deviation from 'expected' behavior. 'Reasonably effective' action dispositions are likely to be different in an organization comprised almost entirely of newcomers than in one comprised almost entirely of veterans.

This view departs from classical formulations of adaptive or evolutionary processes in which fitness is attributed to the direct effect of actions on an environment external to the organization (many examples are provided in Aldrich, 1999). In our case, action patterns (or, more precisely, their underlying dispositions) are shaped mostly by their relation to other action patterns, while the resulting ensemble of dispositions is required to function well enough in the external environment to generate resources needed for the system's survival or growth (Axelrod and Cohen, 1999).

Character in Relation to Other Perspectives

Of course, a new terminology does not erase the problem of sameness or identity, which is, after all, one of the deepest, most enduring of philosophical issues. That the world still cites both Heraclitus and Ecclesiastes is testimony to that. While the problem is not solved by locating it in a context of learning, remembering, perceiving, recognizing and enacting of ecologies of dispositions, it is usefully transformed. We can't say very precisely how coherence sufficient for recognition is achieved or discerned, but these are fundamental questions which contemporary psychology seeks to answer. Even as we wait for more detailed explanations of the underlying individual and group processes, however, we can align organizational theories with the clear fact that this coherence *is* achieved. Useful insight is possible with what we know now and can readily observe.

There is considerable overlap of the ideas we gather under the label 'character', and several themes are discussed in the literature of 'organizational identity' and 'organizational culture' that bear on sustaining organizational action patterns (Druckman et al., 1997; Fiol, 2002; Martin, 1992; Miller and Jablin, 1991; Trice and Beyer, 1993; Weick and Gilfallan, 1971; Whetten and Mackey, 2002). A detailed treatment of our perspective in relation to this work can be found in (Birnholtz et al., forthcoming).

The terminology we've developed, however, can now be used to state our perspective: a coherent system of mutually adapted action dispositions forms an ecology that has the property of organizational character. The question intriguing us can now be reformulated: how does an ecology of dispositions – and consequent practices – reproduce itself and maintain its recognizable organizational character? This is the topic we take up in the next section.

4. SOME REGENERATIVE PROCESSES

We can now abstract some features of Poplar Grove's regeneration that may generalize beyond the one annual cycle that was observed. Specifically, we have observed four such processes, which will be illustrated below. In varying degrees, these processes contribute to the regeneration of coherent systems of action dispositions by serving two primary functions. First, they allow for the more or less direct transfer of knowledge, experience and practice from more experienced to less experienced staff. Second, they allow for the filtering of action dispositions to arrive at a set that is reasonably effective, meaningful and coherent with other dispositions.

The Primacy of Demonstration

One critical aspect of regeneration is the transfer of skill and experience from the more experienced core of the community to newcomers, such that they will be able to do their jobs in a way that is both satisfactory to the generic requirements of the activity area, and considered to be acceptably 'in character'. The severe difficulty of regenerating so many practices with so few experienced members is endemic to seasonal organizations, as evidenced in the strong focus on core administrative personnel in the camp opening process that we find in articles and manuals on camp administration (Ball and Ball, 2004; Dimock, 1948; Drought, 1943; Gibson, 1923; Goodrich, 1959; Hamilton, 1930; Leiken, 2000; Leiken and Riggio, 2002).

In Hoch's observations, demonstration emerged as an essential aspect of the transfer of skills and practices to newcomers. In some ways, this is not surprising and confirms existing findings suggesting that new members of an organization learn their jobs by watching and learning from their peers and supervisors (Feldman, 1981; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Miller and Jablin, 1991).

First, demonstrations were repetitive and increasingly representative of full-scale camp life. As is illustrated above, the staff during training week

gradually adopted a schedule and set of routines that were increasingly similar to those to be used once the campers arrived. One of the first tasks during training week, for example, was setting up the area called 'flagpole', after which staff began gathering there before meals and for meetings. Whether or not it was their conscious intent, this got the staff in the habit of gathering at flagpole and demonstrated an important practice of everyday camp life. This experience, and action disposition to 'meet at flagpole', could then be drawn on in later moments of uncertainty. In moments of uncertainty about where to go for a new event or activity of uncertain location, most people at camp would default to flagpole. Even if the activity turned out not to be there, the probability of running into somebody there who knew where to go was high. Demonstrating this core behavior early in staff training allowed this coherence to persist. Moreover, the continued use of the word 'flagpole' to describe this core behavior helps regenerate the Camp's characteristic combination of flexibility with respect for the past.

Second, demonstrations were multi-staged. They first involved experienced members of the Poplar Grove community, then new staff, and finally the campers. In an anecdotal account, one seasoned camp director has referred to this aspect of training as 'planting seeds' with his staff (Jacobs, 2002). Indeed, as newcomers to a strange organization, new staff are hungry for any and all information they can use in understanding how they will be expected to act in this new setting. At Poplar Grove, this was evident in the observations above in the curiosity of the new staff, who very frequently wondered if they were doing things the 'right' way. Small, early demonstrations and discussions of appropriate behavior had a strong impact that lasted throughout the summer.

A third property of demonstration was that it relied on the memories of experienced staff and campers. To illustrate, consider Brian's efforts to re-implement past practices in the 'carnival night' described above. The past practices 'stuck' in that several planners of subsequent auditorium-based activities (for example, dances, plays, casino nights) that summer began their events with a last-minute 'grand entry'. Thus, we see that the demonstration of a known and effective disposition to begin auditorium activities in a particular way appeared to have an impact on how subsequent events unfolded under similar, but not identical, conditions.

Cascading of Guidance

Another key regeneration process was the 'guidance cascade'. These cascades were extremely common, particularly early in Hoch's observations. Knowledge of procedures was distributed among the returning administrators and other staff, and was often regenerated in new staff not by direct

communication, but by advice from other participants who had heard, or surmised, the answer to an arising question. It was simply not possible for the experienced group to convey the full detail of their tacit knowledge to those in new roles.

We see examples of significant cascades very early on in Hoch's observations, for instance as she was helping set up the kitchen. Rick's advice to her was interesting in that it was sometimes very specific (for example, 'you can put the glasses on that shelf'), but occasionally ambivalent (for example, 'just put it anywhere because when she [Cathy] comes in she will just put stuff the way she likes it'). This episode highlights an important difference between a cascade and traditional hierarchic flow of information. In a hierarchy, Hoch would be receiving advice only from Cathy, who would be able to provide definitive guidance. In a cascade, however, limited numbers of experienced staff and staggered arrival times (for example, of Cathy) meant that advice frequently came not from an authority figure, but rather from somebody who was relying on memory to provide guidance that seemed reasonable. The sort of transfer that occurs via a cascade is neither a detailed set of instructions about how exactly one is to perform one's job nor a reliable indicator of acceptable behavior. Rather, it is a higher-level description of how things once looked or were done, or how they might be done now.

An important concomitant of this observation is what we described above as the 'leadership of the one-eyed', as with Lisa's ability to answer staff questions. What is particularly interesting is that very small amounts of additional experience translated into significant influence. Even Lisa, a new staff member who had been at Camp only a few extra days, served as a source of valuable information about skills, practices and what may or may not be 'in character'.

A second concomitant of information cascades is action in the face of conflicting sources of guidance. Hoch often found herself in this situation and was uncertain about how to proceed, as when she received contrasting advice from Jeremy and Rick about where to put supplies in the kitchen. These situations were often resolved by trying to estimate 'who should know best' by taking into account knowledge about the prior experience and status of the sources. These episodes are also more common and significant in the seasonal regeneration situation which does not meet the usual conditions of stable hierarchy. There the conflicts could be resolved by asking 'who's my boss?'. When the advisers are co-workers without direct authority, however, the newcomer has a much more open problem, which increases reliance on the actor's own experience and dispositions. If advisers don't agree, then it may be an occasion to explicitly apply prior experience, or to do what 'feels right'.

Such frequent moments of indeterminacy, offering as they do the opportunity to bring new patterns of action into play, would seem to make it likely that organizational character will dissipate over time. But in our observations, actors with conflicting sources of advice made a serious effort to intuit what solution made sense in the Poplar Grove context. They didn't always succeed at selecting the 'right' action, of course, but their loyalty to recreating Polar Grove strongly channeled regeneration processes. They were, in effect, implicitly striving to act 'in character', and, by doing so, they were reproducing it.

Bursty Communication

A third property of regenerative processes is the nature of communication that we saw at Poplar Grove. The volume and frequency of communication were significantly constrained by the size of the camp, with some activity areas a 10 minute walk (twice that for certain 7-year-olds) from each other, and by the need to supervise the campers constantly once they had arrived. The Camp provided little in the way of communications infrastructure, save for hand-held radios for core administrative staff and cellular telephones in high-risk areas. All of this meant that virtually all communication occurred in relatively brief, face-to-face encounters that we refer to as 'bursts'. Bursts provided newcomers with 'just enough' information to act in ways that were unlikely to result in conflict with other actions, and to allow for the regeneration of character by seeding a framework of 'sameness', while allowing for slight, inevitable variations in interpretation. We observed two types of communication bursts: collective and individual.

Collective bursts

Collective bursts occurred when 'everyone' was gathered, usually either at 'flagpole' before each meal or at weekly staff meetings. In our terms, the goal of collective bursts was to reduce the probability of action disposition conflict by providing everyone with identical information and shaping a set of shared dispositions. Collective bursts were characterized by their *rapid* nature, *broadly applicable* contents, and *regular* occurrence.

By 'rapid' we mean that collective bursts generally did not take long, and often addressed a large number of topics, such that the outcome was a rapid stream of short descriptions pertaining to many topics. Flagpole, for example, was the one place where the entire Camp gathered on a regular basis, and was therefore the only reliable way to spread verbal information to the entire community. What occurred was the rapid communication of just enough information – one hopes – to provide the requisite framework for seeding the desired outcome.

By 'broadly applicable', we mean that collective bursts were relevant to a large number of people, which often meant that the listeners had to extrapolate the details for their specific area of Camp. For example, an administrator might announce that 'safety needs to be an ongoing concern for all staff' rather than saying specifically to 'watch for open-toed shoes at the horse corral and campers not wearing life jackets in their kayaks at the beach'. The implication is that the collective burst is about using generic information to set up the necessary conditions for people to make desired extrapolations for their specific areas. This, of course, also assumes some basic level of knowledge on the part of the staff. A generic announcement about safety would not be likely to have an effect on the behavior of a counselor unaware that campers were required to wear life jackets while kayaking.

Finally, by 'regular occurrence' we mean that collective bursts tended to be recurring. Flagpole, one key opportunity for collective bursts, occurred before every meal at regularly scheduled times. People distributed all over Camp counted on being together at these times, and on the opportunity to get needed information.

Individual bursts

Unlike collective bursts, individual bursts were targeted at individuals or small groups. Individual bursts are unique among the regenerative properties that we have discussed so far in that they were one of the few means by which feedback and correction could be provided once action occurred. Rather than trying to rapidly or generically convey 'just enough' information to prospectively seed a desired framework, individual bursts were characterized by the conveyance of a detailed kernel of information or experience from the speaker to the listener(s). One example of this above was quick advice from Kelly about how to handle activities on the rainy day. In that instance, Kelly was not only telling the new staff members what to do, but also conveying some critical aspects of her past experience with rainy days. Her clear implication was that it was most important to know where the campers were, and conducting the activity itself may be secondary.

We characterize these interactions as bursts because they are different in important ways from a normal dialog or feedback cycle. In some ways, though, these differences are more pronounced in the way the information is interpreted than in the content. In other words, the lack of an observable and functional instantiation of the organization renders individual bursts more important to new members than similar conversations might be in a more conventional and continuous organization. Individual bursts were unlike collective bursts in that they did not occur regularly, but as

opportunities arose. As a result, they tended to apply to specific situations, rather than general classes of activities.

Applying Generic Skills in Context

Another critical process that we observed was individuals mapping their generic skills and experience from a range of settings onto specific situations at Poplar Grove. Poplar Grove staff are recruited, in part, based on their experience and ability in child care and various program activities. Among others, state law mandates qualified lifeguards at the waterfront, experienced riders at the horse corral, and people with commercial cooking experience in the kitchen. These staff must then determine how the familiar components of their job are to be done at Poplar Grove. In other words, they must combine their existing knowledge and experience in a particular domain (their 'domain knowledge') with what they are learning (via the above processes) about how things are done at Poplar Grove (their 'organization knowledge').

As was illustrated above, we found that job ambiguities at Poplar Grove were typically resolved by asking more experienced staff for more information, or improvising a plausible solution. Asking a more experienced colleague or supervisor for more information is a common strategy for workplace newcomers, and was common in Hoch's observations (Miller and Jablin, 1991). Occasionally, however, even asking for explicit directions raised ambiguity, as when Hoch received different answers from different people about how to arrange supplies in the kitchen.

A second strategy that we observed was the trial of the plausible. Here, people confronted with ambiguity drew on some combination of their knowledge of Poplar Grove (or even the more general class of 'American summer camps'), their prior experience in a particular domain (for example, lifeguarding) and information from the immediate environment to improvise a plausible solution to a problem. In some cases, as we saw above, such improvisations 'stuck' – perhaps because they were simply not noticed, thought by observers not to matter, or were perceived as improvements on previous practices.

In some ways, this selective improvisation process shows how organizations can change while retaining the coherence we refer to as character. While the first three regeneration processes above center on conveying information that will achieve 'sameness' in action, this last process offers significant opportunities for change. Our observations suggest two factors that are important in understanding how improvisations take hold.

The first is the domain experience of the improviser. Where a newcomer knows a great deal about a domain, perhaps more than any other member, he or she may be more likely to dominate a disposition that has historical

roots in the organization. This, of course, also depends on the improviser's persistence, the organization's willingness to adopt novel practices, and on the next two properties. Domain experience played a frequent role in Hoch's observations, particularly with Cathy, the head cook, who had substantial experience in commercial kitchens and, though she wanted to respect past camp practice, had definite ideas about how she wanted to operate the kitchen.

Second is the visibility of the improvised actions. More visible actions, such as those performed in front of others or that depend on input from others, tended to be corrected more often than those performed independently. This was evident above in the discussion of whether the horses should be saddled before each period or at the start of each day. In the end, the horses were saddled each period for the remainder of the summer, because the practice conflicted only with the assistant director's desire for the campers to have more riding time – and the corral was sufficiently effortful to observe that he did not choose to make frequent correction a priority. Such changes did not occur at the waterfront, where many practices are mandated by law due to inherent risks, and administrative observation is more frequent.

Indeed, attention is also directed by experience and institutional requirements. At the waterfront, for example, the State of Michigan imposes rules (for example the 'buddy system' for swimming) that must be enforced by the Camp staff. This is verified at least once per summer via on-site inspection. Thus, there is a strong incentive for administrators to focus on the waterfront, correct anomalous practices and ensure that the rules are being enforced.

5. ACTION DISPOSITIONS THAT PERSIST IN A WORLD OF FLUX

The view of regeneration we have offered is broadly in alignment with treatments of organizational action laid out in recent years by a number of scholars working in the traditions of structuration, practice and activity theories (Adler, 2003; Blackler, 1995). These are approaches that see structure as being recreated through the action taking place within it, and that emphasize human agency in context, and therefore the possibilities for change (Feldman, 2000; Feldman and Pentland, 2003; Hargadon and Fanelli, 2002; Orlikowski, 2002; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002).

Our work brings us to many points of agreement with their accounts, but also discloses some differences of perspective that, we think, avoid some difficulties encountered in the work done so far.

Careful observation convinces all these researchers that action in organizations can be – and most commonly is – recognizably patterned without being static or mindless. These observations raise what we have called the paradox of the (n)ever-changing world: how can an organizational action pattern be ‘the same’ and still be appropriate and effective in a world that is never the same?

Organizations don’t usually engage in established practices or enact routines with no attention to the purposes of those doing the work or with no thought about the specific circumstances of action. This would be the analog of a driver setting out without a destination and keeping his eyes closed.

And yet. . . , we do sometimes drive home when we intended to stop at the store. And a very common complaint of organizational ‘change agents’ is that established practices somehow will not adjust to the legitimate but novel requirements of context, customers or supervisors. Graham Allison’s (1971) classic study of the Cuban missile crisis reports a striking example in which Russian soldiers were told by officers on their ships to disguise themselves as civilians so as to avoid being counted by spies on the Havana docks. They did so, and then, after going down the gangway, formed into ranks and marched away.

All these accounts attack the problem by devising language for rendering the interplay of what we know with how we act. Orlikowski argues that we should distinguish *knowledge* from *knowing*, which ‘is constituted in everyday practices’ (2002, p. 251). Feldman and Pentland (2003) distinguish the *ostensive* aspect of routine, the explicit concept of routine held by organizational members, from the *performative* aspect, the actions that members undertake in executing the routine in a real context. Hargadon and Fanelli (2002) distinguish *latent knowledge* (scripts, goals and identities) from *empirical knowledge* (artifacts, tools and routines).

If one can generalize about how our account differs from these, it is in our emphasis on the procedural memory basis of habitual or skilled action in humans. We rely heavily on the distinction of procedural from declarative memory now taking shape in psychological research (Anderson and Fincham, 1994; Squire and Kandel, 1999). We take habitual dispositions to be fundamental to action, and thoughtful analysis to be a vitally important mechanism of correction and – often enough – of improvement. This leads our attention to the mechanisms of transfer of skill discussed in our fourth section.

In this light we can highlight some differences of detail with the studies we have mentioned. We believe, unlike Feldman and Pentland, that there can be recurring and recognizable organizational action patterns without what they call ostensive elements. Indeed, patterns that develop in this way

seem quite normal. There may be some activities in the Camp that meet the definition they give of routine, with well-developed ostensive and performative aspects, but much Camp activity seems to regenerate without any significant agreement on names for, or shared definitions of, an ostensive aspect of large action patterns.

Our emphasis is different from Orlikowski's (2002) in that she identifies practices as rather general functional categories that interviewees express to her, such as 'aligning effort' and 'sharing identity'. In the case we have studied it appears more natural to take practices as our campers and counselors do, as setting the service table for lunch, saddling the horses, or setting up the swimming dock. We see organizational character as the dispositions that shape these observable practices and are reshaped by them, but not as identical to them. Orlikowski does report that at the firm she has studied there is a notion of doing things 'the Kappa way'. We are certainly agreed that such beliefs have tremendous significance, and we try to capture them in our discussion of organizational character, but we think it may be confusing to define 'the Kappa way' as a behavioral practice rather than as a coherent ensemble of action dispositions.

Tsoukos and Chia (2002) are quite similar to our approach in their emphasis on underlying habit and disposition. In their account 'actors are conceived as webs of beliefs and habits of action that keep reweaving (and thus altering) as they try to coherently accommodate new experiences'. But they give such overwhelming priority to change in their argument that they end up using 'organization' interchangeably with stasis. They are heavily on the Heraclitus side. Indeed they quote him. But they don't quote Ecclesiastes in response. Our difference with their approach is that by marshalling the concept of character we can provide an account of continuity despite flux.

Our emphasis on the habitual dispositions that are the basis of most individual and (hence) organizational action can be captured by an apothegm of John Dewey's (1922), remembering that by 'instinct' he meant what we would label 'emotion': 'Man is a creature of habit; not of reason, nor yet of instinct.' And, although we have touched on them only in passing, leaving a fuller account of the contributions of emotions to organizational regeneration for a later day, their interplay with the ecology of practices is every bit as subtle and consequential as the interplay of habit and reason.

Though each perspective described above casts the issue in a distinctive form, all of these papers wrestle with some variant of the problem of reconciling the authors' field observations of agency and change with the mindless and static connotations of our language for 'routinized' action. And each of them works to enrich our conceptions of the connection between what organizational actors know and the patterned actions they

undertake. It is profoundly difficult conceptual territory, but a better map of it will open new possibilities for organizational research and design, and so it merits our overlapping inquiries. The unusual angle of our fascination with regeneration and organizational character has led us to what may be some fresh ideas. We hope they will stimulate new rounds of discussion.

NOTES

1. International students very commonly serve as staff member in US summer camps. They bring even less prior knowledge to the regeneration problem than their first-time-as-counselor US counterparts.
2. By now 'flagpole' was understood to be the name of a regular activity as well as a location, both graced by the irony that there was no physical flagpole there.
3. There are many formal definitions of *character*, most of them turning on the idea of typical traits. A revealing definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 'the individuality impressed by nature and habit on man or nation'. This one nicely applies 'character' to both persons and collectives, and ties the concept, as we do, to the power of underlying regularities of action (that is, habitual dispositions) to form distinctive and coherent entities (individuals).
4. We use 'organizational character' in a sense quite different from that of Bridges (Bridges, 2000) which clusters overall organizational decision making styles in 16 categories derived from the Meyers–Briggs personality inventory for individuals. Our focus is on much more fine-grained regularities of an organization's actions in its native context.
5. Selznick (1957: 138–9) uses 'integrity' for this same idea

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