PERSPECTIVE

Organizational Character: On the Regeneration of Camp Poplar Grove

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We analyze organizational regeneration using case materials from a study of a children's summer camp. Each year members of various types of seasonal organizations, such as summer camps and ski areas, come together to bring these organizations "back to life" after many months of dormancy. Because many staff members are new and other conditions vary, the result of this regeneration process is necessarily different from the previous year's organization, but it is nonetheless recognizable to repeat clientele as a familiar instance of "the same" organization. We use this rarely examined process of regeneration to explore the question of how we can regard an organization as being the same entity over time. We suggest that this sameness stems from a coherence and similarity of actions at the organizational level that is analogous to the psychological notion of individual character. Just as individual habits cohere in the character of an individual and allow us to recognize and predict future behavior, we argue that organizations are systems of interacting dispositions to act in a particular way. It is the mutually adapted content of this ensemble of action dispositions that constitutes what we present here as *organizational character*. We argue that such an ensemble of dispositions is coherent, persistent, and necessary for seasonal regeneration. This work contributes to an ongoing discussion of organizational action and similarity over time. Our focus on regenerative processes in a seasonal organization provides a distinct and informative perspective on these issues.

Key words: organizational; learning; routines; regeneration; culture; identity; practices

The Miracle of Organizational Regeneration

We are interested in *organizational regeneration*, the process of reproducing an organization after a period of dormancy, often by training and guiding persons who are largely new to their roles, or to the organization as a whole. Regeneration is a phenomenon that is most visible in what we call seasonal organizations, such as summer camps and ski areas, but the basic process occurs in many settings.

Organizational regeneration presents a revealing instance of a fundamental problem facing all members of an organization (and, therefore, all students of organization science): How can we talk of an organization over time as being the same entity? How can we attribute properties today to a business, government agency, church, or school based on observations made yesterday?

In a static conception of organization, the fundamental question is what lies in- or outside an organization's boundaries (see, e.g., the careful discussion by March and Simon 1958 of how the drawing of boundaries depends upon the question being asked). In a dynamic conception of organization that focuses on adaptation and learning, and therefore on change, the fundamental question is when an organized ensemble of actions can be called "the same" entity over time (Tsoukas and Chia 2002, Weick 1991).

After multiple months of inactivity and despite high rates of personnel turnover, an established summer camp comes back to life. In general, campers, parents, and staff, although perhaps noticing some distinctive features of this year's incarnation, regard the camp as the same one they know from previous years. This is all too easily taken for granted, but close examination 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 of humans develop and maintain the collective property of "being organized."

In the paper that follows, we draw on a detailed examination of one cycle of regeneration at Camp Poplar Grove (a pseudonym), a children's camp that sparked our interest in this topic. We will develop the notion of *organizational character* as an aid to understanding the ability of the participants to regenerate a coherent ecology of action patterns that are recognized as "the same" as previous instances of the organization. We will then describe certain aspects of the character of Camp Poplar Grove, and explicate some important properties of the processes we observed in the Poplar Grove regeneration cycle. Finally, we will conclude with implications of the concept of organizational character presented here for the ongoing theoretical discussion of organizational action, practice, and routines. We present this work not as a definitive explanation of the phenomena we observed, but rather as a contribution to ongoing theoretical discussion. We believe this case of regeneration together with the notion of organizational character provide a novel perspective from which to explore issues related to the continuity and variety of organizational action patterns, which is an important topic in many recent studies.

The Paradox of the (N)ever-Changing World

Many have argued (e.g., 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:

(1) One does not step into the same river twice (Heraclitus).

(2) There is no new thing under the sun (Ecclesiastes).

From one perspective (what might be called very close-up), no situation of action repeats itself identically. From an alternate perspective (what might be called standing far back), every action situation 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 become 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.

All organizations must address the problem of turning 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. At Camp Poplar Grove, as at other seasonal organizations, activity is interrupted for long periods and the assembled actors for the next cycle are mainly inexperienced in their roles or are complete novices to the organization. As they gather to (re)create a summer camp together, many of the "things under the sun" seem new.

Still, we found 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 (e.g., "Meet me at flagpole") and an all-camp assembly (e.g., "We'll have flagpole at 10:45"), despite the flag and pole having been removed years before. Familiar activities, such as the traditional July 4 "Medley Marathon" and "Carnival Night," were also carried out as expected, although there were slight variations from prior years in the details of implementation.

We claim that at 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 functioning of the Camp: It takes in hundreds of campers, guides them through satisfying activities, and sends them safely home. The claim that, after the first year, despite dormancy and turnover, patterns have been *re*-generated is more subtle and requires some careful distinctions.

If it is *re*-generation, then the term 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 every year for a decade or more. This rests on the belief of the children and their parents that each year the Camp offers a quite similar (and valued) experience. In his memoir, for example, Eisner (2005) discusses the similarity of his experiences at Camp Keewaydin in Vermont to those of his father and his own children, all of whom went to camp there at different times. Such experiences strongly suggest that this continuity of commitment is achieved by the actions of the Camp's personnel, and is not produced by the simple physical circumstances. The mere existence of a

set of buildings by a lake along with equipment for various activities does not suffice to guarantee consistent experience. Just as one would expect, there are accounts of physically continuous camps in which a change in leadership or philosophy leads parents and children to conclude that "it's not the same camp anymore," switch their allegiance, and the once healthy organization collapses or is radically changed.

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.

Organizational Character

To convey the sort of nonidentical sameness that actually is achieved, we reintroduce the term *organizational character*.[1] We use the term to denote the coherent content of the ensemble of dispositions that generates the distinctive actions of the 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 culture.

Our sense that organizations can be understood to have a property analogous to individuals revives a view that was advanced almost four decades ago by Selznick (1957), but 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. 141–142)

At both the individual and organizational level, 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 situations we judge to be "the same." We label as "characteristic" those specific actions that most powerfully suggest the distinctive broader patterns of a person's behavior.[2] Indeed, research reveals that because action patterns occur in distinctive correlated clusters we can enormously gain in power to predict others' behavior from

glances as short as a few seconds duration. For example, Ambady and colleagues have shown that "thin slices" of an individual's behavior, presented in very short video clips, are sufficient to allow observers to make sharply improved predictions of the actions and relationships of observed others. In dozens of such studies, thin slices have sufficed for naïve raters to predict such things as the test performance of observed teachers' students, the self-assessed quality of observed couples' romantic relationships, and even sexual orientation as self-reported by the observed persons (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 (Selznick 1957 uses "integrity" for the same idea). 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, e.g., 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.

Knowing What to Do: 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 even skills. We regard an individual as developing over time a coherent ensemble of dispositions to act in certain ways in certain situations—i.e., 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 coadapted to other dispositions already developed, they normally form a quite durable and interdependent system.

The developing psychology 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 suggesting 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 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 organizational level.

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 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 different in detail from previous encounters.

A second implication of this focus on individual procedural memory is a key point of departure for our work from Selznick's. Where he largely focused on the character-defining impact of critical decisions made by leaders at the top 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 by any other 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.

Dynamics of 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, which, at the organizational level, we describe as an *ecology*. The term lets us indicate that recurring actions—or, as we will 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, which are occasioned by actions. Individuals act according to 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 results from procedural memory of prior experience

in situations felt to be similar on some critical dimension, either within or outside 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. For example, during one episode observed at Camp Poplar Grove a counselor acted autonomously in assigning kitchen duty as a punishment for some of his campers. This seemed reasonable to the counselor based on his own experience, but it was not anticipated by the head cook who was frustrated that she had to spend her time training and supervising the campers being punished. She complained loudly and the kitchen-duty-as-punishment action disposition quickly vanished from the camp ecology.

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."[3] 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—although not identical—dispositions and hence regenerating the organization.

This formulation raises several interesting and difficult questions that are faced by organizational participants and researchers. First, the problem of identifying dispositions. Even though dispositions are not directly observable, it is still possible to isolate specific actions and infer likely dispositions from these. The inference processes are somewhat error prone, of course, but the ability of participants and outside observers relies on the very remarkable powers of extracting the correlation structures that let us infer future actions from "thin slices." Second, for participants and outside observers it is difficult 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, although even "significant" is highly dependent on the organizational context. In a highly interdependent and minutely controlled organization such as a semiconductor "clean room," a significant failure looks quite different than it does at a more fault-tolerant setting such as Camp Poplar Grove. Moreover, "reasonably effective" will likely be different in an organization comprised almost entirely of newcomers than in one comprised almost entirely of veterans. Understanding the selection and survival of action dispositions will be a major theme of this paper.

Character in Relation to Other Perspectives

It is worth noting that 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 (e.g., Aldrich 1999). Here action patterns (or, more precisely, their underlying dispositions) are shaped mostly by their relation to other action patterns, whereas 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).

The terminology we have developed 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, which examines regeneration at Poplar Grove.

Of course, a new terminology does not dissolve the problem of sameness or identity, which is one of the deepest, most enduring of philosophical issues. Although the problem is not solved by locating it in a context of learning, remembering, perceiving, recognizing, and enacting ecologies of dispositions, it is usefully transformed. We cannot precisely say how a coherence sufficient for recognition is attained by an actor or a group or how it is discerned by perceivers. These are fundamental questions at which contemporary psychology is hard at work. As we wait for a detailed understanding of how this happens, however, we can align organizational theories with the clear fact that it *does* happen. As psychology explains the underlying individual and group processes, we will be able to say more about the way they play out in organizing. But 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 literatures of "organizational identity" and "organizational culture" that bear on sustaining organizational action patterns (Druckman et al. 1997, Fiol 2002, Weick and Gilfallan 1971, Martin 1992, Miller and Jablin 1991, Trice and Beyer 1993, Whetten and Mackey 2002). In fact, some experts on camp administration actually describe the problem as one of sustaining a culture (e.g., Jacobs 2002). Why then do we focus on organizational *character*?

In brief, we do so because the annual regeneration of a seasonal organization brings into sharp relief a central puzzle in the transmission of organizational culture or identity: How are distinctive organizational qualities that are expressed across such a wide range of novel situations conveyed to new members through such a small amount of experience? We believe that resolving this puzzle requires us to focus on organizational character, which is the underlying coherence of the habitual dispositions that produce organizational action. Such action can be at once unique in its conformity to ever-changing situations, but the same in its continuing expression of an organization's culture or identity. A concept of organizational character helps us to better understand the reproduction of organizational culture and the maintenance of organizational identity.
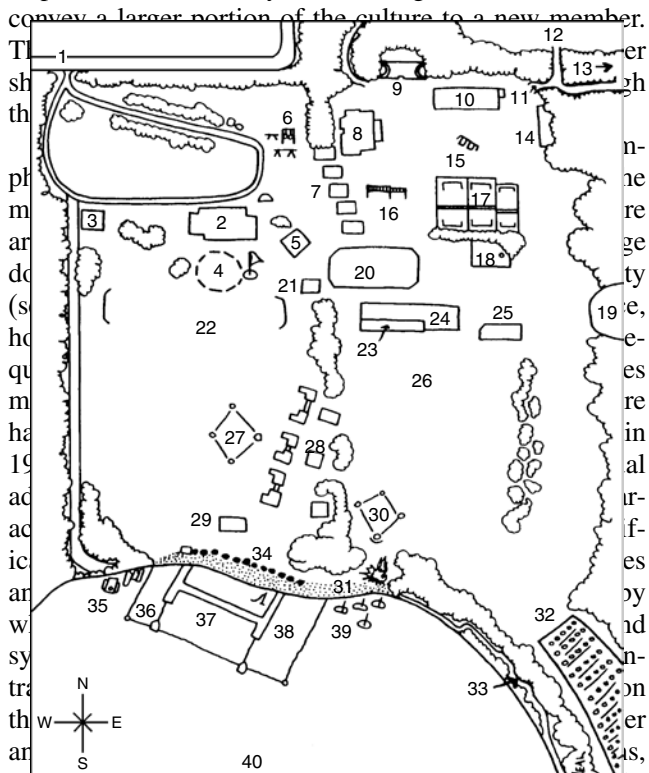
We can identify four differences that follow from focusing on organizational character. First is augmenting organizational identity's focus on explicit beliefs held and communicated by members, by including the action dispositions that interest us, which are implicitly stored and activated. Where the beliefs under study in the identity tradition have frequently been generic beliefs about the whole organization, an individual's differentiated role and situated experience are highlighted in our approach through organizational character.

Second, the literatures on organizational identity and culture are usually not concerned with issues of internal coherence. For example, Swidler's widely cited treatment (1986) takes habits and skills as fundamental elements, as we do. But, seeing them as "a tool kit" (p. 273) rather than as a coherent ecology, she says "a culture is not a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction" (p. 277) Regeneration would seem to require such directionality. Ravasi and Schultz (2006) provide an extensive analysis of the culture and identity literatures and their relations, and also take the view that many elements of organizational culture are tacit rather than explicit. They see organizational culture as a key resource when identity of a long-standing company must be reconstructed. But the coherence of a culture (an aspect of what we have defined as organizational character) plays no significant role in their account.

Where coherence is a concern in accounts of organizational culture or identity, the mechanisms for achieving it are quite different, centering on processes such as debate and the logical analysis of inconsistencies among ideas, rather than on the unconscious adjustment of habitual dispositions in light of generated, or contemplated, actions.

We sometimes call recurring action patterns *practices*, and the dispositions that generate them are the stuff of organizational culture. In our terms, however, a culture does not necessarily have character. There can be essentially arbitrary collections of action patterns in a long-lasting social group. If they do not mutually constrain each other, or express underlying themes, the dispositions corresponding to the actions must be learned essentially one at a time. Such a culture can be passed on, but the process is very costly in time because each element conveyed implies little about the others. The property of character makes an organizational culture easier to pass on, as a sample of actions with common underlying

dispositions or mutually constraining features suffices to convey a larger portion of the culture to a new member. Th [illegible]

[illegible] whether or not there are explicit expressions of beliefs. The same quality of coherence that eases the transmission of organizational culture also eases the problem of recognizing organizational identity. Actions that express a distinctive complex of dispositions aid both the learner and the recognizer.

Fourth, and closely related, the term character carries a normative connotation that is valuable. Just as properties like "to have character" and "to be true to one's character" have normative impact among individuals, so too these have moral force at the organizational level. People are disappointed or irritated when an established organization "has a split personality" or "has lost its way." In our view, these are not mere metaphors. They are grounded in psychological processes that mobilize emotions as individuals forge the coherent ecology of action dispositions that constitutes an organization's character.

As Whetten and Mackey (2002) observe, work on organizational identity is somewhat bifurcated with one line emphasizing how the question, 'who are we?' is answered by outsider's, or how the outsider's answer is understood by members, whereas the second branch is more interested in how members answer the question for themselves (see, e.g., Rousseau 1998). In the third and fourth point above there is some overlap with the from-the-outside branch of the identity literature. Our approach, however, is grounded in habits and other dispositions of individuals and groups, and suggests an alternate mechanism for the normative force on an organization to remain consistent, both internally and externally, with its character.

That is, with a sense of rightness and congruity that develops around recurring organizational practices, just as it does around familiar habits at the individual level. "That's not how we do it around here" rarely is a neutral, technical observation on the existence of more efficient procedures. The "we" is emotionally loaded. And, as the knowledge being built is more procedural than declarative, one does not have to reason through explicit statements of organizational identity in order to absorb its impact. Normal processes for learning skilled action will move one toward action patterns that fit with the established ecology of dispositions and that represent the organizational character expected of "us" by others. Harquail (1998) has observed that investigations of organizational identity have largely downplayed the affective aspects of "the whole person." The work has lost some of its connection to the displays of emotionality that were the original stimulus in Albert and Whetten's (1985, Whetten 1998) seminal article on identity. The idea of organizational character can help identity research regain this aspect of its original focus. Overall, we believe a concept of organizational character suggests powerful transmission mechanisms rooted in human habits and procedural memory that link organizational culture and identity, and can enrich both literatures.

Examining Regeneration at Poplar Grove

Research Context and Methods

We base our discussion on experience with and observation of the regeneration of one seasonal organization—Camp Poplar Grove, which is a small, private summer camp in northern Michigan. It was founded in 1955 to provide a relaxed environment in which children could learn responsibility and decision-making skills. The Camp has been owned and operated by the same family since its founding, with a gradual transition of control to the founder's son, Richard (a pseudonym, as are all subsequent proper names except those of the authors), who is now one of the current directors.

The Camp's physical facility, shown in Figure 1, spans about 400 acres, and includes playing fields, a small private lake, horse corral, archery range, a simple auditorium, an arts and crafts center, cabins, an infirmary, and a lodge with kitchen and dining facilities. There are typically 70–100 campers at camp during each two-week session, of which there are four during the summer. 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 members, and administrators we observed, 23 persons were new to the Camp, and 18 persons were new to camp counseling entirely. During the rest of the year the directors, Richard and his wife Michelle, handle administrative operations, but the maintenance director works sporadically in the

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Figure 1 Sketch Map of Camp Poplar Grove

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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 and crafts	34	Beach
5	Program office	15	Swing set	25	Girls A	35	Boating area
6	Gymnastics	16	Volley ball	26	Golf driving	36	Snorkeling area
7	Girls' cabins	17	Tennis courts	27	Softball I	37	Swimming area
8	Girls' lodge	18	Basket ball	28	Boys' cabins	38	Paddle boards
9	Foundation	19	Archery range	29	Pump house	39	Sailing area
10	Auditorium	20	Barn	30	Softball II	40	Lake

spring and fall. The Camp otherwise has no year-round staff.

The primary data for this study were gathered via minimally obtrusive participant observation, which was carried out by the third author, Susannah Hoch, who was unfamiliar with both the Camp and earlier theoretical discussions of its significance (among the other authors). She was also 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 of her observations. 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.

Notes on these observations were made using methods described by Emerson et al. (1995) during 22 days in the early summer of 2003. This period spanned the Camp's internal staff-training week and the first two weeks of its operations with campers. The notes were generally made in 3 to 5 short writing sessions per day that were squeezed between observations. There are 72 field note documents, ranging in length from 191 to 2,066 words, with a median of 758. Hoch also conducted semistructured interviews with eight staff members near the end of the observational period, when inviting reflection from the respondents would have less impact on their behavior.

The first author (Jeremy Birnholtz) has a long personal association with Poplar Grove, over a period spanning 20 years and involving 11 seasons in residence as a camper, counselor, and eventually assistant director of the Camp. These positions are clear opportunities to note that successful regeneration is not given, but has to be achieved; we draw on Birnholtz's experience below in providing the historical context for and in illustrating the details observed by Hoch. When interacting with staff, Hoch never identified Birnholtz, who was on-site as assistant director, as having a research interest in her work, and she did not share her notes with him until he completed the year's work with the Camp.

Data analysis consisted of independent reading and rereading 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 individuals regarding how to proceed with subsequent action, (2) corrections to incorrect actions taken by individuals, and (3) innovative actions that appeared to take hold or be extinguished. Although 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 were able to reasonably extrapolate this information from the combination of Hoch's records of manifest uncertainty, her detailed reflections on her own experiences as a newcomer to the Camp, her informal conversations with staff members throughout her observation period, and notes from reflective interviews with staff.

As episodes of interest were identified, we tracked the participation and contributions of individuals to better understand the sources of innovation and information. We paid close attention to information sources newcomers seemed to rely on in determining how to act when confronted with uncertainty. We then returned to the field notes, this time focusing less on specific episodes and more on individual staff members. This gave us an improved sense of where individuals got their information.

We also shared early drafts of this paper with administrators from Poplar Grove and two other camps. Their comments aided us in our own reflection on and interpretation of Hoch's observations.

The Character of Poplar Grove

We present three dimensions that distinguish Poplar Grove from other camps. These are not presented as definitive measures of organizational character more generally, but rather show that the regeneration we observed produced a camp distinguishable from other camps, with consistency and coherence in an environment where this is not a given.

Structure. Different camps provide campers with a range of input and flexibility in shaping their experience at camp. So-called high-structure camps feature rigid schedules and substantially limit camper freedom in choosing activities and programs. Structure at camp is a significant and pervasive distinguishing factor that is arguably important to parents who are advised by the American Camping Association website to select a camp that "complements [their] own parenting philosophy" (ACA 2006). Structure is evident in features like uniform program implementation, rule strictness, and planned competitiveness.

Historically, differences among camps along this dimension can be traced back to a philosophical divide among early camp directors (Bond 2003). The first camps followed a strict military model centered on "character building," whereas some later camps loosened their structure and focused on education, community building, and camper independence (see, e.g., Cohn 1957, Doty 1960, Sharp 1930). Given its historical roots in the latter movement, Poplar Grove features minimal structure. One key theme of the staff-training week,

for example, was providing an environment in which campers could "be safe and have fun," as opposed to, e.g., "learn to respect the rules."

Centrality of Tradition. Another important facet of Poplar Grove's character is the importance of not carrying out traditions seemingly for their own sake. The tolerance of changes to traditional activities varies widely among camps, and this appears to be an important factor for parents in choosing camps.

Unlike some camps that place a strong value on tradition, Poplar Grove takes pride in its willingness to change. It was made clear to the staff in training and throughout the summer, for example, that strong value is placed on innovation and hearing out new ideas in the camp community. Poplar Grove also prides itself on not carrying out activities simply because they have been done before. In some cases, this can have quite interesting results as is illustrated by the example of *flagpole*. Each day at Poplar Grove, staff and campers gather at flagpole before each meal as they have for many years. This may appear at first to indicate strong devotion to tradition, but Figure 2 reveals that flagpole describes not a pole where a flag is displayed, but rather a gathering place where announcements are made and the flow of campers into the cafeteria line can be regulated. Richard, the director, indicated that the flag was removed in the early 1970s when flag raising was deemed by campers and staff to be excessively militaristic and unnecessary. Thus, the pragmatic component of the flag-raising tradition—gathering the entire camp in one place before breakfast for announcements—has been

Figure 2   "Flagpole" with Campers and Counselors

retained because a range of other actions are dependent on it, whereas the ritual raising of the flag has not.

It is also important to distinguish this dimension of camps, their adherence in detail to past practices, from our larger theme of the reproduction of character. A certain level of commitment to ritual and tradition is a characteristic feature of a camp. That level can be reproduced over the years. Thus it is quite logical to say "It's the same old Poplar Grove. It doesn't stick to the past."

Specialization. Camps can also be distinguished in terms of their specialization. A camp might specialize in a range of ways, such as by meeting the special needs of a target camper population (e.g., those with unique medical conditions), or by focusing on competency in specific activities such as basketball or fencing. The extent and nature of a camp's specialization can influence the staff it hires, the way it invests resources in facilities and how program areas are managed and executed.

Poplar Grove has largely chosen not to specialize in these ways and instead offers a wide range of activities (typically around 20 regular program areas). Here, the focus is less on building skills in a particular area than on achieving broader goals, such as building community and leadership skills through exposure to a wide range of experiences.

These broad dimensions of structure, centrality of tradition, and specialization provide us with general descriptors that are useful in constructing a summary rendering of Poplar Grove's organizational character. The actual traits that constitute its character are much more specific, of course, just as many specific dispositions of an individual would be summarized if we were to say of her that she is "honest but shy." And just as we might ask how those traits of an individual were produced or are maintained through specific experiences, we can ask of an organization like Poplar Grove how its characteristic practices are re-created each year.

Some Regenerative Processes

We can now describe some features of Poplar Grove's regeneration that may generalize beyond the one annual cycle that was observed. In varying degrees, these processes contribute to the regeneration of coherent systems of action dispositions by allowing for the transfer of knowledge, experience, and practice from more experienced to less experienced staff; and allowing 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) and in Guild's (1999) ski-area observations.

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 (Bechky 2003, Feldman 1981, Lave and Wenger 1991, Miller and Jablin 1991). At the same time, the primacy of demonstration in seasonal organizations is noteworthy given that newcomers have no opportunity to see the organization in action before the season begins. Thus, demonstration is either staged during training week or occurs once the season has started. The demonstrations observed at Poplar Grove tended to have one or more of the following three properties.

First, demonstrations were repetitive and increasingly representative of full-scale camp life. As the training week went on and the camp setup became more complete, the staff adopted a schedule that was increasingly similar to the one used once the campers arrived. One of the first tasks, for example, was the setup of the picnic tables comprising the area called flagpole, after which the administrators made a point of gathering the staff at flagpole before every meal. Whether or not it was their conscious intent, this got the staff in the habit of gathering at flagpole before meals and demonstrated an important organizing practice of everyday camp life. This experience could then be drawn on in later moments of uncertainty. Flagpole quickly became the de facto location for subsequent meetings during training week, and also the usual gathering place for most all-camp activities. Thus, the disposition to "meet at flagpole" resulted in actions that were compatible with a wide range of additional actions in the camp ecology in ways that an equivalent disposition to, e.g., "meet at the waterfront" would not be. This is because a range of activities were structured such that they began at flagpole (and not the waterfront), and because, in moments of uncertainty about where to go for a new event or activity, most people at camp would default to flagpole. Even if the activity was elsewhere, the probability of running into somebody at flagpole who knew where to go was high. Demonstrating this core behavior early in staff training allowed this coherence to persist.

Second, demonstrations were multistaged. 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 members are hungry for any information they can use in understanding how they are expected to act. At Poplar Grove, this was evident in the curiosity of the new staff, who frequently wondered if they were doing things the "right" way. Small, early demonstrations of what constitutes appropriate versus inappropriate behavior had a strong impact that lasted throughout the summer. In addition, new staff watched each other for information on how to behave.

Consider the example of teaching the "Poplar Grove Spirit Song" during training week. This was accomplished by inviting all of the administrators and experienced staff to stand in the center of the area known as flagpole, such that they faced the new staff. This set the scene for a multistaged demonstration. One could easily imagine that, in a group of 18- to 20-year olds who do not know each other well, the disposition to "enthusiastically sing a silly song" (and potentially look foolish in front of new friends) could be trumped by the disposition to "act cool" (and not sing). This same conflict could be imagined once the campers arrive. Nonetheless, we observed enthusiastic singing due to this multistaged process. In the first demonstration phase, all of the experienced staff sang enthusiastically, such that the new staff saw that the disposition to sing enthusiastically, however ridiculous it might have seemed, really was a viable and expected way to act. In the second phase of the demonstration, the new staff joined in singing. And finally, the third phase of this demonstration process occurred when the campers arrived and all staff, experienced and new, took part in singing the song to the campers, after which the campers joined in. This multistaged demonstration meant that only the disposition to sing enthusiastically was visible by newcomers (at each stage) when the song was being taught. It was therefore clear to the newcomers that the disposition to not sing was not appropriate.

A third property of demonstration was that it relied on the memories of experienced staff and campers. To illustrate, consider the activity named carnival night that Hoch observed. Brian, one of the counselors assigned to plan this activity, had strong memories of the excitement he felt as a Poplar Grove camper when the auditorium door was opened at the last minute so that everybody entered the carnival at once, and he worked hard to reimplement this practice from the past. It stuck. Several planners of subsequent auditorium-based activities (e.g., 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.

Memories also play a role by the familiar, indirect process of "how-to" description. Over the course of a summer at Poplar Grove there are four two-week sessions, all of which have a similar program of evening activities and special events. During the first session (the one observed by Hoch), administrators assigned experienced staff members to work with newcomers in planning these events. Thus, experienced staff contributed their memories of past procedures and events to the regeneration effort in ways that influenced how these events were carried out by newcomers for the rest of the summer. As laboratory study has shown, remembered activities, once enacted, are stored in the procedural memories of new participants (Cohen and Bacdayan 1996). We believe such memories can then serve as a guide to future behavior in a broader class of similar situations.

Cascading of Guidance. Another key process of regeneration at Poplar Grove was the *guidance cascade*. These cascades were a nearly constant presence, especially in the early part of the preseason and training-week periods. 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. During the first days of training week, a range of physical set-up tasks were necessary in the activity areas. Tennis nets needed assembling, boats needed launching, docks needed to be put in the water, and so forth. Whenever possible, groups completing these tasks had access to an experienced staff member who was not necessarily an expert in the area, but could articulate some memory of what the setup looked like in previous years. For example, an experienced member of the group assembling docks at the waterfront drew a diagram in the sand to illustrate that the assembled dock would look like a capital H.

In another case, Hoch was helping to clean and stock the kitchen before Cathy, the head cook, had arrived for the summer. Hoch was assisting Rick, a former cook at the camp who lived nearby and was helping prepare for the season. Rick's advice was interesting in that it was sometimes very specific (e.g., "You can put the glasses on that shelf"), but occasionally ambivalent (e.g., "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 (e.g., 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 important distinction here is that 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 commitment on what will later be acceptable. Rather, it is a higher-level description of how things once looked, how they were done in the past, or how they might be done now.

A concomitant of this observation is what might be termed the "leadership of the one-eyed." Cascades often had the effect of turning new staff into instant experts on particular aspects of Camp. These experts were often distinguished from their colleagues only by a day or a few hours of additional Camp experience, but this could be enough to make a difference. Lisa, the camp maintenance assistant, was an excellent example of a "one-eyed" leader in Hoch's account. Lisa arrived at Camp several days before the rest of the staff, and worked closely with core administrative and maintenance staff during her first few days on site. In doing so, she learned about the layout of Camp, maintenance projects for the summer, how to use particular tools and supplies (e.g., using lawn-care equipment and locating fuel), and what was to happen during the training week. Thus, when Hoch and the rest of the staff arrived, they frequently turned to Lisa for information and advice on where things were located (e.g., "Where is the barn?"), how to do jobs (e.g., "Should we scrape before painting?"), and so forth. Because she knew many things, she was often asked for advice on topics beyond her experience, and she would sometimes give what she supposed was a good answer, such as "Just paint without scraping." What is particularly interesting here is that very small amounts of additional experience translated into significant influence. Even 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 what was known about the prior experience and status of the sources. These episodes are also more common and significant in the seasonal regeneration situation that 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 two co-workers without direct authority, however, the new person has a much more open problem and this openness

increases reliance on the actor's own experience and dispositions. If advisors do not agree, then it may be an occasion to explicitly apply experience from other situations, 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, but their loyalty to re-creating 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. Hoch's observations and Birnholtz's experience suggest that the volume and frequency of communication were significantly constrained by the size of the camp, which is over 400 acres with some activity areas a 10-minute walk (and twice that for certain 7-year olds) from each other, and by the need to supervise the campers constantly once they had arrived at camp. The Camp also provided little in the way of communications infrastructure, save handheld radios for core administrative staff and cellular telephones in high-risk areas. All of this meant that virtually all communication observed at Poplar Grove 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 allowed for the regeneration of character by seeding a framework of "sameness," while allowing for slight, inevitable variations in interpretation. We observed two types of bursts.

Collective Bursts. Collective bursts occurred when everyone was gathered, usually either at flagpole before each meal or at staff meetings held weekly. In the terms of an ecology of action dispositions, collective bursts reduce the probability of action disposition conflict by providing everyone with identical information and, by virtue of this broadness, shaping action dispositions that are widely shared. Collective bursts were characterized by their rapid nature and broad applicability.

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. In addition to perennial announcements about lost items ("Has anyone seen an orange

towel?") and community-wide issues needing attention ("Please remember to throw your popsicle sticks in the trash can after snack") that have reasonably clear action implications, others were more ambiguous and interesting ("Tonight's evening activity is 'Whoopee Bowl' so be at flagpole at 7:30 wearing all of the clothes you can possibly fit on your body"). The implication of the rapid nature of collective bursts is that, even in staff meetings, there was rarely an opportunity to explain anything in a great deal of detail. 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, with the frequent effect 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 here is that the collective burst is about using generic information to set up the necessary conditions for people to make the 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 likely would not have an effect on the behavior of a counselor unaware that campers were required to wear life jackets while kayaking.

Individual Bursts. Unlike collective bursts, individual bursts were targeted at individuals or small groups, and occurred opportunistically as time and participants were available. 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 was quick advice from Kelly, one of the head counselors, to several new staff members about how to deal with schedule confusion on the first rainy day of the season. Kelly instructed them to, "go to your second activity, and see if the campers are there. You must make sure you can account for all of them." 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. This also serves to regenerate the camp's nonspecialized character, in that a highly specialized camp might have very

specific skill-building goals (e.g., nomenclature study for horse riders or knot practice for sailors) for rainy days.

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.

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. Staff was 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").

Asking a more experienced colleague or supervisor for more information is a common strategy for workplace newcomers confronted with uncertainty or ambiguity (Miller and Jablin 1991). As we have seen, this strategy often serves to reinforce an attempt at resolving ambiguity, as was the case in Hoch's observations, particularly early on, when staff frequently asked each other questions like, is this right? and, how do I . . . ? Others seemed to use a strategy of asking many questions, often in advance, to resolve as much ambiguity as possible. Hoch's own experience showed, however, that this raised its own series of ambiguities as when she received different answers about how to arrange supplies in the kitchen depending on whom she asked. Thus, even asking for specific directions can require some disambiguation and an attempt to understand which experienced figures to listen to and when.

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 (e.g., lifeguarding), and information from the immediate environment to improvise a plausible solution to a problem. In some cases, such improvisations "stuck"—perhaps because they were simply not noticed, or thought by observers not to matter, or were perceived as improvements on previous practices; in other cases,

they did not. For example, there was significant conflict at the waterfront when the two head lifeguards deemed it appropriate, based on their prior experience as lifeguards elsewhere, for staff to sit on the docks while guarding. Camp policy, however, historically required lifeguards to stand. This was a source of continued tension between the lifeguards and administrators, but the guards eventually relented and stood.

Our question then becomes one of how it is determined which improvised resolutions take hold in the organization, and which are sharply corrected or gently steered back toward past behaviors. Unlike the processes described thus far, which are largely focused on conveying information, this last process of applying generic skills in context offers some of the largest opportunities for change. It allows us to explore the question of how it is determined when changes to existing practice are sufficiently coherent (i.e., "in character") to be retained, and when they are not.

Domain Credibility of the Improviser. The first key property was the *domain credibility* of the improviser, which is the extent to which an individual has domain knowledge and experience that is respected by others in the organization. Where a newcomer has substantial domain credibility in an organization, an innovative action disposition may be more likely to dominate a disposition that has historical roots in the organization. This, of course, also depends also on the insistence of the improviser, on the willingness of the organization to adopt novel practices, and on the properties described below.

New staff with extensive domain knowledge turned to this experience more confidently in resolving specific ambiguities. One instance of this occurred at Poplar Grove when Cathy, the new head cook, drew on her prior kitchen experience in moving the salad-bar table away from the wall so as to improve traffic flow at mealtimes. There was immediate resistance from Michelle, one of the Camp's directors, who moved the table back against the wall where it had been in previous years. Cathy then moved it away from the wall again and this "battle" continued for several meals until the table was finally left away from the wall for the remainder of the summer. Here, Cathy's improvisation is retained, because the action disposition (to put the table away from the wall) conflicted only with Michelle's disposition (from her personal memory) to put it against the wall. Few others noticed this innovation, so it did not conflict with other specific actions, and Cathy's domain knowledge was generally well respected by the camp administrators. She had been hired, in fact, because of her experience and an explicit desire to avoid administrative problems that had occurred in the kitchen during recent summers.

Interestingly, as far as we can determine, formal organizational authority played no role in resolving the table

dispute. It is common to think that this is a major function of authority and a reason for hierarchical structure in which any pair of actors are subject to a unique common superior (Boulding 1968, Simon 1996). But most such disputes in a seasonal organization cannot be resolved by using such mechanisms. They are far too numerous. Instead, the individuals, when the ambiguity is personal, or the parties, when it is interpersonal, must themselves determine which body of experience is most relevant.

Visibility of Improvised Action. Another aspect of mapping prior experience onto novel situations is the visibility of the improvised actions in question. In other words, our observations suggest a positive relationship between the visibility of action and the probability of conflict with the action dispositions of others. Visibility can vary in two respects. First by the extent to which a particular action can be observed (and corrected) by more experienced members. Second by the extent to which action plays out in ways significant for others, as we saw when a counselor assigned "kitchen duty" to campers without checking with Cathy.

Another example from the Poplar Grove kitchen contrasted the salad-bar-table location (as discussed above) with grilled-cheese-sandwich production. Cathy did not ask how grilled cheese sandwiches were produced in the past at Poplar Grove. Rather, she showed Hoch and the kitchen staff how she wanted the sandwiches produced. Unlike the table location, where some persuasion and persistence were necessary, however, we saw no challenge here to her technique. One likely reason for this is that the practice was not highly visible. Grilled cheese sandwiches were assembled behind the closed doors of the kitchen at a time when most experienced members were involved in other activities. Rather, the outcome of the action (a substantial number of grilled cheese sandwiches of adequate quality and timeliness) was its most visible element. As long as this outcome was satisfactorily achieved—and given that the Camp had no "secret recipe" for the snack—the practice was unlikely to be observed or corrected.

Degree of Risk or of External Standardization in the Area. Easy observability affords attention, but attention is also directed by experience and theory held by actors and embodied in institutional requirements. The waterfront, for example, is a closely regulated area because of the dangers associated with water activities. The state of Michigan imposes a set of rules (e.g., 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 properly enforced.

Consider this in contrast to the basketball court. Although there are standards for basketball court configuration and rules for play, these are not formally

mandated in a way that merits significant administrative priority, although one could easily imagine that this would be different at a basketball specialty camp. Thus, practices at the waterfront are likely to receive more attention and be explained more specifically in the first place. We saw evidence of this at Poplar Grove in several cases. For example, on the first day of camp, the director came to the beach during waterfront orientation and helped the lifeguards explain waterfront safety rules. He did this at no other area in Camp. Although certain details might go unnoticed in other areas, they were regularly noticed by administrators paying close attention to waterfront activities. Thus, improvised changes to waterfront practices were far more likely to conflict with administrative action dispositions at Poplar Grove. Whereas in other regenerating organizations the relevant external constraints would likely be quite different in detail, these organizations will still have the problem of regenerating a form that satisfies externally institutionalized constraints.

Discussion: 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 re-created 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 on regeneration of seasonal organizations 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 and present many interesting future research opportunities.

Theoretical Implications. The prior work cited above strongly suggests 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," while remaining appropriate and effective, in a world that is constantly changing? Organizations do usually not engage in established practices or enact routines with no attention to the purposes of 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 although 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. 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 to avoid being counted by spies on the Havana docks. They did so, and then, after going down the gangway, lined up and marched countably away.

In a more recent, contrasting example, the Toyota production system, well known for quality and efficiency, has been the focus of many attempts at imitation in a range of manufacturing environments. Few of these attempts have been successful, however, which Spear and Bowen (1999) argue is the result of imitators confusing "tools and practices with the system itself" (p. 96). They argue that the system is difficult to articulate and has never been written down, and that it consists of implicit rules that guide decision making in the organization. It is, in other words, much like organizational character.

Others have recognized the difficulty in articulating the distinction between habitual, patterned action and the underlying knowledge that guides it. Existing accounts attack the problem by devising language for rendering the interplay of what we know with how we act. Orlikowski (2002) argues that we should distinguish *knowledge* from *knowing*, which is constituted in everyday practices. Feldman and Pentland (2003, Pentland and Feldman 2005) distinguish (1) the *ostensive* aspect of routine, the abstract patterns shaping a routine that are held by organizational members, from the artifacts involved, and (2) the *performative* aspect, the actions, which may involve tacit knowledge, that members undertake in carrying out the routine in real and varying contexts. Hargadon and Fanelli (2002, p. 294) distinguish "latent knowledge" (scripts, goals, and identities) from "empirical knowledge" (artifacts, tools, and routines). Levinthal and Rerup (2006) suggest that we should contrast mindful deliberation with less-mindful routine and then investigate their interrelations. Weick and Sutcliffe (2006) reply to them that we should think of routine and mindfulness as ends of a continuum where routines involve few and coarse distinctions and mindfulness involves many, fine-grained (and perhaps nonconceptual) distinctions.

A distinctive contribution of our account is our emphasis on the procedural memory basis of habitual or skilled action in humans and its crucial role in regeneration. We heavily rely 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 us to the mechanisms of transfer of collective skill discussed above.

Our focus on organizational character emphasizes the powerful mechanisms of learning and generalization inherent in acquiring habitual dispositions. These dispositions are consistent with Pentland and Feldman's (2005) notion of ostensive aspect, which includes any pattern that influences routine performance. The dispositions we study are more general however, as they can be active in situations that do not recur, whereas routines do. We believe these dispositions to be essential to the acquisition of many regularities of action via small amounts of experience, which is the central puzzle of regeneration.

Where Orlikowski (2002, p. 257) identifies practices as rather general functional categories that interviewees express to her (e.g., "aligning effort" and "sharing identity"), it appears more natural in our case to take practices as our campers and counselors do: As the recurring actions of setting the service table for lunch, saddling the horses, or setting up the swimming dock. We see organizational character as the coherent content of 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 certainly agree that such beliefs have tremendous significance, and we tried 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 the recognizable qualities of Kappa's coherent ensemble of action dispositions.

Tsoukas 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" (p. 575) But they give such 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 do not quote Ecclesiastes in response. Our concept of character allows for 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 Dewey (1922, p. 89), remembering that by instinct he meant what we would label emotion: "Man is a creature of habit; not of reason, nor yet of instinct." Although we have touched on them only briefly, leaving a fuller account of the contributions of emotions and feelings to organizational regeneration for a later treatment, their interplay with the habitual basis of organizational action is every bit as subtle and consequential as the interplay of habit and reason.

Although each perspective described above casts the issue in a distinctive form, all of these papers wrestle with some variant of the problem to reconcile the authors' field observations of agency and change with the mindless and static connotations of our language for "routinized" action. And all of them work 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 fresh ideas. We expect these will foster new rounds of discussion and observation.

Research Challenges that Lie Ahead

Our approach to the challenge raised by regeneration is to understand patterned organizational action as flowing from dispositions that are mutually coherent and procedurally remembered. We believe this may have some deep implications for future inquiry. First, the role of procedural memory means that organizational actors cannot always give fully accurate accounts of the sources of their actions (Cohen and Bacdayan 1996). The limitations of actors as direct informants may mean that laboratory studies and intensive field observation play an increasing role in efforts to isolate action dispositions and better understand the workings of organizational character and, by extension, organizations themselves. These methods allow for richer observations that can support more precise inferences about dispositions. However, these forms of observation have traditionally been very time intensive. Here there might be cost-reducing innovations that exploit Internet-mediated experimentation (e.g., von Ahn 2006) or reuse of video records made by organizational ethnographers (LeBaron 2005a, b).

Second, and also in response to the difficulty of articulation, organizational research using survey methods may require redoubled efforts to use the best available psychometric techniques—and perhaps to introduce further innovations—so that aspects of organizational character can be reliably inferred from patterned responses to specifically developed questionnaire items.

Third, the work of exploring systems of dispositions that generate actions may be assisted by current developments in psychology, where a host of new measurement techniques are fueling rapid advances in understanding the remarkable mechanisms we use to make sense of the actions of others. Some work along these lines can already be seen as experimental economists study cooperative dispositions with neuroimaging techniques, such as in Hsu et al. (2005), and with neurobiological manipulations, such as in Kosfeld et al. (2005); see also Gallese et al. 2004 and Cohen (2007).

Fourth, our approach suggests that the coherence of action dispositions is of fundamental importance. It is that property that allows novice actors facing ambiguity to infer an acceptable next step with reasonable accuracy. And so it would be valuable to conduct field studies of how coherence is exploited in the resolution of

workflow ambiguity. Although there are clear difficulties, we see potential in adaptation of context-aware experience sampling methods used to study time allocation and medication practices (Intille 2006), and in video-ethnography techniques such as those of LeBaron (2005a).

Whether or not others see merit in our approach, we hope the challenge of accounting for cases of regeneration such as the one we observed at Poplar Grove will stimulate new thinking among organizational researchers that will actively confront the paradox of the (n)ever-changing world.

Acknowledgments

Endnotes

[1]There are many formal definitions of *character*, most based 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 (i.e., habitual dispositions) to form distinctive and coherent entities (individuals).

[2]We use "organizational character" in a very different sense from Bridges (2000), who clusters overall organizational decision-making styles in categories derived from the Meyers-Briggs personality inventory for individuals. Our focus is on fine-grained regularities of an organization's actions in its native context.

[3]In some cases the interdependencies may be sequential, and durable sequences may form the core of what is often labeled "routines." In this paper, however, we keep to the more general language of dispositions and action patterns (Cohen et al. 1996), to avoid—except for brief remarks in our conclusion—the definitional issues and connotations of mindlessness, which surround the concept of routine.

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