Inhabited ecosystems and ripples of change: Understanding transformation beyond diffusion

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ABSTRACT

Organization studies has long engaged issues of social justice, particularly with respect to understanding the persistence and redress of inequalities. Diffusion models have beneficially been employed as tools for examining how the remediation of injustice becomes more widespread. While diffusion generally focuses on discrete practices, policies, or frames, we trace a path from diffusion toward transformation, specifically from the quest for domestic partner benefits for employees’ same-sex partners to the gradual elevation of practices that reduce the inequities and harms of heteronormative practices. We offer the concept of inhabited ecosystems to understand how activists across workplace settings experiment with social change tactics, build distributed capacity for an expanded change agenda, and co-create the conditions for persevering even as their challenges to the status quo are contested. We find, surprisingly, that activists in pre-adopter organizations may offer innovations that expand and sustain the efforts for social change, precisely from their precarious position of waiting in frustration for a specific change in policy or practice. We look at the less examined post-adopter settings, and find that activists vary in focus and tenacity. We find some who win a policy change relatively easily do not develop the capacity or motivation to continue the struggles, while those who notice others lagging in the wider ecosystem respond with empathy and redirect their sustained efforts towards advancing issues across that ecosystem. The change effort in the inhabited ecosystem we observe is partial, incomplete, ongoing, and contested, but ironically, under precisely these conditions, the capacity for diffusion to beget transformative social change is created. (257 Words)
Organization studies has a long tradition of examining the quest for social justice (Selznick, 1947; Edelman 1992; 2016) and what are recently termed “grand challenges” for society (Ferraro et al 2015). While classic studies identify singularities, whether bursts of struggle for workplace fairness (Gouldner, 1954) or outlier exemplars of workplace empowerment (Lipset, Trow and Coleman, 1956), there is much greater interest in remedies to inequality that spread across organizations. Contemporary organizational research links studies of the diffusion of workplace practices redressing injustice with social movement studies of contestation that focus on big, durable inequalities (Tilly, 1999). Thus, our study is grounded in the process of diffusion, whereby changes that redress inequalities, as well as the capabilities to pursue further changes, proliferate across multiple organizational settings.

These change efforts often coalesce when inequalities that were once private and personally painful become public and motivate claims, coalitions, and policy changes. As C. Wright Mills (1959:226) observes:

Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles – and to the problems of the individual life.

We trace how the once private struggles of LGBTQ employees in their own workplaces are recast into cross-workplace change efforts and imperatives for inclusive human resource and national policies. With a focus on diffusion and contention, we draw upon the literature at the
intersection of organization studies and social movement studies, where we contribute the concept of “inhabited ecosystems” to understand the impact of diffusion that is halting, contested, and incomplete but also propelled by relational alliances, unlikely spaces for activism, and chains of advocacy moves.

Our empirical starting point was a conventional concern for the diffusion literature: the spread of a contested corporate human resources policy. We set out to examine the contentiousness underneath the pattern of organizational adoptions of domestic partner benefits (DPBs), which extend employer-provided health care benefits to an employee’s same-sex partner in the U.S. DPBs were controversial because they offered material validation to relationships and families of same-sex couples and amplified a national movement for employment non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In this struggle, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), founded in 1980 and describing itself as “America's largest civil rights organization working for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer equality,” traced the rates of DPB adoption and rated corporations favorably or unfavorably on that basis from the late 1990s.

The HRC issued its first *Corporate Equality Report* in 2002, referring to a decade of remarkable change since 1992, when Lotus Development Corporation created a stir by becoming the first publicly traded company to offer DPBs. Our study is situated in this historic moment and in a specific “space of contention” (Tilly, 1999), the decade from 1992-2002:

As recently as a decade ago [in 1992], it was a struggle to find 100 “good” companies for lesbians or gay men to work for — and many companies were placed on such lists merely because they were making a small effort or weren’t overtly hostile. Today, thousands of employers large and small, for-profit and nonprofit, have instituted policies to protect lesbian and gay (and bisexual and transgender) workers from discrimination; thousands have implemented domestic partner health insurance and other benefits (HRC 2002).
The crux of this observation is that diffusion matters and widespread diffusion is a hallmark of success, as with the expansion of DPBs among US corporations.

Previous research shows how the DBP diffusion process has been propelled by relatively conservative first movers in the Fortune 500 that made DPB adoption safer for followers (Briscoe and Safford, 2008), by the accumulation of adopters in the company’s industry but not in the company’s headquarters state (Chuang, Church and Ophir, 2011), the presence of employee resource groups (Chuang, Church, and Hu, 2016), and by Fortune 1000 firms in states with favorable laws and with more diverse boards (Everly and Schwarz, 2015). This line of research tracks well the early insights and goals laid out in HRC strategy publications. These diffusion studies employ a rigorous and robust template: conceptualize the diffusion of policy, strategy, or practice as a change of state from ‘not yet adopted’ to ‘adopted’; deploy increasingly subtle vectors of variables; and produce results that provide context-mediated, time-specific rates of adoption. Reviews of this literature point to conceptual, design, and substantive concerns with this approach’s limited ability to understand ‘organizational change’ (Schneiberg and Clemens, 2006; Strang and Meyer, 1993; Strang and Soule, 1998; Whitson, Weber, Hirsch, and Bermiss, 2013) let alone to explain how social movements redress durable inequality (Selznick, 1947; Tilly, 1999).

Our study aims to get inside these diffusion dynamics, to see how employee groups advocated and adapted not just within but across organizations. We consider how and why they notice and attend to the referent organizations macro studies characterize. We observe what was happening in and across organizations that were on either side of the cusp of adoption. We argue that understanding the quest for social justice requires
examining diffusion as an inhabited process. We ask: *During a contested diffusion process, what do activists observe and how does that inform their change efforts?*

**Diffusion Amidst Contestation**

The literature on the diffusion of new and contested forms and practices has advanced at the intersection of organizations and social movements (Clemens, 1993; 2005; Davis, McAdam, Scott and Zald, 2005; Lounsbury, Ventresca, and Hirsch 2003). We have advanced our understanding of contested diffusion through the findings of macro level studies of how social movement tactics spread across organizations but with differential success (Soule, 1997, 1999; Rojas, 2006; Wang and Soule, 2012), how social movements trigger corporate responses (King, 2008; King and Soule, 2007), and how the objects of diffusion change during the diffusion process (Fiss, Kenendy, and Davis, 2012). Microprocesses animate these dynamics (Scully and Segal, 2002), as internal change agents find allies and spaces for resisting opposition to diffusion of a regulated change (Kellogg, 2009, 2011), exploit political opportunities in the struggle between forces of contention and settlement (Campbell, 2005; Clemens, 1997; Meyer and Minkoff, 2004), mobilize strategic framing and cognitive processes with multi-level impacts (Creed, Scully, and Austin, 2002; Schneiberg and Soule, 2005), and tap and create spillover across movements, moments, and settings (Mayer and Bouthier, 2007). Analytic advances in diffusion modeling and greater attention to multi-level and mixed method research contribute to this updated portrait of contested and incomplete diffusion (Schneiberg and Clemens, 2006; Strang and Soule 1998; Whitson, Weber, Hirsch and Bermis, 2015).
The focus on microinteraction promotes a re-inhabiting of organizational theories that had lost sight of the lived interactions and experiences of participants in these large-scale, often distributed processes of diffusion and institutional change (Campbell, 2005; Creed and Scully 1997; Hallett and Ventresca, 2006; Kellogg, 2009; Zilber, 2014). Re-inhabiting these contexts necessitates adopting appropriate theories and methods, including work on institutional microfoundations (Powell and Colyvas, 2008; Powell and Rerup 2017; Kellogg 2009, 2011), the turn to interaction or what Becker (1986) termed “people doing things together”, and exploring new methodologies (Haedicke and Hallett 2016; Ventresca and Kaghan 2008; Zilber 2014, 2016). This work accounts for how local activity articulates across organizations (Scully and Creed 2005; Furnari 2014; Kellogg, 2010; Morrill 2006; Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam 2001).

Explicitly applying this perspective of “people doing things together” in the context of diffusion, we address Strang and Soule’s (1998) call to bring more theoretical attention to heterogeneity of rates of diffusion, pathways, and context.

We argue that across this inhabited macro and micro terrain, there is a critical but under-theorized mechanism of activists “noticing” what is happening across organizations. Their noticing in turn shapes how changes move, embed, and re-start across organizations. Our focus on “noticing” – used deliberately as the first and least invested step in cultivating a process of mutual awareness – lets us examine how capacity for activism grows beyond organization and movement boundaries. Our findings reveal that diffusion may be propelled by activists who are relationally connected in an inhabited ecosystem. Strang and Soule (1998:265) identified the “inspection of the content of social relationships between [collective] actors” (1998: 265) as a research priority. They reflect on the simple act of seeing and the moves it enables:
“We typically know that potential adopters are brought into contact with the diffusing practice but do not know quite what they see” [when scanning their environments, which] “produces some theoretical fuzziness about the microprocesses involved in diffusion” (Strang and Soule, 1998:269).

Studies of diffusion often infer, but do not directly examine, a mechanism of noticing. For example, in their study of the diffusion of domestic partner benefits (DPBs) across Fortune 500 companies from 1990-2005, Briscoe and Safford suggest that “adoptions by companies known to resist activism should trigger attention and deeper processing” (Briscoe and Safford, 2009). In their study of how golden parachute packages transform as they diffuse, Fiss, Kennedy and Davis explain, that changes tend to look alike to garner legitimacy and so as not to “attract unwanted attention” from opponents of change (2012: 1083), but ultimately, broader transformation may occur as processes of noticing facilitate both isomorphic change and context-specific variation in adoption. They go on to state “Beginning with the population-level factors affecting practice variation, the results lend support to the idea that organizations adopt different versions of practices over the course of the diffusion process while paying attention to the actions of other adopters” (2012: 1090).

While noticing supports isomorphic change, it also enables variation that may facilitate broader transformation.

We advance two features of noticing as pertinent for change that goes beyond diffusion toward transformation: noticing that is relational and noticing that is wide-ranging. We argue that noticing, in the space where social justice is activated between “personal troubles” and “public issues” (Mills, 1959), requires understanding the reciprocal concern that activists have for one another’s plights and advances a concern that entails not just noticing but caring about what they notice. Campbell (2005), in a high level review of research at the intersection of organizations
and social movements, argues that relational mechanisms (including network cultivation and social interaction) must be more fully explored and joined with structural mechanisms (such as political opportunities) and cognitive mechanisms (such as strategic framing).

We find that reciprocal concern animates the capacity-building that occurs in and around the diffusion of policies and practices. Noticing can beget action when activists care about change beyond their own organization. On the ground, this collective stance is fueled by anger and empathy (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 2001; Jasper, 2011). Emotional appeals and their pathos are at the heart of mutual noticing. Because “emotional appeals are unable to sustain the limited attention of actors” and may have “transient persuasive power” (Green, 2004:659), transformation requires channeling that emotional energy into capacity building through practices like strategic alliances and distributed experimentation. We find that capacity building rooted in reciprocal concern supports a system that outlives individual efforts and moves diffusion toward transformation.

We explore how activists view the terrain of change efforts widely, noticing the ongoing efforts of others and feeling vested in shaping the conditions for widespread success. Studies of diffusion tend to use the Fortune 500 or Fortune 1000 or state and industry boundaries to make sense of flows of change and next adopters. We find that activists on the ground may not scan either as widely as these datasets nor as narrowly as just only corporations. They may scan beyond the event horizon to notice, with reciprocal and relational concern, what is happening where adoption is highly contentious or provisionally achieved.

We take the approach that workplace justice issues are not simply triggered by social movements, but are endogenous with social movement advancement. We build on this concept of endogeneity that Edelman (1992, 2016) advances, where she shows that equal opportunity
employment law does not simply govern workplaces but is continuously revised through organizations’ own moves, such as court cases, defenses, precedents, implementation of settlements and new rules, and so forth. Similarly, we track how national social movement efforts to contest heteronormativity are at once a spark for – but also substantively advanced by – workplace organizations. Moreover, we show how the work for change adoption is not just inside singular organizations but in the varied linkages across other organizations – those further along in the movement, those lagging, and those specifically with an SMO mission. Change efforts form in the “interstitial spaces,” where relational dynamics govern how “new ideas that attract high levels of mutual attention are more likely to be talked about in future interactions in those settings” (Furnari, 2014:451).

Building on these advances, we move beyond a largely static approach to the environment as a cache of resources to conceptualizing a politically-constructed opportunity space (Gamson and Meyers, 1996; Meyer and Minkoff, 2004; Creed and Cooper, 2007) where critical social skills (Fligstein, 2001) provide for enactment beyond sense-making to include coordinated, collective rationalities (Powell and Rerup 2016). Thus, our inquiry into the quest for social justice through inhabited, reciprocal, contentious, broad-based, and shifting diffusion processes leads us to advance the concept of “inhabited ecosystems.”

Microinteractions in Inhabited Ecosystems

By taking an inhabited ecosystem view in a geographically-grounded setting, we observe how multiple parties, across levels and with varied access to resources, co-create the new conditions for transformation. This working concept of ecosystem builds on several current lines of work: field-level ethnography (Desmond, 2014; Kellogg, Orlikowski, and Yates, 2006; Zilber 2014), theory-building in the literature on entrepreneurial (and policy-focused) ecosystems
(Autio and Thomas, 2014), and studies of microinteractions in fields (Furnari 2014). We argue that understanding inhabited diffusion in the context of contestation requires that scholars take note of both an expanded roster of actors – more heterogeneous organizations as well as groups and individuals within them – as well as their intra- and inter-organizational relationships. That roster should include not only actors at the top of the organization – where research shows that diffusion flows through board interlocks and the decision-makers with formal authority strategically respond to shareholders (Davis, 1991; King, 2008) – but also grassroots activists who have a stake in the change, but limited power.

The domain for our analyses includes the typical unit organizations of diffusion studies, the usual potential adopters such as corporations or government agencies, but also other organizations such as universities, social movement organizations, and philanthropic and civic organizations that may be both potential adopters as well as repositories of resources and tactical innovations. Studying inhabited ecosystems answers the call to understand how movements advance through the varied work of challengers who start from widely divergent social positions, toolkits, and capabilities (Bertels, Hoffman, and DeJordy, 2014).

A consistent characteristic of current ecosystems perspectives is the integration of both a sense of population-community and systems theory, reflecting the fact that “[e]cosystems are thermodynamically open, meaning that they exchange matter and energy with their environment” (Currie, 2011: 22). Extending the open-systems view of organizations and environments (Scott, 2003), constituents in inter-organizational ecosystems exchange resources and energy with their environment – both directly with each other, and with the ecosystem itself. Such resource flows are currently perhaps best illustrated in the literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems, which are identified as “the union of localized cultural outlooks, social networks, investment capital,
universities, and active economic policies that create environments supportive of innovation-based ventures” (Spigel, forthcoming: 1).

By linking these flows to lived experiences in contentious spaces and exploring the mechanisms of noticing, we trace the contours of an inhabited ecosystem in which change advances. We treat the ecosystem itself as a site of contestation, of struggles and settlements, yielding innovations in strategies and providing arenas of action as the transformative processes advance. That ecosystems change in endogenous and distributed ways, with first and second (and third) order impacts, is well established (Edelman 1992, 2016). Our method adds a direct view of actors working proactively across the ecosystem. We offer a design that extends the bounds of methods and sampling that are conventional in most diffusion studies (Strang and Meyer, 1991). We submit that attending to what activists see when they scan their environment and observe a mix of change efforts – inspiring and discouraging, successful and incomplete – crucially respecifies these processes in ways that make it possible to see how an inhabited ecosystem cradles and shapes the change process in distinctive ways. Our ultimate interest is to understand how transformation goes beyond diffusion, to remedy societal problems and injustices with deep and stubborn roots (Tilly 1999; Dorado and Ventresca; 2013).

The inhabited ecosystem approach offers four contributions to the literature in both theory and method. First, it adds relational mechanisms to cognitive and structural mechanisms to understand how social movement aims are advanced by workplace activists who operate across organizations and develop reciprocal and affective commitments to each other’s successes and setbacks. Second, we trace how a social justice change effort becomes fueled and expanded across an inhabited ecosystem composed of heterogeneous social positions not typically considered: post-adopters who do not leave the fight, energized pre-adopters who innovate in
new directions as they do more than wait for policy adoption, and pre-adopters whose
discouragement triggers call and answer chains of tactical ideas. Third, we offer a research
design that moves beyond the confines of diffusion studies to attend to the lived experiences of
activists who notice and mobilize one another as they manage contested change and uneven
progress. We trace how their microinteractions are situated across a locally meaningful terrain,
composed of multi-sector organizations in heterogeneous states that reflect much more than their
adopter status. Fourth, we add new explanations and dynamics for understanding how capacity
for sustained change and engagement is created as activists draw upon and continuously
recompose the inhabited ecosystem. We can thereby widen our lens beyond specific practices
like domestic partner benefits to observe broader transformation, in this case new frames,
policies, and accountabilities that tackle entrenched workplace heterosexism and inform to
national social movement agendas.

METHOD

The inhabited ecosystem view we develop attends to a mix of change efforts (successful,
failed, underway, reversed, emergent), a mix of malleable ecosystem features (constraints,
opportunities, and the conversions among them), and a mix of agents (blockers, supporters,
likely and unlikely adopters). We explore activity in an ecosystem of organizations where the
prospects for the widespread adoption of DPBs and related GLBT\(^1\)-friendly organizational
practices are uncertain and where there is ongoing advocacy and contestation. Exploring a
protracted diffusion process with (mixed) outcomes distributed over time provides fresh insights
into how an ecosystem provides the capacity and mechanisms that support or hinder broader
change. Our goal is an in-depth understanding of the microinteractions at play by employee

\(^{1}\) We recognize LGBT and LGBTQ are now commonly used in the literature, reflecting the evolution of the movement, but we use
GLBT in the methods and findings sections to reflect the language in use at the time of (and in) our interviews.
groups and other actors within and across organizations in the ecosystem. We explore this through a qualitative research design, with data collection that elicited temporally-situated accounts of activities from employer organizations in 24 firms and agencies that were advocating for GLBT-friendly organizational practices and initially for DPBs. The research team conducted in-depth interviews with informants across the ecosystem who provided detailed accounts of current conditions and initiatives in their organizations, as well as retrospective accounts of their path to date and views on ecosystem venues, activity, and myths. These interviews also yielded substantial information about shared and changing aspirations among the employer organizations and in the ecosystem overall, a topic we return to below.

The Research Context

We explored an ongoing diffusion process in a geographic field comprising a multi-sector mix of organizations. For GLBT issues on the national scene, the mid 1990s were a time of considerable policy activity and advocacy, punctuated by the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act (DoMA) in September of 1996. Our interviews elicited temporally-rich narratives as described below, retrospective, concurrent, and prospective. We were in the field to conduct the primary interviews during two-weeks in the summer of 1996 with no such punctuating events, which minimizes the impact of any variation in the both the local and larger ecosystems that might affect the accounts of different informants due to external factors. We have collected archival and documentary data, media accounts, and other supporting data on and from the organizations, the community, the ecosystem, and the policy issues both concurrent with and subsequent to conducting the interviews.

The “Twin Cities” (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota) was home to several Fortune 500 company headquarters as well as established public and non-profit organizations in this
period (Galaskiewicz 1991, 1997). We were initially pointed to this research context by the executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, a national GLBT civil rights organization, who initially alerted us to the local efforts, well-suited for research issues in that original project. After further review, we selected the site because it offered three features important for our investigation of the underlying efforts of change agents across adopters and pre-adopters.

First, the diffusion process in the Twin Cities was contested and ongoing. A few major corporations and other organizations in the region had adopted DPBs, but the large majority of organizations in the area had not. There was active advocacy around the issue. A scan of the newspaper of record for the area, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, on various search criteria related to GLBT workplace issues comprising the 10 years prior to our interviews (n=70) and the ten years subsequent to them (n=177) highlight the ongoing and escalating attention to the issue. Further, at the state level, there was active contestation over GLBT civil rights more broadly. In the early 1990s, GLBT activists and their allies had successfully waged the "It's Time, Minnesota" campaign for a ballot proposition to amend the Minnesota Human Rights Act to include protections for GLBT people. Additionally, a court ruling reversed a Minneapolis plan to extend health care benefits to the partners of gay and lesbian employees, which had consequences for other public entities. Combined, these created conditions for GLBT workplace activism that included both support and opposition, successes and setbacks.

Second, research by Galaskiewicz (1991, 1997) and others provides evidence that the Twin Cities were a place where executives influence one another on corporate social responsibility issues through complex board interlocks and social network ties. This feature reinforces the open systems approach we take to examine the microinteractions involved in the diffusion process. As Scott (2003:91) states: “From an open system point of view, there is a close
connection between the condition of the environment and the characteristics of the systems within it.” We arrived as researchers in this setting just as a contentious issue was coming to the attention of top executives for consideration and potential human resources policy action.

Third, the HRC pointed us to a local organization, the Work Place Alliance (WPA), that supported employee groups focused on advocacy for DPBs and other GLBT friendly workplace practices. In fact, the story of the emergence of the WPA is very much a product and producer of the inhabited ecosystem and is presented in our findings.

The Sample: Organizations and Employee Groups

We made initial use of a WPA roster of member GLBT employee groups at twenty-seven large Twin Cities employers. We approached all 27 groups and we gained research access to 24 for this study. Along the way, informants referred to the other three in their accounts. These organizations varied in sector, industry, and stage in the diffusion process. To verify that our sample represents the active participants engaged in the conversation around domestic partner benefits at the time, we searched the newspaper of record for the region, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, for references to “domestic partner benefits” for the five years leading up to our interviews. While the issue garnered little press coverage, with only twelve articles retrieved, three-quarters (n=9) focused on the actions of organizations in our sample, including the court case that resulted in the reversal of DPB adoption by a municipal agency in our sample. Two discussed local political candidates’ views on the issue and the last discussed the creation of a GLBT business network advocating that adoption of DPBs be a criterion in considering “business to patronize and services and goods to purchase.”

Our data are multilevel. We refer to employees advancing GLBT workplace issues as “activists” consistent with work on internal change agents (Scully and Segal, 2002) and
Clemens’ (1993) observation that under these conditions “members of corporations act like activists.” These activists participate in GLBT employee groups which are embedded in their employing organizations. We conducted 68 interviews in the summer of 1996. We focused our interviews on members of employee groups working on GLBT workplace issues. We interviewed 66 people from 24 organizations, including GLBT employees, their allies, human resource professionals, and senior decision makers. All interviews were done in person, lasted 30 minutes to two hours, and were taped and transcribed. The sample was diverse in terms of profession, gender, race, and sexual orientation. In ten organizations, we interviewed two or three people, and in five organizations, four to eight people. In the remaining nine organizations, we interviewed either the spokesperson for the GLBT employee group (n=6) or the GLBT activist who was identified as a contact person for the WPA (n=3). The remaining two interviews were with the executive directors of two SMOs, which are not employer organizations in our sample.

Data Collection

For the interviews, we used a semi-structured protocol designed to discover the current state of the organization’s climate around GLBT issues and the activists’ perspective of the broader ecosystem and how their group fit into it, probing: 1) the history and current status of issues related to GLBT inclusion; 2) the nature and role of the GLBT employee group, including their current efforts, accumulated successes, past failures, and future goals; 3) the relationship of the GLBT activists to high-level decision makers, allies, and other diversity-related employee affinity groups, (e.g., race or gender); and 4) connections to other organizations in the ecosystem, including the WPA, other employee groups and their organizations, and any other external sources. In addition to the interviews, we gathered field notes and training handouts from events
relating to GLBT workplace issues to understand the overarching movement’s presence and activities inside the ecosystem.

We supplement the original interview data with longitudinal data from archival sources to situate the accounts from our informants in historical context. We used the GLVIndex (Gay and Lesbian Values Index), a corporate rating compiled by Gary Lukenbill (1995) from 1995 until its acquisition by the HRC in 2001 and the HRC Corporate Equity Indices from 2002 to 2016, which track updates to rating criteria that expand beyond DPBs.

Data Analysis

Our initial analysis interrogates our informants’ lived experience of the change process. We focused on what they saw as they scanned their environments, with particular focus on their assessment of the organizations, employee groups and activities that affected both their intra- and inter-organizational activities. We performed analysis in three steps: 1) summarizing the data within each organization to characterize the employee advocacy group in individual portraits, and across groups to identify how they coalesced into the Work Place Alliance; 2) coding interview data for what the employee advocates reported seeing as they scanned their environments and clustering the employee groups based on those perceptions; and 3) mapping the actions, interactions, and reactions among them. We describe these three steps.

Creating portraits of employee groups. After interviews with members of employee groups from each of the 24 organizations, we created a summary portrait for each employee group. Developing a standard template, we chronicled the history, current activities, and future plans of these groups, as well as basic facts about the employee group’s organization, such as industry, size, whether the Twin Cities unit was the corporate headquarters or a division of a larger company, whether the organization had multiple divisions or field locations in urban or
rural settings, and whether they had adopted DPBs when interviewed in the summer of 1996. At the time of the interviews, seven organizations had adopted DBPs and seventeen had not. Drawing on commonly told stories from across our portraits, we identified how activities and relationships emerged and coalesced initially around the Work Place Alliance (WPA).

The work of creating these portraits also made visible that there was more heterogeneity of lived experiences regarding the advocacy process for DBPs among our informants than was captured in standard variables such as sector, industry, organizational form, and adoption status (Appendix 1). In particular, we saw that differences and commonalities in their patterns of actions and interactions did not align to adoption/non-adopt on of DPBs. The portraits of employee groups in some post-adopter organizations showed little activity, while those of some pre-adopter organizations showed action and innovation. The portraits also made salient that there was considerable variety in the ways employee groups engaged with others inside and outside their organizations. This observation motivated our next phase of analysis.

**Mapping what the members of organizations saw.** While there was commonality to our informants’ recounting of the emergence of the ecosystem, the summary portraits we created also suggested differences in their interactions within and with the ecosystem. To assess this more systematically, we returned to interviews from members of employee groups from 24 organizations, using qualitative analysis to characterize the employee groups based on what their members noticed, using the orienting question of “What do inhabitants in the midst of the contested diffusion of a new practice see when they scan their environments?” Initial coding stayed close to the informants’ own words, but as we iterated through rounds of coding, we grouped together codes, resulting in the 18 rows shown in Table 1 that capture what our informants described seeing, hearing, or experiencing. Of these, eight captured experiences or
relationships inside their own organizations (e.g., seeing formal recognition of their GLBT affinity group by their organization) and 10 described experiences or relationships external to their own organizations (e.g., seeing connections with local advocates, attending outside meetings, repeating information about other groups’ efforts). We coded these based on how prevalently they featured in our informants’ stories. These data capture the salience the employee activists ascribed to the opportunities and constraints they saw in their environment, and also of how they saw others navigating the landscape.

We used these data to explore the divergence between different employee groups’ views of the ecosystem. To identify similarities and dissimilarities of their perceptions, we correlated the patterns of what these employee groups reported noticing within and across organizations. We then performed hierarchical cluster analysis (Johnson, 1967) using the complete link method to best investigate the heterogeneity of perspectives in the ecosystem. From the resulting set of hierarchical solutions, we selected the five-cluster solution because it had the optimal measure score on Newman’s Q measure of modularity (Newman and Girvan, 2004). To better understand the commonness of their perception of the environment that yielded this clustering, we ran factor analysis on the original profile matrix shown in Table 1. Principal component analysis with a varimax rotation generated five factors with eigenvalues above 1. We labeled these factors in terms of what our informants described they saw or experienced in their environments, as captured in the variables from Table 1. In order, the five factors capture variables associated with activists seeing 1) support and possibilities, 2) constraints and isolation, 3) powerful opponents and structural hindrances, 4) stagnation, and 5) a lack of required skills or usable lessons. Table 2 presents more details about these five factors and the characteristic variable
loadings. We used the average factor scores for each cluster to assess the common experiences that bound the clusters together.

**Mapping impacts across and on the ecosystem.** In the final step of our analysis, we returned once again to our data, this time oriented by the question “How do members of the ecosystem affect each other and the ecosystem itself through their actions, interactions, and reactions?” In essence, while the prior phase of coding was oriented by the part of our research question that asks “what do they see,” this subsequent phase was oriented by the question “how does that affect their efforts?” From this phase of coding, we identified several recurring actions (e.g., retelling mythic stories, responding in call and answer chains of advocacy moves, naming obstacles, proposing solutions). Specifically, we noted where these actions rippled across more than one organization (e.g., a frequently retold story) or cascaded across two or more employee groups (e.g., a call for advice, a proposed experiment taken up elsewhere, and so on).

**FINDINGS**

Our research question asks what actors see in scanning an ecosystem, and extending from there, how what they see shapes distributed change capacity. Contributing to both method and theory, we present the origins, characteristics, and mechanisms which may enable diffusion in an inhabited ecosystem to broaden toward transformative change. We first present data on the early stages of the ecosystem, when actors begin to notice each other, take each other’s actions into account, and build cross-organizational linkages. This chronology of ecosystem microinteractions sets our research context and explains the connective tissues and myths that begin to form in early moments. Second, based on the cluster analysis, we present how the patterns of engagement across the 24 organization employee activist groups vary according to their state of mutual awareness, their perception of their distinct options for action, and their
assessment of the momentum in the ecosystem. These varied states document heterogeneity in the ecosystem. Third, we trace ripples of action, to observe how reciprocal awareness among inhabitants propels different types of action, interaction, and reaction based on the employee activist groups’ perceptions of the ecosystem. Taken together, these three analyses provide a view of an inhabited ecosystem and its developing capabilities for change amidst contention.

**Doing Things Together: Constituting the Ecosystem**

Through our analysis of ecosystem early moments, we highlight three forms of action that occurred that made the ecosystem a touchstone for action and capacity: Establishing early linkages; institutionalizing new forms of engagement and learning; and promoting mutuality through the identification of shared concerns. These same forms of action underlie and foreshadow the ongoing dynamics that animate change processes in the inhabited ecosystem. They provide a partial answer to our research question of what inhabitants see when they scan their environments and illuminate the important concept of “convening” (Dorado, 2005; Ferraro et al., 2015) as a support for broad social change.

Many employee advocates reported that they began their work in isolation and lacked the know-how to engage in advocacy efforts. In response, they connected through a local SMO that supported the GLBT community; out of this partaking process, they developed a proto-network and a new SMO dedicated to workplace equity and inclusion issues for GLBT employees. The network grew haltingly over months, expanding to include a more experienced GLBT workplace activist and an executive ally. This work of convening (Dorado, 2005) eventually resulted in the formation of the WPA, which in turn promoted additional capacity-building activities. Many of our informants recounted how these early activities provided a form of imprinting (Boeker, 1989; Marquis, 2003), including templates and organizing rules that informed their actions as the
ecosystem evolved further. For our purposes these early days provide a concrete example of how the actions, interactions and reactions of members of the ecosystem become manifest in a new, emergent organization that subsequently is not only a constituent member of the ecosystem, but one that helps shape the ecosystem capacity and impact overall. In our case, we find that activism is not so much “in” or “around” the organizations in our ecosystem (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016), but more precisely characterized as emerging also “from” actors who operate inside and outside their workplace. Thus, we begin our findings by presenting the composite narrative of the earliest interactions in the ecosystem, culminating in the creation of the Work Place Alliance itself with brief discussions of the emergent ecosystem dynamics.

**Generating early cross-organizational linkages.** The ecosystem that we study started to coalesce in the late 1980s as a consequence of incipient employee groups from at first only two organizations beginning to meet to discuss GLBT workplace issues. These two groups approached a local Social Movement Organization (SMO), the Gay and Lesbian Community Action Coalition (the Action Coalition) for help in organizing. The Action Coalition supported this proto-network by placing notices in the gay press and inviting a few participants to meet. The Action Coalition’s Director of Community Education recalls how the emergence of this group required that the Action Coalition and these employee groups learn to work with each other despite coming from different perspectives:

… so people who didn't feel safe being out in the workplace … had a number and a name that they could call. … We just started connecting people. Having the Action Coalition there was really helpful because it gave people a way to circumvent the dynamics of their particular institutions. … They weren't the people the Action Coalition typically interacted with. … They were learning about a gay organization and how to access that, in the sense of empowerment."

She described the early programming in this manner:
We started doing mutual support kinds of things. I think the first workshop we had, and they weren't even workshops, we had panels of people that talked about how you start a workplace group. Then [employees from] organizations that were further behind would come and learn from each other. We did one on how you find allies in upper administration. … very concrete kinds of how do you start a group, advertise, find allies, begin talking about domestic partner benefits.

Thus, in the early 1990s, the ecosystem began to take shape through incipient connections; these “not even workshops” connected small groups of people seeking a safe space to share concrete ideas about how to go about advancing GLBT workplace issues. And, in the eyes of the leaders in the Action Coalition, this process was the beginning of a new kind of empowerment rooted in the possibility that employee activist groups with different capacities, challenges, and opportunities could come together and learn from each other. However, in 1992, the Action Coalition’s Director of Community Education departed to become director of the GLBT Program Office at MinnCollege. Without her to organize them, these informal meetings at the Action Coalition came to an end. Her efforts re-appear in later initiatives that we discuss below. Her transition is one of many examples of how personnel flows catalyze actions in new places.

**Establishing new forms of engagement and learning.** In 1993 and 1994, two happenings revitalized the emerging ecosystem. First, MinnCollege formed a presidential Select Committee in the wake of instances of harassment. It prepared and released a report on the climate for GLBT persons at the university that articulated a strategy for addressing campus homophobia. The driver of the Select Committee report was an assistant dean, a 26-year veteran campus administrator, sociologist, and athletic coach. Observing that “this work doesn't get done because it is the right thing to do,” she described actively orchestrating the process of winning support for the report’s potentially controversial recommendations:
We treated this work is if we were on a political campaign. ... We had a master chart that we knew all of the different constituencies [and] all of the different committees that this had to go through ... At every stage you anticipate that there will be attempts to stall...to block this action... You map out an entire strategy. We had people recruited and planted on...committees [that] were stalling... We did not allow the people who are in charge of the governance process to dictate how this game was going to be played... You can say coaching... It was like a script. So-and-so spoke on this, so-and-so spoke on that. You orchestrated it.

Shifting her focus beyond one organizational setting, the assistant dean came to recognize that many people with the desire to work for GLBT inclusion in the Twin Cities needed the same sort of regular, substantive coaching that was effectively employed in this situation. It was through the process of shepherding the Select Committee that she began to envision a common structure and processes for GLBT workplace activism suitable for dealing with many varieties of contention present in the wider community of firms and agencies. She figures repeatedly in future actions and in retold stories beyond her organizational boundaries as her political skills were leveraged throughout the ecosystem. By seeing beyond the immediate policy agenda at MinnCollege and communicating with others, she contributes to capacity building.

The second happening was a forum whose impact reverberated through – and indeed even catalyzed the coalescence of – the entire ecosystem. The forum, held at Control Devices, traces its origins to a couple of employees at Pediatric Healthcare who decided to form an advocacy group. One of them, an openly gay man, was in conversation with a former co-worker, an open lesbian who was then working at Control Devices. She approached the Senior Vice President (SVP) of International Marketing at Control Devices, a man who had recently been named black male executive of the year by a prominent journal in the African American community, and asked him if he would take on the role of corporate sponsor for the GLBT employee group, a formal role required by the corporation’s diversity architecture. He agreed,
pointing to similarities to the civil rights movement and to the emergence of the African American employee groups a decade or two earlier. The SVP used his clout to help make things happen. Among the first things they did was to plan a forum to which the SVP personally issued an invitation. The employee activist who enlisted him recalls:

He goes, "I want you to write a letter to all these companies and use my name. I want to meet with some of these bigger ones…, with some of their VPs. Send a mailing to the VPs and send a memo to the…person [who] is sponsoring their group…" We got a letter formatted and he signed it and we sent them.

A task force came together to plan the forum – comprising people from Pediatric Health, Control Devices, and the MinnCollege assistant dean who orchestrated the Select Committee report. Ultimately, Control Devices also paid for the production of a manual, compiled and written by the MinnCollege assistant dean, that was still referred to in our interviews years later as “the Control Devices Manual.” She explained the motivation for the manual.

[T]here's an incredible vacuum of knowledge for people…The focus of putting that notebook together is like, “Here is a primer. Whether you are at step five or whether you are at step one, here is the information you need to know about employee groups dealing with queer issues in your workplace. Here are samples from Best Baker, Consolidated Consumer Products. Cut and paste, put your title at the top and go with it. … There are all kinds of people out there who can help you with issues, give you direction, help you with strategy, ready to eliminate isolation.

These accounts underscore how heterogeneous actors started to come together, both to translate their awareness of a broad need for coaching into a shared material resource and to convene an unprecedented meeting of executives, GLBT employees, and allies from diverse organizations.

The first forum event took place on May 18, 1994. One key to the success of the event was inviting potential allies – whether close, distant, informed, curious, or skeptical. The SVP sponsor framed this move as “bring five people,” giving anxious GLBT activists an achievable sub-goal. One of the planners described the event itself:
We had all of her [manuals] all together and “out” … and we filled the Control Devices auditorium. ... [Our SVP sponsor] always said, "if you are ever going to have a group you were always going to have to ask …“Bring five of your friends, bring five more people." Every letter that we wrote ... "Bring five people," because you can't change without adding more people to it. He was the whole story behind that "five people"…And it was very powerful and generating. There is that fear and apprehension, but it was this wonderful revelation that our little group of five or six, with [our SVP sponsor’s] support, had this big meeting… Over 150 people were sitting in our auditorium. We're sitting there talking about gay issues in the workplace. It was VPs, people part of other groups, and it was like so cool, the neatest thing in the world.

Informants from across the ecosystem pointed to the foundational nature of this event, the prototype for what became known as the WPA Forum, a quarterly gathering of Twin Cities employees and executives to talk about GLBT workplace issues. Both GLBT employees and their executive allies emphasized the importance of the SVP sponsor’s putting his name on personal invitations to other executives.

More importantly for our research, that forum at Control Devices gave rise to the WPA itself. The forum task force and some attendees continued to meet. In another example of how personnel flows altered the ecosystem by building linkages that facilitate engagement across organizations, the employee from Pediatric Healthcare went to work for the Action Coalition as its new workplace advocacy liaison. His advocacy experience at Pediatric Healthcare and on the first forum taskforce was the foundation for work on the WPA. The WPA’s emergence as a local SMO was partly a result of – as well as a contributor to – building capacity for workplace activism within the broader ecosystem. Shared agendas, points of regular contact, and flows of people between organizations all facilitated the emergence of the WPA, which in turn became a repository for and expanded those activities and resources moving forward.

**Promoting mutuality.** The success of that first forum inspired several further forums. The assistant dean explained how the forums worked and why they were important to educate and
connect senior executives across the ecosystem.

… rather than having us GLBT people… meet and talk amongst ourselves we would bring our straight administrators together and bring the corporate heads together... You were doing educating…and you were being out publicly as, "here is who we are and excuse me, you have queer people in your workforce, whether you know it or not." For me, to have my president or VP at the University talk to someone at InsureCo or Heavy Industries, because they are all dealing with the same issue here. What is going to happen to our stock if we do this? What is going to happen to alumni contributions if we do this? … My sense was to put people together in the same room to do that.

Her explanation points to how these forums became a crucible for cultivating expanded ecosystem capacity. Her account also makes visible the early emphasis on mutual engagement and shared learning among people across organizations who seldom engaged directly. Instead of differentiating between the issues related to publicly-traded companies and a public institution of higher education, the concern is for the shared nature of issues that affect employees and policy across the ecosystem. The three forms of action presented here (establishing early linkages, institutionalizing new forms of engagement, and promoting mutuality) are material indicators of new capacity and purpose that develops outside of specific firms or agencies.

Mapping the Ecosystem

As described above, hierarchical cluster analysis of how our informants reported they perceived their environments yielded five distinct clusters of employee groups, each with distinct characteristics of what they saw and experienced. These clusters capture the heterogeneity of the lived experiences of the activists in the ecosystem. By clustering employee advocacy groups based on how similarly they experienced the ecosystem, we find that those experiences are not mainly defined by the adoption or non-adoption of a discrete practice that is often the focus of
studies of contested diffusion. This “lived” heterogeneity begets different forms of change-directed activity as it shapes the dynamics of action in the ecosystem.

The factor analysis of the data yielded five dimensions along which employee group experiences and perception of the ecosystem varied or converged: 1) supportive allies and possibilities, 2) constraints and isolation, 3) powerful opponents and structural hindrances, 4) stagnation, and 5) a lack of required skills or usable lessons. Based on the mean scores for these five factors for each of the clusters and our analysis of the original interviews, we labeled the clusters with evocative names: Blocked and blocked off, Smooth sailing, Frustrated engagement, One and done, and Hopeful. Table 3 shows the composition of each cluster along with its most characteristic factor scores.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Cluster 1: Blocked and blocked off. This cluster of employee groups was most strongly characterized by high scores on two factors indicating that these employees saw constraints, like powerful opponents and hindering gatekeepers, and were more likely to report seeing failures than successes when scanning the ecosystem. None of these employee groups were based in organizations that had secured domestic partner benefits during our observation period.

Cluster 2: Smooth sailing. In contrast, employee groups in this cluster are remarkable for their high negative loading on the factor indicating structural obstacles. Employee groups in this cluster reported relatively little opposition and were comparatively less focused on failures and more on successes, next goals, and momentum. Just over half (four out of seven) of the employee groups in this cluster had secured DPBs in their organizations, but all but one reported seeing other forms of success in the ecosystem, such as securing support for GLBT-related charities. The mix of organizations with and without DPBs in this cluster suggest that adoption
or non-adoption of DPBs, initially the focal practice of our study of contested diffusion, does not uniquely define the dynamics in this ecosystem nor the inhabited experience of the constitutive employee groups. Their next strongest scores were on the factor indicating these actors felt supported by powerful allies and saw many possibilities for success other than DPBs both in their own organizations and across the ecosystem.

*Cluster 3: Frustrated engagement.* The employee groups in this cluster reported being engaged with others in the ecosystem, both internally, with peers, allies and other diversity groups; and externally, with GLBT employee groups in other organizations and SMOs in the ecosystem. At the same time, they perceived opposition within their organizations and they questioned their own abilities to overcome it. As in the Blocked and Blocked Off cluster, none of the organizations in the Frustrated Engagement cluster had adopted domestic partner benefits. While groups in this cluster showed greater awareness of what was going on externally, remaining connected and engaged, they lacked the confidence, clear aspirations, and determined focus on success that were characteristic of the groups in the Smooth Sailing cluster.

*Cluster 4: One and done.* Although every employee group in this cluster was from an organization that had adopted domestic partner benefits, this cluster had the strongest average score on the factor that we labeled stagnation. The variables that negatively load on this factor pertain to the perceived possibility of success on GLBT-friendly issues other than domestic partner benefits, momentum, and aspirations for improving workplace conditions for GLBT employees more generally. Because their organizations adopted DPBs without much internal contestation, these employee groups did not go through the trials that might have built deeper internal capabilities or motivation for ongoing change, nor the persistent connections to other inhabitants in the ecosystem. These employee groups treated the DPBs issue as a discrete goal
and, having secured the policy, they effectively disengaged from further activity around GLBT workplace equality. These groups also reported high-level sponsorship for the discrete policy adoption, but little sustaining activity.

Cluster 5: Hopeful. The final cluster was also most strongly distinguished by its score on the stagnation factor, but with a negative loading. Employee groups in this cluster see successes, momentum, and aspirations in the ecosystem, even though none of their organizations had adopted domestic partner benefits. These groups see themselves as having the ability to learn from the lessons of others in the ecosystem and as already having or being easily able to acquire the skills they need to advance DPBs and other GLBT workplace issues. Although they also are focused on success, unlike groups in the Smooth Sailing cluster, they did not report seeing strong or consistent internal support or encouragement. Instead, their sense of momentum comes primarily from the perceived absence of committed opposition among the leadership of their organizations. All voiced the expectation that it would be only a matter of time for their organizations to adopt DPBs, but that none of them would be first movers.

While several factors may account for the observed heterogeneity across these clusters, it is noteworthy that whether or not their employer organizations offer DPBs – the pivot that would have been the focus in a conventional diffusion study – is not determinative of what employee groups see and how they experience the ecosystem. For example, the Smooth Sailing cluster comprises optimistic and motivated employee groups from a mix of organizations that do and do not offer domestic partner benefits. In contrast, groups in the One and Done cluster, all of which have DPBs, see themselves as too passive, or as one interviewee from the Foster Family Foundation put it, as “drifting down the stream as opposed to negotiating rapids.” What matters is not why they experience the ecosystem differently, but the fact that they do indeed see and
experience the ecosystem differently, and that those differences affect action in the ecosystem. Our analysis now turns to how noticing and appraising things differently affects the various employee groups’ ongoing efforts and interactions in ways that continue to shape the ecosystem.

**Reacting to Others: Mapping Ripples of Change**

We next analyzed how actions across organizations in the distinct clusters affect change efforts. The co-existence of very different employee groups, with a range of states from frustrated to hopeful and from stagnant to engaged, creates a setting for actions that may be experimental, halting, and sometimes transformative. These actions ripple across organizations in a context of mutual awareness. Our analysis revealed three broad categories of activities with implications for the arc of activism and impact among the employee groups we studied: Creating the mythos of the ecosystem, Responding and inspiring, and Naming and claiming.

*Creating the mythos of the ecosystem: Stories, heroes, and standards.* Our informants told and re-told stories about key moments in the struggles, in ways that both modeled and enabled action. More than simply an historical anecdote, the recurring invocation of mythic stories also carried lessons and cautionary tales about people, issues, and incidents. These stories often carried affective weight and behavioral implications that reverberated throughout the ecosystem, reinforcing the rightness of the struggles for justice.

One particularly oft-told set of stories was about the foundational Control Devices forum and the origins of the WPA. Although retold by many informants, the general arc was consistent and had the status of an origins myth for the ongoing efforts in this ecosystem. In its many retellings, the Control Devices SVP of International Marketing appears as a larger than life link to a legacy of civil rights activism, as an African American man creating continuity with prior justice struggles. The description of him as “the whole story” behind the personal “bring five”
approach to peopling the first meeting is resonant with grassroots approaches in many movements. The phrase “bring five” was repeated across interviews. The status and involvement of the SVP mobilized other senior executives to show up and to consider becoming executive allies at Control Devices and other organizations, such as InsureCo and Heavy Industries. Many of our informants spoke of how his actions were powerful, moving, and personally legitimating for them, especially his invitation to his high status peers that they themselves could not reach and his explicit linkage of GLBT workplace issues to the civil rights movement. His story also illustrates the power of relationships not only for convening, but for promoting “noticing” of issues and actions in the ecosystem.

Another key story told and retold concerns the actions of the CEO of InsureCo. The GLBT employee group at InsureCo carefully cultivated the CEO and the SVP of HR. These activists were themselves moved by efforts elsewhere, as one explained: “[A woman] in human resources from MediaCo…just had the most empowering speech [at the first forum], and I think for the first time, people were asking questions.” The InsureCo CEO became a champion who offered direct and regular support for InsureCo’s GLBT employees, and employees at other companies mentioned that they experienced this support as validating for GLBT employees more generally. The CEO’s support for GLBT inclusion faced a critical test after Gay Pride Week activities were announced in the corporation-wide daily email newsletter. As the CEO recounted it, the content was a standard announcement: "The day before, the Garden Club had been in, that sort of thing." The Gay Pride announcement generated a furious backlash from the offices in Dallas and Atlanta:

Half the office in Dallas signed a petition addressed to me… I got on the airplane [to Dallas]…the next week…. I conducted eight one-hour meetings [with 50 employees each]. Let me tell you, that's [personal] growth…. By 10:00 the next morning everybody in the offices around the country knew exactly where we stood on this
issue... I hardly needed to go to Atlanta but... I ended up at that meeting and said, "I'm sorry...this is the way this company is going to run and if you are really uncomfortable with that then maybe you might be happier working someplace else."

The CEO explained that he saw his actions as both the right thing to do and as a savvy business move to prevent his company from becoming a “dinosaur” that could not recruit from nor design products for the GLBT community. He sometimes framed the DPBs issue as one for “unmarried partners,” and indeed opened the policy to unmarried heterosexual employees, to generate support:

I left it right on the line and in one week, the whole issue was gone.... As I look back now, if we had not done that [visit Dallas and Atlanta].... we could not have introduced benefits for unmarried partners without significant backlash. We got no backlash.

The story often culminates with the teller recalling how InsureCo hosted the next WPA forum, with the CEO as keynote speaker and an audience of over 500 participants. At this forum, the CEO memorably and rather dramatically announced InsureCo’s adoption of DPBs. The frequent retelling of this story became part of the lore of the ecosystem, one of several accounts that embodied how executive allies, events, critical incidents, and actions accumulated in support of the longer arc of change. The story is in effect a moment in an emerging cultural repertoire, providing a measure of appropriate behavior and a standard for social comparison.

For some who recount the story, it is an aspirational tale that stands in contrast to executive recalcitrance in their own company. For example, at Mega Manufacturing, one informant expressed frustration from making such a comparison. His words “as I’m sure you’ve heard” tacitly confirm that the retelling of this story was commonplace:

I still believe that issue of leadership is a big one…. No action, or a little action, is interpreted as no support…. When [InsureCo hosted the WPA Forum and] the InsureCo CEO comes down [to speak] at his [head] office to a group of five or six
hundred people, including management executives from other companies, and his first words are, as I'm sure you've heard, "Employees of this organization are our most valuable assets and gays and lesbians and transsexuals are amongst that group that we value highly and we wouldn't be successful if we didn't embrace them."

This informant continued with his account, moving the public statements of the CEO to the personal experience of the employees in ways that echo the opening injunction from C.W. Mills.

So, you know, they can be mere words, but if you're one of the employees sitting in that big audience, hearing that, all of a sudden you have the sense of belonging. "I'm not hated," [even] when we can't get meetings with our own executives. Those contrasts are very disconcerting.

Stories also circulated that described, in everyday language, essentially how board interlocks created ripples. At Heavy Industries, the SVP of HR had been ambivalent about whether GLBT issues were policy matters or personal matters. However, after not accepting several invitations to events sponsored by GLBT employees, the GLBT employee group persuaded her to attend a talk hosted by the WPA, featuring Karen Thompson, co-author of Why Can’t Sharon Kowalski Come Home? (Thompson and Andrzejewski, 1989). Karen’s partner of several years, Sharon, was in a coma after a car accident. Because Karen was not legally next of kin and had been prevented from visiting her partner by Sharon’s parents and the hospital staff, she could not participate in critical medical decisions. The Heavy Industries SVP explained that suddenly it “clicked,” with the idea of being kept from her husband in a similar situation feeling horrifying to her. She immediately came to believe that basic human rights were at stake, and she started to use her connections strategically. She created what she called her “Magic Circle:”

Maybe, if you got some movers and shakers from really good companies together to talk about it, we could figure out a way. And maybe if we all announced [DPBs], you know, four of us at once, it would take the heat off if they were worried about the press …. And that's how it started. ... I knew the VP of HR at [InsureCo].... His CEO
is on our board…. [That VP] said, “Sure, I'll come to the lunch. Makes sense to me.” …There was also some thought in this, since my CEO … is on [Control Devices's] board. … [I called around] and said, “I’d really like to see [us] do this.” … They were all struggling with, “How do we do this?”

Her nickname of “the Magic Circle” recurred across interviews. Tacit knowledge – that this issue is one of human rights, that corporate unity could generate legitimacy, that “wins” are at once inspiring and frustrating – moved across companies.

*Responding and inspiring: Call and answer chains.* Another striking way in which actions, interactions, and reactions ripple through the ecosystem is what we describe as “call and answer chains.” In some instances, an employee group’s straightforward pleas for help elicited advice and direct support from others in the ecosystem. Often, however, the responses in the ecosystem were indirect and asynchronous, less like a dyadic exchange than like a garbage can model (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972) of matching solutions, problems, and political opportunities.

One example can be found in the following sequence that involved employee groups from three different organizations, representing both more frustrated and more hopeful clusters. The contact person for the GLBT group for an organization in the Blocked and Blocked Off cluster was typically a lone activist or one of a very few members who were willing to be out at work or shoulder the organizing tasks. Some had “founded” a group only after attending a WPA workshop on GLBT employee group formation. They often found their efforts were blocked by decision-makers or unsupported even by other GLBT employees who they knew from outside work but who remained closeted at work. For example, a night shift factory employee at Pump Engineering was not permitted to post a notice on the factory bulletin board that presented ways for GLBT employees to contact one another safely. He explained:

[I wanted to start] pounding on the desk and say, “I've been working with this for three
years at Pump Engineering… You don't even have an EEO policy that says GLBT. Can't we start there? … It's been legislated, you know.”

While working the night shift often precluded his attending WPA events and left him feeling isolated, his plaintive request for guidance became known by WPA members through his community involvement and personal social networks. They recommended he put a notice in the local GLBT newspaper about how to join the GLBT employee group at his organization. This solution was mundane but effective, and his situation was referenced when the newspaper ad solution was shared with others and became a regularly recommended practice. Another “lone wolf,” who founded the GLBT employee group at Med Devices, recounted how someone from MinnCollege’s group relayed this advice, triggered by the Pump Engineering activist’s dilemma, at one of the WPA’s training sessions:

[The trainer who was from MinnCollege] said, “I think it is a good idea that you form a group. You can put an ad in the local gay paper that you are forming a group.”… I had no idea [who was gay] at work. Slowly, one by one, people started seeing the article and calling in.

The groups at both Pump Engineering and Med Devices reported experiences that located them in the Blocked and Blocked Off cluster, but their plight generated guidance and advice that percolated across the ecosystem, propelled by workplace, SMO, and community social networks. This generalized connectivity becomes the basis for innovative and sustained shared capacity. The ecosystem is stronger than any one set of ties in a single organization or even the connections among organizations within a cluster.

Our findings further underscore that it is not only the availability of strategies and tactics that facilitate reciprocity and learning. Expressions of frustration and inequitable treatment by blocked or frustrated groups also motivated groups in the Smooth Sailing and Hopeful clusters, strengthening their affective commitment to others in the ecosystem. An informant from
MinnCollege, in the Smooth Sailing cluster, reflected on others’ struggles with discrimination:

Why am I doing all of this corporate organizing? Why am I not organizing for the homeless gays and lesbians? … As I got to know folks, it was clear why...Because these are folks who were having a tremendous amount of discrimination at work and were getting so empowered and so energized by all of this [activism around DBPs], it was just incredible to watch.... The piece that clicked for me ... if one believes, which I still sort of do, that American business runs the world, if you change American business about how it deals with issues of diversity and sexual orientation, I don't think it is too grandiose to say that we are changing the world.

An informant from InsureCo, also in the Smooth Sailing cluster, noted that, after being the first to succeed in securing DPBs, her GLBT group did not stop their advocacy work. She explained that they remained energized by the belief that their better position in effect obligated them to continue to build ties, share stories, and create capacity for others. She described the impact on their innovation and outreach:

We created a professional speakers bureau. We didn't wait for diversity trainers to come in…It just wasn't gonna happen fast enough, and besides that, diversity trainers aren't necessarily gay or lesbian. The exposure, even though it was good…is going to be totally different…So we send a gay man, a lesbian, and a friend of the network to do presentations to approximately twenty to thirty people [at Insure Co and other organizations]. We just have an endless number of presentations lined up for the rest of the year.

Call and answer chains also built indirect capacity that was later leveraged by activists internally to their own organizations. People from other organizations were sometimes invited to speak on panels that InsureCo organized. For speakers from organizations still lobbying for DPBs, the speaking engagements helped hone their persuasive capacities and their nimbleness with terms like “EEO statement” and frames like “human rights issue,” recalling that most of these employees worked in accounting, marketing, operations, and other areas where HR parlance was not part of their job. Able to draw on frames in circulation via speakers bureaus, GLBT employees at UpperMidWest Bank, still questing for a host of changes including DPBs,
participated as panelists for one afternoon of a three-day diversity immersion that was required for all senior managers. As noted by one leader of the GLBT employee group:

The whole immersion process, and the [GLBT employees’] presentation … had a very significant impact on a large number of those senior executives. [The GLBT employees] received comments back … how [their personal stories] really shocked [the executives]. … Senior management was very much understanding of their issues and several … were very strong allies after that meeting.

For post-adopters, speakers bureaus pioneered discussions about “what next?”, including how to move advocacy beyond headquarters to remote locations where GLBT employees felt more vulnerable, how to move from DPBs to other types of benefits, and how to support the newly emerging issues for transgendered employees in the workplace.

Reciprocal awareness generated learning across competitors, with activists from one company sharing tactics with activists from competitor companies precisely as a strategy to stir interest. One GLBT group leader at Premier Bank explained how he was attempting to leverage UpperMidWest Bank’s apparent successes at their PRIDE Festival booth:

UpperMidWest …had personal bankers at their booth…. Next year we will…. The fact that UpperMidWest is doing something, you play off of it. You do it for all that it's worth…. If UpperMidWest did it [offered DPBs], Premier Bank would be forced to do it just to maintain parity…. Just the fact that I can show that these other major companies are supporting this effort puts pressure on [executives in my company] in the sense that, “We don't want to be first, but we don't want to be last.”

Employee activists kept a running tally of policy changes not only within their companies but across the inhabited ecosystem that they were watching.

Call and answer chains reveal symbiotic relationships among groups in heterogeneous states. Pleas for help and expressions of frustration from some places in the ecosystem served to sustain and animate the commitment of others who had seen more successes. These chains of action in turn feed the wisdom of experience back into the ecosystem, both tacitly through
continued engagement and explicitly through codified resources like speakers bureaus, PRIDE booths to attract customers, diversity fairs, and retellable stories.

**Naming and claiming: Challenges, experiments, and resolutions.** Distributed problem solving rippled across organizations. New patterns of engagement enabled discovery of shared challenges and some provisional solutions. In particular, we observed how employees learned to help allies overcome fear of stigmatization, refocus on small wins to sustain momentum, and frame responses to common challenges about the relevance of GLBT issues for the workplace.

Potential executive sponsors often feared associative stigma and reputation threat (Hannem, 2012; Ingram, Yue, and Rao, 2010; McDonnell and Werner, 2016). Requiring an official executive sponsor for an employee group was becoming common practice at the time of our interviews. Many organizations established diversity committees composed of leaders and sponsors for several employee groups (including those for women, African Americans, and others). Some GLBT employee groups in our sample struggled to find their place at this table because of fear of stigma by association. Seemingly natural allies from other employee groups (Scully, 2009) were distant, for example when the women’s group at Med Devices declined to co-host an event with the nascent GLBT group. Several interviewees observed that senior executives at their organization rushed to support other employee groups. In the panoply of diversity groups, the GLBT groups could be a “hot potato” for an executive sponsor. After the legendary SVP retired from Control Devices, the GLBT group found itself comparatively stymied as they struggled to enlist another high-level executive sponsor:

> As soon as these executive sponsors found out that they have to sponsor a group, they rushed and took whatever, whether they really believed in that group or not, as long as they didn't have to take on sponsoring our group.
Consequently, the Control Devices group appears as Blocked and Blocked Off and the story of their transition from early glory to frustration was often retold as a cautionary tale.

Identifying the fear of stigmatization among potential executive sponsors prompted uncoordinated experiments by different groups in the ecosystem. Some approaches gained traction as possible ways of gaining attention, legitimacy, and support from allies in the middle and upper executive levels. For example, even after the adoption of DPBs, the employee group at MediaCo struggled for legitimacy. Their experiment entailed joining with other diversity groups to put on a “diversity fair,” with information booths and activities, such as the African American employee group sharing information about how to recruit at historically black colleges. Aware of the cautionary tale from Control Devices, the GLBT group worried that no one would visit their booth, so they advanced the idea of creating “passports” for the diversity fair and encouraging all middle and top managers to get a “passport stamp” from every booth. This way, it became safe, and almost a game, for co-workers to visit the GLBT booth and use the passport stamp as an acceptable rationalization.

Another concrete example for dealing with fears of stigmatization entailed adding “and friends” to the GLBT group name. Imitating an organization from the broader social movement domain, called PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), many of the GLBT groups in our sample used the “friends and allies” convention both to create safe spaces for employees who were not yet out and to invite allies, especially those with GLBT family members. Sometimes one step toward a solution generated a new challenge that exceeded the groups’ capacities, as an activist from Med Devices explained:

One HR person in particular called us up, and he said, “I really enjoyed the PFLAG meeting. I am really willing to help in any way. Let me know if you need my help.” We haven't been able to figure out how we need his help… He has never gotten a call from us, which is unfortunate.
During times of frustration, refocusing on small wins was a practical tactic. Lobbying for a diverse set of small wins initially seen as partial steps toward the bigger prize of DPBs sometimes generated new ways to discuss the overarching issue of exposing heteronormative workplace assumptions and creating GLBT workplace equality. For example, many GLBT activists set their sights on “soft benefits,” such as being able to take a sick day when a same-sex partner was sick or letting a family member use the company car on the weekend. Because soft benefits were granted with fewer formal regulatory or bureaucratic processes than DPBs at several organizations, they provided an ideal “laboratory” for experimenting with ways to respond in the face of a perceived impossibility of securing DPBs. Tactics for adding sexual orientation and gender identity to the EEO policy also circulated in the ecosystem. By building a repertoire with a mix of strategies and resources accessible to the whole ecosystem, activists could select ones that best matched their organizational setting and could also report back, especially at WPA workshops, on positive impacts or unintended consequences.

A story that was frequently repurposed in the quest for soft benefits circulated with the shorthand label, “Dolores’s husband merely had a cold.” It was first told at a company-wide meeting on diversity strategies at MediaCo. The story contrasts the actual experiences of two employees: Dolores was able to stay home from work one day when her husband merely had a cold, while a gay man was denied a sick day to care for his partner who had just gotten home from the hospital. Many middle managers have some flexibility in defining what constitutes acceptable uses of a sick day, whereas the DPBs decision is not theirs to make. Therefore, this story offers a vivid way to tell colleagues who are skeptical, or simply unaware, about a small change that could enhance fairness.
Interviewees also recounted stories they found useful for answering frequent challenges, sometimes hostile sometimes simply curious, about why GLBT issues were relevant for the workplace rather than simply private matters. A simple rejoinder was, “whose picture do you have on your credenza?” The idea was to remind heterosexual employees how easy it was for them to have family pictures at work – bringing the private into the public – in contrast to the risks for GLBT employees. The phrasing became common, such that the quirkiness of the word “credenza” was often noted in the retelling, becoming a culturally-situated joke. Through mutual engagement, employee activists could share and experiment with packaging effective responses.

Other stories in this category include one where the top salespeople at Control Devices received a holiday cruise for each winning employee and a guest. When a gay man was among the top salespeople, rather than let him bring his same sex partner as his guest, the CEO made an on-the-spot ruling that the guest had to be a spouse (thereby excluding a straight man and his fiancée as well). Tellers of this story emphasized that incentives that were not GLBT-inclusive were hardly incentivizing. Another story related a gay man’s dilemma at one of InsureCo’s off-site team-building retreats where an opening ice-breaker exercise was to write the name of one’s “Hollywood dream date” on an index card and put it in a bowl; cards would be pulled, and the group would guess who wrote that name. The “Hollywood dream date” story narrated the unique challenge for the GLBT employee of choosing among undesirable options: explicitly attempting to pass as a straight man by writing a heteronormative response, a choice hardly consistent with the goals of authenticity and team-building; coming out on the spot, which involves a high level of stress and questions of trust; or leaving the card blank. The employee chose to leave the card blank, with the result that his next performance review noted he was “stand off-ish.” Informants
who reported using this story recounted that there was often an “aha” moment for their listeners, who saw the unfairness when promotion prospects were at stake.

All these stories show ways in which heteronormative assumptions are taken-for-granted, and how sexual orientation, in fact, already permeates the workplace. On any given occasion, when a response was needed, a GLBT employee activist or ally could draw on the one most suited for the specific situation and organizational context. Experimentation creates multiple options. The common thread in these stories is reframing the question of why sexual orientation is a workplace issue, shifting it from allegations of inappropriateness to a focus on fairness.

Interestingly, analysis of our informants’ lived experiences of challenging social injustice in the workplace foreshadows the subsequent reframing of GLBT workplace equality more generally in society. Returning to our data on the HRC’s efforts to ameliorate workplace injustice, we find that issues that were broached in the early moves of these activists were systematically codified as factors in the HRC’s Corporate Equity Index over a period of years. For example, while we observed activists discovering the idea of “soft benefits” as a place to experiment with provisional early wins in 1996, ten years later HRC added a new item to its scorecard: “Has parity across other ‘soft’ benefits for partners.” This finding is further developed in our discussion of implications for broader social exchange below.

DISCUSSION

There is a large and growing literature at the intersection of organizations and social movements (e.g., Davis, McAdam, Scott, Zald, 2005.). Interactionist studies reveal inhabited change processes within particular organizations, exploring how both proponents and blockers of change import social movement tactics into their organizations to advance their efforts (Scully and Segal, 2002; Kellogg, 2009, 2011) and integrating micro and macro institutional accounts
(Hallett and Ventresca 2006; Hallett, Shulman, and Fine 2009). Research on the journey from “streets to suites” traces “how movements penetrate the relatively closed polity of private organizations” (Weber, Rao, Thomas, 2009:106). These studies share our interest in how activist groups coalesce to make claims, build capacity, engage in cultural entrepreneurship, or frame issues (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001; Werner and Cornelissen 2014). We widened the lens, attending to the layered embedding of activists who participate in employee groups that are situated in organizations and in a web of linkages across a heterogeneous population of organizations from multiple sectors and industries. We show how actions, interactions, and reactions coalesce in and into an inhabited ecosystem characterized by shared meaning and common purpose that creates the conditions under which the diffusion of a discrete practice is transformed into advocacy for broader social justice that captures the essence of a larger social movement.

We uncover how the activists with heterogeneous experiences and perspectives pursuing their goals in coordinated and uncoordinated ways accumulate and share resources that support and propel change. Research has shown how change agents build institutional scaffolding that supports change (Mair, Wolf and Seelos, 2016), experiment and find allies in “relational spaces” (Kellogg, 2009) and work in the interstices (Funari, 2014). We show how activists using similar tactics in a relational space characterized by flows and interactions within, across, and in the interstices of multiple organizations build the capacity for sustained change efforts in pursuit of broader social justice. We describe this relational space as an inhabited ecosystem to underscore the relational mechanisms (Campbell, 2005) through which lived experiences of noticing, mutual awareness, and shared empathy enable “doing things together” (Becker, 1986; Hallett and Ventresca, 2006) to build and sustain the engagement and advocacy that propels broader social
change. An inhabited ecosystem perspective also foregrounds the implications for research
design and methods that simultaneously attend to micro-level mechanisms and macro-level
outcomes (Haedicke and Hallett 2016; Wright, Nyberg and Grant, 2012; Zilber 2014). After
discussing theoretical and methodological implications of our inhabited ecosystem perspective
for understanding social change, we close with implications for how inhabited ecosystems may
help advance our understanding of transformative change in support of social justice.

Relational Mechanisms: Building and Sustaining Capacity for Change

We observed that affective ties sustained action across the inhabited ecosystem. In
exploring the shared interest in diffusion mechanisms at the intersection of social movements
and organization studies, Campbell (2005) proposes that relational mechanisms are
underdeveloped in contrast to structural and cognitive mechanisms. By attending to the lived
experiences of activists, we are able to propose important but understudied relational
mechanisms: Reciprocal awareness, empathy for dispirited activists, investment in other
activists’ battles, and commitment to broader collective change.

Our mapping of reciprocal awareness shows how cognitive and structural mechanisms
for diffusing tactics and frames are sustained. Compassion, hope, empathy, or resilience are
affective responses triggered by mutual awareness. Structural and cognitive mechanisms are
largely transactional – a frame, resource, or tactic employed by one actor is adopted by another.
Relational mechanisms, however, are not transactional. They are steeped in durable affective
ties that connect players in the landscape and that grow stronger when noticing moves beyond
reciprocal awareness to mutual investment in the experience of others in the ecosystem.
Activists in pre-adopter organizations find hope and inspiration in the success of others, and
post-adopters who remain cognizant of their relative fortune are motivated because of their
efforts on behalf of others. Our analysis uncovers distributed experimentation and engagement facilitated through, even motivated by, relational mechanisms.

The nature of these relational mechanism is also important. In our findings, we use the imagery of ripples to convey that these relational interactions are not always consistent with conventional or formal networks such as straightforward dyadic ties, but rather often manifest in more generalized forms of reciprocity and interaction that might be missed in standard analyses of diffusion of change. Identifying these relational mechanisms, and the heterogeneous lived experiences underpinning them, resulted from conceptualizing our research context not as set of organizations at risk for adoption, but as an inhabited ecosystem comprising activists embedded in employee groups embedded in organizations.

**Inhabited Ecosystems: The Varied Terrain of Change Efforts**

We mapped an inhabited ecosystem by tracing how activists in 24 organizations noticed, responded to, and motivated one another. With this map, we could see with more granularity how change diffuses across a bounded set of corporate and public sector organizations, and how it propels more substantive transformation in support of social justice. The interstitial spaces between actors and organizations (Furnari, 2014) are animated by the lively exchange of tactics and frames that facilitates the development of a dynamic and evolving meaning system that is shared yet not homogenous. Activists from different social spaces in the inhabited ecosystem have different perspectives on the nature and progress of the change effort.

Organizations that have already adopted a policy, normally of limited interest to diffusion studies, sometimes fade away after the adopted practice becomes routine. However, we find activists in post-adopter organizations are sometimes motivated to do two things of interest to our understanding of change processes: inspire other organizations and expand the change effort.
The “Nixon in China” effect documents how unlikely first movers legitimate and stimulate next adopters (Briscoe and Safford, 2007). We illuminate the microinteractions underlying this finding, tracing how the stories of unlikely first movers, such as a big insurance company, become cultural resources. We show how those moves are leveraged by employee groups as both compelling frames and commonly told myths of unlikely heroism that are shared across the ecosystem and actively stewarded as model organizations in the post-adoption phase. Someone had to notice Nixon as a player, provide him a script, care about China as an issue, and continue telling the story.

Post-adopters also help in understanding how an issue evolve or expands during diffusion (Fiss, Kennedy, and Davis, 2012). While it is of some interest that domestic partner benefits were reconfigured as an issue, of much greater interest for social change towards justice is our discovery of how diffusion became transformation, with the issues expanding beyond the initial DPBs to include other benefits, executive sponsorship, transgender rights, and LGBTQ-positive culture and community engagement.

The inhabited ecosystem perspective shifts our conceptualization of organizations from atomistic entities comprising a risk set for adoption to collective entities peopled by relationally interconnected activists and employee groups. This shift enables us to look beyond the diffusion trajectory of one practice like the adoption of DPBs, to see how the arrows of change move across the space, propelled by actors with reciprocal awareness and shared empathy who learned new ways of engaging, fostering mutuality, finding and sharing political opportunities, and building distributed capacity. Conceptualizing an inhabited ecosystem that supports distributed capacity enables interrogating processes of transformation that transcend individual activists or organizations.
In an inhabited ecosystem, savvy insider knowledge about what levers to pull (Meyerson and Scully, 1995; Wright, Nybert and Grant, 2012) becomes not just insider knowledge but a shared repertoire of tactics that move and evolve between and across organizations. Activists with insider tactical knowledge have been characterized as limited to their parochial setting (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016), but situated in an inhabited ecosystem, they can offer and expand their insider knowledge, ask for or provide help in chains of calls and responses, and watch how others’ insider knowledge ramifies. Activists’ experimental moves, like writing a manual for change agents or telling a story about why so-called “soft benefits” favor straight employees, ripple around the ecosystem, getting adapted along the way. Small failures reverberate, too, such that activists who attempt changes in organizations and are thwarted then fuel some of the anger, empathic alliances, and sheer determination that motivate further change efforts by others.

Thus, the change effort in the inhabited ecosystem remains partial, ongoing, incomplete, and contested, but also connected and relational. We find that the frustrating incompleteness of change spurs innovation in strategies, practices, and persistence. Non-adopter organizations vary tremendously as settings for activist work. Activists from groups in the Frustrated Engagement and Hopeful clusters offer new approaches to supporting LGBTQ-friendly workplaces, sometimes looking beyond DPBs of necessity. These activists may be like the slow learners (Herriott, Levinthal, and March, 1985) at the nexus of exploration (of new tactics) and exploitation (of allies’ tactics): “Slower learning allows for greater exploration of possible alternatives” (March, 1991:76). For studies of how diffusion propels and undergirds the longer arc of social change, it will be important to take into account the active work happening in non-adopter organizations. Activists in these organizations, and their presence as a motivator for some post-adopter organizations, undertake actions that build the capacity of the inhabited
ecosystem for tackling tough challenges. These non-adopter organizations are more often depicted as stuck in a queue, waiting until factors like industry density of adoption shift in their favor and they then adopt. That portrait is too passive for the vigor of efforts in our non-adopter settings that were a locus of innovation that expands diffusion into transformation. The actions we report may well be considered “robust action” (Eccles and Nohria 1992; Padgett and Ansell 1993; Ferraro et al 2015), even as they are stitched together from a mix of moves that are sometimes brave and sure but often tentative and experimental.

**Inhabited Ecosystems: Implications for Studying Change**

Our study shows how the lived experiences of activists fall outside the discrete units or sampling frames researchers often employ in studies of change that emphasize either diffusion- or movement-focused research designs. The diffusion literature has an abiding interest in modeling early adopters, late adopters, and the rate of uptake of change. That interest likely stems from its use in the literature on innovation (Rogers 1976, 2010) where adopting earlier or later is a vital differentiating factor among organizations. In contrast, the literature on social movements is interested in modeling the spread of social justice improvements. While the toolkit of diffusion is handy for this purpose, whether an adopter moves earlier or later is less important than the entire social system expanding its capacity. Capacity often expands through the hard-won character of change in a contested space, arguably making late adopters more important than they are in innovation studies. This different emphasis means that diffusion models focused on adoption rates and risk sets, while handy, do not fully serve the overarching interest in transformative change. We move beyond the methodological conventions of traditional diffusion studies, which typify render post-adopters as no longer interesting, pre-adopters as sites of potential but not actualization, and saturation of a space with a particular
change as the goal. Our inhabited ecosystem view traces a variant of diffusion, as changes and
tactics ricochet across a set of organizations, but takes a more expansive view of how the
heterogeneity and simultaneity of change efforts nets up to greater capacity for sustained
engagement, activism, and more transformative change.

In classic studies of diffusion, the organizations in the dataset stand as equal empirical
entities, with the next domino in the risk set ready to fall based on a set of deductive structural
factors. Our lens of an inhabited ecosystem allows us to see a heterogeneous set of
organizations, each peopled by employees and employee groups that have very varied
experiences and perceptions of the diffusion process, each other, and their environment. These
varied experiences and perceptions become manifest in different forms of action, reaction, and
interaction within and across organizational boundaries. When challenger organizations are
heterogeneous, the overall social movement may be strengthened by both their direct and indirect
linkages and efforts (Bertels, Hoffman, and DeJordy 2014). Our research demonstrates that such
heterogeneity cannot be adequately characterized by organizational variables such as industry;
rather, it reflects the distinctive perceptions and experiences of activists operating inside, outside,
and between organizations who occupy heterogeneous spaces, with varied opportunity structures.

The inhabited ecosystem view keeps the macro focus on broad social change that is a
feature of large sample studies; however, it is grounded in microinteractions among activists
multiply embedded in that macro context. It permits us to see typically invisible players – active
post-adopters, stuck post-adopters, and innovative pre-adopters – who not only propel adoption
of the singular policy change but expand the nature of the overall change process. Social
movements are more than an exogenous spark, which may have a limited half-life of efficacy
(Carlos, Sine, Lee, and Haveman, 2014). Instead, social movements are – at times - interwoven
into and even born from organizational activity. Activism “in and around organizations” (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016) may occur fluidly both in organizations and around them, and can also emerge between and through them from a variety of cross-organizational linkages, personnel flows among workplaces, and social movement organizations created by and populated from workplace organizations. Broadly situated in activity across organizations and movements, and beyond them, an inhabited ecosystem view creates an opening for research that foregrounds meaningful change around justice issues salient to the lived experiences of the inhabitants.

**Expanded Capacity for Broad Social Change**

The ultimate aim of our inquiry is to understand social change that redresses injustice. By looking at an inhabited ecosystem, we see prospects for change as well as ongoing puzzles that can direct future research. Without claiming causal connection, we were fascinated by our finding that the innovations in the local inhabited ecosystem presaged changes in the scorecard used by the national advocacy group, the HRC, to rate corporations for LGBTQ supportiveness. Beyond the previously identified parallel between our activists discovering and lobbying for “soft benefits” when the obstacles to DPBs seemed steep and the inclusion of equitable provision of “soft benefits” on HRC’s checklist in 2006, we also found activist groups struggling to find a top executive sponsor in the late 1990s while the presence of employee groups supported by a sponsor became a HRC Scorecard criterion in 2002. When activists in bellwether organizations were getting started, and when activists in lagging organizations needed a new focus, attention turned to the organization’s EEO statement and whether it included gender identity. Speakers bureaus began giving presentations on transgender issues in the workplace. Transgender inclusion was added to the HRC scorecard in 2006 and expanded in 2012. The arc of the broader
change effort reflected in the HRC Scorecard’s evolution itself mirrors our inhabited ecosystem’s shift from diffusion of a discrete practice to transformative social change.

Future studies could move beyond the geographically proximate ecosystem of our study to examine inhabited ecosystems that are not co-located and that craft connections across places, perhaps via social media technologies, as well as across nation states for activism on global issues (Tarrow, 2001). Bonds of engagement and options for experimentation may form differently when mediated virtually than when activists and their allies can meet and strategize in person, but perhaps still meaningfully. Alternatively, it may be that local and embodied action characterizes inhabited ecosystems, and a wider geographic lens will reveal multiple, concurrent geographically-based inhabited ecosystems co-creating national and transnational change efforts (Castells, 2015). Researchers might pay particular attention to “groups of groups,” such as the Out & Equal national workplace advocacy organization, also born in the late 1990s, which linked local advocacy efforts through annual national forums for exchanging best practices. The inhabited ecosystem may be local in its nature, but amenable to linkage with other inhabited ecosystems, a topic for further investigation.

Ecosystems are also embedded in state and local legal systems. These local regulatory regimes and political struggles themselves propel national legislation efforts (Rubstobva, DeJordy, Zald, and Glynn, 2010). Although our study did not interrogate this embeddedness, the legal system began to change as the ecosystem we studied evolved, and the endogeneity of legal and policy advocacy by workplace and other activists could be added to future studies of inhabited ecosystems (Edelman 2016). For example, while studies of social change seldom consider reversals, our study includes an organization that had previously obtained DPBs but then lost them because of a political referendum. This story was often noted by our informants.
Research on not only how change gets “undone” but also how such reversals ripple across an ecosystem may prove quite generative in understanding their effect on the arc of social change.

Employer-based activism for DPBs surged forward when national legislative battles over ENDA (Employment Non-Discrimination Act) were highly contested and blocked in 1996. Employer-based efforts generated new allies, foreshadowing a then completely unforeseeable future, where over 300 corporations filed amicus briefs with the United States Supreme Court in 2013 in support of legal recognition of marriage equality for same-sex couples. This example shows organizations doing more than responding to social movements but becoming an active participant in them, a topic ripe for additional research.

Personal troubles and public policy issues inform each other. We return to the injunction from C. Wright Mills in our opening: “Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles – and to the problems of the individual life.” Legislative defeats and harsh contestation continue, but in the 25 years since Lotus Development Corporation offered domestic partner benefits in 1992, the momentum has been toward broader change that promotes social justice. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., paraphrasing Theodore Parker, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”
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Table 1: Codes for What Ecosystem Inhabitants Describe They See

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<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Successes, e.g., Support for GLBT Charities</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failures</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Momentum</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence to use Lessons</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints, e.g., union or public opposition</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibilities</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: S = Strong; C = Clear; M = Moderate; W = Weak; P = Past (but no longer); N = Not seen; N/A = Not available

*Italicized items capture things seen external to the informants’ organization*
Table 2: Results of Factor Analysis

All variable loadings with a magnitude > 0.5 are in **bold**

*Variables capturing things seen external to the organization are italicized*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Factor 1: Support, Structure, &amp; Possibilities</th>
<th>Factor 2: Constraints and Isolation</th>
<th>Factor 3: Powerful opponents &amp; Structural Hindrances</th>
<th>Factor 4: Stagnation</th>
<th>Factor 5: Lack of Skills or usable lessons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organized core membership</td>
<td><strong>0.876</strong></td>
<td>-0.098</td>
<td>-0.097</td>
<td>-0.235</td>
<td>-0.247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership allies</td>
<td><strong>0.875</strong></td>
<td>0.214</td>
<td>-0.300</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>-0.081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal recognition &amp; support</td>
<td><strong>0.796</strong></td>
<td>-0.109</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td>-0.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibilities for success</td>
<td><strong>0.646</strong></td>
<td>-0.314</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>-0.400</td>
<td><strong>0.099</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived possibilities other than DPBs</td>
<td><strong>0.552</strong></td>
<td>-0.284</td>
<td>-0.331</td>
<td>-0.382</td>
<td>0.240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to local advocates</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>-<strong>0.869</strong></td>
<td>-0.083</td>
<td>-0.246</td>
<td>-0.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to SMOs</td>
<td>-0.089</td>
<td>-<strong>0.792</strong></td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>-0.261</td>
<td>-0.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to other organizations</td>
<td>0.340</td>
<td>-<strong>0.749</strong></td>
<td>-0.134</td>
<td>-0.104</td>
<td>-0.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints, e.g., union or public opposition</td>
<td>0.397</td>
<td><strong>0.560</strong></td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>-0.428</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer allies, e.g., diversity groups</td>
<td>0.220</td>
<td>-<strong>0.501</strong></td>
<td>0.098</td>
<td>-0.463</td>
<td>0.075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership opponents</td>
<td>-0.078</td>
<td>-0.200</td>
<td><strong>0.911</strong></td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>-0.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural constraints, e.g. gatekeeping</td>
<td>-0.149</td>
<td>0.152</td>
<td><strong>0.874</strong></td>
<td>-0.047</td>
<td>0.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failures</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.459</td>
<td><strong>0.589</strong></td>
<td>-0.190</td>
<td>0.261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>-0.137</td>
<td>0.140</td>
<td>-<strong>0.883</strong></td>
<td>-0.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Momentum</td>
<td>0.272</td>
<td>-0.136</td>
<td>-0.107</td>
<td>-<strong>0.840</strong></td>
<td>-0.313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other successes, e.g., support for GLBT Charities</td>
<td>0.454</td>
<td>-0.293</td>
<td>-0.414</td>
<td>-<strong>0.507</strong></td>
<td>-0.354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know how</td>
<td>0.176</td>
<td>-0.282</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>-0.157</td>
<td><strong>-0.872</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence to use lessons</td>
<td>0.283</td>
<td>-0.191</td>
<td>-0.214</td>
<td>-0.367</td>
<td><strong>-0.721</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Analytic clusters of employee groups, by relationship to the change effort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Employee groups in this cluster are from these organizations:</th>
<th>Characteristic factors: *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 1</strong>&lt;br&gt;Blocked and Blocked Off</td>
<td>Best Baker 0&lt;br&gt;Control Devices 0&lt;br&gt;County Government 0&lt;br.Engine Tooling, Inc. 0&lt;br&gt;Local Public Library 1/0&lt;br&gt;Municipal Government 0</td>
<td>Constrains and isolation (Factor 2):&lt;br&gt;( \mu = 1.157; \sigma = 0.419; \mu/\sigma = 2.76 )&lt;br&gt;Powerful opponents/structural hindrances (3):&lt;br&gt;( \mu = 0.897; \sigma = 0.494; \mu/\sigma = 1.82 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 2</strong>&lt;br&gt;Smooth Sailing</td>
<td>Associated Charities 0&lt;br&gt;Big City Media 1&lt;br&gt;Discount Retailer, Co 0&lt;br&gt;Heavy Industries 1&lt;br&gt;InsureCo 1&lt;br&gt;MinnCollege 0&lt;br&gt;Pediatric Health Care 1</td>
<td>Powerful opponents/structural hindrances (3):&lt;br&gt;( \mu = -0.965; \sigma = 0.236; \mu/\sigma = 4.08 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 3</strong>&lt;br&gt;Frustrated Engagement</td>
<td>Consumer Products Corp 0&lt;br&gt;MedDevices 0&lt;br&gt;Mega Manufacturing 0&lt;br&gt;Nationwide Health Coverage 0&lt;br&gt;Pump Engineering Co 0</td>
<td>Constraints and isolation (2):&lt;br&gt;( \mu = -0.902; \sigma = 0.319; \mu/\sigma = 2.83 )&lt;br&gt;Powerful opponents/structural hindrances (3):&lt;br&gt;( \mu = 0.745; \sigma = 0.377; \mu/\sigma = 1.97 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 4</strong>&lt;br&gt;One and Done</td>
<td>Atlas Health Care 1&lt;br&gt;Consolidated Health Care 1&lt;br&gt;Foster Family Foundation 1</td>
<td>Stagnation (4):&lt;br&gt;( \mu = 1.676; \sigma = 0.270; \mu/\sigma = 6.19 )&lt;br&gt;Support, Structure, and Possibilities (1):&lt;br&gt;( \mu = 0.889; \sigma = 0.533; \mu/\sigma = 1.67 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 5</strong>&lt;br&gt;Hopeful</td>
<td>Credit Card Co. 0&lt;br&gt;Premier Bank 0&lt;br&gt;UpperMidWest Bank 0</td>
<td>Stagnation (4):&lt;br&gt;( \mu = -0.916; \sigma = 0.273; \mu/\sigma = 3.35 )&lt;br&gt;Lack of skills, confidence, &amp; usable lessons (5):&lt;br&gt;( \mu = -0.505; \sigma = 0.219; \mu/\sigma = 2.30 )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: 1=adopter of DPBs, 0=non-adopter, 1/0=adopted then rescinded

* Notes:

To assess characteristic factors, we first calculated mean (\( \mu \)) and standard deviation (\( \sigma \)) of factor scores for the employee groups comprising the cluster and ratio (\( \mu/\sigma \)).

We report all factors with a mean absolute value greater than 0.5 and a mean-to-standard deviation ratio greater than 1.66.

Negative loadings are italicized.
Appendix I:
Sample of Organizations by Sector, Industry/Type, and DPB Adopter Status (N=24)

*All names are pseudonyms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Industry / Type</th>
<th>Domestic Partner Benefits (DPB) status as of July 1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DPB Adopter (n=7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate (n=14)</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CreditCardCo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>InsureCo *</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Premier Bank</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UpperMidWestBank</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Big City Media *</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Engine Tooling</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heavy Industries *</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mega Manufacturing</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pump Engineering</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Best Baker *</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer Products Corp *</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discount Retailer</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Control Devices *</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Med Devices *</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Profit (n=7)</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MinnCollege</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Atlas Health Care</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consolidated Health Care</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nationwide Health Coverage</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pediatric Health Care</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropy</td>
<td>Associated Charities</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foster Family Foundation</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government (n=3)</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>County Government</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local Public Library</td>
<td>X **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Municipal Government</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: * = Headquarters for private sector company  ** = Adopted then rescinded
Founded in 1892, the University of Rhode Island is one of eight land, urban, and sea grant universities in the United States. The 1,200-acre rural campus is less than ten miles from Narragansett Bay and highlights its traditions of natural resource, marine and urban related research. There are over 14,000 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in seven degree-granting colleges representing 48 states and the District of Columbia. More than 500 international students represent 59 different countries. Eighteen percent of the freshman class graduated in the top ten percent of their high school classes. The teaching and research faculty numbers over 600 and the University offers 101 undergraduate programs and 86 advanced degree programs. URI students have received Rhodes, Fulbright, Truman, Goldwater, and Udall scholarships. There are over 80,000 active alumnae.

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The creation of this working paper series has been funded by an endowment established by William A. Orme, URI College of Business Administration, Class of 1949 and former head of the General Electric Foundation. This working paper series is intended to permit faculty members to obtain feedback on research activities before the research is submitted to academic and professional journals and professional associations for presentations.

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