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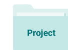

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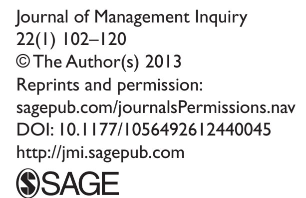

Institutional Work in *The Wire*: An Ethological Investigation of Flexibility in Organizational Adaptation

Mike Zundel[1], Robin Holt[1], and Joep Cornelissen[2]

Abstract

Analysis of institutional work is habitually complicated by the need to combine agentic and structural features. Drawing on the work of Gregory Bateson, the authors suggest that such complications emerge from an error in epistemology whereby the stability and "it-ness" of things is presupposed. As an alternative, they develop a processual analysis that considers the flexibility of adaptation in relational patterns. Here, institutional phenomena are not stable but characterized by regenerative and degenerative cycles of influence that afford or restrict room for maneuver without classifying them "as" something. The authors explicate this by drawing on empirical material covered in the HBO TV series *The Wire*.

Keywords

process studies, Bateson, *The Wire*, institutional work, ecological thinking, schismographs

Introduction

There is a double bind of meaning in managerial and organization studies: The closer we attend to things, the more distant they become. Closeness belies "it-ness." Research in institutional theory and, more recently, "institutional work" (e.g., Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011) has been alive to the problems and paradoxes entailed when, under careful scrutiny, self-evident organizational facts lose their unity and stability. For instance, the more attentive studies are to field-level relational systems and meanings, the more apparent becomes entrepreneurial influence (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Haveman & Rao, 1997; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003). The identification of unifying and stabilizing processes of shared institutional logics and passive conceptualizations of institutional agents (e.g., Scott, 2001; Tolbert, 1985; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983) are upset in recognizing individuals' capacity to bring about novel or altered institutions (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004). Acknowledging individual entrepreneurial freedom as a driver for institutional change, for example, requires the consideration of recursive relationships between individuals and institutions by which meaning, significance, and value are negotiated (Clemens & Cook, 1999, Seo & Creed, 2002, Sewell, 1992; Suddaby, 2010). How institutions influence particular thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in individuals needs to be reconciled with how individuals' backgrounds, experiences, and interpretive processes influence the consensual practices and understandings sustaining those institutions (Oliver, 1992; Zilber, 2002). Such reconciliation requires the inclusion or development of adequate analytical frameworks that account for institutional forces and agent autonomy (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 216).

Reconciling individuals and institutions has become the explicit concern of research in "institutional work." Here, studies investigate effects of day-to-day agency for institutional orders, paying heed to the "awareness, skill, and reflexivity" of individual and collective actors and how institutions are "constituted in the actions of those actors" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). With causality running in both directions between institutional structures and the intentionality of resource-endowed, powerful or gifted social agents, studies of institutional work consider social theories concerned with the mediation of free will and determinism, including discourse analysis, practice theory, actor-network theory, and semiotics (e.g., Lawrence et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2011). It is in using these theories empirically that institutional work studies encounter and struggle with the double bind: The agents' activities and thoughts are observed and acknowledged in conceptual juxtaposition to

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their institutional context so that a relational analysis of agents-in-context is established. And yet, the closer any study gets to the "rough ground" of the phenomena, the less apparent it becomes: just where does the individual stop and institution start?

One response emerging from within institutional work comes from Willmott who argues that categories like "institution" and "individual," though apparently "self-evident and/or necessary aspects of social scientific analysis in institutional work," are "humanly produced, constructed objectivities" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 79; Willmott, 2011, p. 69). The problem with using humanly produced categories that offer static identifications of entities and patterns is their abiding by a different logic to those continually mutating behavioral patterns that characterize the goings-on in organizations. Willmott (2011) suggests we might adopt less substantive and coercive categories. The concern then becomes how this loosening of language still offers the prospect of analysis, without relying on the apparent factual self-evidence of social phenomena such as "individual" or "organization," and their inherited and taken-for-granted descriptions.

Our article offers one such response and set of analytics, proposing an alternative conceptualization of the unfolding dynamics of institutional work without resorting to unified categories. We begin with the work of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson for whom the very idea of something being a unified and stable "it" is questionable (Bateson, 1976; Yocum, 1985, p. 2). The insights underpinning institutional work approaches—namely, that what appears to be stable and orderly when considered from conceptual distance loses its clearly defined outlines and properties with increased analytical attention—are also a concern for Bateson. However, rather than suggesting this to be the result of an inherent duality in the structure of theorized phenomena, or even a problem of bad measurement leading to erroneous or incomplete taxonomies of things and their properties, Bateson argues that these problems stem from a tendency to ignore the difference between the categories we produce and the world of phenomena they are designed to capture: They are "errors in epistemology" (Bateson, 1972, 1979). His response is a move from analyzing "things" to investigating "patterns" (Bateson, 1972, p. 428), suggesting we can recognize and describe *patterns* of accelerating and regulatory processes whose dynamics afford or restrict the possibilities of adaptation for living systems.

This move toward patterns is particularly beneficial for the study of institutional work, as it does not rely upon conceptual separation of action, agents, and institutions or identification of intrinsic, fixed, and stable properties of such entities and their causal relationships. Neither does it invoke the complexities of hybrid theories that merge agency and structure. Rather, it understands unfolding institutional behaviors in terms of a dynamic sympathy of interacting systems that emerge within an economy of flexibility, which is afforded by the availability of energy (for the display of certain behaviors) and restricted by counteracting processes placing demands upon the activation of these resources. Through flexibility, the "it-ness" of phenomena hardened by logical classifications of categories and their relations loosens and dissolves, affording investigation of a world of continual movement.

Our article develops and applies Bateson's work through an indicative study of organizational and managerial processes understood as dynamic systems. We illustrate our argument by drawing on episodes of the HBO TV series *The Wire* whose events, locations, plots, and characters are knotted around the drugs trade in the US city of Baltimore. We argue these novel (in both senses) data hold particular benefits for theorizing transformative dynamic patterns in organizational life. The stories implicate agents (traders, police, politicians, addicts), institutions (commercial markets, courts, standards, language, laws), and objects and symbols (clothing, electronic surveillance) within realist narratives of organizational creation and dissolution, performative success and failure, and personal accomplishment, frustration, and tragedy. Confined to an approachable "field" of analysis (five series of 12-13 episodes each), these data allow us to use and develop Bateson's theoretical work.

Our article contributes to the nascent debate on institutional work as it introduces an alternative conceptual vocabulary that does not rely upon reified categories and therefore circumvents the difficulties associated with the reconciliation of structure and agency. It also develops a method of analyzing organizational processes that brings a new set of phenomena relating to cycles of intensifying and dissolving system behaviors into analytical focus.

Bateson's Epistemology

Schismogenesis

We can begin to approach Bateson's epistemology through a distinction he draws between the living and nonliving world. The nonliving world is a world of entities and mechanical processes for which a language of *impact* and *force* may provide adequate *explananda*. In the world of living systems, on the other hand, forces and impacts play only a subordinate role. The affairs of animals and humans are primarily animated by *information* and *difference* and not just the transmission of forces. The world of living systems is a world in which the " . . . very phenomena to be described are among themselves governed and determined by difference, distinction, and information" (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, pp. 17-18).

Bateson's understanding of the processes of the living world emanates from his struggle to make sense of his study materials generated when researching indigenous tribes in New Guinea and Bali. He found that the contacts between

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individuals and groups could be explained neither by "culture" nor as the result of sex, physiology, or heritage (Bateson, 1980, p. 171). More generally, the emotions, behaviors, and temperaments of tribal members could only limitedly be understood in terms of cause and effect or through the language of force and impact.[1] For instance, unlike the linear, calculable, and delimited forces involved when one billiard ball hits another, acts of boasting of an individual, family, or clan can lead to yet more exaggerated reactions in others when these actions are reciprocated. Echoing Mauss' (1990) "potlatch," Bateson finds relational patterns that are not linear but intensifying when each reciprocal contact prompts even more excessive displays of grandiloquence in return (e.g., more boasting, bigger festivals). We can perhaps find similar tendencies in an established firm investing in new research and development to counteract new market entrants. Intensifying, regenerative cycles ensue when displays of behavior, emotion, or temperament (A) are mirrored and intensified in response (leading to more displays of A by others). Bateson terms such progression "schismogenesis," which in cases of patterns of boasting or intensifying competition is symmetrical. The alternative to symmetrical is complementary schismogenesis, when increases in the display of one behavior (A) elicit more of a *different* behavior (B), for instance displays of "dominance" invoking greater display of "submission." These interactive patterns of living systems can therefore not be explained using a language of force and impact alone. In the living world, the energy released (e.g., in investing heavily in new R&D or boasting) has no correlation with the energy involved in its "stimulus" (in Bateson's language, the "difference" signified by the news of the emergence of competitors or acts of boasting).

If schismogenetically intensifying processes remain *unregulated*, they create a " . . . tangle of interlocking variables in which the more of something, the more of something else; and the more of the other thing, the more of the first" (Bateson, 1975, p. 29). Progressive boasting patterns between individuals or families of a clan, or intensifying competitive relationships between firms, can lead to breakdown. Continuing patterns of boasting can break up and disperse the cultural unity, for instance when families leave a clan or when incessant investment in new product search can squeeze margins and encourage borrowing in ways that deplete available resources in the firm or the wider economy.

The cultural "unity" of a tribe, firm, or industry system is therefore not a static entity (an "it") but a dynamic equilibrium. Social, living systems are under continuous stress as their interactive behavioral patterns tend toward (schismogenetic) intensification, threatening breakdown if variables are stretched beyond their tolerances. For living systems to maintain temporary states of equilibrium, schismogenetic processes must be counteracted by processes that *regulate* the otherwise runaway patterns (Bateson, 1980, p. 175). In the case of boasting, regulative processes may include the outbreak of smaller, even ritualistically ordained quarrels through which tensions are released and schismogenetic intensification temporarily suspended (Bateson, 1980, p. 175). Similarly, ceremonial excesses in gift giving may be regulated by demographics or financial restriction (for a modern Western equivalent, think about caps on political donations). Likewise, runaway commercial competition may be counteracted by antitrust interventions, by emerging technologies, or by limitations on bank lending. Regulative processes intersect the build up and eruption of excessive tensions and counteract the depletion of available resources. To endure for a sustained period of time, any system, be it an organism, tribe, firm, or individual, requires regulative patterns sufficient to keep schismogenetic processes in a state of possible equilibrium.

Energy and Flexibility

Through the concept of schismogenesis (and its regulation), we become aware that a system is not a thing but a thing-in-relation that finds sufficient organizational stability to persist through time. So to understand systems, and systems-in-systems, is to identify the quality and persistence of patterns in the relational setting of what Bateson calls an economy of *flexibility*. Flexibility is a function of the availability of alternative courses of action and the degree of possible maneuver for systems ("individual" and "social") to bring about new behavioral dimensions when nested in other systems and thus embroiled in responsive patterns of contact with others. Bateson's suggested investigation represents a shift from concern with entities and the characterization of their nature (e.g., the definition of fields or the identification of rules and templates of actions for institutional actors) toward an investigation of how the *interactions* that constitute systems *afford* or *restrict* behavioral changes over time. They may be afforded in situations when relational patterns are not tightened up, when there is sufficient uncommitted *energy*. When physical resources, time, or motivations are available, parts of the system are flexible to change the ways in which they interrelate, dynamically, with others. Such flexibility may be restricted because energies are committed when systems devote their efforts to satisfy ongoing interactive patterns, for instance when defending their territory, in competitive relations, or simply when keeping up with the neighbors, so that it is difficult and sometimes impossible to do things differently while trying to satisfy existing and unfolding commitments. Systems can expend a lot of energy simply staying put. The concept of flexibility as the "degree of available, uncommitted alternatives available to the system" (Bateson, 1979, p. 230) affords the investigation of particular courses of action without requiring a search for and classification of the entities (e.g., institution, individual, practices) that accrue in the transformation of the experienced

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and observed world. It also shifts our attention toward the importance of time through which recursive relational patterns play out and toward unintended consequences when exploiting or neglecting the availability of excessive flexibility in the system and thus affording another part of the system the room to maneuver.

It is important to highlight that regulative processes are not restricted to physical resources but denote *energy* in a more expansive sense, including, for instance, imagination to conceive things differently (e.g., when embroiled in day-to-day efforts at satisfying the demands of intensifying processes), reputation (e.g., the ability to ignore others' boasting behavior without losing face in the community), or psychological pressures (e.g., employees resist critiquing their organization in periods of strained labor markets). Moreover, because energy availabilities change continually, systems only *appear* to be in steady states. As we will show, while systems tend toward intensification, they also experience periods of relaxation (e.g., after an excessive process has been regulated, for instance the forced removal of an excessive boaster, following the introduction of market regulations, or in the wake of technological breakthrough, etc.). In these periods, schismogenetic strain is temporarily suspended, and systemic resources (energy) become available for existing and new institutional actors to change the dynamics of the system. Under schismogenesis, however, energy is depleted; the system is under strain and the majority of systemic activities are directed toward sustaining responsive patterns (symmetrically by owning more goods to show off or leveraging assets to finance new product investment, and complimentarily by submitting to tribal elders' blandishments or the structuring conditions of oligopolistic power). Bateson argues by identifying schismogenetic[2] and regulative response patterns we begin to appreciate the dynamics of human (individual and social) systems for what they are, less *things* in motion, and more movement *per se*.

Ethos

We are able to discern living systems from each other because they have a degree of standardization in their response patterns (e.g., competitive responses in liberal market economies or understatement in response to boasting), and their interrelations are kept in temporary balance. These patterns may also vary between intra- and intergroup contacts (e.g., one ethological group may typically display 'understatement' in intra-group relations, but these may turn to boasting when in contact with others, for instance at an international sporting event). They depend upon the emotional attitudes that govern what value a community/individual sets upon various satisfactions and dissatisfaction. Bateson (1980, p. 222) calls the *system* of possible response patterns in the contacts of individuals' ethos: a "culturally standardised system of organization of the instincts and emotions of individuals" (Bateson, 1972, p. 108).

Bateson (1991, p. 50) is careful to avoid the impression that ethos is somehow more "real" or more connected to unfolding reality than other terms used by scientists, such as culture, economics, or institution. Such an assumption would, he argues, commit Whitehead's fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Accordingly, Bateson treats ethos not as a class or field *containing* particular elements (e.g., individuals with particular behaviors, firms with distinct attributes) but as a system that characterizes "patternings of relationships." Two implications of this distinction are important. First, because ethos denotes processes, not things, it cannot "cause" particular behaviors[3] (e.g., it makes no sense to claim a person did something "because of her ethos"). Second, a person's ethos does not refer to the "individual" but to the "individual in the world"; it denotes unfolding patterns of contact of individuals *with* others and *with* the outside world (Bateson, 1980, p. 274). Such patterns are therefore always reactive. In cases of juvenile boasting behavior, we can imagine symmetrical reactions amid peers (X's boasting elicits more from Y) or complementary reactions when dealing with parents (excessive boasting of the child is met with parental reticence or even shame).

In this section, we have introduced a number of concepts that allow for the investigation of patterns of contact characterizing the dynamics of living systems. *Schismogenesis* describes the tendency of relational patterns to intensify through responsive cycles to behavioral displays. Such cycles can be *symmetrical*, for instance in the case of price wars, or *complementary*, when a dominant firm forces other market participants into submission. Both cases endanger the balance of the living system because of the resource implications of unfolding schismogenetic intensification. To achieve a (temporary) *equilibrium* between *energy* resources and patterns of contact, living systems rely upon *regulative* processes to intervene in otherwise runaway, schismogenetic patterns. Finally, we have introduced "*ethos*" as a concept that describes the quality of behavioral patterns of schismogenetic and regulative patterns underlying contacts between parts of the system (e.g., individuals with each other and with their environment). Changes in ethos refer to changes in behavioral *patterns*; in the ways in which behavioral displays are responded to. Such changes, however, require a degree of *flexibility* that comes from the availability of energy (unused resources) in the unfolding relational patterns. We now explicate this conceptual schema through the analysis of institutional work in Baltimore's drug organizations as depicted in the TV series *The Wire*.

Introducing *The Wire*

The exemplary or critical case study we selected involves the drugs trade depicted in the HBO TV series *The Wire*, which aired between 2002 and 2008. We chose this case study because of the analytical advantages of this particular

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data format as well as the expressiveness of the material for the elaboration and illustration of theory. *The Wire* tells of the entrepreneurial drugs trade, political corruption, urban "white flight," rising unemployment, and increasingly fraught struggles to retain education as a prospect for all in a sprawling US rust belt city. As an ethnographer, *The Wire's* writer David Simon (1992; Simon & Burns, 1997/2009) talks of finding himself addicted to bearing witness to the minutiae of everyday life in which mundane events are followed as readily as significant ones as well as becoming emotionally involved with the lives being followed. The implication of complicity with the subject is made explicit, an expression of humane concern that Venkatesh (2009) found equally compelling, and contentious, when reflecting on his book *Gang Leader for a Day* in which he recounts his own experiences of living with, and analyzing, the lives of residents of South-side Chicago. Simon and Burns (like Venkatesh) attempt both honesty and accessibility, wanting to show the reality of what occurs "in the raw," to show the emotion of being involved in the conditions being described, to introduce others to lives being led, while nevertheless accepting their being distinct and removed from these lives. In both Venkatesh's memoir, and Simon and Burns' "novel for television," there is a touching of observer and observed, an awareness that phenomena are unending and hence open, and an acceptance that the meaning generated by social investigation is not exhausted simply because it is not conveyed in a propositional language of science.

Throughout *The Wire*, there is an emphasis not simply on describing what happens but on teasing out relationships between such events. In this, suggests Lemann (2010), Simon and Burns are working in the tradition of the Chicago School of Sociology founded by Robert Park for whom the rendering of an entire urban ecology through detailed and painstaking ethnography worked right to the edges represented something like a holy grail. Park thought investigating the lives of those struggling on the edges of the powerful institutional settings in which they found themselves revealed more than studies of settled, habituated calm. There is something revealing about breakdown, and the experience of breakdown, in that everyday institutional settings become apparent. This is where Simon and Burns found themselves. To get at things you go from underneath and you go with what happens, with what unfolds without trying to abstract from it, or to rationalize it. You just follow it, and then follow what it touches, without confining it to balanced systems of cause and effect. Studies of drugs gangs (e.g., Taylor's, 1990, report in urban Detroit) suggest members experience a weave of concerns associated with the lure of economic reward, feelings of belonging and status, and the promise of adventure. The gang works as an institutional compensation within which alternate hierarchies with similar concerns for survival and flourishing as "legitimate" business surface. The portrayal of unfolding routines, strategies, and institutional relations puts the significance of events and their meanings in perspective, thus adding a quality of generative richness for analysis (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010; Weick, 2007).

As data, and as an explication of institutional work, *The Wire* depicts emotions and behaviors, motivations and reflections of individual and social agents involved in the drugs trade in a single city; rivalry between gangs and other organized systems; as well as the development and decay of organized routines. The narrative, fictional format also depicts an unfolding of events "in flight" as living things, rather than in a strictly emplotted or otherwise academically preinterpreted form, and allowed us to trace responsive patterns of various social systems over prolonged periods (comprising 5 seasons, 60 episodes, and over 80 hours of film material). Although dramatized, many of the actors live and work in Baltimore, a few were involved in the drugs trade themselves. *The Wire* is self-consciously fiction, yet it remains intimate with the everyday, unresolved atmosphere in which those living and working in Baltimore breathe (or cease to). The two main writers David Simon (originally a journalist with the Baltimore Sun) and Ed Burns (originally a Baltimore detective and then a high school teacher, who actually arrested one of the actors [the Deacon] Melvin Williams; Moore, 2010) spent in total over 2 years in the field, with teams of homicide and major crimes detectives, drug crews and addicts, victims of crime, and politicians. The realism demands the scenes and story lines always skew toward what occurs in the moment; people are written in basic human terms, characters are equivocal, and what is colloquially known as "The Game" of drugs trading is depicted in all its serpentine detail. The filming evokes this sense of unfolding involvement, providing an intimate account of the habitual but sometimes feverish pace of evolving real lives as they struggle with, account for, and alter (minutely, or significantly) the institutional systems in which they find themselves; the Game and the players are systems in systems, with neither being prior nor entirely distinct (Alvarez, 2009, p. 22). This account is unlike conventional story structures or plots associated with fictional or canonical narratives (Booker, 2005); very little is explained, overtly contextualized, or wrapped up into consumable packages.

These novel case data also have benefits for the elaboration and illustration of theory. For the purposes of building theory, the realist and diachronic nature of the audio–visual data has advantages vis-à-vis traditional research designs and methods. Typically, with quantitative or case study data, the researcher's job is to represent what has already happened accurately so as to consider how outcomes were triggered by a series of causally connected events. Realist fictional data instead allow the researcher to theorize differently, to examine experience as it unfolds. With realist fiction, the researcher can appreciate the value of what Shotter

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and Tsoukas (2007) call the prospective account of living within situations in which "what happens" and "what is the case" are always emerging, in forms as subtle as glances or as monumental as death. It also allows for juxtaposition of these minutiae with the unfolding of events at large and thus for the entwinement of observed behaviors with the dynamic relational patterns of social systems, whereas in most alternative analyses, we can only ever get at retrospective accounts in which the significance and status of events have already become accepted and the separate identity of individuals and wider institutional systems have already been assumed; the result being a theorization of retrospective sense-making, rather than what has been lived through. To go back to our opening problem, in *The Wire*, we can witness institutional work happening through time and understood temporally (i.e., experientially) rather than just spatially (i.e., this happened there, then).

Methodological Considerations

The investigation of institutional work using Bateson's conceptual schema of ethological patterns urged us to continuously engage with our own conception of "method" to avoid, as much as possible, our thinking in terms of classifications and logical syllogisms. Rather than applying a well-formulated and explicated analytical framework in accordance with well-rehearsed methods, our approach therefore took the spirit of Law's (2004) questioning its seemingly secure status, where "[m]ethod . . . will often be slow and uncertain. A risky and troubling process, it will take time and effort to make realities and hold them steady for a moment against a background of flux and indeterminacy" (p. 10).

In this section, we therefore explain how we went about "working through" the empirical material and reflectively reshaping our "concepts" and "data" in a process that has lasted over 2 years. First, as with any application of theoretical lenses to empirical material, it is important to demonstrate that our illustrations are not merely convenient examples that uncritically support our conceptual developments. Second, analysis of ethological patterns requires the identification of those contact patterns that tend toward intensification (schismogenesis) and therefore have significant implications for the resources of the system. It also requires identification of processes regulating the schismogenetic patterns that otherwise would lead to imbalances of the system. Third, investigation of systemic flexibility requires analysis of situations in which ethological systems (patterns) change to demonstrate how uncommitted alternatives become available and are exploited (Bateson, 1979, p. 230). We take each in turn.

First, the selection of our illustrations is based on an in-depth analysis of the TV material. Our data are 60 episodes of the HBO TV series *The Wire*. We transcribed the verbal expressions and communication across all episodes, resulting in 64 files totaling 1,616 pages of text and 402,426 words. We saved these files as a single corpus and used the Oxford Wordsmith software to combine information about instances of individual experience and reasoning with contextual discursive and historical data. Wordsmith is adept at navigating across a large collection of texts (Gephart, 1997).

Due to the nature of these data, we were able to repeatedly watch the entire material individually, writing notes and commenting on the verbal transcripts that we had compiled in Wordsmith. We then held six half-day meetings over a period of 2 months (as well as two further half day meetings in the writing process) during which we discussed and played back scenes, using both the film footage and the processed transcript. We made extensive use of whiteboards to investigate ways of illustrating the dynamic relationships. In addition to the more formal meetings, we had numerous discussions and exchanges while continually revisiting Bateson's writings in the process. We also consulted the two published ethnographic studies of the drugs trade in the city of Baltimore upon which the series is based (Simon, 1992; Simon & Burns, 1997/2009), as well as a compendium of the characters and story lines depicted in *The Wire* (Alvarez, 2009). This was helpful in systematically providing background and historical information to interpret ethological patterns and gave us a way to interrogate how meaning evolved through interrelated sequences of events. Our approach is therefore best described as analytic abduction, that is, as iterating between empirical data and emerging as well as preexisting theoretical constructs and understanding (Orton, 1997).

Second, through our grounding in data and discussion, we identify predominating systems and interactive patterns. Because ethos is not a fixed class with particular properties, but denotes patterns of contact, there are almost infinite amounts of possible permutations in the ways in which individual and group systems behave and respond to each other. Not only can boasting, for instance, be expressed in a multitude of behaviors, each social group can also have nuanced patterns of responses to such behaviors. Instead of attempting to confine this range of possibility to a static and (inherently) incomplete list, Bateson (1972, p. 95, 1980, p. 160) follows the structural technique introduced by Levi-Strauss of identifying oppositional extremes depicting emotional and behavioral *dimensions.*[4] These range for instance *from* boasting *to* demureness so that each dimension hosts a possibly infinitive amount of actual behavioral expressions within extremes. Bateson (1979, p. 193) calls this "a typology of process." Rather than saying that one individual or group is boastful, while another demurs, bipolar dimensions suggest they are capable of displaying motifs along a continuum of boasting–demureness, in relation to different contacts, and more or less consciously. Thus, our first analysis identifies persistent patterns of contact as dimensions of dominance–submission and presence–absence, as well as an emergent ethological register of legal–illegal.

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In identifying these standardized bipolarities, we cannot be exhaustive. We therefore required a means of identifying which patterns were most *pressing and persistent* in the unfolding relational patterns between individuals and groups in the system that makes up the drugs trade in *The Wire*. For this, we investigated their relative energy commitment and the ability of the system to regulate the intensification of these commitments (effectiveness of regulative processes). For instance, behavioral displays along the dimension of presence–absence have huge implications for the drug gangs' energy commitments, as they have to devote (and lose) men, time, and effort to conquer and defend their territory of street corners against rival gangs and police interventions (these processes and their implications for energy commitment are displayed in the schismographs in Figures 2-5 in the following sections).

We also observed other behavioral displays, such as a feminine–masculine dimension in similar frequency, but found that these patterns did not lead to schismogenetic resource depletion in the gangs' relations. Interestingly, however, we found the feminine–masculine behaviors to have such implications in other cases in and around *The Wire*, for instance in the events surrounding the election of a new mayor (Tommy Carcetti), in the interactive patterns of a gay female police officer (Kima Greggs), or more broadly outside *The Wire* in most developed societies where individuals and groups spend increasing amounts of energies reacting to displays of beauty, strength, style, and so on. Additional dimensions which we identified and discussed, but not explicitly included, involve loyalty–deceit in relation to the development of personal relationships between members of the police and gang members in the wake of longitudinal investigations or the role of police informants and cases of corruption and bribery. Another dimension is aggression–passivity which is demonstrated in behaviors within and between groups, as well as wider systemic forces, as for example, within expected behaviors of the court system. Although behavioral displays along these patterns were clearly identifiable, over the period of our analysis they had only limited implications for the systems' energies. In the case of aggression–passivity, this was due to effective regulative processes, for instance in the form of family members intervening and pleading with the gang leaders to spare misbehaving gang members and thereby interrupting otherwise escalating, schismogenetic intragang conflicts and, at least for a while, the number of casualties.

Third, we investigate the gang's relational flexibility. Flexibility denotes the ability for changes in behavioral patterns of interaction. Following our first step of identifying processes, which require the commitment of large and increasing amounts of energy, we traced changes in these patterns through changes in regulative processes. For instance, following the institution of a cooperative project between various drug gangs, presence–absence behaviors no longer bound large amounts of energy, as territorial decisions were made at the conference table and not fought out on street corners (see Figures 2-5 for an illustration of these changes). Our analysis pursues a number of ethological changes in the behaviors of the drug organizations in the wake of the creation of this drugs trading cooperative (the Co-op) that begins with the imprisonment of a gang leader and the possibilities for adaptation ensuing through the relaxation of established relational patterns of "warfare." Emerging from this analysis, and against the background of the entire chronology of events depicted (Langley, 1999, p. 695), we were able to identify evolving patterns around meaningful events we could then "bracket" from these data as a "series of more discrete but connected blocks" (Langley, 1999, p. 703). This temporal bracketing strategy allows us to deconstruct and analyze the temporal and nonlinear dynamics that led to wider systemic changes. Aiding the exemplification of our work and as a guidance for readers not familiar with *The Wire*, we have appended a picture illustrating the systemic organization of the "West Side Gang" and its key relational contacts (Figure 1).

Analysis of "Ethos" in *The Wire*

Our analysis begins by focusing on the two most pressing and persistent behavioral patterns discernable in the West Side Gang's ethological relations: dominance–submission and presence–absence. Behaviors along those dimensions are frequently displayed and have intensifying, schismogenetic tendencies. In the gang-controlled areas, the absence of functioning family structures following unemployment and drug addiction, and the weakness of resource starved educational and social structures, render drug gangs a key authority and role model. In their behavioral dimensions, displays of dominance–submission have become deeply ingrained into everyday interactive patterns, so that even the youngest gang members are versed in their nuanced display and reaction. Gang members move through a series of ranked positions, starting off as *look outs* in low-rise housing developments, then might be promoted to *hoppers* running supply or dealing with customers, perhaps in high-rise tower blocks. Trusted hoppers move through face-to-face trade to more specialized roles, as *muscle*, entrusted with more violent aspects of the drug trade, working further upstream in supply chain and intelligence gathering. Throughout such initiation and development processes, gang members become further sensitized to varieties of dominance–submission behaviors whereby instructions are issued and enforced, product gets moved, and money is earned and spent or invested.

One visceral example is when the gang leader, Stringer Bell, orders Bodie and Poot (two juvenile hoppers) to kill

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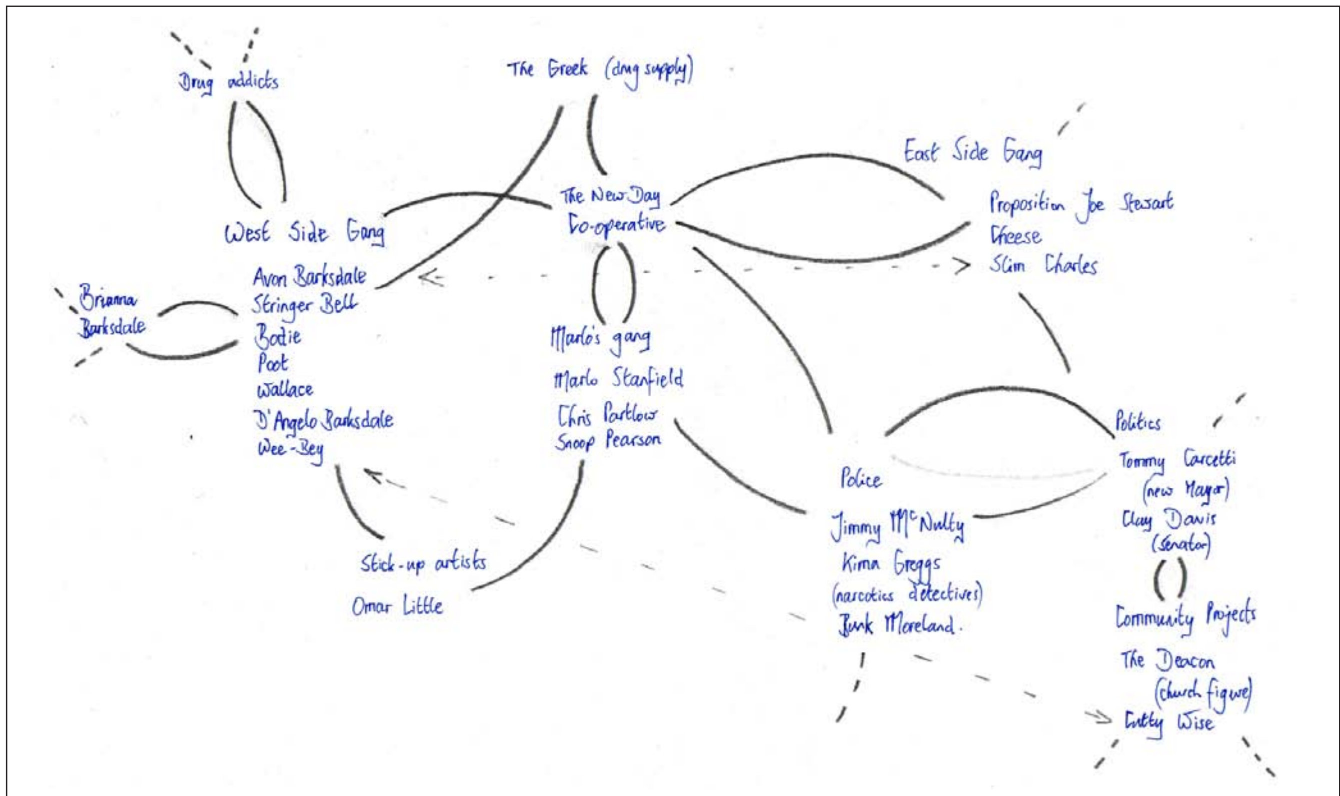

Figure 1. Things-in-relation in *The Wire*

their erstwhile colleague and friend Wallace with whom they had grown up and who was suspected of disloyalty (s1,e12).[5] The selection of Bodie and Poot for this task can be understood as initiation (and a display of "strength") as well as prompting submission to orders even if it involves the murder of a friend, personal humiliation, or imprisonment. Poot and Bodie have to muster the strength to murder Wallace, signaling their readiness to move into and through gang ranks, suggesting that integral to dominance–submission behaviors come expressions of strength or weakness, mental and physical. The dominance–submission pattern is also played out habitually, unthinkingly, when, for example, Avon Barksdale, the other West Side Gang leader, demands his subordinates to be "strong" when it comes to taking "years" in prison for gang crimes and to resist offers to mitigate sentences by collaborating and providing evidence to police. It also forms part of the emotion, for instance when Bell throws fake punches at subordinates (s2,e9,m9) and, in other scenes, when the arrival of higher ranked gang members for on-the-spot checks of the running of street-level drug sales leads to displays of nervous behavior among hoppers. Gang leaders Barksdale and Bell often arrive in large MPVs, rap music blasting from the car stereos and disembark with exaggeratedly slow, confident movements, while the hoppers Bodie and Poot step from foot to foot, responding demurely to questions and comments. The dominant gestures of the gang leaders are exacerbated by corporeal signals such as elaborate muscles and tattoos, which stand in stark contrast to the famished physiques of drug fiends and the young hoppers. Recognizing and adequately responding to displays of dominance–submission are basic aspects of survival in the gang. Lest these tropes become clichés though, in later series, we find a rival gang centered around the figure of Marlo Stanfield, a group of physically average characters exhibiting dominance through psychology and weaponry rather than raw muscle. Moreover, one of the group, Snoop, fatalistically submits to her own death, acknowledging The Game, just as readily as she did when dispassionately, almost indifferently, meeting out killings to many others. Dominance–submission finds individuals, groups, and even wider systems, like the "police" or courts, within whose institutional purview the individuals and groups work, moving across patterns of behavior, dominant in one setting and period, while weak in others.

The schismogenetic pattern of this dimension *within* the West Side Gang is typically complementary, as displays of *dominant* behaviors find *submission* from other gang members and vice versa. This complementary pattern is most visible in the relational pattern that unfolds between Bell and his co-leader Barksdale, and subordinated gang members; a pattern that is repeated on lower levels of gang hierarchy. Interestingly, the complementarity of dominance–submission

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patterns within the gang turns to a symmetrical pattern in the case of intergang contacts, where such displays are responded to with displays of the same behavior, peer levels matching up toward one another with increasingly intense displays of reciprocating actions. These patterns of dominance–submission have the tendency to intensify with gang leaders harassing, bullying, threatening, or physically harming lower ranked gang members and violent eruptions between rivaling gang members as a result of the symmetrical buildup of tension.

However, there are also counteracting processes regulating this intensification, preventing the breakup of the group or the depletion of too many "human resources." Such regulators include Barksdale's family, for instance his sister Brianna, who continually invokes the importance of family when trying to protect her son, Barksdale's cousin "D'Angelo," who Barksdale feels is not submissive enough, but also acknowledges as being "family." Other regulators include the depletion of the gang's energy associated with police surveillance and raids and court cases, limiting supply of tools to effect such behaviors and providing alternate institutional settings in which the submissive become assertive (arrested hoppers no longer demur to authority) and the dominant powerless (leaders are handcuffed, harassed).

A second ethological dimension that commits large amounts of the gangs' energies is the display of presence–absence behavior. Varying expressions of behaviors and emotions relating to presence–absence are integral to the West Side Gang's ethos. Standing on corners (the street intersections forming the market place for buying and selling drugs) and standing with confident posture and a marked visibility defines a gang's identity. This presence focuses on the gang and not the individual so as to demand conformity of approach. Presence is demanded; its lack elicits incursion from other gangs, which in turn demands yet more presence. Barksdale's responses to the appearance of the upcoming gang leader Marlo Stanfield (s3,e2) is an example of this. While intragang displays are complementary, intergang presence–absence displays are symmetrically patterned with a scaling up of presence, with the incumbent Barksdale seeking increasingly resource-depleting confrontation with more mobile new entrants. On occasion, this symmetrical scaling up extends beyond the gangs; for example, through media pressure following the death in crossfire of uninvolved citizens (s2,e9,m8), the police are forced to scale up operations through "street rips" to physically break up and arrest the gangs. This confrontational capacity to "stand tall" and be seen to be strong is played out in yet wider system discourse concerning the politicians' declared "war on drugs," a phrase whose stark emptiness marbles *The Wire* in its entirety, used variously as it is as a valediction of federal and city social and criminal policy, as a justification of police immunity from proper procedure, and for the simplification of the internal dynamics of gangs into a very clear dynamic of being in a fight.

Another aspect of presence–absence concerns the importance of locale. For some characters, West-side Baltimore is indistinct from the entire world. In the wake of "white flight" and the ensuing absence of tax dollars and industry, large urban areas have become enclaves for gang members who, generationally, have grown up within tight, inner-city neighborhoods, rarely if ever leaving the boundaries of their gang's territory (for instance, when driving on his first out-of-town errand, Bodie notices with surprise "Philly radio is different?" that his local, Baltimore radio station is not available elsewhere [s2,e1,m8]).

The intensifying pattern of presence–absence displays is frequently regulated. For example, in relation to wider police systems, gangs use small businesses as "fronts" to launder money and where informal talks occur under the neutral system of "parley" allowing contact without repercussion, whether between gangs or gangs and the authority. Presence is also regulated by the state-sanctioned use of wiretaps to gather evidence and intelligence patiently, without presence or violence, but which feeds off the presence of gangs should they become too visible. Within the West Side Gang, there is regulation of presence–absence when Barksdale's position of strength diminishes in the immediate wake of his imprisonment and hoppers are no longer willing to fight for ("stand tall") street corners in the same way. This is hastened by the interruption of drug supply and the deterioration of the quality of drugs, prompting Bell, now de facto leader, to consider how presence carries costs in income and bodies that might be avoided with carefully managed invisibility, allowing others to conduct visible trade while his gang concentrate on more valuable upstream activity and market protection and development.

The Transformation of "Ethos" and the Economy of "Flexibility"

In the second part of our analysis, we focus on instances in which the dynamic equilibrium of the gang's "ethos" is transformed. The implications of altered ethological patterns for the availability of alternative courses of actions, which we earlier defined as "flexibility," form the conceptual tool to investigate such shifts in dynamics, and we illustrate such analysis by focusing on one "situation" in *The Wire*, relating to the establishment of a Co-op between hitherto rivaling gangs. The 'schismographs' in Figures 2-5 map these transformations.

Initially, the West Side gang's ethos is characterized by an energy-depleting conflict over the occupation of corners, a fight for presence that commits energy (Figure 2). There is regulated dominance–submission and latent

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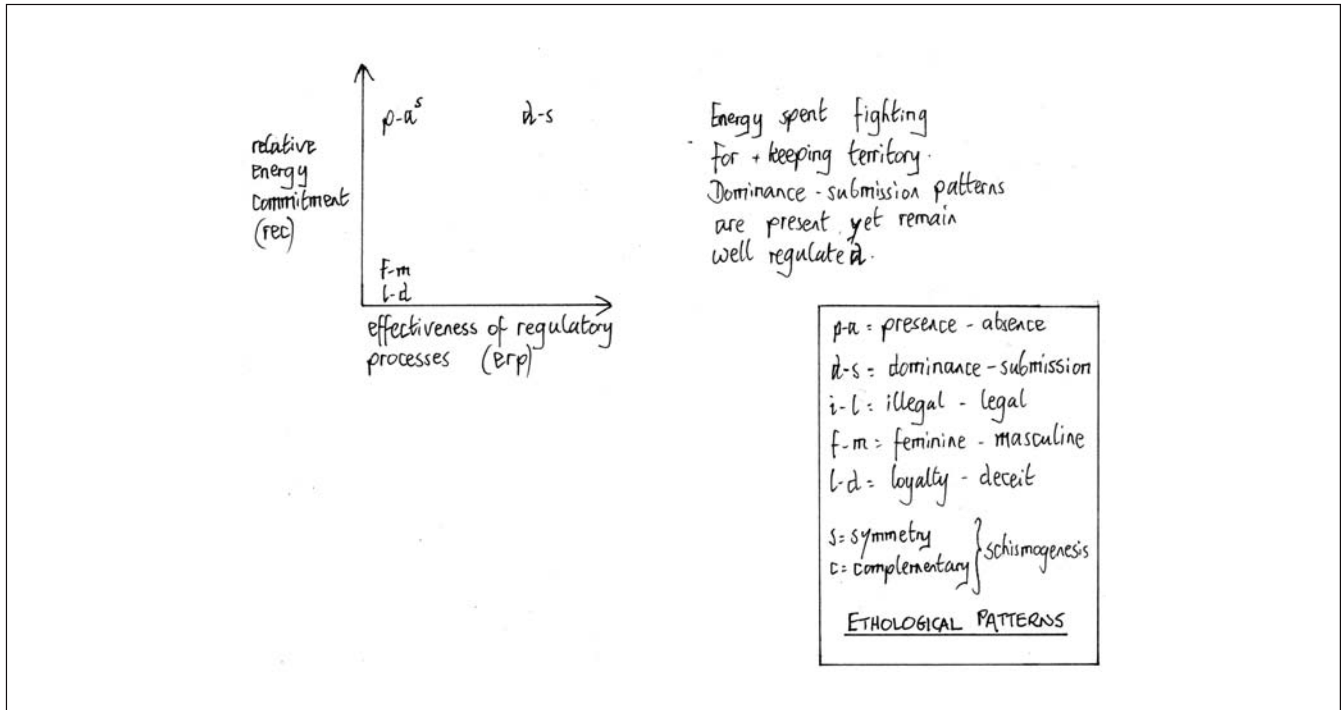

Figure 2. The ethos of the West Side gang

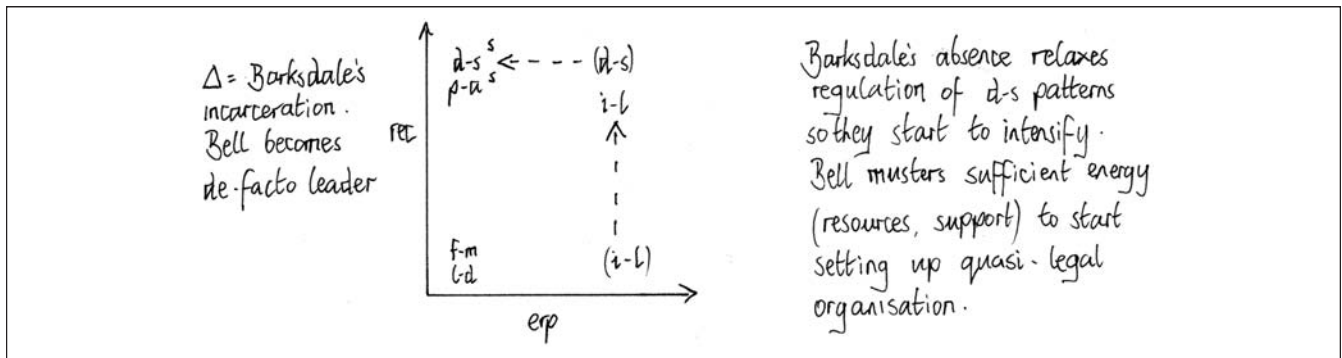

Figure 3. Ethos after Barksdale's incarceration

manifestations of feminine–masculine and loyalty–deceit patterns.

Following the incarceration of Avon Barksdale (Figure 3), Bell, Bell takes on de facto leadership of the gang and, faced with diminishing supply of drugs or "product," cedes control of prime market territory to Prop Joe's East Side Gang in exchange for access to Joe's more secure supply chain run by "The Greek" through contacts at Baltimore's Docks. Bell has become used to handling money and to the benefits of a legal facade and tries to secure ways of using the resources available to him as a leader free from official scrutiny, typically through relationships with business and city officials. He begins to consider the nature of collaboration with Prop Joe, bringing together Joe's superior drugs sourcing channels with the superior markets (street corners) still held by Bell's gang. This relationship eventually becomes formalized as a wider grouping involving all the gangs of the city through the establishment of "The New Day Co-operative" (s3,e5,m27), a trading cartel aiming at shared drugs supplies, information, and contacts, and that reduces costly intergang violence.

The emergence of the cooperative further transforms relational patterns between previous rivals as well as between gangs and law enforcement agencies. In previous sections we

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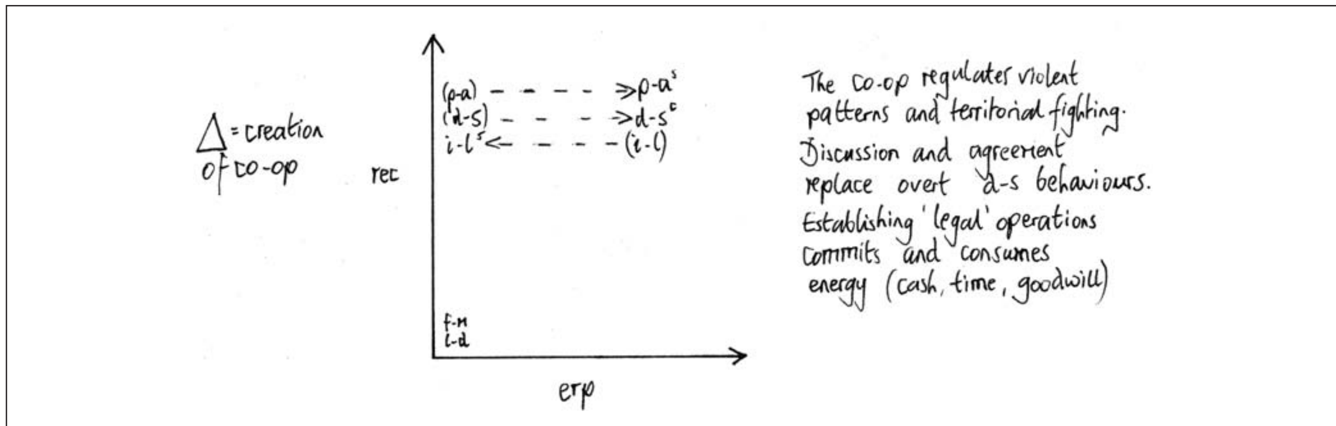

Figure 4. Ethos during emergence of The New Day Co-op

characterized intergang relationships primarily via relational patterns along dimensions of (symmetrical) dominance–submission and (complementary) presence–absence. The establishment of the Co-op transforms and regulates these patterns (Figure 4). It transforms the presence–absence patterns, as street corner presence is no longer fought over. It also regulates and prevents the escalation of violence as symmetrically schismogenetic patterns of dominance–submission (as well as related patterns of aggression–passivity and loyalty–disloyalty, etc.) now find de-escalation through discussion and collective decision making. For example, (s3,e5,m27):

Bell: Remember, man, talk this shit up when you hit them bricks. Best way to get more involved is to tell people about the benefits of this here thing [The Co-op]. No beefing, no drama, just business.
Joe: Anybody got problems with anybody else here, we bring it to the group.
Bell: We ain't gotta take it to the streets.

This de-escalation of hitherto intensifying, regenerative patterns frees up gang members' flexibility to establish new behavioral patterns. Pre Co-op gang activity was focused on the defense of territory, pursuing vendettas, laundering cash, and evading executive sanction (all part of the indicated schismogenetic dimensions).

The relaxation of vicious patterns means gang members are no longer completely absorbed with "keeping up" with these responsive processes. They gain flexibility to experiment with new ethological registers, adapting the ways they interact. For instance, in contrast to Barksdale, Bell's actions and emotional expressions increasingly concern money-making and improving business, an alternative which was impossible under the duress of intensifying relations within the gang, and with rivaling gangs and the police under Barksdale's leadership. Expressions of this flexibility under the aegis of the Co-op abound, where, for example, Bell reprimands Bodie (now promoted to running a crew) for allowing the escalation of a gang feud into a street shooting involving the death of a young girl (s2,e9,m8). In another instance, (s3,e1,m16), Bell outlines new possibilities for behavior to his gang:

> "We had six of the Towers on the Terrace, right? All running 24/7. But three of those we gave to Prop Joe to upgrade the package that we was putting out. Now, how much you think we lost in the deal? All right, the answer is, we made more. Half the real estate, twice the product. And our profit went up eight or nine per cent. Territory ain't shit. Especially when you consider it's the fight for the territory that be bringing the bodies, and the bodies that bring the police."

The Co-op regulates schismogenetic relationships, generating sufficient flexibility to extend the gang's ethos with a new vector of behavioral displays: legal–illegal. In addition to holding street corners, being fierce and displaying strength and dominance which had previously characterized the gang's stable ethos, displays of the nascent legal–illegal dimension range from "gangster" to calculating "business(man)"; a distinction that was hitherto unintelligible to gang members or to authorities investigating the gang. Behaviors along this dimension begin to "consume" increasing amounts of the gang's energy, for instance when Bell begins to invest large sums of money into quasi-legal property outfits and spends much time and effort in driving out gangster-style methods that compromise "legal" business. Moreover, in addition to the legal–illegal register and the exploitation of benefits of specialization across gangs (one secures supply, another markets, another protects the entire city from foreign gangs),

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there are also changes within wider systems. For instance, when police officer McNulty encounters Bell running a "legal" copy shop (s2,e4,m45), his confusion as to Bell's status as "criminal" increases, asking himself on finding a copy of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* when searching Bell's flat "just who were we chasing here?" Previously, gangster–police encounters were restricted to street corners, investigation rooms, prisons, and court rooms. The addition of the ethological dimension of legal–illegal behaviors raises for the first time for the gangsters the possibility of hitherto unintelligible surface behaviors, for example, conducting formal business meeting according to Robert's Rules (s2,e5, m49) or wearing suits and meeting property developers (s2,e1,m39). Bell works across worlds, no longer confined to one neighborhood, he ceases to be a fixed member of a class, his emerging sense of logical association (he has money, commercial developers have money; he is a commercial developer) finds others like McNulty having to break from their own conventional bipolarities to accommodate his entrepreneurial wandering, sometimes condescendingly, sometimes fearfully, often unsure and unaware of anything beyond the fact he has money. The Co-op's institutionalization of commercial vectors is both regulative and schismogenetic, it cannot be pinned down "as" something.

Discussion

Following analysis of ethological patterns and changes in flexibility in the West Side Gang, we can begin to discuss the implications of this research for the study of institutional work and, in particular, for our understanding of actors and institutions, the dynamics of interorganizational patterns of action, as well as possible methodological approach toward understanding the dynamics of institutional ethos experienced within organizational life.

The work of individual and collective actors in our analysis of *The Wire* finds expression through the consideration of systemic flexibility, which as a parameter indicates the range and degree of possible adaptation in relational patterns. Take, as an example, Bell's pursuing of a "conscious project of institutional change" (Kisfalvi & Maguire, 2010; Maguire et al., 2004) into "legitimate" business. He uses available resources to create the Co-op and to transform the existing institution of the West Side Gang. Bell's concern for survival and flourishing finds him first considering how to trade better and second insinuating his organization into wider, commercial and political systems in such a way as to conceal and then dissolve illegality. Bell's is not a unique concern. For example, Venkatesh and Levitt's (2000) ethnographic analysis of the dynamics within Chicago's drug gangs during the 1980s found something similar. Taking one gang in particular, the Black Kings, Venkatesh and Levitt describe how in an institutional setting of educational disenfranchisement and unskilled, temporary work opportunities, coupled with a winnowing of welfare supports, the gang's organizational ethos shifted from "a beacon around which intimate life was organized" (2000, p. 434) toward a commercial concern in which the entrepreneurial activities of members became subject to conscious managerial manipulation. Similarly, Bell's activities indicate the possibilities for transforming the gang's "profession" by taking on new organizational forms and practices, and requiring new sets of expertise (Anand, Gardner, & Morris, 2007; Dezalay & Garth, 1996; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). In accordance with existing research suggesting the role of professionals as change agents (e.g., Suddaby & Viale, 2011), Bell's work expands possibility by releasing energy from warring and evoking a kind of entrepreneurial wanderlust, that subsequently become tangled in energy-sapping struggles of legitimacy. Yet it is not Bell as an isolate system that "works," not Bell as a singular agent. We suggest that his installment of new gang members in crucial positions (e.g., Bodie and Poot's rise to "muscle") and the changes in the gang's relational registers were only possible because systemic energy was available in the first place: energy that was hitherto committed in reactive patterns (presence–absence; dominance–submission) within the gang and with other organizations (rival gangs, police, etc.). Organizational systems can therefore attend only to some elements of their symbolic environment and not to others (Suddaby, 2010) because of available energy, and agency is understood relationally as an association of flexibility and energy expressed in the particularity that is labeled Bell, yet whose life is individuated in "the game" in all its multiple, unpredictable possibility.

In Bateson's categorical scheme, the individual system is not a given thing (an "it") standing within, and in partial opposition to, forces of institutional normalization. Rather, the individual is sustained as a system within other systems. The institutional work of Bell (and also of Prop Joe and Marlo Stanfield) shows ingenuity and skill not only in discovering (and sometimes creating) but also in exploiting flexibility in the system. These individuals, though, are not particularly "heroic" or even a "causal" originators of change (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Lawrence et al., 2009; Suddaby & Viale, 2011) but act through the creative and skilful exploitation of surplus energies. These are occurrences of system flexibility (the individual as a system, the gang as a wider system), which themselves occur within yet wider dynamic (systemic) institutional conditions (the legal system split between punishment and reform, the city system bedeviled with political agendas and spending restraint). In Bell's case, reflective processes and the potential to envisage alternative versions of institutional settings are linked to his wandering between both gang and commercial institutional "fields" that in our analysis of bipolarities of behavior equate to absence; he becomes marginal in both fields. Studies of the work of

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institutional innovators have frequently pointed toward the importance of the bridging of diverse institutional fields (e.g., Hargrave & Van De Ven, 2006, Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Kostova, Roth, & Dacin, 2008). However, it has remained less clear how such peripheral work functions in practice and how it realizes change or stability (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010, p. 190). Our analysis offers a number of new insights into these questions. In particular, "boundary" no longer indicates an enclosure of a fixed and stable field that distinguishes people and groups (Bowker & Star, 1999; Carlile, 2002) but, rather, relational patterns. To understand institutional work, we analyze movement that makes differences (they resonate: energy is transferred, soaked up, released). Here, fields become temporarily balanced ethological systems. This changes the character of movement made possible within and between such ethological systems. For instance, Bodie's surprise about the geographical boundaries of the "Philly" radio station (s2,e1,m8) indicates his own inability to transgress the boundaries of gang life and geography. He is locked in relational patterns with gangs surrounding "his" territory and is aware of their likely violent (schismogenetic) reactions to trespassers. He, like the drug fiends he supplies, is unable to transgress the institutional configurations into which he is thrown because relational patterns with the wider systems are equally locked into inflexible reactive cycles of insecurity, mistrust, pride, unrealistic expectations, and the inability to envisage "normal" civic life, which render alterations to his social and geographical conditions impossible.

In contrast to Bodie, Bell has managed to learn new relational registers. His transgressing of the spatial and ethological boundaries of the gang carries echoes of Park's (1928, p. 886) argument that the processual emergence of what we condense around the institutional field of "civilization" emerges less from accomplished, stable institutions than from continual contact and communication, and it is at its most visible in the collisions brought about by migratory or commercial wandering, where institutional forms give way to freer associations. Wandering prompts breakdown in custom and tradition that Park (1928, p. 888) suggests releases individuals as being free for adventure but with little control. The released individual is able to look upon their original world with a degree of disinterest, so gaining perspective; in Georges Simmel's (1908/1971, p. 144) words, she or he becomes a stranger, staying, but not settled, askance from localized pieties, and thereby delegitimated, for instance when Bell orders a shooting on Sunday, which is traditionally sacrosanct, the reaction of his own gang is bemusement, hostility even (s3,e9). Bell's defiling of the Sunday truce is therefore not a "contradiction" that creates pressures for institutional change (e.g., Seo & Creed, 2002; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) but the enactment of one extreme permutation of already existing relational patterns enabled through the release of energy from wandering. More generally, contradictions are not necessarily problematic or in need of resolving but are, like allegories or irony in linguistic systems, commonplace and everyday dimensions of organizational life. This range of possibility is heeded in our analysis through the use of bipolar dimensions that house varieties of expressions of ethological behavior that, in extremis, can constitute relationships of direct opposites (e.g., dominance vs. submission).

This points to a further aspect when considering the possibilities for individuals to work within surroundings that present conflicting situations. Avon expends much energy because he is incapable of coping with the double bind of legality and illegality of gang activities as well as with the contradiction of gang competition and collaboration in the Co-op. For him, the new behavior dimensions invoked in the Co-op make little sense, and he is unable to embrace the dimension as a whole without getting fixed on a particular point on the continuum (e.g., either being a gangster *or* a businessman, a member of his gang *or* of the Co-op). Bell, on the other hand, is a quick learner in the skill of holding apparently different and sometimes conflicting positions at any one point in time so that, for a while, he can collaborate with other gangs and with quasi-legal building contractors while continuing to run a competitive and illegal drugs business. What rises as possibility for Bell is not a decision of being legal or illegal, but the dimension illegal–legal, an awareness of possibility, not the occupation of a position. A crucial skill for institutional agents is therefore the ability to creatively absorb and respond to apparently paradoxical situations as well as material and cultural conditions without necessarily striving for their resolution (Bateson, 1972, p. 271; Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 360).

One further implication depicted with striking consequence in *The Wire* is that despite the obvious skill and determination in working within the world, the scope for the intended, planned outcomes is very limited. The individual system is nested in wider systems with an inherent openness that belies any idea of understanding institutional work as an agent first deciding upon a situation and then acting. *The Wire* shows an entanglement of systems, the analysis of which requires, as Law (2004, p. 10) observes, the erosion of the " . . . idea that by taking in the distance at a glance we can get an overview of a single reality." We find individual systems working across established and emerging bipolarities of behaviors manifest in schismogenic or regulative cycles where outcomes remain inherently open. The individual belongs in wider systems, unable to disassociate from or control the unfolding patterns of belonging. To show this, we only need to follow the further development of the Co-op and its key protagonists. Submission to the open, collaborative organization of the Co-op finds Baltimore's gangs gaining and yet relinquishing flexibility. They gain the flexibility to pursue alternative actions by reducing costs of enterprise (capping

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resource-hungry violence, bulk buying product, setting up legal footholds, etc.). But with the increasing focus on harmony, they also increasingly deprive themselves of the flexibility to exercise violence, partly because they no longer maintain their private armies of "muscle" and partly because of new decision structures entailing debates and standards that place bureaucratic burdens upon the execution of violence, as such acts now require sanctioning ("quorum") by the Co-op.

The unpredictability of outcomes is also visible in the ways in which the relaxation of hitherto aggressively violent response patterns effects interactions with wider parts of the system. For instance, in the absence of visible drug-related violence, the police diminish their activities (fewer patrols, fewer over-hours, etc.) and thus also gain flexibility for adaptation. Having to spend fewer resources to prevent or pursue acts of gang violence, they find time to set up wiretapping equipment or investigate financial and personal gang structures. Eventually, the police survey Co-op activity just as readily as they did the corners, though within a different ethology of patient office work. The flexibility released by the Co-op is also attenuated by its inability to defend erstwhile territories by force, leaving space for the upcoming gangster Marlo Stanfield. Stanfield is originally co-opted to specialize as the Co-op's muscle, defending the Co-op's interests in Baltimore against encroaching New York gangs (s4,e8,m18). Initially a reluctant member, Marlo finds the Co-op offering him access to valuable information about drug supplies, financial laundering tricks, and the machinations of police and legal systems. Learning how to work within multiple institutional settings, he finds himself with both institutional wisdom and a semiautonomous gang (in outsourcing the supply of violence, the Co-op fails to regulate their supplier; Figure 5).

Flexibility shifts to Marlo's own system, as he turns against senior members and imposes a new, almost irresistible hierarchical order. The Co-op's flexibility vanishes entirely as Marlo sets in train traditional bipolarities once more. Dominance–submission (now no longer symmetrical but complementary, as Marlos' dominance results in others' increased submission; see Figure 4) comes from his monopolization of available violence and product supply. He enforces harsh commercial and symbolic terms on once independent gangs. Presence–absence comes in his retaking of corners (now equally complementary as established gangs are unable to ward him off). He "stands tall," which in turn excites in him an almost paranoid urge to be recognized on the streets as who he wants to be: the man with courage. It is this urge that comes to deplete his own flexibility. An example of this depletion is his interactive pattern with the solitary, wandering figure of Omar Little, a "stickup artist" who makes a living from raiding gangs' drug stashes. Under the aegis of Avon and the established patterns of intergang relations, Omar's loot remained small because gangs, steeped in intense presence–absence and dominance–submission patterns with competitors and police, expended much effort in protecting and frequently changing drug storage locations. Here, Omar remained a marginal nuisance, and the demands of ongoing schismogenetic interactions meant that gangs could not devote much energy on reining him in. The subsequent regulatory influence of the Co-op and the rise of Marlo in the game brought the consolidation of drugs supply processes and less need to spend energy on protection and disguise of drugs storehouses, affording Omar larger booties on his raids. Moreover, with Marlo's rise comes a marked departure from the "old" competitive game. While Avon responded violently to signs of dominance, Marlo's domineering excels when he senses submission and weakness in others. His persecutory dominance leaves no room for a furtive stranger like Omar who finds his weaknesses exposed and exploited when his friend and advisor, near-blind "Butchie," is tortured and killed by Marlo's crew. Marlo spends immense amounts of energy satisfying his obsession with recognition and his excessive suspicion of others, increasingly restricting any possibility of cooperation with his increasingly alienated surroundings. This delimits the flexibility (the available options) for the establishment of a legal facade and, eventually, for the established players to move, leading to the eventual murder or imprisonment of the "old" guard, Barksdale, Bell, and Prop Joe, and to Marlo's own marginalization (as the game continues with different "players").

The continued depiction of organizational and individual demise in *The Wire* is therefore an illustration of Willmott's (2011) concern with the supposed stability and unity of the phenomena under investigation, yet it also shows that institutional work is as much a matter of skill and ingenuity as it is prone to systemic affordances and systemic reactions exceeding any possibility for control of the individual "parts" (e.g., Lawrence et al., 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). For Bateson, as well as for the analysis of institutional ethos and flexibility, "institutions" or "agents" are not the naturally given, stable, and enduring "units of analysis." Individual and collective agents like Bell, Marlo Stanfield, or Barksdale; the West Side Gang; or the Co-op are system configurations whose cohesiveness is tied to the endurance of equilibrium in their "internal" and "external" relational patterns. The disintegration of the West Side Gang is set in cycle when the intensifying and regulative processes of the gang's leadership come out of balance. Barksdale's imprisonment opens the door for Bell's initiation of adaptations in the gang's ethological pattern. De-emphasizing violence and aggression emasculates the gang and renders it unable to respond with the former vigor to the actions of Marlo Stanfield, the new market entrant whose vicious dynamic finds other systems wanting. Similarly, the Co-op's ephemeral "existence" emerges out of and is tied to the temporary suspension of violent and competitive interaction patterns between gangs, which creates a fragile space for flexible adaptation, for

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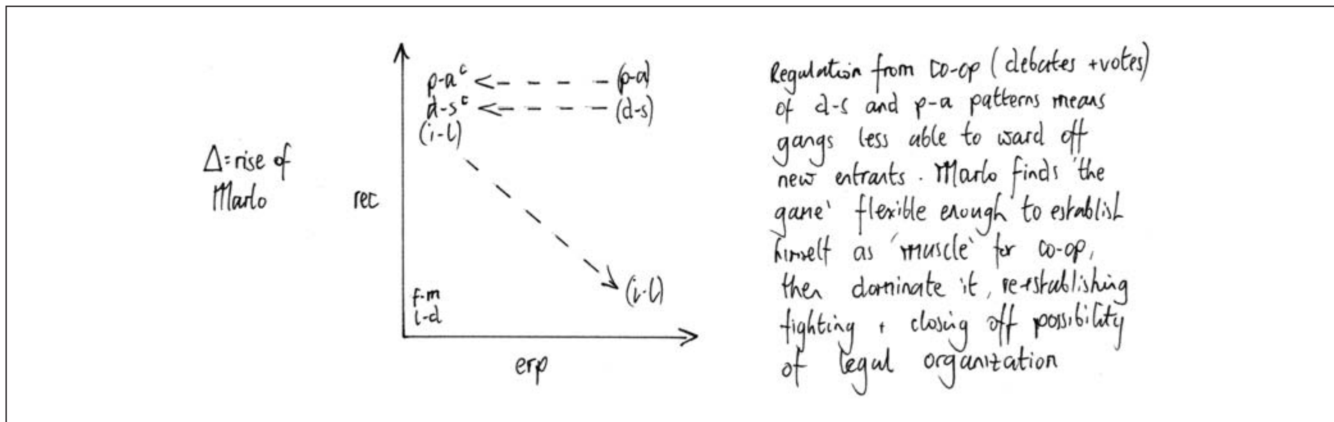

Figure 5. Ethos after rise of Marlo

collective adventure. The vanishing of this space incurs the vanishing of the Co-op. The inherent fragility of the supposed "it-ness" concerns individual as well as group systems. Just like the West Side Gang or the Co-op, "individuals" wither when they are no longer in a balanced state when interacting with wider institutional and environmental systems. The demise of almost all senior figures in the Co-op is understood as a depletion of energy and the possibility of doing things differently; caught in intensifying interactive patterns, they no longer have the flexibility to invoke adaptations so as to relax and deintensify these patterns to sustain their position or simply to survive. In this, the demise of the gang leaders shows close affinity with the interactive patterns of the drug fiends they supply. Both are trapped in intensifying relations with others and otherness (e.g., substances), unable to change or get out of their schismogenetically unfolding trajectories until their energies are exhausted. This emphasis on movement as the base character of phenomena under investigation in institutional research reverberates with more recent and largely theoretical discussions about the nature of organizational change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). With Bateson's conceptual schema, we have shown how such theoretical speculation can be analyzed. Our conceptualization of institutions and institutional work as inherently volatile explains why concepts such as routines or fields harbor both processes that lead to "change" as well as "stability." Both possibilities for adaptation and equilibrium emerge out of the interplay of dynamic patterns, out of the concurrence of schismogenetic and regulatively governing processes that are characteristic of the world of living things. We therefore suggest that living systems, such as agents and organizations, are only seemingly stable. Investigation of their underlying dynamics suggest processes whose schismogenetic tendencies may temporarily be held in equilibrium through counteracting, governing processes which de-escalate the otherwise dispersing bias of intensifying patterns. Moreover, if flexibility is not exercised, it tends to get absorbed by other parts of the system, as in the case of Marlo's taking over of the alternatives of violent intervention. Finally, while systems, whether organizational or agental, have the possibility to generate flexibility, any control over the actual alternatives generated are limited; the institutional world is always opening up in possibility.

Conclusions

In this article, we have drawn on Bateson's identification of two epistemological errors relating to experienced problems when attempting to isolate and stipulate what "is" the case with any degree of certainty. Using material from *The Wire*, we have shown that "underneath" seemingly stable identifications of "its" lies a constant restiveness; a multitude of interacting and sometimes mutually compensating, circular processes; precarious equilibria in which tendencies for dispersion and adaptation are temporarily counteracted. Drawing on the work of Bateson, we have developed this conceptualization of *processes* by analyzing the transformation of patterns characterized in terms of economies of flexibility and investigated through a method of tracing bipolar behavioral dimensions. Our interest has been in how systems (e.g., individual traders, organizations, etc.) and processes (both accelerating [e.g., competition, fighting] and regulative [e.g., laws, cooperations, and resource limitations]) create or restrict flexibility and therefore the availability of alternative courses of action.

We reach a number of methodological and normative conclusions for the study of institutional work and for the use of data in investigating institutional phenomena. First, congruent with the program of institutional work (e.g., Lawrence et al., 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), we highlight that the skill and reflexivity of individuals are

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paramount in mobilizing and enlisting support from their environment. The investigation of flexibility and energy affords an understanding of institutions constituted in actions (e.g., Lawrence et al., 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). We show through the example of the work of drug organizations how day-to-day contact patterns can be conceptualized as an ethos, an array of possible dimensionally conceived behaviors that cannot be distilled into explicit rules or espoused templates for action. Flexibility for adaptation can be understood *through* interactive patterns over time and not through juxtaposed categories of "individual" and "institution" that house particular characteristics and form a locus of action. Our analysis finds neither the human agent nor the social structure "thing-like" in nature. Life displayed in *The Wire* is testimony to this lack of persistent distinction in identity. Human characters vie with the character of the city itself; the electronic wiretaps meld, frustrate, or enhance conversation; the drugs belittle, be-knight, and destroy sentient life. There is a loosening of agency. Yet also of structure, as organizations and even norms are concealed and revealed, intensify, and fall back. Thus, we have addressed the individual–institution problem encountered by institutional work studies less as a question of how to discern individuals and institutions and their complex interaction, and more as problem arising from an epistemological error of wanting to identify separable things in the first place. In many ways, this problem is a problem of language. A concept like ethos (or norm, or rule) is short and definitive sounding, too much so thought Bateson, it is a unit word, bewitching us into thinking it a thing, with causal forming power. Bateson reminds us to treat ethos and structure loosely, to find in them useful perspectives rather than representations of referents. Ethos and structure are not distinct but aspects of the same behaviors.

Using Bateson's concepts of schismogenesis, energy and flexibility, and ethos, and mindful of being seduced by language, we suggest future studies might use a different mode of analysis identifying possible patterns of behavior and how these become more or less plausible through lived experience. This is of particular importance as Law (2004, p. 140) reminds us that notions of "structure" and "agency" inevitably point toward the "coherence," "singularity," and "out-there-ness" of the phenomena under investigation and therefore invoke a "hinterland" of assumptions which become manifest when theoretical constructs run against continually varying empirical findings (see also Willmott, 2011).

Our introduction of Bateson's concept (not a class) of "ethos" to the study of institutional work to describe transformative patterns of social interaction and norms offers clear parallels with other process studies of organizational fields in institutional theory (Weber, Heinze, & DeSoucey, 2008) as well as research on institutionalized routines and their evolution over time, including degenerative and regenerative cycles (Rerup & Feldman, 2011). Our study offers a useful analytic to identify and analyze such cycles and the potential for transformation over time. This leads to our second contribution concerning what can be called "naturalistic generalization," recognizing similarities between the findings of the research and the induced theorization of "transformation" with other cases without making any statistical inference (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010; Stake, 1995). But in part it extends beyond this, finding generalization configured through possibility rather than prediction.

By devising a conceptual schema to investigate processes of *transformation* in ways not restricted to taxonomies or categories of ever-changing meanings (cf. Hannan, Polos, & Carroll, 2007), we also identify an approach that accepts we cannot step out of action and practice (e.g., Lawrence et al., 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Placing interactive patterns, and not things, at the core of the investigation, we do not presuppose a conceptual distance from entities under investigation. Investigating interactions is a "following with" rather than "observing of." This confinement to the particular means our analytic speaks of events not laws. The resulting representations of institutional work—the dimensions of presence–absence or illegal–legal plotted in the schismographs against energy use and the regulation of schismogenesis—are of possibilities rather than law-like conditions. We illustrate this through the interventions of the leader of a drugs gang who skilfully exploits a situation of emerging flexibility in the system to invoke changes in the gang's behavioral motifs without, however, having any control over the wider systemic responses that ripple from these changes and lead, ultimately, to his demise. Moreover, the emergence of the legal–illegal dimension in Figure 3 indicates that issues of legality and illegality do not represent preexisting categories indicative of a general set of problems for which each gang or any other systemic unit finds idiosyncratic responses. Legality/illegality considerations emerge and disappear only in relation to particular situations. The question is therefore not whether Bell's running of the gang is more or less legal than Avon's or whether they occupy any other particular point on this dimension, but whether such considerations are an issue for them at all. If questions of legality and illegality do not pertain, the particular group has not merely failed to discover these concepts but, while they may be part of the researcher's world, they are not germane to the gang's ethos. Processual analysis is therefore not the application of a method that relates what happens to predefined sets of analytical categories (Law, 2004). It requires investigation of the dimensions that make up the relational patterns from within systemic interactions, and these may be different in every analysis.

Finally, we show how narrative fiction can provide rich sources of data, notably realist fiction grounded in the detailed forms of ethnography exemplified by the writers and producers of *The Wire*. These methodological conclusions then lead to a normative one. Organizational flourishing is a function

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of system flexibility: the capacity to appreciate systems beyond systems, so agents remain aware of how they impact other agents, or organizational settings, and organizations maintain procedures permitting feedback from yet wider institutional settings. Much of the literature on institutions (as well as related literatures on routines and strategy), however, emphasizes organizational distinctiveness and the associated commitment to possession and accrual (of capabilities, for example). Our espousal of reticence suggests a different stance.

The processual approach we have outlined in this article therefore invites an important shift in perspective from being surprised about frequently finding organizations in states of dispersal or decay, toward surprise at finding organizations capable of maintaining a temporary balance between regenerative and regulating pattern for any prolonged period of time. We suggest that focus on the equilibrium of dynamic processes affords alternative insights into acts of organizing. The work of Bateson, which we applied to the study of organization, offers one way of studying such dynamics while remaining ever sensitive to the difference between the territories we study and the maps we create and use to do so.

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Notes

1. Bateson effectively establishes similarities in structural patterns that are not precipitated upon the logic of classes underlying the structure of our language as well as that of scientific explanations (Bateson, 1941). He derives the principle of symmetry/asymmetry from the study of organisms with body-parts and distributed shapes so that there is no left or right side (radial symmetry, for instance in jellyfish) and "tighter" cultural systems akin to organisms which show symmetry along a traverse plane, as in the physiology of human beings (Bateson, 1980, p. 98, 1941, p. 56). This metaphorical, rather than "logical" development of analytical tools allows Bateson to explain a variety of observed social behaviors (e.g., sanctioning systems or breakups of moieties). Bateson's use of symmetries/asymmetries is opposed to the ordering of living things into classes according to their homologous or analogous properties and this runs counter to orthodox thinking about the key explanatory method for instance in zoology or cultural studies (Bateson, 1972, p. 76). It also upsets logical syllogistic reasoning that depends upon the establishment of "classes" which emanate habitually from language use and prevent the transgression of class boundaries (e.g., from "biology" to "cultural behavior") in explanatory chains. It is because and not despite of this transgression that we suggest this approach is particularly beneficial for the study of process.
2. There are further possible contact patterns, for instance homeostatic ones, where the display of behavioral patterns does not find symmetrical or complementary responses, or patterns involving more than two behavioral patterns. Bateson suggests, however, that these instances are less typical for the Western ethos.
3. Bateson reminds us that to equate the "thing named" with the "thing" is to mistake the map for the territory; it is akin to eating the menu card instead of the meal (Bateson, 1972, pp. 408, 457-460; Bateson & Bateson, 1987, pp. 21-27).
4. Ethos leavens a structured analysis of relational patterns of behavior with an awareness of the emotional registers in which these behaviors are experienced and expressed. This structuring finds its apotheosis with Levi-Strauss' scientific rendering of cultures and organization using such scales (raw and cooked, naked and clothed, near and far) in which the human being is emptied of resonance, presence even, the idiosyncrasy of history expunged by second-order representations of patterns without subjects. In this, Levi-Strauss does not ignore emotion, indeed his structuralism is acutely sensitive to the feelings of the heart that elide positivist science. It is just that emotion is dealt with structurally, whereas Bateson approaches it experientially; hence, his invoking ethos.
5. s = season; e = episode; m = minute. Minutes are not indicated if the reference refers to the entire episode or season.

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