

**Building Purposeful Organisations from the Inside Out:
A Feminist's Exploration of Experiential Agency**

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Ella Scheepers
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Supervisor: Dr. Warren Nilsson, Associate Professor

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Abstract

Building Purposeful Organisations from the Inside Out: A Feminist's Exploration of Experiential Agency

Social purpose organisations across the world are experimenting with new possibilities and challenging power for more just and caring societies (Lynch et al, 2021). This research examines how organisations fighting for social change live those goals internally instead of perpetuating the inequality and injustice they aim to fight (Nilsson & Paddock, 2014). This research seeks to build on theoretical insights into the emerging field of agency and positive institutional work (Nilsson, 2015), focusing on the experience involved in pursuing social goods (Hampel et al, 2017). It draws on developing literature on institutional work and its transformatory possibilities, in conversation with feminist institutionalism (Mackay, 2009; Kenny, 2011; Montoya, 2016) and politics of care literature (Toronto, 1991; Woodly et al, 2021; Lynch et al, 2021), to offer a more experiential understanding of agency in institutions. To do this, this research also reignites a multiscale conceptualisation of power in new institutionalism to reflect the deeper societal forces at play that affect the institutional work of organisations and the individuals that experience them.

Insight was built via a qualitative inquiry and empirical exploration into the practices and experiences of agency that constitute and maintain experiential legitimacy in three social purpose organisations in South Africa. Experiential legitimacy refers to how organisational members perceive that their *lived, subjective experiences* reflect—or fail to reflect—the organisation's espoused social purpose. The inquiry shows that organisation members felt most connected to each other and their organisation's purpose through specific practices, such as surfacing subjective experiences, communing as whole persons, and dialoguing around purpose and meaning. It was evident that the question of how experiential legitimacy is accomplished was linked to organisation members' experience of agency as they work to become more conscious and effective participants (Lawrence et al, 2011) in the mutual ongoing inquiry involved in pursuing social goods with a collaborative spirit (Nilsson, 2015).

My findings highlight how a deeper understanding of power, experience and agency underscores the transformatory potential of institutional work demonstrating alternative modes of relating inside organisations (Benschop, 2021), specifically building on feminist ideas of agency as a situated, embodied and relational phenomenon (McNay, 2016). By engaging in positive institutional work, organisation members deepen their experience of each other and their organisation's purpose. This research cultivates the idea of *experiential agency* as the iterative collective process through which actors connect their social purpose goals to their everyday experiences through positive institutional work.

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Compulsory Declaration

- 1 This dissertation has been submitted to Turnitin (or equivalent similarity and originality checking software) and I confirm that my supervisor has seen my report and any concerns revealed by such have been resolved with my supervisor.
- 2 I certify that I have received Ethics approval (if applicable) from the Commerce Ethics Committee.
- 3 This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree in this or any other university. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Student Number	SCHELL004
Student Name	Ella Scheepers
Signature of Student	
Date:	

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Problem

Around the world, there have been many examples of people striving for change in the face of social and economic exclusion (Msimang, 2014; Sen, 2000), increasing wealth inequalities (Piketty, 2013), and the effects of climate change (Guggenheim, 2006). They are building movements of people from all walks of life who are imagining and creating a different world. This renewed energy and call for action is not without tensions and anxieties, the locus of which is linked to exclusions and silence particularly around the structural challenges of the intersections of race, global capitalism, and patriarchy (Nazneen & Okech, 2021). Part of this movement are social purpose organisations specifically working toward social purpose goals such as justice, equality and freedom. This research looks at the ways in which people *inside* these organisations do (and do not) experience their shared social purpose in their everyday organisational life.

Although individuals, driven by their personal and shared social purpose, have worked to build impactful organisations for social change, they are still faced by serious internal challenges. Harmonising the multiplicity of identities, approaches, priorities and institutional baggage is incredibly complex. Over the last 10 years, in the wake of #MeToo, there has been a global surfacing of harmful experiences of power and privilege (Jaffe, 2018). There are a myriad of examples as women in social purpose organisations in South Africa (Akoob, Allison, & Collison, 2018) and globally come forward with similar stories of abuses of power and sexual harassment by well-known leaders. These stories are a stark reminder of the disconnect between the social purposes organisations espouse and the experience of those inside them, where power and privilege play out in abusive ways, often without repercussion. In response, there has been a global renewal of activism and practice emerging as organisation members demonstrate “they have had enough of sexist oppression and are actively engaged in resisting it” (Bell et al, 2019:5).

When Marina Sitrin in *Joyful Militancy* (Montgomery & bergman, 2017) asks ‘why do we [organisation members] keep coming back to these spaces?’, her answer is:

“It is both a fairly large and abstract concept, and at the same time a very simple, direct, and emotive one. How do we feel when we participate in a movement or group? **What are our relationships to others in the group? Does it feel open? Caring? Social? Is there trust?**”

Much depends on the nature and experience of power and care which imbue these organisations. And there is hope. Inspired by organisers, like adrienne maree brown, I join those who are actively exploring how we “grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for” (brown, 2019:14). Organisation members are collectively experimenting with, and relearning what it means to be in relationship in organisation, and unlearning neoliberal ways of being that individualise, create competition and alienate them from one another and their shared purpose. By creating space for people to bring their voices and surface their different experiences, by engaging in courageous dialogue, and by attending to the emotional well-being of those doing this work (Horn, 2020), these organisations begin the work of building more caring organisations from the inside out.

This research stems from a real-world concern as organisation members actively question the hypocrisy (and contradictions) within their organisations, and seek ways to reconnect with each other and their shared purpose. This requires grappling with the multiscalar power dynamics at play. It explores organisation members’ experiences of power, working to uncover whose voices are heard (and whose are not), whose experiences are deemed valid (and whose are not), and why. It explores experiences of agency, where organisation members have challenged and negotiated and played with power that is often unseen and difficult to negotiate. It explores daily collective practices that connect ideas of justice and freedom to the lived realities of the members within organisations, through moments of celebration, connection, care, recognising that the social change sector needs to do this if it wants to experience and embody the change it is trying to make in the world. Through this research, I seek to explore how paying attention to the *experiential nature of organisations* might cultivate more just and caring organisational cultures that are aligned to their social change work (Scheepers & Lakhani, 2020) and ultimately strengthen their efforts to advance social change (Nilsson & Paddock, 2014).

1.2 Purpose and Importance of this Project

This research has a dual purpose: grounded in feminist theory, it is both a research paradigm and political project (Mügge et al, 2018).

1.2.1 Theory building: A Research paradigm

This research is situated at the intersection of **institutional work** and **feminist theory**, drawing from both to build a framework attentive to power, agency, and lived experience. Institutional work, a subfield of institutional theory, explores how actors create, maintain, and disrupt the institutions they inhabit. Feminist theory, particularly feminist institutionalism, extends this inquiry by showing how power operates through everyday relations and embodied experience. Together, they make possible a richer understanding of how institutions are enacted, felt, and transformed in practice.

The study contributes to debates within institutional work by addressing its persistent concern with agency and power. Scholars have noted that much institutional work research focuses on “the experience of *doing* institutional work itself, rather than on the *kind of work* involved in pursuing experiential institutional end goals” (Nilsson, 2015). Responding to this, Nilsson and others have proposed the concept of *positive institutional work*, defined as “the creation or maintenance of institutional patterns that express mutually constitutive experiential and social goods” (Nilsson, 2015:372). Such goods—freedom, equality, inclusivity—are experiential because they relate to “personal experiences of fulfilment by organisational members,” and social because they support “the long-term sustainability of people, organisations, society, and the environment” (Nilsson, 2015:372). Positive institutional work thus centres the subjective, affective, and moral dimensions of institutional life.

Feminist theory complements this perspective by placing **power** and **relationality** at the centre of institutional analysis (Kenny & MacKay, 2009). Feminist institutionalism recognises that institutions are not neutral containers but are shaped by hierarchies that privilege certain identities and norms. As Montoya (2016:374) warns, treating institutions as external to society risks obscuring how they “actively discriminate” and “create inhospitable environments based on hegemonic [frequently white, heterosexual, cisgendered, able-bodied] norms.” Feminist institutionalism has made these dynamics visible, yet it has paid less attention to the affective and embodied processes through which power is lived and potentially transformed. This study builds on that foundation, bringing feminist theories of experience, care, and relational agency (McNay, 2016; Ahmed, 2017; Tronto, 2013) into dialogue with institutional work. Doing so reveals how power is not only structural but also affective—circulating through everyday organisational interactions and embodied practices.

Much of the existing institutional literature still approaches **legitimacy** and **agency** as cognitive or rational phenomena, achieved through rule conformity, discursive alignment, or strategic action (Lawrence et al., 2011; Thelen & Conrad, 2016). Legitimacy is treated as a property that institutions possess or lose, and agency as an individual's intentional capacity to act upon structures. These perspectives privilege formal and symbolic dimensions while overlooking the felt, experiential qualities of institutional life. This research revisits these assumptions through emerging scholarship on *experiential legitimacy*. It advances a feminist reading of legitimacy and agency as dynamic, relational, and embodied processes, drawing on Nilsson (2015), McNay (2016), and Ahmed (2017) to frame institutions as affective worlds continually enacted through relational practice.

Within this framework, **experiential legitimacy** refers to the perception among organisational members that their lived experience aligns with the social purpose their organisation claims to uphold. It contrasts with symbolic legitimacy by focusing on how people feel, interpret, and inhabit their collective purpose in daily organisational life (Nilsson, 2015; Lawrence, 2017; Thomas et al., 2018). Rather than understanding legitimacy as compliance with external norms, or agency as the control exercised by individuals, both are conceptualised here as emergent—arising from embodied, situated, and relational encounters within organisations. In doing so, the study contributes to a broader rethinking of institutional vitality, showing how legitimacy is not only performed but *felt*, negotiated, and sustained through relational work and shared meaning-making.

This approach positions organisational life as a key site of institutional maintenance and transformation. Although the data is derived from specific organisational contexts, the analysis concerns broader institutional logics and legitimacy processes that these organisations enact and contest in everyday practice. By foregrounding the experiential dimensions of agency, the study demonstrates how actors participate in collectively maintaining and reshaping the normative foundations of their field—illustrating the micro-foundations of institutional work as an affective and relational endeavour.

1.2.2. Practice building: A Political Project

The other purpose of this research is to strengthen and support the deep work of social purpose organisations in their efforts to live their purpose from the inside out. Therefore, it deliberately moves away from a discussion of institutional work that has, in the past, taken place “without reference to [institutions] underlying moral or political vision” (Creed et al,

2010:1360).

Despite the transformative potential of the social change field to challenge the unequal distribution of power, wealth and resources (Cloete, 2018), it continues to manifest increasing social and economic injustices (Tjabane & Pillay, 2011), and may be guilty of reproducing the same patterns of inequality and injustice that it is trying to change in the world (Paddock & Nilsson, 2014). Scholars and practitioners search for alternative orientations that are attuned to the complex and interdependent dynamics of domination, oppression, and resistance (Hankivsky, 2014). This is especially evidenced by ongoing academic debates about social construction of politics of inclusion/exclusion, dynamics of power and inequity, and social justice (see for example, Yuval-Davis, 2011; Gaventa & Tandon, 2010; Hancock, 2007; Pateman & Mills, 2007; Scott, 1992). There is a growing awareness that “individual impulses and interior lives, the intimate and banal details of family histories and personal experiences, are directly connected to external forces” (Hobart & Kneese, 2020:1).

Part of the political project of this research was to journey with organisations to witness and explore a range of experiments that disrupt the status quo, and to experiment with alternative practices and ways of being that connect social purpose goals to organisation members' everyday experiences. As indicated above, experiential legitimacy is defined as “evaluations of the way the internal subjective experiences of field members do or do not reflect legitimated regulations, norms, and beliefs” (Nilsson, 2015:373). This meant paying attention to the embodied, situated and relational experience as core to the pursuit of shared social purpose goals. This research is not focused on what social purpose organisations claim to do, but rather on what organisation members experience while doing it, and the little epiphanies that occur in the process. As the research unfolded it emerged that the politics and practice of care is essential to this work.

This thesis is a personal and collective project to learn better ways to build more intentionally purposeful, caring organisations, drawing on feminist theory and practice and positive institutional work as linchpins for deeper social change in organisations.

1.3 Personal contribution: A reflection

Inspired by feminist researchers who encouraged me to ask how my particular social, economic and political context affected the research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007), below I

reflect on how my history and context affected my relationship to this research and my approach.

My relationship to institutions: the personal is the political

As a mixed-race woman of colour, born in London in exile from Apartheid South Africa and returning in 1997 just before my 12th birthday, I have always had a complex relationship with institutions. As the child of a mixed-race couple who proudly broke a myriad of Apartheid laws including the Mixed Marriages Act (1949), which said they could not marry, the Immorality Act (1950), which said they could not have sex, and the Group Areas Act (1950), which said they could not live together, I have a healthy disrespect for institutions. I recognised early on that institutions, and the logics that shape them, have great power; from written laws and the infrastructures that enforce them, to the unwritten cultural norms and behaviours that rule our lives. But my parents, like many others in the anti-apartheid struggle, showed that these institutions are not immutable, and that we are able to resist them. Through collective action and individual rebellion and sacrifice, I saw the possibilities for challenging and changing what was seen as given. My history made me acutely aware of how institutions shape our lives, specifically our experiences of *otherness* and marginalisation. From an early age, I saw the world through the lens of those included and those excluded - these experiences were formative for my personal/political life.

My experience in organisations: a disconnection between purpose and experience

Driven by the stories of exclusion and injustice that textured my life and the lives of those around me, I was drawn towards organisations fighting for social change; for inclusion, for freedom, for justice for all. I started by studying law, with a focus on human rights law in Africa, recognising the power of law to shape society. And when I started working, I joined a human rights organisation in South Africa that was deeply connected and grounded in the struggles and dreams of communities. The work was inspiring - they ensured access to much needed basic services and they were able to bring people together in powerful ways. But my experience inside this organisation, and others that I later joined, was frustrating and disheartening. I experienced a disconnect between their purpose - what they were fighting for - and my experiences within those organisations. This resonated with the experiences of many others around me, including frustrations with lack of transparency, abuse of power by those with more power (many in leadership positions), sexual harassment and bullying, and struggles with unequal and unjust power dynamics across the

organisations. Despite the social purpose goals of equality, justice and freedom being fought for in the world, the internal experiences of organisation members were given little attention. The focus was on 'The Fight' and, cynically but realistically, on quantifiable numbers and visibility in the world for donor reports to keep the funding coming. I was frustrated by these contradictions.

Little epiphanies

Over the last few years I have been based at a business school collaborating with inspiring people and social purpose organisations to think more deeply about how to build more purposeful, caring organisations from the inside out. These people work on seemingly different issues (e.g. education, health, sex work), they speak very different institutional languages (e.g. law, entrepreneurship, activism), but they acknowledge that we are grappling with the same fundamental structural social challenges and lack of care in the world and inside our institutions. Moreover, working to reflect on our experiences of social purpose work, there is an acknowledgment that the way we are living inside our organisations is less than ideal and often does not reflect the lofty social purpose goals that we espouse. I have seen collectives, many of which deliberately adopt feminist approaches to organising, consciously build stronger more purposeful organisations for social change; where the daily experiences of justice (and the process towards it) are valued as much as the outcomes, the recognition that the experience of social change is lived in the everyday, seemingly mundane, interactions and practices of organisational life.

1.4 Research Questions

In light of the research problem, and the personal, political and theoretical context outlined above, this study is guided by the following research questions.

To-date, institutional work theorists have largely focused on the symbolic legitimacy of institutions, and have struggled to incorporate subjective experience into theory (Lawrence, 2017). Yet, as highlighted by Lawrence (2017:1793) "*experiential legitimacy* may be an important concept... because it highlights social and moral dynamics that may not be easily observed in terms of people's behaviors or language." In the context of social purpose organisations, experiential legitimacy refers to organisation members' perception (evaluation) that subjective experiences reflect (or do not reflect) the social purpose goals that the organisation espouses in the world. The absence of experiential legitimacy occurs when there is "a disconnection between the intended experience of practices and how

members of the organisation actually experience them” (Thomas et al, 2018:4). Specifically, I aim to distill practices and capabilities that contribute to experiential legitimacy in pursuit of shared social purpose goals.

Therefore the first question that this study will engage with is:

- **How is experiential legitimacy maintained within social purpose organisations?**

Second, the study is focused on the *experience* of organisation members of their shared social purpose within a social purpose organisation. While definitions of experience are incomplete and few, they differ from activities that are observed or performed by others to confer legitimacy (Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, Suchman, 2017; Suchman, 1995) in that they are subjective, immediate, and contextual (Nilsson, 2015). Nilsson (2015:370) writes that “experience is inherently specific and contextual and institutions are not.” He goes on to quote Selznick (1992:310): “What counts is how people experience the everyday life of the institution.” Particularly within *social purpose organisations*, where normative experience is particularly relevant to the legitimacy of organisations working towards social goods, it is important that we become aware of the way that organisational members themselves experience the institutions they are a part of. Drawing on feminist theorists, I explore the “situated, embodied and relational” (McNay, 2016:41) nature of agency.

Therefore, the second question my study attempts to answer is:

- **What is the nature of agency in accomplishing experiential legitimacy?**

1.5 Research Context

Given the exploratory nature of this research, it was particularly well-suited for a qualitative multi-case study approach. I was specifically looking for evidence of continuous and constructive positive institutional work over a sustained period of time and a collective interest in exploring the organisation members’ experience of the shared social purpose. Significantly, the three social purpose organisations I worked with were heterogeneous in terms of social purpose, sector, and form, though they all form part of the broader non-governmental (NGO) sector in South Africa. All three are well established (older than 20 years) and I was able to study them from late 2019 to late 2022. I go into more detail about my case organisations in my Methodology chapter (page 57).

This research is based on my real-world practice within social purpose organisations, a

fieldwork journey with three case studies, and a transformative research process. It has been a journey of self and collective discovery, which has been guided and shaped by feminist research methodologies and ways of being.

In the next section I set out my background literature that formed the foundation for my research.

CHAPTER 2: ESSENTIAL BACKGROUND LITERATURE

"In the eyes of some of our social science and Marxist associates we have in fact undergone a transmutation from theory saints (faithful and devoted to the truth of the world) to theory sluts (good time girls who think around): if you're not with the theory you love, love the theory you're with!" (Gibson, 2009). I would say I identify as a theory slut. I have deliberately reached outside the 'usual suspects' of my academic world to seek inspiration and to be challenged by spaces that I might otherwise not engage. This has given me a more complex and nuanced understanding of the people and organisations I am working with and the worlds in which we live [excerpt from my thesis notes, 2018].

This literature review provides an overview of institutional theory with a focus on feminist institutionalism and positive institutional work, as well as drawing on other relevant theory as it connects to the experiential nature of social purpose organisations and agency. When I began this thesis journey, the macro, meso and micro distinctions in existing new institutionalism literature provided a useful way to structure my literature review. Over the process of researching and writing I have found this division a hindrance to understanding the complexity and interplay of power and agency in organisations, but for the purposes of writing a literature review I have kept it if simply to show how institutional theory has simplified and compartmentalised the complex multiscalar nature of institutional life.

This Literature Review is split into the following three sections:

2.1) The macro level - introduces *Institutions and Power* - specifically delving into feminist institutionalism and relational power from feminist organisational theory to help understand the complex *multiscalar nature of power*. It highlights that institutional analysis has had limited engagement with more political complex concepts of power. As a result, this section articulates a more critical conceptualisation of power, which supports this research to understand how experiential legitimacy is accomplished in the face of hidden and invisible rules (deep structure), from inherited legacies (hegemonic institutions), that shape and are shaped by the experience of organisation members and their collective practices.

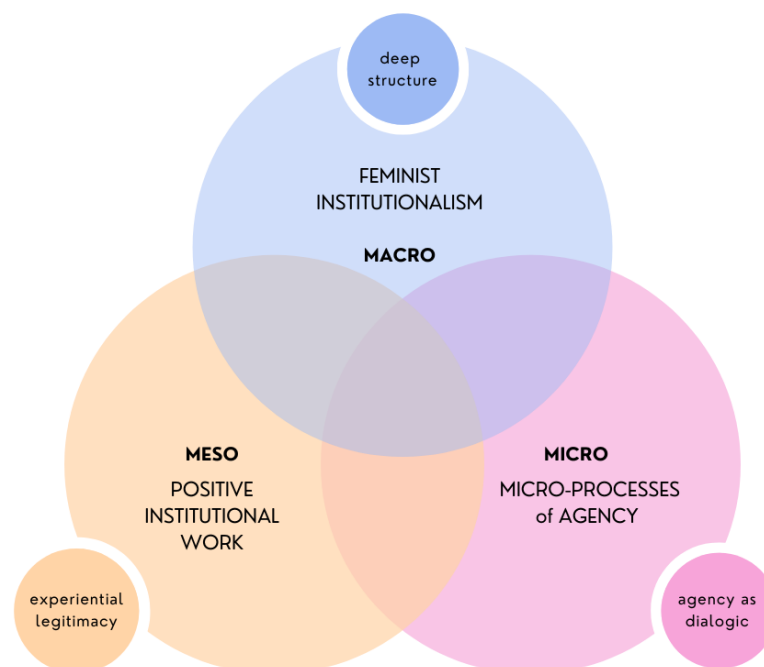
2.2) The meso level - explores *Positive Institutional Work*, including new areas like the

‘experiential turn’ and ‘practice turn’ in new institutionalism with recent empirical examples. Though the field of institutional work is well-researched, there have been questions about how the study of institutional work understands the *experience* involved in pursuing social purpose goals. I draw on practice literature to delve deeper into the practice nature of positive institutional work, moving away from authors that focus on the purpose or *intended outcome* to more recent work focused on reconceptualising legitimacy work by changing the criteria by which organisation members evaluate practice - through experience.

2.3) **The micro level** - explores *Agency* in institutions. As such, I touch on institutional literature that looks at individuals as agents of change within institutions and how they participate and affect change from within. While a few authors have explored the micro-processes of identity work and agency within institutions, this area is quite new. Importantly, I move away from the individualist, singular conceptualisation of agency, towards a more complex interdependent dialogic understanding of agency that better reflects the experience in organisations.

Below is a diagram of these three sections illustrating the literatures explored towards an understanding of experiential agency in social purpose organisations:

FIGURE 1: Thesis Literature (Macro-Meso-Micro)



As feminist writer Ahmed (2017) invited, I am conscious that whose work researchers are socialised into citing (and whose to avoid) is an important part of how knowledge is produced, and how patriarchal practices in the academy are reinforced. This literature review forms a fundamental part of my theory building work - I have deliberately drawn on work that has not been commonly in conversation with new institutionalism, including anthropologists, feminists practitioners and natural scientists, because they challenge the ways I think and write about institutions. I use these diverse and expansive concepts (even when they don't fit neatly) to understand experiential agency by grounding institutional theory to the local, allowing for a deeper personal-is-political perspective of the everyday experience of organisational life.

2.1 Macro: New Institutionalism, Feminist Institutionalism & Power

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way... on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing." (Roy, 2003:75)

Introduction: Why Power?

How we think about power may serve to reproduce and reinforce power structures and relations, or alternatively it may challenge and subvert them. It may contribute to their continued functioning, or it may unmask their principles of operation, whose effectiveness is increased by their being hidden from view. (Lukes, 2005:63).

How we conceptualise power is shaped by the political and theoretical interests that we bring to our study of it (Lukes, 1986; Said, 1986). Thus, specific conceptualisations of power could be more or less useful depending on the specific disciplinary or theoretical context in which it is deployed, where usefulness is evaluated in terms of "how well it accomplishes the task the theorists set for themselves?" (Haugaard 2010:426). In this view, this thesis is interested in surfacing and understanding experiences of domination and subordination inside organisations, and thinking about how those experiences can be transformed through individual and collective resistance and transformation. However, the literature on institutions, and specifically positive institutional work, has not engaged with a deep analysis of power. Thomas et al. (2018), in their exploration of positive institutional work, admittedly assume that it involves egalitarian and participatory conditions of distributed power. They acknowledge that this assumption is a limitation of their theorising and this leaves open space for further exploration.

When I read feminist institutionalists like Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell (2010), Mackay &

Waylen (2009) and Montoya (2016), they reminded me of Sara Ahmed's 'feminist killjoys'. Feminist scholar Ahmed (2007) describes the unpopular women *who speak uncomfortable, necessary truths*. She says that without them the world will never be challenged to change radically. I looked to those killjoys in the feminist institutionalism literature to give me the language of institutional resistance and disruption. Their most powerful contribution to this research was the invitation to think carefully about how I conceptualised my institutional landscape and the ways power plays out in different ways, because this conceptualisation would shape how I approached, analysed and cared for the worlds I was researching.

This section on Power is split into the following sections:

2.1.1) Power as Hegemony - Who Benefits and Why? - I explore the value-laden nature of institutions delving into feminist institutionalism, as well as existing institutional literature on the cultural-cognitive dimensions of power (Scott, 2013), exploring the ways certain beliefs or logics are widely shared permeating society (Zhao & Wry, 2016).

2.1.2) Power as Deep structure - How Power Works in Organisations? - I then go on to explore *how power functions* - power as a social relation - offering an account of how power works across macro-meso-micro scales. This includes exploring *how particular ideas become dominant*, making visible the invisible and hidden rules and norms that privilege certain actors' experiences over others through feminist organisational theories of *deep structure* (Rao et al, 2015).

These two sections help to set the scene for a multiscalar conceptualisation of power in institutions, grounded in a more complex understanding of the experience of institutions.

2.1.1 Power as Hegemony - Who Benefits and Why?

The origins of institutions run congruent to the history of humankind as we seek to understand how we order and transform our world. Institutional theory rose to prominence as a popular and powerful explanation for both individual and organisational action (Dacin et al, 2002) within the management theory space. Institutional theorists have historically set out to understand how institutions are formed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), how they change (DiMaggio & Powell, 2012), and more recently on what bases connections, collaborations, relationships and conflicts arise. Institutional researchers have set out key concepts and relationships that create the nexus between institutional structures and logics, and patterns of human behaviour and social order (DiMaggio & Powell, 2012; Greenwood & Hinings,

1996; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The evolution of institutional theory culminated in the coining of the term 'new institutionalism' which recognises that,

“institutionalists vary in their emphasis on macro and micro features, in their weightings of cognitive and normative aspects... and the importance they attribute **to interests and relational networks in the creation and diffusion of institutions**” (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991:1).

Through 'new institutionalism', theorists have found different lenses to explore the complexity and multiplicity of meanings of institutions (Seo & Creed, 2002) and the specific processes by which institutionalism cements social order (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 2001, 2008; Rydin, 2021; Grothe-Hammer & Berkowitz, 2024). However, these perspectives on institutions and their involvement in the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1967) did not feel complete.

Some of the most serious analysis into a more complex understanding of power in new institutionalism comes from Scott's comprehensive work (2001; 2008; 2013) exploring the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars of institutional power. Scott (2008:54+57) identified these three pillars institutional power which include: (1) *regulative elements* identify how rule-setting, monitoring and sanctioning activities take place; (2) *normative elements* identify the “prescriptive, evaluative and obligatory dimension” of social life; and (3) *cultural-cognitive elements* identify the “shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is made”. Building on a long history of anthropologists Douglas (1982) and sociologists like Berger and Luckmann (1967), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Meyers and Rowan (1977), Scott (2013) stresses the centrality of cultural-cognitive elements of institutional power as the *socially mediated construction of meaning*.

However, the existing literature on this cultural-cognitive dimension has a distinctly individualist perception (Welter & Smallbone, 2011), referring to the internal interpretive processes that are shaped by external or environmental cultural factors (Noguera et al, 2012). This approach is dependent on the institutionalisation of authority and has been mostly functionalist in its use. This echoes broader assessments of new institutionalism where approaches to power have been used for their explanatory power and instrumentalised “rather than vibrant, unfolding, and contingent” (Lounsbury et al, 2021:263). As such, the field of institutional theory has tended to view hierarchical power as

‘legitimate’ power assuming hierarchy as ‘normal’ and ‘inevitable’ following from the formal structure of the organisation (Clegg & Hardy, 2006). Therefore institutional theorists have rarely felt it necessary to explain *why* power should be hierarchical.

As a result, new institutionalism has been critiqued for its limited engagement with conceptions of power, and more specifically hegemonic forms of power (Hampel et al, 2017; Zhao & Wry, 2016). In their introductory chapter on the evolution of institutional thinking, institutional theorists Greenwood et al. (2017) state that institutional theory is only beginning to rigorously encompass power in its explanations, whereas previously there was little questioning of taken-for-granted beliefs and the power imbalances that come along with that. For the most part institutional theorists have framed power as institutional control (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017), where “departures from the pattern are counteracted in a regulated fashion, by repetitively activated, socially constructed, controls – that is, by some set of rewards and sanctions” (Jepperson, 1991:145). However, if we look to feminist and other social science literature, this more traditional conception of power, essentially grounded in control or ‘coercion’, represents a minority (and simplistic) view of power (Haugaard & Clegg, 2009). Haugaard & Clegg (2009:38) argue that by focusing on the coercive nature of power, institutional theorists “might be taking over and reproducing the bias of the systems they are studying”. Drawing on Clegg’s (2010:5+8) reflection:

“Perhaps, the absence of an adequate account of power in institutional theory is most evident in the massiveness and solidity that is attributed to institutional ordering—**but not as an effect of power**. It is at this point that institutionalism displays its origins in sociological functionalism most clearly... **I would suggest that where power is marginalised conceptually, it is given a fuller remit to flourish unchecked, practically.**”

In response to these warnings, I aim to *re-politicise and reignite the conceptualisation of power* in new institutionalism to reflect the deeper societal forces at play that affect the institutional work of organisations and the individuals that experience them. My contribution joins other feminist theorists exploring the question of *who benefits* (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2016:10) and *why* (Findlay, 2012), because very often institutional theory masks institutional power and does not interrogate how institutional activity discriminates based on hegemonic norms (Montoya, 2016). They have explored unmasking institutional power in various ways and have spearheaded theorising power as it is “woven into the DNA of institutions and play out in their structures and clues, artefacts and processes, ways of working and

behaving” (Rao et al, 2015:162). Feminist institutionalists, Mackay & Kenny (2009:275), state clearly that power is at best a “peripheral component” of new institutionalism schools and they continue to do the critical work to understand how institutions shape human action (Grahn, 2024).

Most notably, feminist theorists have extensively explored who benefits and why. Commonplace in feminist theory is the complex interplay between the macro, meso and micro levels in which institutions are continually enacted through everyday gender practice (see for example, Acker, 1992; Connell, 1987, 2002; Hawkesworth, 2003; Kathlene, 1995). In the late 80s and early 90s feminist scholars theorised around the power structures behind bureaucratic capitalist societies, describing the ways in which ‘gender regimes’ mandate divisions of labour and the taken-for-granted domination of organisational cultures by men and male culture (Ferguson, 1984; Connell, 1990, 2001; Collinson & Hern, 1994). Acker (1992) analysed gendered patterns of hierarchy and the ways in which gendered processes exclude by ‘colonising the mind’ as they affect the internal mental work of individuals. Other works within the realms of organisational studies (Ashcraft, 2016; Acker, 2006; Gherardi, 2009; Scott, 2005; Trethewey, 1997) and management theory (Grosser, 2016; Metcalfe, 2008; Mills, 2004; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Nienaber & Moraka, 2017), focus almost exclusively on gendered power dynamics against the backdrop of writing that assumes organisations are neutral (Acker, 1992, 2006). Conceptualising the organisation as a place where institutionalisation of power relations occurs makes visible the ways that various forms of oppression are multiscalar and interconnected at the macro level of society, and at different levels of the organisation, and experientially for individuals. Drawing on feminist political and social theory to connect this multiscalar dynamic helps *place institutions within rather than outside of society and social relations*.

Building on this history, I drew heavily on feminist institutionalism theorists (Montoya, 2016; Chappell, 2010; Kenny & MacKay, 2009; Kulawik, 2009; Metcalfe, 2008; Thelen, 2003) who gave me the language and a lens to uncover the complex power dynamics at play inside organisations. Resonating with the feminist theorising above, feminist institutionalism recognises that institutions are “created to serve *particular* purposes” (Montoya, 2016:369) rather than Max Weber’s (1964) original ‘value-free’ institutional analysis. Importantly, Montoya (2016:372) emphasises “the limitations of treating institutions as entirely exogenous to societal structures and immune to power hierarchies”. As such, feminist

institutionalists acknowledge that institutions contribute to power dynamics that reinforce and magnify their creators, recognising that institutional rules and norms privilege certain forms of behaviour and certain actors over others (Thelen, 2003; Chappell, 2010). Feminist studies of institutions bring *power to the centre of institutional analysis* (Kenny & Mackay, 2009) by making visible power relations (Lovenduski, 2014), specifically recognising the *cognitive and normative legacies* (Mackay, 2014), or 'frames of mind' and 'habits of the heart' (Goodin, 1996), in which institutional paths are embedded.

This research joins other feminist institutionalists in highlighting that "seemingly neutral institutional processes and practices are in fact *embedded in hidden norms and values*, privileging certain groups over others" (Mackay & Kenny, 2009:274). When institutions are viewed as neutral, the solutions to experiences of exclusion and inequality seem simple – introduce a new practice like a quota system or a bureaucratic process for diversity or inclusion. However, this fails to address how institutions structure and perpetuate institutionalised power hierarchies therein. To this end, institutional theorists like Lawrence and Buchanan (2017) touch on the notion of power as *domination* and "systemic power that works by altering the range of options available to actors" (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017:477). However, there are relatively few empirical studies into what domination might mean for actors inside institutions and their experiences.

There is a relatively small body of literature that is concerned with empirical studies of more structural conceptions of power in some of the newer institutional literature on institutional logics. For example, Zhao and Wry (2016) explore patriarchy as a 'societal logic' that shapes gendered interests, identities, and practices that are invisible and fundamentally affect the experience of institutional work at multi-levels. In their empirical study, Zhao and Wry (2016) investigate how patriarchy affects the widespread practice of lending to women by microfinance organisations. This is one of few empirical studies for how logics evident at a broad, societal level work to shape practices within different sectors or institutional fields (Zhao & Wry, 2016). So far, institutional logic theorists have focused mostly on how sector-specific logics shape cognition and behaviour in a sector-specific domain (Ocasio et al, 2017; Lounsbury et al, 2012; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, 2008). Through an analysis of professional institutional logics, researchers explore the organising principles, material practices and symbolic meanings associated with specific professions (Lounsbury et al, 2012). Deepening this analysis, Zhao and Wry (2016) suggest that organisational practices

also reflect broader societal beliefs. These studies reveal some of the effects of widely shared societal logics and professional logics on practice, experience and agency.

Moreover, this research adds to a body of literature from the global majority highlighting the role of historical and contemporary societal logics, such as economic imperialism, in shaping the lives of people and their organisational worlds (Purkayastha, 2010). For example, as the research unfolded, it became evidence that NGOization at a societal level was shaping the practices and experiences of organisational members. NGOization is a trend which has been written about extensively, globally (Gianni et al, 2021; Roy, 2015; Awashra & Awashreh, 2012; Choudry & Kapoor, 2012; Alvarez, 2009; Kamat, 2003, 2004). According to Jad (2007:117), NGO-ization is the

“process through which issues of collective concern are transformed into projects in isolation from the general context in which they are applied and without taking due consideration of the economic, social and political factors affecting them.”

NGOization is particularly relevant to this research because it demonstrates multiscalar effects of liberalism, professionalism (Nicholson, 2010), and patriarchal models of ego-led authoritarian leadership (Block & Miller-Stevens, 2021). Resonating with feminist critiques of neoliberalism (Fraser 2009a, 2009b; Korolczuk, 2016) and new work by Abu-Assab et al. (2020) on NGOization, this research highlights the material and epistemological implications for organisations as they become driven by notions of ‘polite reformism’ to maintain funding relationships, ultimately serving external interests (McNally, 2002; Rojas, 2007; Smith, 2007). For the purposes of this research, the concept of societal logics helped to map NGOization as “a dominant ideology and shared cognitive framework” (Davis et al, 2005:15) within the NGO space in South Africa.

However, as indicated above, new institutionalism has tended to keep the macro, meso and micro levels of institutional studies separate; either focusing on the creation and maintenance of institutions at an institutional field level, or on the work individuals do to resist power and to construct their own voice and agency in everyday life (Hampel et al, 2017). This research builds on more recent institutional theory exploring how individual agency connects to broader institutional processes (Greenwood et al, 2017) and their *recursive relationship* (Boxenbaum, 2019) whereby: (1) actors pull down institutions from the macro-level and ‘translate’ them into organisational contexts, and (2) organisational interactions produce local patterns that ‘bubble up’ to the macro level, generating

institutional change (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). In fact, recently, Steele et. al. (2020) have taken up the challenge to contextualise what they call ‘macro found local activity’ and the interplay of micro and macro. Building on this, I delve deeper into this experiential turn but with a feminist twist.

Below I explore power as a social relation, and how it is experienced, drawing on organisational feminist theories of ‘deep structure’. This grounds power in its experiential reality, moving away from the more functionalist approaches to power.

2.1.2 Power as Deep structure - How Power Works in Organisations?

Both new institutionalism and feminist institutionalism have been critiqued for their lack of overall theory of *social* power by oversimplifying its structural analysis, and its inability to illuminate *how power functions* (Findlay, 2012). Findlay (2012:4) argues that feminist institutionalism may demonstrate the gendered ways in which power is divided between levels or scales of institutions “but this does not tell us *why* and *how* these ideas became dominant, i.e. what were the relations of power that put this into place?”

In contrast, other feminist theorists and practitioners have provided important insights into the ways that macro power dynamics play out in micro ways - through social relations. They have focused on the intimate day-to-day, an approach where the *personal is the political*, blurring the macro and micro boundaries (bell hooks, 1981; Butler, 1990, 1993; Lorde, 1984). Feminists distinguish the idea of the ‘personal is the political’ stating that “it is not that the personal is the same as the political, but rather that it never ceases potentially to become political – this is a place of contestation over power and the terms of inclusion” (Heberle, 2016:602). It is a notion that there are political implications of social relations and personal everyday experiences (Skeggs, 1997; Roberts, 1981) and on how organisations are theorised (Benschop & Verloo, 2016).

“The personal as political is not a simile, nor a metaphor, and not an analogy... It means that **women’s distinctive experience as women occurs within a sphere that has been socially lived as the personal** - private, emotional, interiorised, particular, individuated, intimate - so that what it is to know the politics of women’s situation is to know women’s personal lives...” (Mackinnon, 1989:119-120)

In working to reignite the new institutionalism’s conceptualisation of power, it is useful to recognise that the ‘personal is the political’ not so as to focus on separate identities and

experiences but to adopt a multi-scalar understanding of power that contextualises processes and systems over time and space and bodies (Dhamoon, 2011; Hankivsky, 2014). Rather than ‘a new caste system’ (Coaston, 2019), this research recognises that engaging with power from an institutional perspective involves a more dialogical approach.

In the organisational context, feminist scholars and practitioners have extensively explored the connection between the macro scale of hegemonic institutions (and their associated invisible and hidden norms and values) and the micro scale of experience (Rao & Stuart, 1997; Rao & Kelleher, 2000; Batliwala, 2011, 2019; Batliwala & Friedman, 2014). Feminist organisational scholars like Rao and Kelleher (2008) echo the value-laden warning above, highlighting that the building blocks of organisations are biased in ways that are quite invisible.

This was a critical contribution to this research and helped deepen my analysis: drawing on the concept of *deep structure* it was possible to more realistically theorise power and lived experience by surfacing the hidden rules that shape organisation members’ organisational worlds. Rao, Sandler, Kelleher & Miller (2015:144) concept of ‘deep structures’ in organisations refers to the

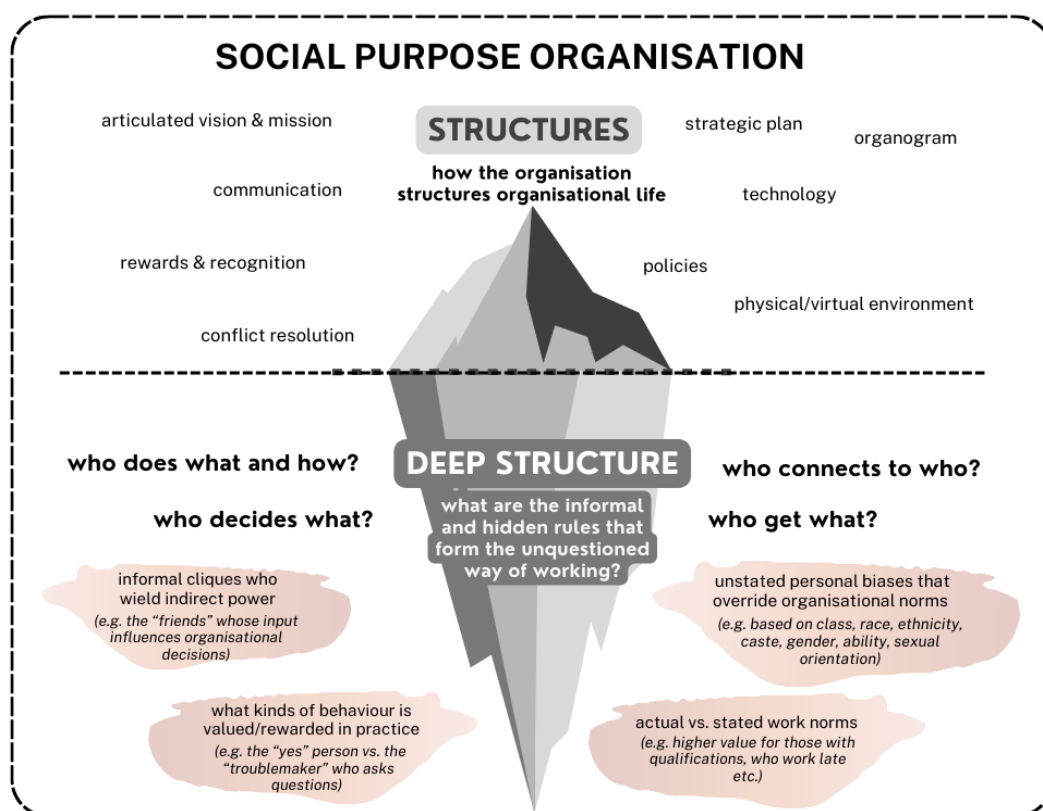
“...collection of values, history, culture and practices that... **[shape] the informal and sometimes hidden rules** that form the ‘normal’ unquestioned way of working... [and] determine who gets what, who does what and who decides”.

Importantly, deep structures are sustained and transformed by *the daily enactment of institutions* that are manifestations of structural hierarchies and inequalities (Rao et al, 2015). Deep structure describes how invisible forms of power manifest inside organisations through daily enactments of beliefs, behaviours, practices and structures. Rao et al. (2015) also explore the qualities of deep structures as “*invisible, mutually reinforcing, constantly being reproduced, highly resilient and importantly both unchanging and changeable*”. They state that deep structures are often uncatered for within literature and organisational change efforts and it is through surfacing and considering these hidden and invisible forms of powers that my understanding of power lies (Rao et al, 2015).

I draw ‘deep structure’ (Rao & Stuart, 1997; Rao et al, 2015; Batliwala, 2011) as a way to locate experiences of inequality and injustice within broader hegemonic systems of power (including capitalism, patriarchy, racism, etc.), grounding organisations in *social relations* at

a multiscale level. It helps uncover the status quo that dictates who is allowed to speak, in what manner, about what, and in what contexts, which privileges or marginalises specific groups. Organisations identify the ways in which different experiences of marginalisation are linked to broader systems of power and societal structures of exclusion and inequality. For example, discussions around who is an expert in professionalised spaces is an experience of specific marginalisation of those who do not have ‘the right qualifications’, which in South Africa is fused with generations of racial apartheid and systematic exclusion (Bonnin & Ruggunan, 2016). These experiences are not separate but integrally connected to the historical and societal realities in which they unfold that resist and undermine positive institutional work and social change inside organisations. The Figure 2 below illustrates this deep structure, recognising that the key to surfacing deep structures is to look under the water:

FIGURE 2: Deep Structure in Social Purpose Organisations



I designed the iceberg image above building on Batliwala’s (2011:22) exploration of facets of the “deep structure” of organisations, specifically the kinds of behaviour and practices (see examples in puddles in the figure above) that manifest in organisations that demonstrate particular *informal and hidden rules that form the unquestioned way of working an organisation* (Rao et al, 2015). I connected these facets to recent writing on social

innovation as social change (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Nilsson, 2019) recognising the institutional disruptive potential of challenging rules, norms and beliefs through institutional work. Nilsson (2019:286+288) specifically points to an institutional work lens that makes clear “the entanglement of macro-structures with the micro-interactions in the day-to-day” which he calls specific *performative dimensions* whose “structural enactment are critical to holding a given institution together”. I drew on these specific performative dimensions named by Nilsson (2019) to bolster the facets of deep structure: who does what (role), who gets what (resource flows), who decides what (authority processes), and who connects to who (relationships). I have included these performative dimensions in Figure 2 above.

Importantly, this complex understanding of power surfaces the ways in which structural power relations that are seen as given, monolithic, can be resisted and transformed. As feminist theorist Horn (2013:29) highlights “norms that entrench stereotypes and inequality, cannot be uprooted and eradicated without recognising and tackling them at this informal level, as well as through formal structures, policies and processes”.

In the context of new institutionalism, institutional cultural-cognitive theorists, like Scott (2008, 2013), explore how “behaviour is informed and restrained by the ways in which knowledge is constructed and codified” (Scott, 2013:82). The cultural-cognitive dimension of institutions reflects the cognitive structures and social knowledge shared by people in a given space. These shared concepts constitute the nature of reality and the frames through which meaning is made (Scott, 2001). Scott (2013) argues that to be effective institutions also have to be ‘believed in’, which means that people need to accept them and stay in relationship with them. Scott (2008:59) uses the term ‘legitimacy’ to describe how people negotiate this relationship; it is “a condition of reflecting *the perceived consonance* with relevant rules and laws, normative supports, or alignments with cultural-cognitive frameworks”. In this framing, legitimacy is based on the *symbolic world* of language, culture, and beliefs, through which it is possible to see the dispositions, capacities, habits, or practices that make sense to individuals, which then become the elements (such as formal structures, policies and processes) through which individuals judge consonance with their environment.

However, this approach does not take new institutionalism far enough to truly capture the experiential nature of organisational life and explain why and how power plays out in particular ways. Symbolic legitimacy drowns out why and how particular roles, resource

flows, authority flows and meanings become dominant i.e. why what is considered the unquestioned way of working is considered so and how it became so. Nilsson (2015) suggests that focusing on symbolic legitimacy and visible signals tends to consciously and unconsciously drown out subjective experiences. Challenging existing cultural-cognitive theories in new institutionalism, and the narrow emphasis on symbolic legitimacy, this research deliberately reconnects with “the lived experiences of organisational actors” (Lawrence et al, 2011:52) and “the unspoken codes, taken-for granted norms and unnamed behaviours” that shape organisation members’ experience of each other (Batliwala & Friedman, 2014:82) through engaging the subjective experiences of actors.

In light of this, this research “is explicitly concerned with recognising how institutions reproduce...[specific] power relations, but perhaps more importantly, with how these institutions can be challenged and reformed” (Krook & Mackay, 2011). As such, recognising the reproduction of power and inequality as structural does not mean that institutions are static and unchangeable (Findlay, 2012:8), rather it stresses how power is constantly negotiated (Graefe, 2007). This multiscalar approach to power opens up space for innovation and change.

Conclusion to Macro Section

My approach to power in this research is suited to the interests that I want to bring to this study: to understand the multiscalar (structural and experiential) ways that power plays out in institutional work and its effects on experiential legitimacy and agency.

Applying a multiscalar conceptualisation of power is important because organisations are key sites where unequal power relations in society (e.g. racism, ableism, classism, homophobia and other experiences of oppression) are institutionalised, resisted and transformed. Through the daily enactment and institutionalisation of unequal power relations, social inequality is reflected and reproduced within organisations structures and processes, which in turn is reflected in deep structures and affective relations. This entails not simply that social inequalities are mirrored in organisations, but that the organisation and its members take an active role in structuring and restructuring them. As such, the creation and maintenance of experiential legitimacy cannot be achieved without engaging the multiscalar power relations that affect those experiences. This research augments a feminist critical understanding of power and organisations (Batliwala, 2019, 2011) by

moving away from the more instrumental or managerial approaches re-politicising and reconceptualising power as “woven into the DNA of institutions” (Rao et al, 2015:162) not separate from them.

In the next section of my Literature Review I build on this more experiential focus by exploring Positive Institutional Work and the experience involved in pursuing social purpose goals.

2.2 Meso: The Practice of Positive Institutional Work

The formation of institutions and the relationships with actors who create, maintain and disrupt them have encouraged scholars to explore the notion of ‘institutional work’ (Lawrence, Leca & Zilber, 2013; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009). In early studies, there was a misconception that institutional environments were uniform and homogenous (Scott, 2008). In response, some scholars moved away from focusing on the macro-dynamics of the field to look at the multiple ways in which *institutional work* takes place – the literature is wide, diverse, and growing including, bridging (Maguire et al, 2004; Tracey et al, 2011), mobilizing (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006; Wijen & Ansari, 2007), partaking and convening (Dorado, 2005), bricolage and break-through (Garud & Karnøe, 2003), boundary work and practice work (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), embodied identity work (Creed et al, 2010), narration (Zilber, 2007), discourse problematisation and translation (Hardy & Maguire, 2010), resistance (Marti & Fernandez, 2013), and much more (explored more thoroughly in Nilsson, 2015).

In one of the most recent overviews of institutional work, Hampel et. al. (2017:566) highlight an important broader phenomena within institutional work whereby scholars increasingly suggest that “the *process and outcomes* of institutional work may differ.” Historically, most institutional work was explored based on its intended outcomes. Lawrence et. al. (2011:53) define these outcomes as:

the efforts of individuals and collective actors to cope with, keep up with, shore up, tear down, tinker with, transform, or create anew the institutional structures within which they live, work, and play, and which give them their **roles, relationships, resources, and routines**.

In contrast, some scholars have introduced the experiential side of institutional work (Creed, DeJordy & Lok, 2010), and more recently explored the lens of emotions as relational,

intersubjective and socially embedded (see more Voronov, 2014; Voronov & Weber, 2016; Zietsma, Toubiana, Voronov & Roberts, 2019; Voronov & Weber, 2020; Zhang, Voronov, Toubiana, Vince & Hudson, 2024). But institutional theorists have rarely looked at how to institutionally maintain the experiential dimension of social purpose. In his seminal paper, Nilsson “moves away from explaining doing institutional work itself, to focusing on the kind of work involved in pursuing experiential institutional end goals” (2015:372). He introduces the idea of ‘positive institutional work’ “*as the creation or maintenance of institutional patterns that express mutually constitutive experiential and social goods*” (Nilsson, 2015:372). Nilsson (2015) joins other more recent theorising around experiential (embodied) ways of encountering and evaluating institutions (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen & Smith-Crowe, 2022; Creed, Taylor & Hudson, 2020).

In response to the invitation to explore the *experience* of institutional work in the pursuit of social goods, and how this might included in an evaluation of legitimacy, this section of my Literature Review explores three essential directions that positive institutional work literature takes:

2.2.1) The Positive turn: First, I explore the roots of positive institutional work with reference to Nilsson’s (2015) proposed experientially and socially normative framing. I outline what this means for how we understand social purpose organisations and the work organisation members do towards their shared social purpose goals, specifically opening up possibilities to consider the experience and effect of affective relations.

2.2.2) The Experiential turn: I then go onto outline more recent theorising around alternative ways to evaluate legitimacy with a specific focus on experience and how this might help give a more complex and realistic picture of institutional work towards social purpose goals.

2.2.3) The Practice turn: I conclude with an exploration of the more emergent theorising between institutional and practice scholars, with reference to specific practices within positive institutional work literature. This includes an exploration of the stickiness of practice and the proposed role of subjective experience may play in institutional disruption, maintenance and transformation.

These three directions help frame the basis for understanding positive institutional work and the construction and maintenance of experiential legitimacy.

2.2.1 The Positive turn: A social field of positive institutional work

I begin this section by explaining what is meant by ‘positive’ in positive institutional work, foregrounding Nilsson’s (2015:372) “integrative framing that is both *experientially and socially normative*”. There are a number of studies on institutional work in the context of social or environmental issues, including the rise and fall of the pesticide DDT (Maguire & Hardy, 2009), sustainable forestry (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), feminist rape crisis counselling (Zilber, 2002), HIV/AIDS treatment advocacy (Maguire et al., 2004), child nutrition (Lawrence et al, 2002), and microfinance (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). As Nilsson (2015:388) highlights, despite their empirical contexts, these studies have typically developed theory “generalised to institutional work as a whole, rather than specifically to institutional work with a social purpose”. Most institutional researchers have rarely explored possible differences in *the nature of institutional work associated with different types of institutional goals*, except for Marti & Mair (2009) and Creed et al (2010). Feminist institutionalists have given consideration to specific institutional goals largely focused on positive change (Waylen, 2007; Miller, 2021) and there are some examples that illustrate how critical actors can challenge and adapt oppressive structures, norms or policies (Thomson, 2018). This research joins these rare examples, exploring specific institutional goals, specifically that of social goods.

Social purpose organisations are explicitly focused on the resourcing of *social goods*, which includes intangibles such as equality, freedom and justice, to those who are excluded or disenfranchised by the current systemic distribution of those resources. Nilsson’s (2015) invites a deeper look at the *experience* involved in pursuing social goods, because, he argues, experiential and social goods are mutually constitutive. They are *experiential* because they are related to “personal experiences of fulfillment by organisational members” and *social* because they are also related to the broader “long-term sustainability of people, organisations, society, and the environment” (Nilsson, 2015:372). Therefore these social purpose goals are framed at individual level of experience *and* wider societal level of social goods (resonant with the multiscalar conceptualisation of power): for example the social purpose goal of equality enhances an individual’s “capacity to live, grow and develop” while also being a resource and attribute that can “cascade from the organisation out into larger social domains” (Nilsson, 2015:372). As Nilsson (2015:375) highlights, the ‘positive’ in positive institutional work distinguishes this research from the usual focus on “positive subjective phenomena like values, commitment, job satisfaction, and job involvement” to

the rarely inquired into “*broader social impacts and meanings of these phenomena.*” As such, an experientially and socially normative framing implies that social purpose organisations are in touch with broad social, moral, and spiritual meanings beyond the immediate goals and objectives of the workplace as positive organisational scholars have explored (see examples, Cameron, 2003; Emmons, 2003; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Worline & Quinn, 2003; Golden-Biddle et al, 2007; Carlsen, 2008).

Because my underlying interest is in the ways that organisations can experience meaningful social change, I join Nilsson (2015) in assuming a critical definition of ‘social purpose’, recognising it as a term that has been deployed to *reconnect institutions with issues of power, values, resources and distribution* (or lack thereof). While there is no current typology of social purpose organisations, White (2018) gives a broad definition simply as, “they attempt to alleviate complex societal problems” (see more about typology of organisations in DeTombe, 2001; Liebl, 2002). However, by recognising that social goods are by their nature *social* allows for greater integration of experiential nature of social goods within organisations. To date, most understanding of social goods has been rooted in private/public dualisms (explored further later in this section on agency). As Lynch et. al. (2021) emphasise that traditionally the ontological *who* of justice (or equality or freedom or any other social good) is usually premised on an individualist rather than the relational concept of the person. But social goods are by their nature enhanced and constrained by *inter-dependency* (Lynch et al, 2021). In order to bring forth this relational reality in institutional theorising, positive organisational theorists Nilsson and Paddock (2018) describe:

“the deepest level of organisational life [is] ‘the social field’. The social field is different from organisational culture, structure, and leadership. **It is the overall experienced quality of relationship in a given human system, the soil out of which all else grows.** If we want to do truly transformative work, we must cultivate a transformative experience of relationships within and between organisations.”

However, within institutional literature not much attention has been paid to this ‘social field’ or to the experience of relationships. In more recent institutional work literature, Thomas et. al. (2018) emphasise relationships as core to organisational functioning and highlight efforts to bring relationships to the forefront of understanding and doing positive institutional work. This is supported by other management theorists like Mohrman & Shani (2008:479) who identify distinct high-quality connections as “the lifeblood of the work”. Nilsson (2015) specifically draws on positive organisational scholars to explore how experientially positive

relations are not defined by the comparative and competitive dynamics usually associated with social identity construction (Roberts & Creary, 2012), rather they deepen authentic (but critical) connections between the organisation and the actors inside them, especially collective work for a bigger social purpose (Reynolds & Trehan, 2003). Other organisational scholars have explored the notion of *positive relational goals* (Gittell & Douglass, 2012) that are intended to manifest connectedness, empowerment, and mutuality within organisations. Examples include goals such as collaboration and a sense of care for and among members (see more in Adler, 2012; Gittell & Douglass, 2012, Dutton & Ragins, 2017). But there has been limited engagement with this relational quality in institutional literature.

This research moves away from the limited conceptualisation of institution as action-based on rationality to assert institution as *affective action*, based on relationship and emotion (Monteiro & Adler, 2022). To support this unusual conceptualisation I drew on care theorists Lynch et al. (2021:58) definition of *affective relations* as:

“distinct ethically-informed, nurturing-led social relations, that take different manifestations culturally, but whose primary intent is to be with and co-create others relationally in a non-alienating, non-exploitable way.”

This research furthers the enquiry into what might it mean to bring the transformative potential of positive institutional work drawing on politics of care theory to convey “a distinct set of social relations that have a formative impact and are deeply normative in character” (Lynch et al., 2021:54) through exploring the more intimate sides of professional life in social purpose organisations. Much research remains to be done to more carefully connect the experience of institutional life to institutional work organised around normative social purpose goals (Nilsson, 2015), recognising and embracing the relational interdependencies beautifully captured in care theory (Chatzidakis, 2020).

In the next section I explore the experiential turn in positive institutional work.

2.2.2 The Experiential turn: From Symbolic to Experiential Legitimacy

For institutional theory to authentically engage with complexities of affective relations and multiscale forms of power in organisational life, it is necessary to engage with individuals' biographies, perspectives and experiences. Nilsson (2015:373) argues for the reconceptualisation of 'legitimacy work' by “*changing, reinforcing, or disrupting the criteria by which people evaluate practice*” through experience. To date, institutional work research

has focused largely on *symbolic modes of legitimacy* i.e. the way that observable practices index onto legitimated regulations, norms, and beliefs (Deephhouse et al, 2017). Suchman's (1995:574) frequently used definition conceptualizes legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions".

The symbolic conceptualisation of legitimacy most often emphasises how *visible*, *observable* behaviours, relationships and structures reflect regulative, normative, and cognitive frameworks of 'appropriateness'. From this perspective, Scott (2001:59) provides a simple explanation of legitimacy as a "symbolic value to be displayed in a manner such that it is visible to outsiders". In an empirical example of symbolic legitimacy, Dobbin, et al. (1993) looked at the development of explicit personnel practices, such as salary classifications, job descriptions, and performance evaluations, in response to ambiguous civil rights laws to signal legitimacy to potential judicial reviewers. Legitimacy in this light is rooted in "post hoc accounts" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991:27) that "specify and justify social arrangements and behaviours" (Garud, Hardy & Maguire, 2007:958). That is, according to Nilsson (2015:374), relationships and behaviours are evaluated as signals, and not understood "in terms of how they are *experienced* but as *implied* expressions of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions". According to Nilsson (2015) and Thomas et al (2018:4), institutional scholars have paid little attention to how *experience* might be incorporated into the evaluation of legitimacy and "what happens when there is a disconnection between the *intended experience* of practices and how members of the organisation *actually experience* them?" In his exploration of positive institutional work, Nilsson (2015) recognises the deep work of feminist organisations doing the political work to change lived, subjective experiences inside organisations (Ahmed, 2017; Calas, Marta & Smircich, 2006; Chafetz, 1997). Working toward broad social goals of inclusiveness and participation, through the lens of the 'personal is the political' as an active political project (Mügge et al, 2018; Montoya, 2021), feminist organisations developed various organisational forms meant to distribute power, voice and agency to all members equally (Nilsson, 2015).

Nilsson (2015:375) begins to theorise an alternative when he asks us to "imagine an experiential alternative to symbolic evaluations of legitimacy". To illustrate this reconceptualisation Nilsson (2015) elucidates on experiencing the positive institutional goal of inclusion. He describes an imaginary 'inclusive' organisation where there is diverse

representation of different people across the organisation; the leadership have an open door policy and encourage all staff to share their perspectives and bring their issues to the table; decision-making is approached in a horizontal manner across several distributed teams. In fact, from the outside, it appears all staff are equal in position.

“What if, as this organisation intentionally works to institutionalise inclusivity, someone experiences exclusion in an interaction? This is particularly in the case where the form of the interaction meets the **symbolic** criteria for inclusion, even though the **subjective** experience has fallen short? It is less clear that the kinds of rewards, sanctions, norms and mimetic processes typically described in the literature will have the desired effect on **inner experiences**” (Nilsson, 2015:381).

Nilsson (2015) suggests that, in accordance with symbolic legitimacy, organisations will focus on *observable* behaviours, practices, processes and structures of inclusion, the categorical inclusion of people “who are different”, but don’t take the next step to ask how the inner experiences and different aspects of human experience might also impact the individual and collective experience of the work. As such, in reconceptualising legitimacy work, Nilsson (2015) argues that to include this *more complex experiential understanding of inclusion*, it is necessary to theoretically and practically include a distinct experiential dynamic. For example, where formal inclusion might mean including people with many categorical differences in the work of the organisation - e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, health status, ability, class - a more experiential approach to inclusion might include other aspects of human difference like “thinking, doing, feeling, physical sensations value and intuition, spiritual and other knowings” (Guharay, 2020:9). Institutionalising an experiential approach to positive institutional goals like inclusion, engagement, or high-quality connections, might require acknowledging that we really don’t know what those things will look like in practice in specific contexts given their experiential nature. As Nilsson (2015:382) emphasises, even “if we do arrive at some experiential version [of a practice] today, the forms of behaviour and language that we have used may not serve us tomorrow”.

Positive institutional work theory emphasises the *experiential nature* or lived quality of institutional work and critically, Nilsson’s (2015) seminal piece positions *experiential legitimacy* as central to efforts to support institutional maintenance. Experiential legitimacy refers to the extent to which members perceive their lived organisational experience as congruent with the institutionally legitimised norms, beliefs, and values. While symbolic

legitimacy rests on visible markers of compliance and performance, experiential legitimacy concerns the felt congruence between institutional values and members' lived experience. It signals resonance within the social and emotional life of the organisation (Nilsson 2015). In feminist institutional terms, experiential legitimacy foregrounds the felt dimensions of institutional life, therefore experiential legitimacy as relational and embodied—experienced through care, trust, and shared meaning rather than symbolic conformity.

Nilsson (2015:373) posits that organisations working towards the long-term sustainability of society and defines experiential legitimacy as “evaluations of the way the internal subjective experiences of field members do or do not reflect legitimated regulations, norms, and beliefs.” Conversely, to date, new institutionalism has aligned with a more structural approach focusing on objective observable behaviours, relationships and structures as described above by symbolic legitimacy, to the exclusion of more intangible, complex experiences of organisation members. As Nilsson (2015:381) highlights,

“observable forms of behaviour can be structured directly, but **inner lives are more slippery**. We can alter behaviour and language to conform to prevailing institutional patterns, but we do not have the same control over the stuff of experience: emotions, physical sensations, the deepest cognitive frames.”

The present research focuses on *experiential legitimacy*—how organisational members perceive alignment between daily experience and espoused internal values, as an institutional phenomenon. Building on the exploration of experience as an essential criteria for evaluating legitimacy because, despite being more ‘slippery’, it also provides a fuller explanation of institutional action and agency. This research shows how experience is also the “stuff out of which organisational patterns are forged” (Nilsson, 2009:148). But such inquiry into the experiential nature is more amorphous, requiring a different approach and understanding of what makes up organisational life, not just the mechanics but the *experience of relationships and interrelations*.

Developing institutional literature like that of Delmestri and Goodrick (2016:234) has begun to explore “the new assumption in the developing emotions and institutions literature... that without such ongoing *emotional maintenance* taken-for-grantedness would not automatically sustain itself”. There is a recognition that affective relations and emotions have been overlooked in analysis of institutional stability and therefore so has their contribution to disrupting and maintaining institutions. Even more recently, institutional

theorists Ashforth & Humphrey (2022) have acknowledged that affective states (emotions, moods and sentiments) can become institutionalised "such that they become "objective" factors that are exterior to any one person and resistant to change". This is a massive shift in institutional theory which largely dismissed *affect* as a disruptive force in organisations that were "intendedly rational" (March & Simon, 2004). Instead these new areas focus on how affective relations become institutionalised, shift the focus onto the actors as they "engage in a perpetual dance, fostering a dynamic equilibrium" (Ashforth & Humphrey, 2022).

Theorists like Nilsson (2015) and Thomas et. al. (2018) have begun to explore specific organisational patterns and practices involved in constructing and maintaining experiential legitimacy and I unpack these further in the section on 'the practice turn' below.

2.2.3 The Practice turn: Away from the Form Trap

Recent years has seen an increasing mutual engagement between institutional and practice scholars (Smets, Greenwood, & Lounsbury, 2015; Suddaby, Seidl, & Lê, 2013; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) and a growing realisation that many current institutional theories and empirical research do not adequately capture the emergent and changeable nature of organisational phenomena.

The interest in the *experience* of institutional work appears to be giving rise to a methodological and empirical interest in 'practice' as researchers struggle to challenge long standing dominance of static institutions and explore tenuous and complex experiences of organising. Institutional theorists are thereby following the 'practice turn' which has characterised much of organisation theory in the last twenty years (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Whittington, 2006; Schatzki et al, 2001). The profound interrelationship of meanings and practices has been at the core of conceptualizing institutional work from the beginning (Friedland & Alford, 1991). However, a more committed empirical focus on practice theory (Schatzki, 2013, 2019; Schatzki et al, 2001) has enabled a deeper understanding of the constitutive nature of institutions and how they are constructed, maintained and disrupted (Lounsbury et al, 2021; Smets et al, 2017; Zilber, 2021).

The practice turn is based on earlier work by such social theorists as Giddens (1984), Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Foucault (1980) who demarcate a stream of diverse theories sharing a common aspect: *they consider practices as the constitutive element of social life*

(Seidl & Whittington, 2014). According to Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and Von Savigny (2001), there is no definitive canon of practice theory or unified practice approach. To date, institutional theorists have drawn on this practice turn to explore the broader phenomena looking at how competing institutional logics relate to actors and their identities and practices (e.g. Jones et al, 2012; Lok, 2010; Lounsbury, 2007; Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007; Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006; Pache & Santos, 2010; Reay & Hinings, 2009; Smets et al, 2012; Tracey et al, 2011). Other studies explore the micro dynamics of institutional work as performed by people's actions, interpretations, relations, and strategies (e.g. Thornton et al, 2012; Zilber, 2002; Munir & Phillips 2005; Lawrence, 2004; Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007; Kellogg, 2009).

Related conversations have also emerged within performativity-oriented scholarship, which examines how institutional and organisational realities are enacted through patterned action (Laasch et al., 2025). While this research shares an interest in the constitutive effects of practice, the present study takes a more experiential and relational approach, focusing on how meaning and legitimacy are enacted through lived experience rather than through discursive or symbolic performance.

For the purpose of this research, it was helpful to see practices as the chief and immediate context within which humans in their organisational life form and are formed (Schatzki, 2002). Schatzki (2010) emphasises that practices are not just individual skills and collective activities, but "*bodily experiences, surface presentations, and even physical structures*". To specifically engage the experiential nature of positive institutional work, I focused on an understanding of practice as "*embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around a shared practical understanding*" (Schatzki et al, 2001:11). This understanding emphasises practices are intertwined with the character of the human body, and further, that bodies and activities are 'constituted' within practices. As such, the *human body* offers itself as "the point of connection between individuals and social manifolds" (Schatzki et al, 2001:17). This connects to recent theorising around microfoundations, which will be discussed further in the section below, and the view that institutions are not only as cognitively 'carried' by people in organisations, but as 'inhabited' (Hallett, 2010; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Furnari, 2020) by those who can actively engage in the work of maintaining, creating, or disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

I enjoyed connecting with practice theory because it invited me to think more deeply not

just about the practices themselves, “as if there is something automatic and compelling about the enactment, *but rather to consider what moves or inspires the human beings involved*” (Barnes, 2001:29).

Below I outline some of the specific practices that have been explored by scholars Nilsson (2015) and Thomas et. al. (2018) that enable experiential legitimacy:

i) Experiential surfacing

Nilsson (2015) proposes *experiential surfacing* as a foundational practice that supports positive institutional work. Originally, Nilsson (2010) used the turn ‘inscaping’ to describe the way that:

“The most deeply engaging organisations I’ve encountered seem to be rooted in small, daily acts of personal revelation. I’m not talking about pouring out our darkest secrets to each other. By ‘revelation’ I mean simply an accretion of simple glimpses that people offer each other into their inner states – their ideas, emotions, curiosities, histories, likes, yearnings, confusions, etc.”

In later work, Nilsson and Paddock (2014:4) extrapolated on this using the term ‘surfacing’:

“the practice of **surfacing the inner experiences** of organisational members during the normal course of everyday work. By “inner experiences,” we don’t mean just emotions. We mean everything that makes up our inner lives: ideas and intuitions, aspirations and fears, values and memories.”

The practice of surfacing involves “eliciting the expression of emotions, feelings, and impressions in authentic and genuine ways, ideally within a relational space where those expressions can be noticed, appreciated, and understood” (Thomas et al, 2018:761). They (ibid) highlight that given the subjective and dynamic nature of experience, experiential surfacing will surface *numerous* different experiences of a practice, not just one version.

ii) Experiential reconciling and aligning

Thomas et. al. (2018) propose two additional practices, *experiential reconciling* and *experiential aligning*, that actors can engage with to overcome the misalignment between organisational goals and members’ experiences. They define this work as “the action involved in surfacing and reconciling inner subjective experiences and assessing the alignment of experience with organisational goals” (Thomas et al, 2018:754). They explore the practices of ‘reconciling’ and ‘aligning’ as key components of experientially-oriented work involving the reconciling of different individual experiences in a way that allows for

coordinated action and aligning those into a collective understanding within the organisation. They expand on Nilsson's idea of experiential surfacing, which involves *using inquiry* to surface the inner experience of organisational actors, taking it a step further by acknowledging the need for collective sharing and potential stabilising of the experience of organisational practices (Thomas et al, 2018). Through this reconciliation process, according to Thomas et al. (2018:762), organisation members,

“reveal not only differences in how the practice is being enacted by different people, departments, levels, or roles of an organisation, but also differences in how individuals are attributing meaning to and experiencing very similar enactments of the practice.”

Above, Nilsson (2015) and Thomas et al. (2018) begin the exploration of specific practices and orientations that support the assessment of the alignment of experience with organisational social purpose goals - experiential legitimacy.

Warning! The Form Trap: The stickiness of practice

There has been progress in understanding what type of practices may enable experiential legitimacy, but Thomas et al (2018:3) emphasise that this is undermined “when these same practices become bureaucratically formalised in an attempt to increase their sustainability, replicability, and scalability”. Connecting the experiential and practice turns, Nilsson (2015) and Thomas et al (2018) explore the disconnect between the practices (despite how well intentioned they are) and how individuals inside organisations experience them.

An empirical example of this was Zilber's (2002) ethnographic study of a Rape Crisis Centre. Zilber illustrates the unconscious effect that new leadership had on the existing feminist practices used by the organisation. In his analysis of this case, Nilsson (2015:8) emphasised the shift in experience of the members: in the early years members subjectively encountered feminist values of non-hierarchy, but in later years “feelings of hierarchy grew, even though the organisation's structure and basic procedures had not markedly changed.” As the case suggests, what started out as *experiential* legitimacy became *symbolic* over time, which left individuals feeling alienated and disempowered.

Nilsson (2015) states that the failure to legitimise and surface subjective experience in an organisation can lead to a *form trap*. The form trap describes the disconnection between the intended experience or purpose and how the form is actually experienced by individuals. The form could be a practice, or process, or structure. Let's take for example an

‘open door policy’ at an organisation that indicates to employees that their manager is open to their questions, suggestions and concerns and aims to encourage open communication and feedback. But instead of feeling encouraged employees indicate they do not feel comfortable to ‘walk through the door’ and engage openly with their manager. Thus, the intended purpose of the policy is disconnected from the actual experience of organisation members.

Many organisations fall prey to this ‘form trap’ and practice theorists have explored this disconnection in various empirical examples. Erhardt et al. (2016) note in their fieldwork looking at rituals in restaurants that some individuals felt pressured to engage in rituals rather than seeing them as positive, spontaneous and voluntary, which resulted in high turnover. Collins (2014) argues that when practices feel imposed, they tend to provoke resentment and disgust, and can even become toxic. Koschmann and McDonald (2015:321) suggest there is a limit to management’s ability to “create” particular organisational cultures or “use” specific practices to accomplish specific ends, and they “encourage us to examine sources of action and agency *beyond human intentionality*”. Thus, the challenge remains for organisations to be cognisant of and understand how organisation members experience specific practices that may have either outlived their usefulness or create unintended (often negative) consequences, while still attempting to pursue their shared purpose.

Importantly, practice theorists argue that the persistence and/or resistance to change of practices within organisations may be due less to social sanctions or to formal structure than to the degree of institutionalisation of specific informal patterns of shared beliefs and socialised expectations (Zucker, 1977; Meyer, Scott, & Deal, 1981). This institutionalisation has been explored in recent writing like Goldenstein & Walgenbach (2019) who argue that this effect is based on what they call institutional generations. The ‘old’ generation, which was socialised in an institutional field, transmits institutions to the ‘younger’ generation, which is not yet entirely socialised in the field’s praxis.

Nilsson (2009:148) explains the challenge of institutionalising experience:

“In order to discover how subjective experience can be institutionalized, we first need to know how it can be seen at all by the people involved. **Institutionalization requires that a pattern be visible**, in order that it be typified, imitated, legitimated, given meaning, etc. So if organisation members are unaware of each other’s

subjective experiences – if those experiences aren't part of the ongoing conversation that produces sustained patterns – they can't be institutionalized.”

In the context of positive institutional work, keeping in mind the form trap, practice theory may assist in supporting an experiential orientation rather than a symbolic one by deliberately uncovering the taken-for-granted nature of practice. Echoing feminist organisational theory on deep structure discussed above, practice theorists like Nicolini (2012:3) highlight:

“practices are resilient and often difficult to change because they are taken for granted and often considered as part of the ‘natural’ order of things. **The contribution of a practice approach is to uncover that behind all the apparently durable features of our world there is always the work and effort of someone[s].**”

It is in ‘the effort of someone[s]’ that experiential practice against the form trap is found. So, if it is in the course of performing (and experiencing) the practice with others that individuals experience the institution in immediate and locally coherent ways (Brown & Duguid, 2000), then it is in the experience of the practice that the institution is lived, resisted, transformed. Therefore, despite the stickiness of practices, they are always necessarily open to contestation through the conscious participation and engagement of organisation members - through agency.

Conclusion of Meso Section

The new focus in institutional work, specifically the experience involved in pursuing social purpose goals, has brought to the fore new literature around positive institutional work as embodied shared purposeful practice. The positive, experiential and practice turns invite a deeper, more critical exploration of the experiential nature of institutional life and how experience might provide an alternative evaluation for legitimacy in institutions.

Expanding on this, in the next section of this Literature Chapter, I explore more in-depth the idea of agency and institutional change, and how deeper understanding of institutional purpose, power and practice can free people to “to step out of their established roles, adopt a reflexive stance, and engage in the institutional work necessary to transform the conditions under which they live and work”, thereby becoming more conscious and effective participants in their institutional worlds (Lawrence et al, 2011:56).

2.3 Microfoundations of Institutional Theory

The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion (Camus, 1955)

Microfoundations is a relatively new field of institutional theory, and it has been acknowledged that it merits theoretical attention and development (Lok & Wilmott, 2019). As such, the role of the individual within institutions has received increasing attention from institutional theorists through the exploration of micro-processes and microfoundations in institutional work. A number of scholars have attempted to reintegrate the notion of agency and the power that individuals have within the institutions that structure and are structured by them (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Creed et al, 2010; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2011; Mutch, 2007; Nilsson, 2015; Tracey et al, 2011; Weber et al, 2008; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010).

To adequately understand the transformative potential of positive institutional work in social purpose organisations requires drawing on theories outside those which have historically focused on either field-level outcomes or individual agents of change (Hampel et al., 2017). For example, recent explorations into microfoundations of institutional theory includes identifying dynamics at lower levels of analysis that aggregate into institutional effects at the field level (Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Powell & Rerup, 2017; Boxenbaum, 2019). Excitingly, this development aims at multiscalar theorising and a broader analytical scope of institutional theory (Cardinale, 2018) and begins to uncover more about how individuals connect to broader, more macro-institutional processes (Greenwood et al, 2017).

Additionally, while institutional theory has identified a micro-level, bottom-up approach to institutions, it mainly focuses on the performative role of organisational systems, practices and processes, leaving the ‘micro-interaction’ among actors largely unnoticed (Vossen & van Gestel, 2019). Hou (2021) argues that *social interactions comprise an essential part of the institutionalisation process*, but that most institutional studies have stayed away from studying them. This tendency calls for a closer look at how individuals and their social relations are being integrated into institutional theory and how it conceptualises agency.

This section is split into the following sections:

2.3.1) Agency in institutional theory - Moving from dialectic to dialogic agency - I explore the foundations of agency in new institutionalism and developments towards a more

dialogic understanding of agency as intrinsically social, relational and purposeful.

2.3.2) Towards agency as inquiry - Then I briefly outline Nilsson's (2015) invitation to explore agency as a shared inquiry as organisation members become more conscious and aware of their institutional experiences.

In response to the invitation to explore the *experience* of institutional work, this section of my Literature Review explores these different approaches to understanding agency in institutional work.

2.3.1 Agency in institutional theory: From dialectic to dialogic agency

The conceptualisation of agency within institutional theory has been subject to much scholarly debate. The notion of agency has been mostly concerned with the *paradox of embedded agency* (Garud & Karnøe, 2003; Seo & Creed, 2002; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010; Lounsbury et al, 2012). Institutional theorists have recognised the hegemonic power of institutions through the exploration of *embeddedness*. One of the main contributions of new institutional theory is the conceptualization of institutions as cultural-cognitive structures (Phillips & Malhotra, 2008), which achieve the status of *taken-for-grantedness* during their institutionalisation (Jepperson, 1991). Embeddedness describes institutions as *cultural* because they are socially constructed becoming an external cultural toolkit that form a scaffold for actors' agency (Swidler, 1986; Lounsbury et al, 2012); and *cognitive* because they order actors' perceptions of the social world (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Zucker, 1977).

As Nilsson (2015:379) explains embedded agency is the institutional 'puzzle' of "how people can think and act in intentional, socially novel ways within institutionalised systems that may cognitively delimit what is possible to conceive in the first place". Nilsson (2015) sites work exploring diverse experiences of embeddedness (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Garud et al, 2007; Seo & Creed, 2002), which emphasise the role of agency in institutional work (Lawrence et al, 2011) within complex (Dorado, 2005) fields of multiple logics (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2009; Jarzabkowski et al, 2009) with unintended consequences (Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Marti & Mair, 2009).

Institutional theorists explore questions like *when and how can actors engage in*

change-oriented behaviour (Holm, 1995; Seo & Creed, 2002). However, the focus up to date is on analysing change-oriented behaviour in itself, that is, “how actors settle on specific courses of action out of those that are possible” (Cardinale, 2019:675). This reminds me of the traps that institutional theorists have fallen into previously, failing to look at *why* those specific actions were thought to be the only possibilities. This remains rooted in an analytical dualism, instead of a more co-constitutive interpretation of institution (Jessop, 2001). In fact, new institutionalism has been criticised for its lack of a microfoundation that considers the *co-constitutive* nature of institutional constraints and actors’ agency (Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Powell & Rerup, 2017), implying that institutions and agency appear as semi-independent forces rather than co-constitutive (Lok & Willmott, 2019).

New writing on institutional theory’s conceptualisation of structure and agency has rejected the “phantom problem” of embedded agency (Lok & Willmott, 2019). They argue that the relationship between structure and agency is not one of embeddedness, which implies that “agency is set firmly into a surrounding mass called structure” (Lok & Willmott, 2019:470), but rather that the relationship should be understood as *mutually constitutive*. Powell & Colyvas (2008:277) call for “more attention to everyday processes than momentous events, to less powerful members of organisations as opposed to only leaders and champions, and to cultural and cognitive aspects as well as political ones”. Though early institutional theory had a relatively passive view of actors, over-emphasizing conformity and isomorphism, the turn towards institutional fields entails a more dynamic view (Geels, 2020). This dynamic view comes from two shifts:

“one, that the understanding of institutions has changed from monolithic, inert structures (exerting one-directional force) towards more **malleable patterns** that are reproduced (and gradually changed) over time; two, that actors in fields are fundamentally oriented towards each other, leading to a **relational view of agency**” (Geels, 2020:8).

Conversely, institutional researchers have almost exclusively portrayed agency as *dialectical*, seeing conflict between institutional logics as “the core generating mechanism of change” (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006:878) as agents compete in political contests to further their own interests. The institutional entrepreneurship literature has been some of the most explicit exploration of agency (Dorado, 2005; Hardy & Maguire, 2008, 2017; Battilana, Leca & Boxenbaum, 2008; Battilana & D’Aunno 2009; Weik, 2011). Theorists have explored the ways that institutional entrepreneurship unfolds when actors try to either elaborate

macro-level frames, categories and meanings (through institutional logics) within organisations, or try to establish new logics that later become taken-for-granted (Hou, 2021). This approach focuses on how actors seek power, status and interests while their agency is constrained by institutional contexts (Hou, 2021).

Other institutional theorists have moved “beyond constraint” (Glynn, 2008) to explore actors’ agency through micro-processes of the ‘constructing’ and ‘performing’ particular identities (Creed, DeJordy & Lok 2010; Creed, Scully & Austin, 2002; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Rao, Monin & Durand, 2003; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). For example, Creed et. al. (2010:1336) explored micro-processes through which marginalised actors - in this case lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) ministers who were committed to the institution in which they were embedded (the church) - began “to think and act as agents of institutional change”. Agency, in this sense, exists to resolve the experience of institutional contradiction and marginalisation. It follows that actors are conceptualised as “heroes who have unique traits that allow them to exploit opportunities undetected by mere mortals” (Garud & Karnøe, 2003:277).

The growing interest in unpacking the role of actors and micro-processes of institutional change has facilitated a rising number of these actor-centered accounts (Hwang & Colyvas, 2021; Hwang & Colyvas, 2020; Hwang et al, 2019) focusing on a “realist, interest-based approach to actors and behavior” (Lounsbury et al, 2021:266). And although microfoundations do not refer rigidly to individuals, institutionalists often emphasise individuals in their accounts of microfoundations (Harmon, Haack & Roulet, 2019; Haack, Sieweke & Wessel 2019). Moving on from looking at actors as institutionally constrained, simply accomplices to social processes of institutionalisation, actors are seen as reflexive, goal-oriented and capable agents (Lawrence et al, 2013). However, avoiding naively realist, actor-centered accounts is a challenge (Steele et al, 2020; Zilber, 2021).

There have been efforts to counter this individualistic heroic approach. This expanded view of agency as *distributed* explores “entrepreneurship [as] a larger process that builds upon the efforts of many... drawing upon the generative impulses of actors from multiple domains” (Garud & Karnoe, 2003:277). This gives a more nuanced picture of agency where political contest is not necessarily defined and enacted only through dyadic competitions (i.e. not just between two competing interests), but dialectical contests “accomplished through the coordinated and uncoordinated efforts of a potentially large number of actors”

(Lawrence et al, 2011:5). This is particularly likely and necessary in the domain of complex social problems or grand challenges (Hamann, Nilsson, Drimie & Freeth, 2025; Eisenhardt, Graeber & Sonenshein, 2016; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi & Tihanyi, 2016) that are “too many-sided and complex for any one single individual or organisation to handle” (Dorado, 2005:386).

Nilsson (2015) highlights that even with this more collective understanding, agency remains distinctly political, since institutional agents still generally focus on exploring tensions to further their own individual interests or to advocate for their own framings (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2009). Such conceptions of agency in institutional theory are reminiscent of political theorist’s zero-sum game where agents struggle over “stakes” in a game-like fashion (Bourdieu, 1984). Interests then become the “fabric of agency” (Nilsson, 2015:380), in that “agency can be defined as the process through which actors render practical consciousness discursive and make sense of their *political interests*” (Hensmans, 2003:358). Nilsson (2015) unpacks the conflation of interests with agency, whereby institutional benefits are framed as *scarce resources accruing to specific individuals or groups at the expense of other individuals or groups*, and it is then this resource scarcity that drives institutional change (Scherer & Lee, 2002). The conflation of interests with agency can be traced back to dualistic narratives that have plagued sociological and institutional theorising and practice for decades.

Given that these dualisms affect how agency is framed in sociological and institutional theorising and practice, I thought it necessary to explore a little deeper what this means for the experience of agency in institutions.

Against Dualisms

Feminist theorists Waller & Wren (2021) explore the history of dualisms rooted in the public/private divisions of the 19th century. They draw on Jennings (1993) feminist institutional analysis to outline the enduring system of connected dualisms that structure everyday life, and which I want to emphasise have affected conceptualisations of agency in institutional theory.

Table 1: Public/Private divisions in the 19th Century

[adapted from Waller & Wren 2021]

Public	Private
(Market) economy	Family
Rational	Emotional
Competitive	Nurturant
Independent	Dependent
Individual	Social
Objective	Subjective

Waller & Wren (2021:59) highlight that the dualistic narratives outlined above define “what is to be fully human on the left-hand side, and the right-hand side represents a lesser valued, social inferior human”. The double dualisms create “a coherent whole which redefine and privilege certain interests, [which] were framed by market-interests” embodied by rationality, scarcity and objectivity, over familial and social processes (Waller & Wren, 2021:57). Importantly, Waller & Wren (2021) emphasise that this narrative is centred around the ideology of hyper-individualism, which further legitimises and prioritises individual, competitive, independent activities above socially integrative activities. As such, any behaviour that doesn’t conform to this ideal, like expressing emotions, nurturing, caring, is relegated to the private sphere.

This dualistic context supports “a self-referential yet inauthentic agency” that is “limited to the public, market sphere of society and the realm of economic man” (Waller & Wren, 2021:60,62) and separates this ‘economic man’ from his emotional, nurturant, dependent body. A dualistic agency venerates the individual acting alone, and “is neatly understood as the power to change one’s situation and station” (Waller & Wren, 2021:60). Consequently,

“all inequalities, misfortunes, and tragedies are surmountable and dependent wholly on the action of the individual regardless of their social context – there is no sexism, no chauvinism, no systemic or social barriers; the only barriers are self-imposed” (Waller & Wren, 2021:60).

It negates the possibility of social change on a collective scale because all fault and power of change lies with the individual (Ratner, 2000; Wrenn, 2015). Feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway (1988, 2010) have long argued for situated knowledges, asserting an awareness of the power behind particular deep structures, specifically *how and why particular ideas became dominant*. By exploring the ways in which these double dualisms limit how institutionalists have defined and understood agency, as synonymous with

hyper-individualistic political contest for market conquest, exposes “the truncated notion of human capabilities built into the reified, dualistic structures that support neoliberalism” (Waller & Wren, 2021:63).

Waller and Wren (2021:63) offer an alternative, inviting people to question the valuation and the appropriateness of behavior based on “what kind of behavior is more useful for achieving the *social goal of the activity* rather than their individuated self-referential goal, then the character of the activity can change in positive ways”. This resonates with the positive turn in positive institutional work and a more purposeful and shared conceptualisations of agency. As Nilsson (2015:381) elucidates:

“If the institutional goal is *positive* - that is, if institutional work is aimed at a shared experience of a social good - it is hard to see how interest-based contests can be the main dynamic of agency... [One of the reasons being that] the interest in question is a *public interest*. The institutional goal is not a social arrangement meant to serve one person or group at the expense of another. Goals like virtue, freedom, engagement, or authenticity are not seen as scarce resources.”

By drawing on the positive experiential turn of positive institutional work pursued with a collective spirit, agency is no longer seen as a scarce resource, for which actors are in competition, but rather a more authentic collective understanding of agency where “we could be fully human” (Waller & Wren, 2021:70). Significantly, this research recenters the embodied, situated and relational nature of agency which will be discussed below and in much more detail in my Discussion section.

Agency as Dialogic

Drawing from relational sociology of organisations, it is possible to build a conception of agency that recognises it as intrinsically *social and relational* (Emirbayer, 1997). For Emirbayer and Mische (1998:974), “*agency is always a dialogical process* by and through which actors immersed in temporal passage engage with others within collectively organised contexts of action”. They highlight the importance of intersubjectivity, social interaction, and communication as critical components of agency micro-processes. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) emphasise that the agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity if it is *analytically situated within the experience of time and space*. They argue that through the experience of time and space, it becomes clear how the structural environments of action are both dynamically sustained by - and also altered through - agency. Actors are conceived of “not as atomized individuals, but

rather as active respondents within nested and overlapping systems,” which Emirbayer and Mische refer to as ‘temporal-relational contexts’ (1998:969). They critique contemporary theories of agency, stating that they

“restrict the discussion of human agency to its iterational dimension... They focus upon a low level of reflectivity and **do not show us how such schemas can be challenged, reconsidered, and reformulated**” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998:983).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) maintain that actors do not merely repeat past routines, they are also the inventors of new possibilities for thought and action. This invites an innovative and creative potentiality for actors, enabling them to reconstruct and innovate upon existing institutions in accordance with evolving desires and purposes. Following this perspective, actors are not ‘prisoners’ of existing institutions, but take agency to yield deviance, creativity and innovation (Hou, 2021).

Importantly, within the context of positive institutional work, if agency is understood as a dialogical process and situated within the experience of time and space (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) it is inseparable from an analysis of power. Despite the feminist institutionalism invitations, the political dimensions of power and the politics of agency remain underdeveloped (Munir, 2015; Geels, 2020). Feminist theorist McNay (2016:39) summarises this political dimension of agency as:

“the ability of an individual to have **some kind of transformatory effect or impact on the world...** But this apparent simplicity is belied by the fact that although agency is a universal capacity, **it is socially realised in a variable and unequal fashion:** it means different things according to the cultural context and some individuals and groups clearly have more agency than others. **In other words, agency is inseparable from the analysis of power.**”

McNay’s challenge invites a framing of agency that is particularly attuned to issues of power that are situated and relational. I found resonance with other feminist theories of agency which explore the normative entailments beyond the conceptual limitations of the ‘sovereign actor’ (McNay, 2016). This is in contrast to the heroic model of action/agency described above that views actors as autonomous and unencumbered and fully rational beings. Reminiscent of critiques of institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al, 2009; DiMaggio & Powell, 2000; Garud, Jain & Kumaraswamy, 2002), feminist theories of agency argue that the rational agent perspective fails to adequately address the foundational fact of *social interdependence*, and that individuals are formed “through embodied interaction and

social norms, rather than pre-exist them” (McNay, 2016:41). It is feminist theorists who gave me some of the richest explorations of agency as flesh, as *embodied, situated, and relational* (McNay, 2016). This situational analysis does not assume an experiential ‘truth’ but rather gives rise to a fuller explanation of action (McNay, 2016).

This reconceptualises power as a relational process rather than a fixed possession. Tronto (2013) distinguishes between “power over” and “power with,” the latter describing forms of collective agency grounded in care, attentiveness, and mutual responsiveness. Similarly, Miller and Stiver (1998) propose that growth-fostering connections expand individuals’ capacity to act through being seen, heard, and understood.

This study builds on recent work on embodied and relational forms of agency. Scholars have increasingly conceptualised agency not as an individual attribute but as emergent from embodied relations, affective attunements, and material engagements (Heney, 2020; McNay, 2016; Beausoleil & Boucher, 2022). Within institutional and organisational studies, this view emphasises agency as distributed and situated (Gherardi, 2022), unfolding through the interplay of sensing, reflecting, and relating. By engaging these perspectives, the study positions experiential agency as both a felt process of inquiry and a *relational condition* through which institutional vitality is continually generated.

Where traditionally in institutional theory hegemonic institutions are often neutralised and secured in invisible fashion, a situated, embodied and socially interdependent framing recognises that agency is bound up in the *web of interpersonal relations and domination*. Framing agency as dialogic goes further in offering a much more dynamic and social view of actors as they seek to become more effective participants in creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions they live in, but the individual-in-relation integration requires a richer theorising about institutional agency, especially in the pursuit of social purpose goals. Below, I briefly outline new theorising in this direction.

2.3.2 Moving towards agency as Inquiry

A beautiful invitation from Nilsson (2015:373) comes in an unusual form. He posits: “*shared inquiry* as an under explored solution to the paradox of embedded agency... because positive goals are experiential, and not scarce resources”. Framing agency as inquiry moves away from the notion that agency would be “dependent on structural contradictions like institutional multiplicity, internal contradictions, or an actor’s social position” (Nilsson,

2015:382). In this context, inquiry only requires “a generalised awareness of cognitive and normative submersion” (Nilsson, 2015:382).

Nilsson (2015) turns the focus of agency away from consciousness of specific institutional conditions to *the consciousness of embedded agency itself* - the fleshiness of institutions. Interestingly, the metaphor of institutions as flesh has been newly introduced in institutional theory in the work of Gehman (2020:238) who wrote “no flesh, no institution’. He explores the nature of individual-in-institution whereby the “already instituted direction *must be personally understood [in the flesh]... if it is to be understood*” (Gehman, 2020:46). This phenomenological approach is frequently associated with sociological approaches to embodiment but requires more exploration within the context of new institutionalism. Flesh as the foundation for institutions invites a reimagining of the relationship between micro and macro foundations of institutions. It frees up agency from being limited to a particular set of understandings and perspectives, rather actors “start with the awareness that they are not aware of all the different assumptions, values, and beliefs framing their institutional experiences” (Nilsson, 2015:382). Agency is enacted not by understanding *how* their experience is institutionally constituted but by recognising that their experience *is* institutionally constituted. This has a fundamental impact on how researchers understand and analyse institutional work as “agency is expressed less through the development of projects focused on realising particular institutional arrangements than through attempts to raise institutional conditions and possibilities into fuller consciousness” (Nilsson, 2015:382).

In this case, inquiry “becomes not a discrete act but a continued practice” (Nilsson, 2015:383) and this continued practice requires broad participation in the ongoing “questioning of the hitherto unquestioned” (Moore & Beadle, 2006:38), recalling the feminist theorists who “consider agency as ongoing and uncertain, a constant process of negotiation; agency can be neither complete nor discrete, it always exists in relation to complex personal and social histories” (Heney, 2020:17). This makes possible a theory of agency which centres “both an awareness of personal and social histories of action and of oppression, and a space for processes of change or movement which are shifting, uncertain, and nonlinear” (Heney, 2020:17).

Within institutional theory, practices are often understood as the situated enactments of collective life (Schatzki et al., 2001), while agency involves the generative capacities that sustain such enactments over time (Sen 1999; Nilsson 2015). Feminist theorists extend this

distinction by locating capabilities within embodied, relational agency (McNay 2016; Ahmed 2017). This theoretical pairing frames the analysis that follows, where practices and capabilities are treated as dynamically co-constitutive dimensions of experiential legitimacy.

Drawing on systems theorists like Bateson (2018), complex living systems approaches offer a useful framing for this shared inquiry and the interplay of vital relationships between different parts of a system. Bateson (2016:86) speaks about agency as “diffused into the larger contextual processes that are shared by the entire community. Agency is a paradoxical product of mutual learning within and between people, nature, and culture.” As such, for Bateson, (2016:86), the role of each individual actor is “to be ready and willing to show up, serve, and then, most importantly, stand back... *it’s a zone of interrelational process*”. This “is only possible when all participants are willing to be wrong... willing to learn, to explore new ideas, to go off the map, out of the known, and together grope in the shadowy corners of new ideas, new plans, new territories” (Bateson, 2016:84). Therefore, it is also necessary to explore the modes of relating that would foster this kind of shared inquiry, for example critical dialogue (Freire, 1970), creativity (Hou, 2021) and meaningfulness (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Mayer, May & Surtee, 2015). In this research process I was able to further investigate the kind of agency involved in the pursuit of shared social purpose, and the specific capabilities that emerged in this mutual ongoing inquiry as organisation members become more active participants in their organisational world.

Conclusion to Micro Section

In this section I explored the blind spots in institutional theory which compromise its explanatory power of ‘agency’ (Hou, 2021). A deeper understanding of institutional purpose, power and practice can free people to step out of their established roles to become more conscious and effective participants in their institutional worlds. My conceptualisation of agency moves beyond the traditional dialectic understanding of agency joining more recent institutional theorists in acknowledging the active relational unfolding nature of agency required in the pursuit of positive institutional change.

Conclusion of Essential Literature Chapter

Drawing on the literature above, I’m inviting institutional work literature to do three things:

First, as Hampel et al (2017) highlight, I join an important direction they indicate for future research looking to understand ‘big’ institutions, their place in societies, and their

relationship to institutional life. I do this by deliberately inviting a *multiscalar conceptualisation of power* that puts macro institutional analysis of hegemonic institutions in conversation with the practice of positive institutional work and the experiences of organisation members in daily enactments.

Second, while engaging with institutional work literature, I found limited studies on the *experience* involved in constructing and maintaining social purpose organisations and how their social purpose goals are experienced by those inside. In order to theoretically and practically speak to the experiential reality of organisations doing social purpose work (not just the symbolic work to do so), I explore how paying attention to experience of organisation members as embodied, situated and relational might support the cultivation of experiential legitimacy where internal practice is experientially aligned to purpose.

Finally, to understand the role and nature of organisation members' as active agents and relational beings in shaping their organisational lives and realities towards their social purpose goals I use the term *experiential agency*. Building on work into the microfoundation of institutions work, and drawing on Nilsson's (2015) work of agency as inquiry, I define experiential agency as

the iterative collective process through which actors connect their social purpose goals to their everyday experiences through positive institutional work.

I created this construct of experiential agency to synthesize the literature gap and frame my thesis.

2.4 Useful Terminology

This research involves a number of key concepts:

Experiential agency is the iterative embodied, situated and relational process through which actors connect their social purpose goals to their everyday experiences through positive institutional work.

Experiential legitimacy is defined as “evaluations of the way the internal subjective experiences of field members do or do not reflect legitimated regulations, norms, and beliefs” (Nilsson, 2015: 373)

Positive Institutional Work refers to “the creation or maintenance of institutional patterns that express mutually constitutive experiential and social goods” (Nilsson, 2015:372).

Practices that connect experientially oriented purpose to practice refer to the recurrent, relational actions through which members of social purpose organisations sustain alignment

between their lived experience and their organisation's espoused purpose.

Capabilities in the pursuit of shared social purpose goals describe the inter-relational abilities developed as organisation members become more conscious and effective in the process of collective ongoing inquiry into their shared social purpose.

Deep structure describes the "collection of values, history, culture and practices that... [shape] the informal and sometimes hidden rules that form the 'normal' unquestioned way of working... [and] determine who gets what, who does what and who decides" inside an organisation (Rao et al, 2015:144).

Societal logics describe the pervasive rules that guide members of society, the rules which depend on the values, beliefs and specific material legacies and patterns of power distributions (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001) surrounding that particular society.

Social purpose organisations organise around *social goods* which can include *intangible* social goods such as freedom and equality, or more *tangible* social goods such as education or health (Nilsson, 2015).

In the following chapter I will explore the methodology used for this research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

"Methodology is itself a theory. It is a theory of methods which informs a range of issues from who to study, how to study, which institutions practices to adopt (such as interpretive practices), how to write and which knowledge to use" (Skeggs, 1997:17)

In this chapter, I will describe the methods I used to explore the phenomenon of experiential legitimacy and experiential agency in the context of social purpose organisations. I start by situating the study within its research paradigm and describing the approach and design of the study. Then I discuss the selection of the case sites and the characteristics that made each case appropriate for this research. Next, I describe the data collection methods I used to gather information about the question over a three-year period, and the analytical approach I used to arrive at my findings. Finally, I conclude with the ethical considerations, including those that unfolded during the COVID-19 period.

3.1 Research Paradigm

Situated in the scholarly field of institutional work, this study adopts a nominalist/subjectivist ontology. The study is rooted in the belief that social reality is socially constructed, mutable and dependent on, and embedded in the behaviour, thoughts and feelings of individual actors (Hampel et al, 2017). The study also operates within an anti-positivist epistemology, from the point of view that social facts are ecologically

embedded within specific contexts of time and space—that is to say, within particular interactional fields composed of concrete, historically specific histories (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994). As such, drawing extensively on feminist theorists who explain that experience is not the origin of knowledge but “*that which we seek to explain*” (Scott, 1999:780; see more in Grant, 2016), constructed in a specific moment and a specific location (Haraway, 1991). Moreover, as an exploration of agency within institutions, the study tends toward a voluntaristic view of human nature (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), with the “assumption that people and collective actors have the potential to act in ways that involve an awareness of their relationship to institutions” (Hampel et al, 2017:2).

3.2 Research Approach

This research is qualitative, inductive and exploratory in approach. It draws upon explorations of three case study organisations that are part of the broader non-governmental (NGO) sector in South Africa working towards social purpose goals. Qualitative research allows for inquiry into situations that are characterised by novelty and nascent theorisation (Eisenhardt, 1989; Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Yin, 2015). In particular, “case studies are ideally suited to rich, detailed, interpretive analysis of poorly understood phenomena and ill-structured links among actors” (Hou, 2021:660).

My aim was to scrutinise the experience and relationships between heterogeneous organisational members working collaboratively towards shared social purpose end goals, within the institutional field of NGOs. As such, it made sense to delve deeply into individual and collective experiences of organisation members, using all the tools available at my disposal (interviews with organisation members and external individuals working in the field, focus groups, observation and other social artefacts).

Importantly, my research approach aimed to be rooted in feminist methodology practice. Harding (1987:2) argues that there are not necessarily specific methods for feminist research, however, what makes feminist research different is “the way they carry out these methods of evidence gathering.” As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007:4) put it:

“Feminist researchers hold different perspectives, ask different questions, draw from a wide array of methods and methodologies, and apply multiple lenses that heighten our awareness of sexist, racist, homophobic and colonialist ideologies and practices.”

This approach allowed me to focus on the experiences of power and disempower within the

social purpose organisation context. The process of data collection was an interactive one, constantly asking questions about what I was seeing, hearing, feeling *with* the participants in the organisations with whom I was engaging (Hesse-Biber & Leavey, 2007). This approach was grounded in the agency of individuals, not as ‘victims’ of inequality but as active agents in the construction of their organisational realities and the individual and collective choices they make to negotiate and/or resist those realities. As such, this research sees these individuals as producers and imaginaries in the construction of knowledge.

Building on the thesis research questions guiding this study (1) How is experiential legitimacy accomplished within SPO (2) What is the nature of agency in accomplishing experiential legitimacy? I used a set of reflective prompts as reflective anchors for the research process itself. These questions did not introduce separate lines of inquiry but helped sustain conceptual coherence between the study’s theoretical focus on experiential legitimacy and its empirical exploration of organisational practice. They oriented the research process toward noticing how lived experience interacts with institutional purpose and care-based values, ensuring that data collection and analysis remained grounded in the study’s broader interpretive aims.

Reflective Prompts	Theme addressed
(1) What does it feel like to be in a social purpose organisation? Why do organisation members join them? Why do they stay?	Focusing on the nature of the social purpose organisations and the individual's relationship with their work, locating the interviewee in their institutional context
(2) How do organisation members experience the purpose of an organisation in their everyday life?	Focusing on the exploration of specific examples/instances of positive institutional work; and common examples of experiential legitimacy
(3) How does the experience of agency manifest in the pursuit of shared social purpose end goals?	Focusing on the presence and extent of experiences of agency by individuals during the course of their everyday work

I adopted a flexible methodological approach to engage my questions. This is because this research relies heavily on the experiences, narratives and stories of participants as they explore their relationship with their organisation. I remember distinctly, when presenting my fledgling research at a conference on Feminist Institutionalism at the University of Stellenbosch, a lawyer saying to me “experience is NOT truth!” (from PhD Notes 2019). But feminist researchers maintain that we can understand people’s positions within society through the lens of experience; that experience should not be looked at as the “foundation

for knowledge”, but rather as “a subjective construction of knowledge” (Skeggs, 1997:28).

Joan W. Scott (1991:794–795) argues:

“We should not look to discover truth in experience, but look to it as a place to find material that must then be interpreted in light of the imbrication of the social and the personal, all the while recognising that there is no single narrative of any one experience.”

Therefore, as a feminist researcher, subjectivity is key because it gives the researcher glimpses into the unknown, the unexplored, the unsaid. If institutional work has been dominated by men, by patriarchal institutions, by a particular ontology of being, then it is through surfacing the experiences of ‘the other’ that I am going to find other realities. Haraway (in Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007:13) argues that:

“Our situated location - our particular biography, history, and positionality - does not have to be perceived as a barrier to achieving knowledge or truth but can offer each of us a unique way of seeing the world... It can be a ‘focusing device’ so to speak, through which we may be able to catch, see and/or understand phenomena in ways that others cannot.

Feminist theory stems from the idea that ‘the personal is the political’ which means that personal experiences have important political implications; these experiences should not be taken for granted but should be conceptualised to be able to understand people’s situations thoroughly (Hughes, 2002), especially those whose voices and experiences are not represented in the current institutional theory literature, and those with less institutional power. However, there is danger in taking ‘an experience’ as evidence if it is not connected to the systemic issues at play, which only become evident over time (Powell, Hamann, Bitzer & Baker, 2017). As such, it was also necessary to triangulate individual experiences with collective ones (in focus groups); look for similarities and differences across the case studies (through my analysis); and also sense-making with others in the field who are involved in social purpose organising (through my sense-making interviews).

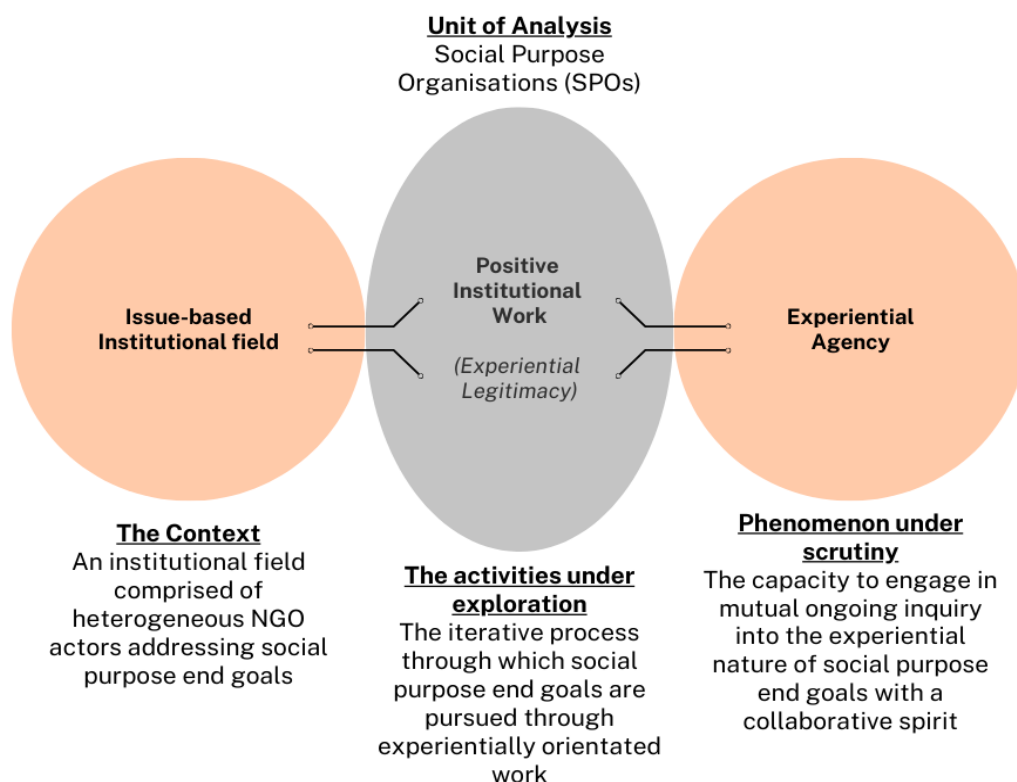
I kept extensive field notes while doing each case study site visit, and a PhD ‘diary’ to capture emerging ideas and questions that were arising more broadly in the research, all of which formed part of my ethnographic work. In order to capture these reflections Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2007:210) talk about the use of field notes, specifically ‘jottings’ “to capture a unique turn of phrase or interactions that stand out and

observations/interpretations after a day in the field”. It is important to note that my field notes were both descriptive and analytical, capturing observations of who was there and what happened, as well as being interpretive and speculative. Throughout this thesis I draw on these field notes, using ‘rich description’ to paint a fuller picture of organisation life and agency (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2007). My intimate experience of these organisational rhythms captured in my field notes forms the basis of this research as it was only through the ebbs and flows of daily organisational life that I could begin to piece a picture of positive institutional work and agency.

3.3 Research Design

Below is an image outlining my research design:

FIGURE 3: Research Design



For this study, the *phenomena under scrutiny* is ‘experiential agency’ and the *unit of analysis* is ‘social purpose organisation’ within the broader institutional context of the NGO field. Importantly, the *activities under exploration* are those involved in ‘positive institutional work’, specifically the iterative process through which social purpose goals are pursued through experientially oriented work.

Both practically and phenomenologically, this was challenging as experience of a shared purpose is studied as a composite of the individual subjectivities of its members. Therefore, the unit of analysis for this research was multi-layered: the organisation as the primary unit of analysis, while the organisation members were analysed as components of the organisation. This research aims to identify those experiences, motives and practices that emerge across these subjectivities, not as a summation of subjective experiences, but as *shared subjective experiences* that reflect a common patterning (institutionalisation) in and across the three case organisations. Hence ethnographic case studies were an ideal vehicle to study experiential agency and its relationship with positive institutional work.

3.4 Case Study Selection

For this research, case study sites were selected using theoretical sampling or purposive sampling focusing on “unusually revelatory” cases that are particularly likely to offer theoretical insight (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Patton, 2002). When using case studies to build theory, sampling of cases is theoretical rather than statistical (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) - my aim was to explore theory rather than to test it. Therefore, I was seeking ‘information-rich’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994) case sites “where the focal phenomenon is likely to occur” (Eisenhardt, 2021:149), the phenomenon for this study being experiential legitimacy. The case study organisations that I engaged for the research were unique in their organisation members’ willingness and openness to ask themselves questions about their congruence with purpose, practice and experiences. Prior familiarity with the social-purpose field provided insight into which organisations were engaged in ongoing reflexive work. This ensured that cases would yield information-rich data for understanding how experiential legitimacy is accomplished, rather than testing whether it exists. Each organisation therefore represented a distinct configuration of social purpose and size allowing for comparison across contexts while preserving the depth required for inductive theory-building. Although each organisation demonstrated some commitment to exploring purpose, experience and practice congruence, the analysis remained open to identifying incoherence, contradiction, and breakdowns in experiential legitimacy as much as its presence.

3.4.1 Searching for case study sites

With an inductive approach, there were no predetermined hypotheses being tested; rather,

the case studies needed to provide a place in which to explore the experiential nature of organisations working towards social purpose goals. Specifically, the case studies for this research had three characteristics: (1) social purpose organisations with distinct social purpose goals; (2) an interest to engage with the experiential nature of organisational life; and (3) evidence of continuous positive institutional work over a sustained period of time.

It was important that the organisations in question were engaging with the grubby complexity of positive institutional work in ‘real-time’, not as a one-off exercise or workshop, but rather as an ongoing set of challenges with which they wanted to grapple.

For this research, I did not define social purpose organisation within the constraints of a particular organisational model or change methodology. Focusing on ‘social purpose organisations’ allows for a focus on the overall *social purpose* of the work rather than any particular organisational structure or means of social change (e.g. advocacy or service delivery or civic mobilisation), especially in a world where organisations are becoming more hybrid, operating in the same sector drawing on multiple tactics (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). There is a recognition that organisations that are working to solve some of the world's most complex issues - world hunger, climate change, civil war - need to take on complex modes and methods themselves (George et al., 2016), with a renewed focus on the structural nature of oppression (Nazneen & Okech, 2021).

Moreover, for the purposes of comparative homogeneity and convenience - I have worked in the social justice sector in Southern Africa for over 15 years - I specifically focused on formalised NGOs in South Africa. As Srinivas (2022) highlights, organisational research on NGOs remains modest. South Africa has a long history of social activism from the anti-Apartheid movement, to post-Apartheid democracy rights-based activism (Mbali, 2005) to more recent student activism (Stuurman, 2018) and a strong civil society. The heterogeneity within the NGO space in South Africa in terms of the methods and purposes and diverse logics across the sector (explored further below) ensured there were enough rich possibilities for case study organisations. In my initial explorations, I was approached by a for-profit wine farm with a social purpose based in South Africa, and a social movement I had worked with in Brazil. But I steered away from these possibilities as I felt there would be too many variables to make an effective comparative analysis within the timeframe and theoretical frame of this thesis.

3.4.2 Entry to case study sites

Accessing the organisations was a difficult and lengthy process. As Hesse-Biber et al. (2017) explore, feminist ethnographers distinguish between access, entry and rapport. Access refers specifically to gaining access to information; *entry* refers to “the initial act of entering the field or gaining permission to start study”; and *rapport* refers to “the quality of the researcher-participant relationship itself” (Buch & Staller, 2011:10).

For my research process, entry was the hardest. I began by approaching several social purpose organisations with whom I had worked in the past, and who I knew were thinking about the nexus between social purpose and internal practice. However, in an informal conversation with a social activist working and living in Cape Town, South Africa, she said that many social justice organisations were having conversations about purpose, power and practice internally, but they might not be willing to engage openly about the issues. She went on to say that leaders of social purpose organisations might be worried about doing a study like this because it might make the organisation vulnerable - it would be “exposing their dirty laundry” with possible political and funding consequences. She warned me that I might have trouble accessing organisations. And she was correct. The fear and scepticism proved true as many organisations were nervous to have an outsider, even one that was deeply connected to them and the work, come and ask questions about the internal workings, experiences of organisational members, and systemic power dynamics. But as I continued to reach out I was pointed to particular organisations and individuals who were consciously thinking about the dynamics I was exploring.

I adjusted my strategy for entry by describing the dynamic of positive institutional work in brief conversations within my own network and related networks of SPO practitioners and activists asking around for organisations that were already openly sharing their reflections on this kind of work. I was fortunate to have a wide range of individuals to reach out to. I received suggestions of about 15 potential organisations. I focused on those that I had an intimate knowledge of what *the experience of participating in that organisation* was like. This included listening to how the different leaders framed their work and what they were doing in the world. I selected three. I asked to meet with the three directors to explore whether my research might support the work they were already doing in this regard. It was through having these conversations that I got permission to begin the research. Buch and Staller (2011:11) warn against ‘gate-keepers’ who, for good or bad, “hold key positions

(formally or informally) that help to facilitate access". In some ways the leaders did play a gate-keeping role in my entry to the organisations but importantly, all three of them went back to their organisations to get a sense of whether the rest of the team would be keen before giving me permission. Moreover, I was invited to present my research intentions to all organisation members and engaged with questions that concerned/intrigued them. Being introduced in this way also established a level of trust with others in the organisation.

3.4.3 Site Access & Verification

Although this research is exploratory, I needed to identify social purpose organisations in which the practice of positive institutional work was *unusually high* for it to be meaningful and convincing. For theoretical purposes I used 'intensity sampling,' choosing cases where I had access to rich information with respect to the phenomenon in question. Drawing on Nilsson's (2009) methodological approach to exploring positive institutional work, I worked with these assumptions that pointed me to outlier organisations:

i) The experience of positive institutional work is based on purposefully connecting purpose to practice.

If I wanted to understand how positive institutional work happens in organisations there needed to be an initial show of purpose/sustained intention towards doing this work. As a feminist researcher I assumed that the organisation and those working in it wanted to go on a journey of reflection and discovery with me. I assumed that organisation members wanted to talk about their experiences in an honest and engaged manner and to open themselves up to these, sometimes difficult, intimate conversations collectively. This became a defining feature of site verification especially in the NGO field because at the time of the research the environment was very protective and closed.

ii) The experience of positive institutional work is a generalised, relatively multi-dimensional state, not a momentary singular dimensional experience

My assumption was that the depth of relationship between one or two co-workers would not lead to an overall organisation wide feeling of shared connectedness and engagement. Experiential organising patterns cannot be separated out from broader organisational patterns and therefore there would be "an overall long term feeling of personal fulfilment" and purposeful engagement at work and a generalised pattern of shared organisational purpose and engagement (Nilsson, 2015:372).

iii) Institutional patterns are not discrete, they are related to each other through broader meaning systems

My assumption was that to understand the way in which positive institutional work is institutionalised, I needed to study the wider social settings where positive institutional work dynamics are reproduced by multiple, related institutional practices. This meant exploring the presence and effect of societal and other logics on the experience of organisation members and their pursuit of social purpose goals.

Ultimately, these organisations didn't have to meet any optimal criteria (I wouldn't even know what that looks like), they simply had to demonstrate sustained and widespread patterns of positive institutional work within their day-to-day relational structures. This approach aligns with Nilsson's (2015) call for studying institutions "in the making," where legitimacy is not presumed but continually negotiated.

3.4.4 Rapport with each site

After the initial challenges of access and entry to organisations were overcome, I looked for evidence of continuous and constructive positive institutional work over a sustained period of time. Though I consciously recognised that leadership would *not* be my primary source of data, leaders' commitment was a good first indication of continuous and constructive experiential practice. I identified the first organisation, the Sustainability Hub quite early on through a connection with their Director as we had been talking about the challenges and joys of building organisations from the inside out.

I began the search for two other sites later in 2018, a friend from the sector suggested that I speak to one Director because of her strong feminist approach. She said the Feminist Legal Clinic were asking themselves 'what does a feminist approach look like from the inside?', meaning not just how they live their politics in their work but also in how they treat each other in the everyday. From our first introductory conversation the Director was inspired and excited to continue working with me on the research. The final case study, the Women's Empowerment Project, was drawn from previous research I had done on organisational innovation, drawing on relationships and intimate knowledge of the organisation's internal culture-building work. With the advent of COVID-19 this third case study did not take place in the same manner as the first two, although I had identified the case study organisation in 2018 (prior to the pandemic). However, I was able to collect ample data, and a depth which

I felt was comparative to the other two, despite the necessary research design adaptations.

From different individuals suggesting those sites, and conversations with their Directors, I was able to glean enough about their experiential qualities. Preliminary engagement with each organisation—through informal conversations, observations, and early relational encounters—offered enough to sense the relational quality of organisational life. What stood out was not a set of predefined criteria but a discernible atmosphere of attentiveness and reflection. These early impressions suggested that members were already in some form of collective dialogue about how their lived experience aligned with the organisation's values and purpose. It was this sensed vitality of relationship that signalled the suitability of each site for deeper inquiry into experiential legitimacy. It is important to note that there were different framings for how each organisation understood the idea of experiential legitimacy and connecting purpose to experiences inside the organisation, but that itself became a good indicator of experiential practice - it was dependent on the individuals and the purpose, the time and the place.

3.5 The Unit of Analysis: Case Study Organisations

I chose three relatively small NGOs, because small organisations are likely to reveal identifiable social patterns (Nilsson, 2009:53) where multi-level dynamics of those patterns play out in visible, researchable ways (Weick, 1974) and it is possible to see the whole “system” in a way that is difficult in larger organisations. The three cases (names are generic to protect anonymity) are:

- **Sustainability Hub** engaged in social and environmental justice for people and the planet through education and place-based practice;
- **Feminist Legal Clinic** focusing on equality and justice for women in South Africa through law reform advocacy and legal advice;
- **Women's Empowerment Project** working for equality and freedom for women through rape counselling services and legal advocacy.

See Table of Summary of Cases (page 81).

Apart from the size of the organisations (each had less than 50 employees), the age of the organisations (each are over 20 years old), and the type of organisation (all three were non-governmental organisations (NGOs), my sample set was heterogeneous in terms of social mission, driven by different professional logics, and taking on different organisational forms, methods and approaches to achieve their social purpose. Despite these

heterogeneous factors, these organisations were all rooted within the wider NGO field. As such, it was necessary early on to acknowledge NGOization as a societal logic affecting their social context. Also, in the organisational overviews below I include brief outlines of the most prominent professional logics, as it was evident that depending on the nature of the professional logic, and the extent to which there was collective awareness around the experiential implications of those logics, each organisation (and the experience of its members) was impacted to differing degrees.

Symbolic legitimacy played a secondary but informative role in site selection. Each organisation had articulated—through mission statements, public materials, or practitioner narratives—symbolic commitments to different social purpose goals, namely equality, justice and freedom broadly. These symbolic expressions offered a meaningful comparative frame for examining how such espoused purpose translated into lived organisational experience. However, these representations were not treated as indicators of success or as selection criteria for “positive” cases. Rather, they provided an entry point for investigating how the pursuit of publicly declared purposes is enacted, interpreted, and contested internally. This allowed for exploration of coherence and dissonance between what organisations claimed symbolically and what members experienced relationally.

Despite my initial superficially positive assessment, I couldn’t be certain that the organisations were positively experiential enough for my purposes until I began gathering primary data. Below, I give a brief overview of each organisation and I summarise the nature of responses with respect to overall connectedness and engagement between organisations members and towards the organisations purpose. The term “experiential potential” below refers to the sensed readiness within an organisation to engage reflexively with its relational life — a capacity among members to notice, question, and make meaning of their shared experience. This potential was not assessed through formal criteria but through the quality of interaction and openness observed during preliminary contact. It described an atmosphere in which lived experience appeared to matter: where people showed curiosity about how their work and each other felt, and where internal processes allowed such reflection to surface. This notion of experiential potential provided an interpretive cue for identifying sites in which the relationship between espoused purpose and lived practice could be studied in depth.

This approach resonates with McNay’s (2016) emphasis on agency as embodied and

relational, and with Ahmed's (2017) argument that institutional life must be felt to be understood. Experiential potential therefore denotes a relational condition — an atmosphere in which lived experience is treated as meaningful and discussable — signalling that an organisation possesses the ethical and affective ground from which experiential legitimacy can later be examined in depth. I provide several illustrative quotations to convey how this potential was sensed in practice.

3.5.1 Organisational Overview: Sustainability Hub

The Sustainability Hub was co-founded as a progressive learning space in 1999. The two co-founders had big dreams of setting up a space where individuals could live and learn together. The Hub's mission was brave: "to create a learning environment that was place-based, grounded in participation and community" (Support team member, SH - Interview 6). It was built on land purchased by a donor who supported the founders' vision to create "a living and learning environment, but they also see what is happening in real life... the joy of creativity working with small groups of people that were committed to something different." (Support team member, SH - Interview 6).

The Sustainability Hub is now a well-established organisation which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2019. The Institute claims to be a pioneer in transformative learning for all ages, through its involvement in the local preschool, primary school, youth development programme and its Diploma, Masters and PhD programmes in sustainable development. The initial idea was to create programmes that were "a living experiential laboratory" rooted in the principles of place-based, participation and community (Former leader, SH - Interview 1). They have developed a number of other programmes and projects over the years including an agro-ecology programme, immersive learning journeys, and a community farm. The garden is the organisation's keystone for place-based experiential learning.

The organisation has an intergenerational staff composition with many of the staff coming from the surrounding areas or having been students on one of the courses run by the Hub. This gives a deep sense of connection to the organisation and the physical place. The Hub does not feel like a traditional university space from the moment you drive through the gates. It was funded by donors and built specifically for the purpose of intentionally bringing together distinct communities; local people from a farming community that has been dispossessed, academics passionate about sustainability and experiential learning, and

people who wanted to build a new way of living and learning collectively. As one participant emphasised, “this is a community project that just happens to have academics in it. And we just need to always remember that” (Project coordinator, SH - Interview 7).

It was evident as the research unfolded that a key professional logic affecting the shaping of purpose and practice (and experience) of the organisation was a ‘*professionalised higher education logic*’ (Urbanek, 2021). The Sustainability Hub outwardly mirrors the symbolic legitimacy of a university with formal academic structures, credentialed authority, and elite knowledge systems with recognisable markers such as publications, formal qualifications, academic titles, course recognition and professionalism (Canhilal, Lepori, & Seeber 2016). I explored the experiential legitimacy of Sustainability Hub through surfacing the experiences of all organisation members, with special attention to those who fall outside the taken-for-granted “university-like” standards (without academic experience).

Symbolic Indicators of Experiential Potential

There were several symbolic indicators that Sustainability Hub is purposefully engaged in the kind of work involved in the pursuit of mutually constitutive experiential and social goods:

- The organisation's stated purpose (from the website) names both symbolic and experiential goals: “[The organisation] is an international living and learning centre for studies and experience in ecology, community and spirit.”
- The organisation is built on land that was bought for the sole purpose of creating a living and learning space, land that was historically used to exploit people, but now reconstituted for a very particular social purpose. It shares the land with an eco-village and therefore the programmatic work of the Hub and the life of the village are inextricably intertwined.
- Other organisations and groups frequently ask the Hub to share the “strategies” that allow them to create their experiential learning programmes. The Hub responds that it is not through specific strategies but because of the overall experience of being involved and engaged in the organisation that the experiential learning takes place. However, they receive many visiting groups wanting to learn from them and their practice.
- The organisation’s word-of-mouth reputation amongst the alumni and in the surrounding area typically highlight what an unusually energetic and attractive place the Hub is to live and work. They have received awards and recognition for their academic

programming and increased funding to innovate new programmes, and world recognition of students who pass through their programmes (e.g. sustainability design awards and media awards). They have deliberately built partnerships with sustainability and innovation learning centres around the world while also building relationships with local organisations in the physical vicinity of the Hub.

Experiential Indicators of Sustainability Hub's Experiential Potential

A majority of the interview participants at the Sustainability Hub framed their experiences in the organisation as deeply meaningful. Participants, and visitors, I talked to during my informal ethnographic work describe their experiences as positive and passionate. I interviewed 15 organisation members in individual interviews, and 9 other organisation members participated in 3 different focus groups. Here was the distribution across the organisation:

- 6 Support team staff in traditionally defined 'management' positions
- 16 staff from across the different programmes and different levels of the organisation focusing on those who usually might not be usually be engaged, for example, cleaners, gardeners and teachers
- 2 former employees in leadership positions, mentioned by current organisation members when asked about who exemplified the purpose the organisation's work and may want to reflect on it

In addition, I attended formal classes, two garden lunch events, two seminars, and 'hung out' at the Sustainability Hub Cafe on numerous occasions while conducting interviews and focus groups. These informal encounters with organisation members, students and people visiting supported the impressions I got from my interviews and focus groups. Of all the organisation members that I interviewed, the majority spoke with high positive experiential contrast. Only one participant I engaged with spoke in more negative terms. As a former employee she framed her relationship with the organisation as fraught. However, those who advised that I speak to this particular former employee highlighted the depth of her knowledge about the history of the organisation and the importance of the systemic lens she brings to her critique, especially around experiences of exclusion of non-academic staff and the continued legacy of Apartheid.

When contrasting the highly positive experiences at the Sustainability Hub with experiences in other organisations, participants tended to focus on:

- The energising and joyful quality of the organisation
- A sense of community and connection shared among the entire staff
- A sense of connection and grounding to the physical place itself
- Authenticity of relationships and the sense of care across the organisation
- The openness and creativity in the organisation

Examples about Sustainability Hub's Experiential Potential

The following comments are examples of the kinds of observations participants made, particularly when they were asked how they found themselves working at the Sustainability Hub and how it compared to other organisational experiences they have had.

“‘Ek se, is nie a spook nie!’ [*I said, it's not a ghost that makes this place this way!*] **It's the gees [spirit] for the work.** I don't let the gees go away. I want the gees there. You need the gees!” (Community team member, SH - Interview 6)

“I feel joy and gratefulness. **I come to work happy and I go home happy.**” (Field Note, SH - Dialogue)

“I found my place and I'm very happy here. It's super interesting, challenging, I love the work, love the people... **I actually feel very lucky.**” (Support team member, SH - Interview 6)

“Whenever I leave at the end of the day **I feel grateful for my own life.**” (Field Note, SH - Dialogue)

“No day is ever the same and it's very meaningful work. And the people here are just lovely.” (Project coordinator, SH - Interview 7)

“It is the space where I can't believe I get to work here, because regardless of the challenges, the things you get to go through personally and professionally... **It's a building space.**” (Project coordinator, SH - Interview 7)

“It just shows that if you start something, and you get the right people, **it's all about the people at the end of the day.**” (Research and teaching team, SH - Interview 10)

“What does it mean to be human in an ever changing world... as we become increasingly diverse, **it is not only who we are but how we are.**” (Support team member, SH - Interview 4)

“It's those are the small bits in-between that make the organisation unique and special” (Support team member, SH - Interview 6)

“It's like any family. From the outside you are like, ‘Wow! That family is crazy’. And then

when you are in the family you are like, 'Yeah! This is the best thing ever!'" (Support team member, SH - Interview 6)

"It's hard to explain. When you see it... when you experience it... when people walk through the gates.... Everybody crisscrosses. Everybody is friendly and you don't have to talk about work. **It's a family vibe.**" (Field Note, SH - Dialogue)

"I think everyone is on the page in terms of understanding that we are all here to make a difference, but we are still people and we are here to make sure that everyone feels supported... **It's people first.**" (Project coordinator, SH - Interview 11)

"It's always reiterated that, yes, we do sustainability, but then if a person's not doing well, then the work can't continue, so **our main focus is developing people.** And so then we are a people development organisation which happens to work in sustainability." (Project coordinator, SH - Interview 11)

"I think the good thing about [the organisation] is when it comes down to money or people, **we will always choose people**" (Project coordinator, SH - Interview 3)

"[This place] has this way of getting rid of people whose hearts are not pure, who don't belong here. Because everyone that works here is all for the children. If they have any part of their body that is selfish, you will actually get frustrated with us. [laughter] Because our systems and processes are really slow and lagging **because we do people first. Because we're relationship orientated**" (Project coordinator, SH - Interview 3)

3.5.2 Organisational Overview: Feminist Legal Clinic

The Feminist Legal Clinic is a renowned social purpose organisation in the South African social justice legal field, launched in 1999. The organisation established itself as a markedly *feminist* legal centre that advances women's rights through strategic litigation, advocacy and partnerships through feminist approach.

"It is actually having women exist in society, not as objects but as actors, who are capable of making their own decisions. And once they do that, do not feel stigmatised. To do so freely. Like a white man, you know [laughter], to move about the world without fear, and to be able to give self-expression." (Communications team, FLC - Interview 1)

The organisation has a long history of providing free legal advice to women through direct legal services. They are well known for their strategic litigation, winning several precedent-setting cases that have improved women's access to justice in South Africa.

They are a women-only organisation and all four of the lawyers were new staff that joined because of prior relationships with the new director. However, the majority of the administrative and office support had been at the organisation for longer than 5 years. There was definitely a sense that with the new director there was a fundamental shift in the organisation's culture and approach to how they organise internally. Reflecting on previous experiences in other organisations (and even with the previous director in this organisation), it felt like those in the organisation wanted to start from scratch with new staff, new energy, new commitment to feminist values as they define them.

As the research unfolded, it became apparent that the key professional logic present at the Feminist Legal Clinic was a *legal professional logic*. It was important to note that despite the stated feminist approach the organisation focuses on legal interventions and adherence to established laws, which are complicit in the construction of capitalist modernity (Tzouvala, 2021) and rooted in a historically patriarchal rational logic (Rifkin, 1980). Feminist writers (Smart, 1989; MacKinnon, 1989; Eisenstein, 1988) have long affirmed that 'masculine thought' and patriarchal assumptions have shaped and controlled law as an institution, as a practice, and as a source of meaning (Henderson, 1991). The Clinic's symbolic legitimacy rests on established legal practices—adherence to the law, precedent, and the hierarchies of legal professionalism along with other symbols that are acknowledged such as law degrees, formal titles, courtroom victories. I explored the experiential legitimacy of the Clinic through surfacing the experiences of all organisation members, and paid special attention to those who are not lawyers and are lower down on the professional hierarchy.

Symbolic Indicators of Experiential Potential

There are several symbolic indicators that Feminist Legal Clinic is purposefully engaged in the kind of work involved in the pursuit of mutually constitutive experiential and social goods:

- Recognition from the legal sector and partner organisations that Feminist Legal Clinic goes out their way to support women.
- Several of the organisation members who were lawyers have been acknowledged by national awards for their work and commitment.
- The organisation was given an award in celebration of women's contributions to the legal sector in South Africa.
- The organisation's word-of-mouth reputation locally typically highlights what an unusually attentive and responsive place it is.

There were less symbolic indicators of experiential potential compared to Sustainability Hub, therefore I relied more on my initial engagements with the new Director and the staff in initial conversations about the research to determine if the site was rich enough.

Experiential Indicators of Feminist Legal Clinic's Experiential Potential

When I joined the organisation for two weeks in 2019 for focus groups and observation, a high level of connectedness and engagement was evident. I continued with interviewing 12 organisation members through individual interviews, and there were 2 focus groups that took place, one with three interns (who I had not previously interviewed) and one with the lawyers (after I had individually interviewed each of them):

- 5 attorneys, including 2 in management positions
- 2 organisation members from communications and finance
- 2 organisation members in the legal support team
- 3 organisation members from the administrative and office support team
- 3 interns

In addition, I attended their 20th Anniversary Event, two protests where the organisation was present and a training on feminist jurisprudence. During these events I was able to talk to organisation members and those who are connected to the organisation and record my observations and conversations in my field notebook.

During my time based at the organisation, I could feel the hierarchy of the legal profession, the deference to the attorneys whose voices were often louder and more present in the space. On the other hand, the lawyers were self-reflexive and aware of their power. Moreover, the administrative members expressed feeling cared for by the organisation and connected to the purpose through practice outside of their roles/responsibilities.

When contrasting their Feminist Legal Clinic experiences with other experiences, participants tended to focus on:

- A feeling of inclusion and participation
- A feeling of being accepted and of interacting as whole people
- The experience of a warm, fun environment
- An excitement in collaboratively learning about feminism (and power) and law and how it affects women's lives (personally and professionally)
- An enjoyment of participating in living out the organisation's purpose together for

example organising and attending protests

Examples of Feminist Legal Clinic's Experiential Potential

The following comments are examples of the kinds of observations participants made, particularly when they were asked how they found themselves working at the Feminist Legal Clinic and how it compares to other organisational experiences they have had.

"We are all about people, we forget this; we are all social beings." (Communications team member, FLC - Interview 1)

"The cause that we are fighting, what [the organisation] is all about: it is for women. **That is how the organisation treats people, in a humane way**... it is what is expected, it is how all women should be treated... **For some reason we see things differently here, we see people differently.**" (Finance team member, FLC - Interview 2)

"Because they love what they do. And they don't take this space for granted. And they don't take women for granted. Even the way they speak to other people and address things. You can see their priorities. (Paralegal, FLC - Interview 5)

"What if they [the lawyers] don't respect your views? It's not like that here. **You can walk through the door, say your opinion, get challenged but find a compromise.** We are challenging the definition of what it means to be a lawyer - you are not always right!" (Field note, FLC - Dialogue)

"I don't mind going to a workshop on a public holiday. My friends are supposed to go for a massage. But it's fine, let me go for our [organisation's] event. **You learn with people and you connect with people.** (Paralegal, FLC - Interview 5)

"I am comfortable with people [here]. When I have questions I can go and ask." (Field note, FLC - Dialogue)

"My interest lies in how do you ensure people feel empowered at work? So, we are all learning and not just being a receptionist or a cleaning person or an accountant." (Communications team member, FLC - Interview 1)

"It means giving up power. This is very unusual in a law setting which is usually all about hierarchies. But to break those hierarchies you have to trust people. **You have to give up power, because it's not about you, it's about the women.**" (Finance team member, FLC - Interview 2)

"We are mostly women of colour [at the organisation], and in some senses it's really great because **there's this unspoken and underlined understanding of struggles** as a person of colour." (Lawyer, FLC - Interview 6)

"[That lawyer] can be a bit scary sometimes. [laughter] When you look at her you would

be scared but she's not like that. **She has such a kind heart. You can tell. And she's still passionate about the work.** (Paralegal, FLC - Interview 5)

"We are all sisters in this space" (Field note, FLC - Dialogue)

"Being invited to a random meeting, not in my expertise but it's the most fun thing ever. There is not a lot at stake for me and I'm not responsible, **so I can just have wild ideas. It's really nice**" (Communications team member, FLC - Interview 1)

3.5.3 Organisational Overview: Women's Empowerment Project

The Women's Empowerment Project was the only case study where I was not able to carry out a full ethnographic site visit because of COVID-19 restrictions and the closure of their offices. However, in collaboration with the organisation, I was still able to finish my data collection, as outlined below.

The Women's Empowerment Project was established in 1978 as one of the first organisations responding to the ever-growing problem of gender-based violence in South Africa. The story of Women's Empowerment Project was started as a volunteer-driven organisation committed to supporting survivors of rape. As South Africa embarked on a democratic journey, the Women's Empowerment Project was struggling with what it meant to be identified as an historically white feminist organisation (Field Note, WEP - Observation). At the time the organisation had a flat structure but was grappling with issues of diversity and the inherent tensions that brought, especially around race and class (Field Note, WEP - Observation). By the late 1990s, as the organisation became more structured and expanded into other locations across the province, these tensions grew.

The organisation is well-known for its volunteer-centred approach to providing support services to survivors of gender-based violence, especially in less resourced areas in South Africa. They are a women-only organisation and a majority of the organisation members have worked together for years, including the Director at the time who had been in the organisation in various capacities for over 15 years. Moreover, many of the current staff had previously been counselors or volunteers and they had a deep sense of personal connection with the organisation and its purpose. There was also a consciousness about the sensitive nature of their work, knowing that most organisation members had personal experiences of gender-based violence.

As the research unfolded, it was evident that a key professional logic guiding the purpose and practice of the Women's Empowerment Project was an *empowerment logic*. Their organisational practice (internally *and* externally) framed their work around how to empower women's ability to make strategic life choices which were previously denied to them (Stein, 1997), and to participate in gaining control over their lives in their community and larger societies (Mahbub, 2021). The Women's Empowerment Project runs as a mainstream professional feminist NGO with centralised "headquarters" spaces and bureaucratic routines. I explored the experiential legitimacy through surfacing the experiences of all organisation members, and paid special attention to the experiences of working-class women of colour who are either survivors of gender-based violence or come from the communities most impacted by the organisation's work.

Symbolic Indicators of Experiential Potential

There are several symbolic indicators that Women's Empowerment Project is purposefully engaged in the kind of work involved in the pursuit of mutually constitutive experiential and social goods:

- The organisation was selected as one of the organisational innovation organisations by a well-known innovative funder in South Africa. The funder is funding and facilitating a process through which organisations who are seen as innovation leaders can share their experiences and insights to catalyse systems change inside and outside the organisation.
- The organisation's word-of-mouth reputation nationally typically highlights what unusually safe and kind places the different offices are, especially for survivors.
- All types of organisation members - volunteers, lawyers, researchers and others - tend to stay with the organisation for a long time. Staff turnover is lower when compared to other volunteer-based organisations working on gender-based violence.

Indicators of Women Empowerment Project's Experiential Potential

When I added the organisation to my study, I mainly wanted to test out some of my findings that had emerged from my work with the other two field sites in a context that was quite different from them. The organisation is double the size of the others and has been in existence for twice as long. Moreover, the majority of the staff had been at the organisation since the start of their careers as volunteers.

The most commonly expressed emotions involved a sense of gratitude that the Women's

Empowerment Project existed and a contentment that they were able to be part of it. Formally, 14 organisation members participated in individual zoom interviews and I hosted 3 in-person focus groups with other participants in the different offices across Cape Town:

- 4 organisation members from communications and operations/finance teams
- 4 members of counselling and volunteer teams
- 3 organisation members from the advocacy and training teams
- 3 former employees in leadership positions, mentioned by current organisation members when asked about who exemplified the purpose the organisation's work and may want to reflect on it

In addition I attended two of their full-day General Annual general meetings (post-COVID), and 'hung out' at the different offices on numerous individual occasions while conducting the focus groups and attending events.

Because most of the organisation members had not had many other work experiences, there wasn't much 'contrast' to other organisational experiences, however it was still possible to draw out some of the experiential potential as participants tended to focus on:

- A sense of safety and community
- A sense of empowerment, like their individual voice is important and heard
- A feeling of being cared for, more especially considering traumatic experience
- A feeling of personal reflection and growth with others

Examples of Experiential Potential at the Women's Empowerment Project

"Part of our goal is to establish connections. This is captured in the way we are encouraged to show up. 'When you go into a meeting, you don't have to say a word... It's about your presence, to show that you are relatable, that you are listening. The opportunities for engaging will come. You just have to fly under the flag of [the organisation] and you've got the whole organisation behind you.'" (Advocacy team member, WEP - Interview 4)

"[The organisation] is a place of a lot of conversation, even though there are constant battles for certain voices to be heard. There is a lot of warmth between the women at the organisation. I was constantly exposed to different peoples stories/experiences, survivors, counsellors, whoever they are, **that is the beauty of this process - many stories and many truths** (Counselling team member, WEP - Interview 3)

"I did a year in the corporate world. In corporate you're just a number. You just have to push for deadlines. **Here, it's more like family. People care for each other.**" (Finance

team member, WEP - Interview 5)

“These are my fundamentals: focus on the individual that you are working with in the space right now, **focus on the person sitting right in front of you**” (Operations team member, WEP - Interview 1)

“**We continue to journey with individuals within the organisation**” (Operations team member, WEP - Interview 1)

“The organisation was made up of very strong women. They are engaged and they challenge, they ask hard questions.” (Operations team member, WEP - Interview 1)

“I’m not sure I’m the first person to tell you this but the talks in the kitchen... **the time in-between to just connect to people** like before a meeting or after a meeting” (Leadership team member, WEP - Interview 2)

“In my opinion **you can’t separate the two: connection to self and connection to others**. One has to fuel the others, you can’t connect to others if you can’t connect with yourself.” (Leadership team member, WEP - Interview 2)

“Those **water cooler moments when there are no frills and no fuss**. You are just yourself. That’s the truest form of connection, when you are able to speak freely, having coffee or making coffee for others, talking about life, about hardships... going back upstairs your demeanour changes because you are back to work. But those moments are impactful because you get to know the person” (Leadership team member, WEP - Interview 2)

“We are grounded, we are strong as a container for the very wild emotions that a rape survivor can experience.” (Field Note, WEP - Dialogue)

“You have a job and a job description but there is also flexibility to do other things. Those things were not part of the job but they were just seen as part of political action. They were part of your character.” (Former leadership, WEP - Interview 12)

“We are trying to find the balance between the culture, the politics, the atmosphere and then the aspects of accountability and responsibility... doesn’t mean we will hold you and support you if you catch on kak! **It’s constantly a conversation about ‘what is happening here, right now?’**” (Operations team member, WEP - Interview 1)

3.5.4 Summary of case organisations

Below is a summary table of the case organisations (Table 2) including some characteristics drawn from categorical elements in the institutional logics perspective (Thornton et al., 2012; see also Almandoz, Lee & Marquis, 2017):

- *Root metaphors* refer to the manner in which knowledge is structured and action is organized' (Almandoz et al., 2017:195)
- *Professional logics* that involve the organising principles associated with specific sectors or professions (Lounsbury et al, 2012)
- *Sources of legitimacy* refer to “the means by which power or influence is institutionalized and given a moral grounding” (Almandoz et al, 2017:196)
- *Sources of authority* refer to the rationale behind accepting restrictions (Georgiou & Arenas, 2023) and specific role, routine, resource, relationship boundaries.

TABLE 2: Summary of Cases

Organisation	Sustainability Hub	Feminist Legal Clinic	Women's Empowerment Project
Age in years	25	25	46
Financing	Private philanthropy Government grants	Private philanthropy	Private philanthropy Government subsidies
Annual Budget	R 8 000 000 (approx)	R 7 000 000 (approx)	R 6 000 000 (approx)
Model	NGO Decentralised	NGO Centralised	NGO Volunteer-based
Staff Size	47	15	24
Method of Change (Means)	Education programmes Research & advocacy	Legal advice Strategic litigation Policy advocacy	Counselling support Policy advocacy
Root metaphor*	Education as transformation	Law as feminist practice	Law as empowerment
Professional logic*	Higher education logic	Legal profession logic	Empowerment logic
Sources of legitimacy*	Academic reputation Importance of social purpose	Legal reputation Importance of social purpose	Community reputation Importance of social purpose
Sources of authority	Donor requirements Academic associations Government regulation	Donor requirements Legal associations	Donor requirement Government regulation

3.5 Data Collection

To study a multiscalar phenomenon like experiential agency, I took an embedded approach to data collection and used different qualitative tools at my disposal. I developed a data collection plan that would allow me to spend time within each of the layers of the unit of study—individual, collective and organisational—trying to understand the experiences and practices that were occurring amongst members. By observing organisation members in relationship with one another, I hoped to understand how these activities affected and shaped the experience of social purpose goals and the construction of agency. Ultimately, the goal was to witness, in intimate detail, the process by which an organisation members develop capacity to perform positive institutional work, and use this to describe the phenomenon of experiential agency. Here is a summary of my data sources (TABLE 3) and their use in my data analysis.

TABLE 3: Summary of Data Sources & Use in Analysis

Type	Source	Analysis Use
<i>Semi-structured interviews</i>	41 case study interviews • 15 interviews at Sustainability Hub • 12 interviews at Feminist Legal Clinic • Conducted in person and recorded via phone • Manually transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber <i>During COVID-19</i> • 12 interviews at Women's Empowerment Project • Conducted and recorded via Zoom • Manually transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber 15 sense-making interviews • Conducted in person and recorded via phone	• Understanding prior experiences of members that motivated them to join their organisation • Discerning practices that comprise experiential organising in the organisation • Determining sources of connection and disconnection with the organisation and fellow members paying specific attention to silences and conflicts • Determining sources of agency • Sense-checking the case study findings to understand and detail experience of experiential organising and experiential agency (looking specifically for contradictions/outlying experiences)
<i>Focus groups</i>	8 case study focus groups • 3 focus groups at Sustainability Hub (with different teams) • 2 interviews at Feminist Legal Clinic (1 with lawyers and 1 with interns) • 3 interviews at Women's Empowerment Project (at different offices) • Conducted in person and recorded via phone	• Understanding non-individualist accounts of practices that comprise experiential organising (and practices that do not (looking specifically for invisible and hidden power dynamics)
<i>Participant Observation</i>	Sustainability Hub • In-person 2 weeks organisation deep hanging out • Lectures, Community Work, Staff Meetings, Convenings, Lunches, Workshops Feminist Legal Clinic • In-person 2 weeks organisation deep hanging out • Staff meetings, Trainings, Presentations, Anniversary Celebration, Protests Women's Empowerment Project (Took place during and post COVID-19) • In-person 2 full-day Annual General Meetings • In-person deep hanging out at different offices (whilst hosting focus groups)	• Sense-make with organisation members to understand their understanding and comfort in sharing experiences of connectedness and disconnectedness • Selecting a diverse group of possible interviewees • Observe and experience organisation's rhythms and experience of practices by org members • Identifying the relational dynamics between members, including ways of interacting and sources of connection and disconnection with org. purpose and other members • Detailing potential practices identified in the interviews that comprise experiential organising
<i>Archival data</i>	• Website pages and reports • Internal documents (Powerpoint documents, organisation brand surveys, organograms, strategic documents, anniversary publications) • Meeting minutes on relevant culture discussions	• Developing an overarching understanding of the current structure of the organisation (and symbolic power dynamics) • Identifying how the organisation portrays itself and is received to potential organisation members and external stakeholders (including donors)
<i>Visual social artefacts</i>	• Picture/image/photograph that represents participants work (and their relationship to the work) at the organisation	• Fostering collaborative meaning-making between the participant and or researcher • Making the participants more comfortable, particularly when discussing sensitive topics through intermediary artefacts

Below I explore my process of data collection:

Starting with the Sustainability Hub & Feminist Legal Clinic

I collected data through four overlapping and intervening methods - interviews, focus groups, participant observation and archival review. I started my fieldwork in June 2019 and lived in it for over 8 months, spending time in both organisations doing interviews, attending events, completing ethnographic observation and deep hanging out. During the ethnographic observation parts of my fieldwork - spending 2 full-time weeks in each organisation.

I began by conducting an exploratory phase at the Sustainability Hub and Feminist Legal Clinic by attending staff meetings at each organisation to present the research and make space for questions and concerns. This phase was critical as it allowed me to gain an overview of the organisation, gain trust from organisation members, and plan my data collection further. I then conducted semi-structured interviews with members from across the organisations, and focus groups with unique constellations of organisation members divided in collaboration with the leaders and other participants with insights into whose voices may be more invisible in usual everyday practice. During this period I also actively participated in these two organisations, performing participant observation or 'deep hanging out' joining the organisations' daily rhythms. Later I conducted sense-making interviews with experts from outside my case study organisations who are working in and reflecting on this work in the field. Finally, I corroborated these data sources with archival review of internal documents, and externally-facing website pages and reports.

3.5.1 Opening up through interviews

I interviewed a total of 56 participants as part of the research. I chose to use semi-structured open-ended interviews because I wanted to collect data about experiences of organisational life and "through conversations we get to know people, get to learn about their experiences, feelings, and hopes and the world they live in" (Kvale, 1996:5). I used an interview protocol which helped to remind me of the main issues I wanted to discuss as the interview progressed. This was useful as each interview was carried out differently and had a different rhythm depending on my connection with the interviewee and their current state of mind. The loose and iterative nature of the interviews made for a flexible feedback loop between questions and answers. The semi-structured interviews allowed room for probing

and asking follow up questions allowing me to examine each organisation member's intentions involved in enacting particular practices (Loscher, 2019).

While some participants were recommended by organisational leaders, care was taken to balance this with voluntary participation and invitations extended to those whose perspectives might be less visible in routine organisational processes. The composition of interviewees and focus groups was intentionally diverse in terms of role, tenure, and positionality, to ensure a fuller understanding of how legitimacy and agency were enacted across organisational layers and relationships. I chose to interview a wide variety of organisation members, from senior leadership, to those in programmatic work, to those in finance and fundraising, to those in cleaning and gardening. This was essential to get a fuller picture of experiences of power and agency. I was interested in identifying how different forms of hegemonic institutions like patriarchy, gender and class influenced these organisation members' experiences. Once I had been granted permission to do the research, access to information within each organisation was relatively easy and organisation members were open to meeting with me.

As a feminist researcher, I continuously reflected on how the information that participants chose to share with me might make them feel vulnerable, or could possibly have negative consequences for them. Therefore, I did all the interviews in private, mostly at their place of work in a place of their choosing. Some interviews took place outside the office at quiet coffee shops, at the request of the participant. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed by an external translator bound by confidentiality. All interviews took place in English, though some of the interviewees used phrases in Afrikaans and Xhosa, which were either translated in the moment or later.

The length of the interviews ranged from a minimum of 45 minutes to 3 hours. The reflective prompts functioned as reflective prompts rather than as interview questions. They provided a framework for attending to the relational, embodied, and situated aspects of participants' experiences. In practice, they guided iterative interpretation—helping me to trace how patterns of experience, agency, and legitimacy unfolded across organisational contexts. The most important element became establishing rapport because the more I shared about myself at the beginning of the interview the more I felt the interviewees opened up quicker about their own experiences. At least five organisation members cried during their interview, and interestingly most of them were in the Feminist Legal Clinic. I deeply appreciated the

vulnerability. In my PhD reflection notes I wondered how often they get to talk about their emotions and feelings, because of the nature of being a legal organisation and not as expressive in nature.

I also spoke to former organisation members in each organisation. The organisation identified these participants as important voices in the experiential journey of the organisation. It was reassuring and refreshing to speak to former organisation members. That organisations encouraged me to do so, especially those who they knew were critical of the organisation, showed an openness to critique. There is not one story of an organisation, every organisation consists of a myriad of individuals and no organisation is going to make everyone happy - it's what the organisation does with that feedback that speaks to their experiential nature.

Individual interviews helped me to dig deeper into organisation member's unobserved and unnoticeable spaces, such as memories, personal issues, feelings, views and intentions (Patton, 2002), perfect for exploring the nature of positive institutional work and agency. Feminist researchers have particularly relied on interviews to gather data and hidden knowledge as they give "access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories *in their own words rather than words of the researcher*" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007:118). It helped me understand the social world in people's own language, words, meanings, and also helped me understand how organisation members make sense of and construct their own realities (De Vault & McCoy, 2006; Reinhartz, 1997). Moreover, during the interview I was able to pick up other important personal elements, such as body language and gestures. Feminist research principles *encourage paying attention to silences* (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007), to the pauses and awkward starts, specifically because these give insight into the struggles and conflicts at play (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). In reflections on my individual interviews I noted that the majority of participants expressed a deep appreciation after the interview. A common narrative shared by participants was that I made them feel that their story was unique and important for the research and for the organisational whole.

Finally, in preparing for this research process, I knew I wanted to reflect with others on my evolving findings. It was important to have triangulating conversations with individuals who work in the field of social purpose with organisation members trying to cultivate experiential legitimacy and agency in their work. I framed these conversations as *sense-making interviews*. I engaged with 15 individuals for this purpose. I shared my reflections on the

research so far exploring if they are seeing the same kind of things in the spaces that they are working, what resonates with them and what does not. With these interviews I wanted to gauge my analytical depth, inviting different experiences outside of my case organisations and I also wanted to give myself the chance to be contradicted.

3.5.2 Diving deeper with Focus Groups

Focus groups provide “non-individualist accounts [that] attribute social order to phenomena that are something more than features of individuals and their immediate interactions” (Schatzki, 1996:13). Drawing on group dynamics can have the positive effect of opening up conversation, creating a comfortable space for exploration and producing mutual understanding (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Also, it is through this process of sharing and reflecting in community that surfacing and sense-making of the organisation occurs. Focus groups have been specifically used by feminist researchers to unearth and “understand the experience of oppression” (Hesse-Biber, 2007:172). The ‘group happening’ may allow the researcher to unearth hidden knowledge by exploring common experiences within a group.

Focus group sessions followed the semi-structured protocol derived from the individual interview guide (Appendix 2) and were designed to explore parallel themes collectively. The protocol was adapted to each group’s size, preferred language, and institutional setting to ensure inclusivity and comfort in participation. Questions were open-ended, encouraging dialogue about shared experiences of agency, care, and organisational practice. All focus group sessions were audio recorded with consent and transcribed. Field notes captured contextual and relational observations immediately following each session to support interpretive depth during analysis.

I was aware that group dynamics can also silence individuals and make them uncomfortable; “they may mute minority voices” (Hesse-Biber, 2007:172). And this was especially evident when wanting to explore the questions related to when members felt disconnected from the organisation as some members were reluctant to be seen to ‘criticise’ the organisation in front of others. The flow of conversations was much easier in praise of their experience in organisation than in critique. But the longer I spent at the organisations and the more I engaged (through deep hanging out), the more participants seemed to trust my intentions and were more honest and open about their multitude of experiences, good and bad.

Moreover, when putting together the focus groups, I was conscious of hidden power dynamics that may come with role hierarchies within the organisation and I deliberately asked for advice about who was most comfortable with whom. For example, putting the cleaner in a group with the secretary as they had a close and supportive relationship, making it more comfortable to share collectively. This helped to minimise the muting of voices and to build confidence of my interviewees.

The number of interviews and focus groups in each organisation was guided by both practical and interpretive considerations. Data collection continued until the patterns emerging from participants' accounts began to repeat across roles and organisations, signalling data sufficiency. Rather than pursuing numerical saturation, which can imply closure, the process aligned with feminist and interpretive traditions that prioritise depth and reflexivity (Harding, 1991; Code, 1991; McNay, 2016). Theoretical saturation was approached when additional interviews no longer produced new conceptual insights about experiential legitimacy or the relational dynamics of agency, but instead elaborated existing patterns in greater nuance. This balance between breadth and depth ensured that each case offered a textured, situated account of organisational life while maintaining conceptual coherence across sites.

The individual interviews and focus groups augmented the deep hanging out described below.

3.5.3 Going with the flow through deep hanging out

With access to the case study organisations during (and after) deep hanging out in each organisation, I was able to refine my research questions to be theoretically sound and to triangulate my findings across multiple sources, and ultimately to theorise how experiential agency develops. With this focus, one of the most important forms of data collection was to see the organisational collective in motion together. According to Schatzki (2012), ethnography is the primary method for uncovering practices and their relationships to the social. I engaged within the organisations “to uncover the activities and the material arrangements bound to a practice” (Loscher et al, 2019:14). I needed to develop a deep understanding of positive institutional work practices, and to abstract analytically from the concrete activities to uncover the positive institutional work principles of the practice (Schatzki, 2012). This required immersing myself in the organisational members' worlds.

Following Ahrens and Chapman (2007) exemplary study, I gathered data on the day-to-day activities of individuals (e.g. interviewees taking me through their daily routines), observing different settings (central and peripheral places in the organisation), and the formal and informal interactions of organisation members (e.g. meetings, office work, coffee breaks, lunches events), and I participated in particular practices (e.g. passing through trainings). I spent two weeks in both the Sustainability Hub and the Feminist Legal Clinic doing fieldwork to gain as broad a spectrum as possible with regards to the organisations' rhythms. Although my presence was initially noticeable, I very quickly became part of the furniture. At the Feminist Legal Clinic there were often new interns who were quickly assimilated, so new energy was normal. And at the Sustainability Hub there were new batches of students all the time so I felt welcome and able to make myself at home.

The nature of my research is innately sensitive and deeply embedded in the subjects of power and powerlessness. Entering organisation members' work 'homes' and broaching questions about their experiences at the organisation created a complex dynamic. However, the more time I spent in each organisation, the more organisation members felt comfortable sharing their experiences with me. For example, during my deep hanging out at the Feminist Legal Clinic, one of the organisation members I had already interviewed came to me and said she had censored herself during our one-on-one interview and she asked for another chat. Across both organisations I had similar 'follow up' conversations.

My daily routine during the two weeks that I based myself on site consisted of much of the same, 'hanging out', greetings in the morning, having lunch, chatting about work, chatting about life. I also attended various gatherings such as meetings, marches, lectures, staff lunches (and anywhere communing was done) to gain an understanding of how individuals within the organisation experience each other in relationship. It was through deep hanging out and observing the everyday practices of organisation members that I was able to observe the complex routes and relationships to navigate through daily adversities and opportunities (Lakhani, 2014).

Responding to the COVID-19 invitation with the Women's Empower Project

My initial intention was to study 3 social purpose organisations that drew on ethnography, focus groups and individual in-person interviews. For the first two organisations I spent at least 2 weeks with each. I got a glimpse into everyday organisational life as an observer and appreciator of their unique organisational experience. However, in March of 2020 South

Africa went into national lockdown when its president Cyril Ramaphosa announced a national state of disaster in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Coronavirus: President Ramaphosa announces a 21-day lockdown, 2020). NGOs and the organisation members within them experienced severe mental shock, with staff working from home and barely managing to keep their home lives together while balancing work, organisations struggled to find a routine which didn't lead to zoom fatigue or burn out (Eribo, 2021; Kim, 2021).

It was in this context that I was to complete my third and final case study. I was already in contact with the organisation, I had gained entry and I had presented my research and intentions to the staff and got permission to carry out the research. I was excited to get started and finalise my fieldwork. I had previously engaged with some of the staff and I also knew many of the staff through my other work, so the pre-existing connections made this case study particularly exciting. In engaging with the Women's Empowerment Project during the lockdown, organisation members shared that they were struggling to get essential services to their communities, and to connect and engage with staff because of resource limitations including the lack of good wifi connectivity and not all staff being tech savvy. Moreover, I had several personal setbacks with my mother being diagnosed with cancer and I moved across the country to care for her.

I felt distressed and anxious, and I was concerned that my data collection was not going to be completed. But in an unexpected turn of events the organisation requested that I work with them to shape their response to organisational connectedness and change during this strange time. We co-developed a process, drawing heavily on my research questions, exploring how the individuals and teams within the organisation were coping with change and connecting to each other and the organisation through practice. Instead of doing an in-person deep hanging out ethnography I completed individual interviews - mostly online - exploring the current time and space. It was a relief to feel useful in a time that felt so chaotic and disconnected. This provided me with insights and understanding of the organisation and those within, while highlighting the impacts of pandemic on this particular social purpose organisation.

Post lockdown I was able to follow up with 3 focus group reflections, spending some at the organisation on the days I had organised to meet the groups in-person. Furthermore, I attended two of the General Annual meetings in-person in late 2020 and in 2021, which provided more insight into the organisational dynamics and experiences of organisation

members. As such I had a rich data set from which to draw conclusions with the other case study organisations. The story of this research pivot highlighted how hard it is to conduct research on continuous and constructive experiential practice as organisational life shifts and changes in the face of external shocks.

3.5.4 Archival review

It was useful to draw attention to archival data, especially background documents, that were shared with me in my initial engagements with the organisations. These included staff organograms and current strategies. These were my first official introduction to the symbolic representations of the organisations. Moreover, I also reviewed documentation that the organisations voluntarily shared with me, specifically anniversary publications and internal brand surveys. These were the documents that they were proud of and that they felt represented the story of the organisation. I used these documents to corroborate findings I was seeing in my interviews and during my deep hanging out, specifically findings related to power dynamics. I looked “to compare what people say and the documents they produce with the ways they act and talk in their natural environments” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007:208). In my archival review process I drew on Hesse-Biber & Leavy’s (2007:227) content analysis, which invited the following questions: whose viewpoint is being represented?; how is difference represented?; how are ideas of identity constructed?; whose viewpoints are silenced or marginalised?; what does this tell us about how and how people are valued? These questions provided useful insight into the symbolic and experiential coherence inside the organisation.

3.6 Data Analysis

Theory-building from case studies is often done in an iterative fashion, with an overlap between data collection and data analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, I approached the analysis of the study in a staged fashion, occurring concurrently and intermittently with the data collection phase, constantly asking questions about what I was seeing and hearing and understanding (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2007).

I approached the data through an embodied, situated, contextual way, looking for the following characteristics:

- Level of detail

- Number and richness of examples of connectedness between members in the organisation and to the purpose of the organisation (experiential legitimacy)
- Degree of passion in particular language (e.g. strong, personal, emotive words vs abstract, analytical, instrumental language)
- Ability to contrast current experiences with experiences in other organisational settings

The biggest challenge was assessing the *richness of the overall experience* of positive institutional work at the three sites. Even though I encouraged participants to share their experiences of disconnection, struggles, difficulties and disempowerment, it seemed likely that organisation members would say mostly positive things about the organisations they were a part of. Therefore I did not consider the mere presence of positive statements to be a sufficient indicator of positive institutional work and agency. By drawing on feminist institutionalism's approach to data analysis, it is possible "*to expose silenced and unspoken institutional issues* such as racism, sexism, patriarchy" (Metcalf, 2008:459), and a vital aspect is appreciating how power plays out in institutions by the 'monitoring of inaction, silences and lacunae' (Chappell, 2014:193). This was useful during my observation at the organisations and also during interviews as interviewees paused or awkwardly approached more difficult questions around disconnectedness.

I took an interpretive approach to data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), as I wanted to use the information I had generated, coupled with my field notes and archival materials, to elucidate underlying meanings and the practices through which those meanings were expressed. In other words, I was not just analysing interviews as text. I was not seeking to draw conclusions about *how organisation members talked about their organisations*, but about *how they actually experienced*, as per the phenomenological perspective in Patton (2002) and about *how those experiences were constituted via organisational practices*, as per the practice perspective in Patton (2002). I moved iteratively between data gathering, coding, and analysis because I wanted to "understand the process by which actors construct meaning out of intersubjective experience" (Suddaby, 2006:634). The analytic process followed an iterative logic, beginning with open engagement with participants' experiences before moving toward theoretical comparison and refinement.

In this study, "experience" was approached as relational, embodied, and situated rather than as an interior psychological state. Drawing on feminist theorists who view experience

as a site where social structures are felt and made meaningful (McNay 2016; Ahmed 2017), I treated experience as both a lived encounter and that through which organisational life becomes knowable. During analysis, instances of experience were identified through moments in the data where participants articulated how organisational practices or relationships felt, where affect or bodily awareness entered the narrative, or where shifts in tone, silence, or emphasis revealed meaning beyond description (Code, 1991, Tronto, 1993). These cues were noted as experiential indicators during coding—phrases of sensing (“I felt...”) or embodied imagery (“it was heavy in the room”). By foregrounding these embodied, situated and relational markers, the analysis remained faithful to feminist methodological commitments to reflexivity and situated knowing.

Interpretive analysis began with close engagement with raw data and searching for patterns—reading and re-reading transcripts, field notes, and reflective memos to identify words, gestures, and interactions that spoke to how members experienced organisational life. Initial codes captured these concrete moments of practice and expression. Through iterative comparison across cases, these descriptive codes were refined into first-order categories that reflected the participants’ own terms. The next stage involved clustering these categories into second-order themes, focusing on relational and affective patterns that explained how legitimacy and agency were being enacted. Ongoing memoing and diagramming helped to trace the dynamic links among these themes, leading to the identification of two central themes: *practices*—recurrent ways of relating that shaped shared experience—and *capabilities*—relational capacities expressed by individuals sustained (and deepening) by those practices.

To make this process more explicit, I structured the analysis into four stages: Stage 1: Searching for Patterns; Stage 2: Comparing and contrasting; Stage 3: Contextualising; and Stage 4: Validation

Stage 1: Searching for Patterns

During and immediately after each interview and focus group, I wrote down observations in my field notebook about anything that stood out to me. These observations were very free, reflecting on new categories of experience or practice that I noticed, or connections between the current interactions and other interactions, resonant theory, and instincts about links between institutionalised patterns.

After I had all the interviews at the Sustainability Hub and Feminist Legal Clinic and they had been transcribed, I began to iteratively code and look for patterns within each individual transcript, intra and cross-organisationally (Eisenhardt, 1989). I created folders for each organisation and later for each thematic code as it arose based on the themes related to my research questions. Themes included: Capability; Practice; Power (institutional logics); Experiential Legitimacy.

Searching for patterns involved identifying recurring behaviors, interactions, and processes observed in the raw data, reflecting participants' actions, decisions, and reflections and then identifying themes (thematic codes) as higher-level constructs that articulate the underlying significance of one or more patterns.

I then identified similar processes/worldviews/experiences, assigning those parts of the interviews to specific codes (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2007). What were the common practices and ways of being that organisation members seemed to be experiencing in these organisations. As the process continued I then began to focus more carefully on developing specific practice codes: *What were the common organisational practices that constituted these experiences?* When I first began identifying practice codes I attempted to describe the more traditional 'practice' forms of the three case study organisations, but a difficulty arose. As Barnes (2001:25) put it, "the entities are presumed to have fixed and definite implications, upon which those who cleave to them are obliged to enact". A fundamental tenet of positive institutional work is its *experiential nature* and therefore as the research unfolded I was aware of avoiding the form trap: thus, there is no fixed or definite norm, structure or process that *is* positive institutional work - rather I noticed there were common approaches to practicing positive institutional work e.g. the way organisation members surfaced themselves in the collective or the way they came together as a collective. Examples included: playing with roles/routines/relationship/resources; mirroring/witnessing others; celebrating/appreciating others; having difficult conversations.

These did not take place in the same way inside or across the organisations, but the experiential nature was common - how connected and engaged the participants felt due to these experiences in organisation with others. The practices varied across organisations but shared an experiential character e.g. paying appreciative attention. Alongside practices, I identified capabilities that enabled these experiences, including openness to change, intentionality, reflexivity, and sense of purpose (Lawrence et al., 2011). Focusing on

experience rather than fixed forms allowed me to prioritise experiential legitimacy, recognising that formal rules and structures are mediums through which organisational experience is enacted. It is for this reason that the collection of everyday experiences was essential to this research project: because despite the fact that individually each narrative is isolated and subjective, the relationships and patterns that underlie and connect the experiences tell a much more nuanced and complex story about organisations and their institutional work (Gottfried, 1996).

Practices and capabilities were foregrounded because they most directly captured actionable and relational aspects of experiential legitimacy that have surfaced in other organisational and institutional literatures.

Stage 2: Comparing and contrasting

Using ‘comparing and contrasting’, I looked for “similarities and differences between different organisation members’ experiences within and across organisations to identify indicators of experiential characteristics (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2007:213). I was looking for ways of being and indicators that exemplified experiential characteristics. I did compare and contrast these indicators between the three organisations. I paid particular attention to divergences. For example, the way organisation members contrasted experiences at previous organisations in which they had worked compared to their current experience of feeling like they were being put first. I frequently compared the insights emerging from interviews and focus groups with observations from my field notes. Had I seen other examples of this theme or practice? Had I seen things that would challenge, delimit, or qualify this experience or practice?

A supplementary table of representative data excerpts by theme and organisation are included in Appendix 3 to illustrate cross-case support for the aggregated analytic categories.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, having previously identified my third case study organisation and continuing to be in contact, I scheduled interviews online and postponed the in-person focus groups. The process of comparing and contrasting when I continued to engage in in-person focus groups and events with the Women’s Empowerment Project after the national lockdown was lifted and the organisational in-person rhythms resumed.

Stage 3: Contextualising

Contextualising “ties everyday individual experiences to broader trends in the social world” (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2007:213). I did this through the sense-making interviews by specifically exploring the ways that a particular theme or practice resonated in the wider social change field. For example, the stifling effect of NGOization on the experiences inside NGOs. Feminist contextualisation (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2007) included thinking about: Whose viewpoint is represented in each organisation and across the NGO field? Whose viewpoints are silenced and marginalised? Reflecting on these questions gave attention to the way the NGO field often perpetuates the focus on form (symbolic legitimacy) over experience (experiential legitimacy), but also highlighted even more clearly where participants felt particularly connected and in relationship with each other and their organisation despite these external dynamics.

Because analysis was guided by the overarching research aim of understanding what contributes to experiential legitimacy, alongside iterative engagement with the data itself, analysis took place at different interpretive levels. At the descriptive level, the analysis asked, “What observable behaviors, interactions, or processes are occurring?” This informed initial coding of raw data into concrete examples or patterns. At a more interpretive level, the focus shifted to themes around questions such as, “How do these behaviors and interactions coalesce into practices or capabilities that shape relational experience?” and “What broader significance or meaning do these patterns convey in terms of sustaining experiential legitimacy?” By moving between these levels, the analysis moved from concrete observations to higher-order conceptualizations, allowing practices, and capabilities to emerge while remaining grounded in the data.

Stage 4: Validation

Validation occurred through triangulation across methods.; deep hanging out to validate the interview findings; focus group findings to validate individual interview findings; sense-making interview findings to validate case study findings, etc. As I developed practice codes that seemed compelling, I began to triangulate through my sense-making interviews, focus groups and later interviews to comment on them. I would describe the theme or practice and ask if it resonated with their experience of the organisation (or field), and whether they could think of anything that might challenge or contradict. This helped me refine my understanding of the theme or practice with qualifying examples. I also shared my findings back with the Sustainability Hub and the Feminist Legal Clinic by creating creative

zines made for each organisation based on my experience, my reflections and their insights. During that process of sharing back I received their reflections about the experience of doing this research with me and insights on my preliminary reflections. This iterative process allowed me to develop plausible theoretical linkages: why certain experiences contributed to **experiential legitimacy**, and how practices enabled **experiential agency**, contributing to the maintenance of positive institutional phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989).

My data analysis approach in practice

The analytic example below has been expanded to demonstrate how interpretive movement unfolded from participants' experience as they told it to me to the formation of analytic categories. The excerpt now presents successive layers of analysis, showing how direct quotations were coded, grouped, and interpreted. To illustrate my approach, I have used a snippet from one of my interviews:

And here I am. And, wow, yes, [the organisation] is that space where I am just like, I can't believe I get to work here! Because regardless of the challenges and the things that you go through personally and professionally, it's a building space. I think everyone is on the same page in terms of understanding that we are all here to make a difference, but we still are people and that we are here to make sure that everyone feels supported, regardless of how confident or, you know, not confident you feel, like, if you're having a bad day. Its people first... for me has been amazing to witness like, you know, you hear they're preaching this and I wasn't sure if I came to this space, if they would be practicing, and that's what I see, I see a lot of, it's not—you know, how you work in your job and you just feel like you're just colleagues or acquaintances. Here people really value the personal relationship building as well... I mean, I think, maybe they see that it literally doesn't work to separate yourself from a person, personally. And it only works if you really are interested in the person, as well, because that's when you get interested in their work. Because, the other way, if you're only interested in their work, that means it is an extractive relationship, other than having a real, genuine relationship. Yes, because I can't separate it, and some people are good at that, but I've never been able to do that [laughter]. It's good, and I just felt that this space was, like, for people like that and I keep seeing that here. You bring all, all of you here and more importantly, it's not just bringing all of you, it's knowing that people accept all of you, and you're in a space that is holding you and respecting you for who you are. I think that's also the other thing and I also think to myself, "If not, why not?" mantra. It's saying, "You may be an expert, in like, this and you may be hired for that, but if you see that there is a need somewhere and you have the capacity to support that, why not?" That's also something, I found very freeing (SH - Interview 3)

This quote has a lot of flesh to it. I made the following notes in my field notebook:

- *Feels lucky to work at the organisation*
- *It's a building space. All here to make a difference. Community*
- *People first*
- *Practice what you preach. See it/feel it in practice*
- *Interested in the person AND their work. More than just your role*
- *Bringing all of you. Accept all of you. Hold you. Respect you. Feels seen*
- *If not, why not? Outside roles. Autonomy. Flexibility. Freedom*

As the process unfolded I did some iterative code development as I went along:

- Themes: Agency & Practice - Org members feeling deeply connected personally to org and purpose - feel held/supported. Possible practice codes: Individual/collective Purpose. Feeling seen. Connectedness.
- Themes: Practice & Experiential Legitimacy - Organisation putting people first, not just seeing them as their jobs/roles - Organisation as a building space/holding space - People feel supported/ safe. Possible practice codes: Putting people first. Inclusion. Playing with roles. Relational.
- Themes: Agency - Organisation members feel free and flexible in their role and in the org. They feel a sense of agency to be who they are. Possible codes: Personal expression. Freedom.
- Themes: Capability & Practice - Organisation members able to reach beyond job title/role and do other things. Bringing all of themselves. Roles loose and open. Building on individual strengths for collective purpose. Possible codes: Playing with roles. Individual/collective Purpose. Link to Nilsson transboundary work.
- Themes: Practice & Experiential Legitimacy - Why does this organisation feel particularly connecting for this participant? At a practice level, what makes people feel their interactions feel meaningful? Possible code: Experience of care. Experience of feeling seen.

Building on my notes, I deliberately searched for cross-referenced examples to confirm or contradict what I was seeing. The biggest challenge was trying to identify practice from individual phenomenological experiences. Nilsson (2009:64) said, when exploring the phenomenology, it “often required seeing beyond the initial pattern that struck my eye”. For example, similar to the experience quoted above, many participants at the Sustainability Hub felt like the organisation ‘puts people first’. I saw a familiar pattern at the Women’s Empowerment Project. And many participants contrasted these positive experiences with

less positive experiences at previous organisations they had worked at where the work was put first, so this idea felt important.

As I connected and contrasted quotes related to themes like ‘feeling like you can bring your whole self to work’, more ideas emerged. There were examples where participants said they had experiences where they did not feel they could bring their whole selves. But that was mostly linked to previous work experiences where they had tried and either been shut down or been ‘burned’ by colleagues taking advantage of them. The organisation members who did feel welcomed, on the other hand, didn’t have the same reservations. Many also said they were nervous when they first joined the organisation, especially because this is not usual practice in the workplace. But the way they were received on their first day and through the orientation rituals, the way individuals interacted with them on a daily basis, made them feel different.

Theoretically, it wasn’t hard to see the connection between positive experiences shared and this feeling of being cared for as a whole person. It seemed to create a feeling of inclusion and belonging. But ‘putting people first’ and ‘bringing all of you’ do not seem like useful practice principles to highlight. *What makes someone’s experience of ‘being put first’ and ‘your whole self being cared for’ genuine? What are the organisational practices that constitute such an experience?*

There were two dynamics at play that helped me identify it as an experiential organisational practice rather than an individual experience: (1) *how open organisation members* were (and continued to be) to the experience of the practice - later I identified this as specifically *embodied, situated and relational* in nature; some participants found this initially uncomfortable but majority adapted to it and majority indicated an enjoyment (2) the other dynamic had to do with *how those in the organisation were interacting with each other* during the practice which was perceived to be unusually *open, caring and authentic*.

Why did participants find a particular interaction so positive? First, they felt that the others in the organisation took a genuine interest in them as individuals, not because of their role in the organisation. Organisation members seemed curious about getting to know them, not just knowing what they were there to do. Second, each participant was able to define for themselves what feeling “whole” felt like for them: an accountant checking in on a little boy, a program person digging in the garden, a gardener sharing their love (skill) for prayer.

These experiences were spontaneous and welcomed by the organisation. I noticed how many organisation members shared stories of engaging beyond their role or sharing parts of themselves that were not directly related to their job. They shared stories of grief, joy and celebrating others' success. They talked about and celebrated others, and talked about themselves and their life dreams. The overall feeling of these interactions was joyful and warm. There was a lot of smiling. My observations saw a similar flow, a humanity in work corridors. I tested these organisational patterns against my observations in my field notes and what was coming out of the sense-making interviews.

There was one particular contrasting interview in relation to the Sustainability Hub when I interviewed a past staff member. They expressed bitterness and feelings of exclusion and disconnection, specifically in relation to the way the organisation engaged with issues of race and class. They were very honest about the way academic staff are treated with more respect, as 'experts', and given more flexibility and power because of their positions. This made me poignantly aware of underlying institutional and relational power dynamics. This was similar in the other case studies where institutional power dynamics around race and class and professional expertise and logics bled into how organisation members experienced a disconnect to their general positive experiences within the organisation. This too was very useful for understanding the relationship between multiscalar experience of power and the practice of positive institutional work.

3.7 A Feminist Researcher's Ethical Dilemmas

In conversation with my supervisor, when I initially started my fieldwork, I talked about the dilemma of the role of the researcher and the obsession with objectivity, especially in a business school setting. He reassured me and said there will always be a lingering presence of you as a researcher: you are not dealing with a removed institutional manifestation or even just personal interactions, you are dealing with the whole fabric of the organisation and your being in it.

As such, I considered the following as my research unfolded:

- 1) Reflexivity: Being the insider/outsider
- 2) Intersubjectivity: Relationship between the researcher/researched
- 3) The Personal is the Political: Research as Intimate work
- 4) Reciprocity: Expanding the giving field

3.7.1 Reflexivity: Being the insider/outsider

Locating and positioning my researcher 'self' before, during and post my fieldwork, and exploring my personal conundrums and accounts of the research process were important aspects of the feminist research process to produce a less distorted account of the world (Hertz, 1997). As a feminist researcher I don't claim to be objective but through the exploration and reflection of my own pride and prejudices, I was able to surface what parts of me have shaped the research and how. Caplan, 1994 (in Reinharz 1997:4) states

"There are a number of factors which determine the kinds of data we collect and our interpretation of them. **One of the most important of these is your positionally - who are we to them? Who are they to us?** Such questions have to be considered... in terms of such factors as our gender, age, life experience, race and nationality."

I saw myself in the field as an outsider and an insider. My insider status was both empowering and restricting (Bolak, 1997). It was empowering because I could relate to those inside the organisation. I was familiar with the NGO field and the professional logics having studied human rights and worked in social purpose organisations. There were limitations to this, especially when participants assumed I understood what they were referring to, and therefore I had to be very conscious about digging deeper for examples and context. My professional and PhD status privileged me, as for many participants I was perceived as intelligent and hard-working.

I realised my gender was "negotiated rather than a given status during the research process" (Bolak 1997:104). My gender intersected with my educational attainment, my professional status, my sexuality and other markers. All of the organisations I did fieldwork with were led by women and two of the organisations were women-only staff compliments. Being a woman in the field made things easier for me and I was told that I made participants feel comfortable. Feminist researchers have highlighted that in particular cases "women-to-women interview has special characteristics which give rise to the 'easy flow' of information, and subsequently more detailed and comprehensive data" (Butler, 2001:103).

Other issues emerged as I explored the interaction between myself and my field. One aspect of feminist research and work is to attempt to understand how and why individuals do what they do, and how they construct their realities. Therefore, as a feminist researcher I should avoid imposing what I see as 'right', rejecting the idea that the researcher becomes

the expert in people's lives. I wrote after one of my first interviews with one of the organisation members whose work was specifically human resource-related that "I was too defensive and too involved. I wasn't researcher enough and shared too much organisational development stuff" (Field Note, SH - Observation). This made me more conscious of how I inserted my voice/perspective as I continued my research process.

It was my educational attainment and my perceived race that were the most restricting, especially because some participants experienced me as intimidating and somewhat unapproachable because of my masters' degrees and my 'fancy' private school British-South African accent. It was restricting because during interviews some participants were less comfortable with me. I had to ask organisation members to expand more on their answers because they were nervous that what they were saying wasn't the right thing or not what they thought I wanted to hear. The hardest experience was interviewing a teacher at the Sustainability Hub. From the beginning of the interview no matter how hard I tried to break the ice and build rapport I could see there was a barrier, a wall of privilege, which I struggled to diffuse. To try and mitigate some of the power dynamics I engaged more consciously with the idea of intersubjectivity, as explored below.

3.7.2 Intersubjectivity: Relationship between the researcher/researched

My research process was an interactive process between the researcher and researched. For that reason, during the interviews for example, I started each interview by sharing some of my life story: my personal history, why I was doing this research, what prompted me to ask these particular questions. I shared my own experiences with the participants as a way to reduce the hierarchical power relations existing between me (the researcher) and them (the participants). However, despite my different attempts to create intersubjectivity to reduce the hierarchical power relations between the 'object' and the 'subject' (Westkott, 1979), I was still conscious of the inherent hierarchical power relations between me and the participants because of the nature of a doctoral thesis - ultimately this was *my* project and it would be *my* voice that would be telling the story.

During one of my first interviews, when we were discussing the research process and my approach, one of the organisation members in leadership expressed a concern that other members might not understand the academic framing of the research. They were conscious that the wording could be exclusionary. Another participant was also a little worried that some organisation members, particularly the gardeners and cleaners, might not feel

comfortable to share openly. To help, I started my interviews speaking about my personal story to explain why this research is important to me and why their voice is important to the research process. Sharing my story and my history gave organisation members something relatable to connect to and I felt they were more willing to open up. Also I began interviews by asking participants simple questions about how and when they arrived at the organisation and what led them there. As was highlighted by one interviewee, “If you can develop and create a very comfortable warm space for them... I think that’s where you’ll find the meat for your thesis. It’s in that kind of conversation with the voices that don’t often get heard, those who are often not included, those who are not often asked” (Support team member, SH - Interview 2).

I spent time and encouraged participants to tell me personal stories about themselves and their histories intertwined with their experiences of organisational life. Those in the Sustainability Hub and the Women’s Empowerment Project seemed more open to talk about themselves and their personal lives. The attitude of the participants in the Feminist Legal Clinic was slightly different as participants seemed to find it more difficult to talk about their personal stories and histories focusing on answering the questions in direct relations to the organisation. But once I encouraged the sharing of more personal stories as the interviews progressed and they started feeling more relaxed, they talked more about their personal intimate experiences and less generally. There was also a sense from those not in senior positions that I had power to give them voice. I sometimes found myself feeling compromised for having not explained more clearly that I am an independent researcher, and not working for the organisation who could respond to their individual challenges and give support.

3.7.3 Personal is political: Research as Intimate work

Throughout the analysis and writing up of this research, I aimed to put the personal experiences (including their emotions and feelings) of those who live, survive and thrive within these organisations at the core. This agency frames participants not only research objects, but agents who resist, negotiate, accommodate and protest forms of oppression (McNay, 2000). It recognises that “each individual experience is located in a society and a history, and is embedded within a set of social relations that produce possibilities and limitations of those experiences” (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1996:63).

Some of the interviewees, especially those who had been at the organisations for longer,

were quite defensive when I asked about contradictions and internal power dynamics. There was a resistance to the reflexive and perhaps critical nature of the questions. I remember one participant sat defensively with her arms crossed and her body closed, but I saw her physically open up and speak with pride when speaking about the times she felt most connected to the organisation. It was a good reminder that this work is sensitive, it is intimate, and some organisation members are understandably careful and protective over organisations that they see as home, especially to outsiders.

The recognition of the intimacy and sensitivity of this research was put to the ultimate test with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many PhD students were encouraged to see the pandemic as an opportunity to ‘stress test’ their ideas. If anything a pandemic is a perfect time to look at the manifestations of institutional work and experiential agency within social purpose organisations. But when I checked in with my various case studies I felt the stress and fear across the organisations and in almost every single person, and I felt it myself. My emails were often not replied to and WhatsApp conversations were brief. I could see that inside organisations there was trauma and that the hustle to adjust to the new normal was taking enough energy and time. So I paused, kept in contact, and waited to see when the best time to reconnect might be. In all three cases the leaders kept in contact, as did some of the other staff members, and I was able to reconnect at different points.

3.7.4 Reciprocity: Expanding the giving field

In respecting this active construction and negotiation of the research, I found it necessary to feed my reflections back to the research participants and the organisations more broadly. I wanted to show my gratitude and celebrate the participants as agents and storytellers of their own organisational lives. It felt like an obligation since the participants engaged actively with the research process and without them the whole PhD would not have been possible. This reciprocity offered a way to lessen the asymmetry of power (Gottfried, 1996:109) creating an exchange of sorts; by offering something of myself, a creative outlet that was not academic in nature. I worked with an artist friend to create short zines with vignettes from my personal observations (see Appendix 1), and anonymous quotes from different interviews and presented it back to the organisations.

My methodology for this research was rooted in feminist knowledge and wisdom (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Sprague, 2005; Maynard, 1994). I was invited to continuously reflect upon the following: the origins of my topic and where my interest in the topic

emerged and what biases might need exploring; the unfolding research process itself and whether the methods were congruent with the purpose of the research; the resulting writing process and whether participants would recognise themselves in what I was writing.

Conclusion of Methodology Chapter

My research approach was designed to explore the nature of the experience of positive institutional work through organising and agency, deeply rooted in feminist research praxis, recognising organisation member's agency as producers of knowledge and constructors of their social reality. The methods used to collect data linked to the overall framework of this research: combining semi-structured interviews with deep hanging out, focus groups and sense-making interviews supported me in my quest to answer my research questions. My position in the field as an insider/outside fundamentally influenced the research process and research design, because as a feminist researcher and as an actor in the social purpose field I am also a constructor of knowledge, and in writing up the findings and interpreting their meaning, I put my own imprint on the research. Therefore, reflexivity was a really important part of this research process.`

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

To begin to answer the question of how experiential legitimacy is maintained in social purpose organisations through positive institutional work, and to explore the role of experiential agency in this process, below I set out my empirical findings. As a reminder experiential legitimacy is the “evaluation of the way the internal subjective experiences of field members do or do not reflect legitimated regulations, norms, and beliefs.” (Nilsson, 2015:373).

I have divided my Findings Chapter into the following sections:

4.1 Practices - I begin my Findings with the practices of positive institutional work I found across my case organisations because it was evident, through my interviews and participant observation, that when I asked when participants felt most connected to the organisation's purpose and to others in the organisation, it was through specific experiences of organisational practices that this was clearest and most felt. I explore three common practices and some of the challenges I observed in the practice and some of the ways in which these challenges were overcome. The three practices are: *surfacing*

subjective experiences; communing as whole persons; and dialoguing around purpose and meaning.

4.2 Capabilities - I then explore three capabilities I observed cultivated through (and in turn helped to deepen) practices as organisation members “become more conscious and effective participant(s)” (Lawrence et al, 2011:56) “involved in pursuing meaningful, long-term social goods with a collaborative spirit” (Nilsson, 2015:382). The capabilities are: *purposivity, reflexivity and creative will.*

The above practices and capabilities were identified across all three organisations. Representative data excerpts illustrating the scope of support for each aggregated theme are provided in *Appendix 3: Cross-Case Quotations Supporting Aggregated Themes.*

4.3 Challenging NGOization through positive institutional work - Finally, to understand the broader institutional implications of experiential legitimacy on social purpose organisations, I place them in their broader context of societal and professional logics. I explore three specific examples of how, through positive institutional work, these organisations challenged NGOization logics, namely, the prioritisation of professionalisation, the centralisation of power and managerial dominance, and the standardisation of practice.

These three sections form the findings foundation for my exploration of experiential legitimacy and agency inside social purpose organisations.

4.1 Practices that connect experientially oriented purpose to practice

In this section I begin by exploring and illustrating three common practices (summarised in the table below) that express mutually constitutive experiential and social goods which I observed across my three case organisations.

In this study, **practices** refer to the recurrent, relational actions through which members of social purpose organisations sustain alignment between their lived experience and their organisation’s espoused purpose. These practices are ‘positive’ not because they are uniformly harmonious, but because they contribute to the ongoing vitality of the institution—they restore, repair, and reorient relationships in ways that make collective life more coherent, reflective, and humane. Empirically, such practices took form as everyday modes of relating that cultivated experiential legitimacy: *surfacing subjective experiences, communing as whole persons, and dialoguing around purpose and meaning.* I also explore

some of the real life challenges I observed organisational members face in practicing positive institutional work and some of the ways in which those challenges are overcome.

TABLE 4: Summary of Practices

Practice Definition	Evidence of practice	Challenge in practice
1) Surfacing subjective experiences <i>Practices that elicit the expression of emotions, feelings, and impressions in authentic and genuine ways, ideally within a relational space where those expressions can be noticed, appreciated, and understood</i>	Check in = <i>practices that surface emotions, feelings, and impressions around inner subjective personal and professional experiences in authentic and genuine ways in relationship with others</i> [e.g. personal and professional] Paying appreciative attention = <i>practices whereby organisation members attend to each others experiences in a relational manner where those experiences can be noticed, appreciated, and understood</i> [e.g. success and grief]	Trauma
2) Communing as whole persons <i>Practices that consciously bring organisation members together renewing the connection between individuals, and with the organisation, and its purpose, ideally in an experiential manner</i>	Congregating practices = <i>practices whereby the organisation members comes together to renew their connection to each other and purpose as part of organisation's day-to-day</i> [e.g. physical spaces/sharing food] Liminal practices = <i>practices whereby organisation members comes together to renew their connection with each other and purpose outside the usual daily life</i> [e.g. clay cafe/protests/ceremonies] Welcoming practices = <i>practices whereby organisation members come together to invite (new and old) members into relationship with the organisation's purpose</i> [e.g. Community work/Counselling training]	Disruption of time and space - COVID-19
3) Dialoging around purpose and meaning <i>Practices that consciously invite organisation members to explore, exchange ideas and sense-make collectively around their shared purpose and meaning of their work</i>	Example 1: Experimenting with the meaning of names of their purpose [management team vs. support team] Example 2: Brave conversations about identity and purpose [annual report dilemma] Example 3: Collective sense-making of meaning of their collective work [toilet paper question]	All talk and no action The Silence Factory

4.1.1 Surfacing subjective experiences

Definition: Practices that elicit the expression of emotions, feelings, and impressions in authentic and genuine ways, ideally within a relational space where those expressions can be noticed, appreciated, and understood

There were two forms of surfacing practices that I noticed across the three case organisations:

(i) **Check ins** describe the practice of surfacing emotions, feelings, and impressions around inner subjective personal and professional experiences in authentic and genuine ways in relationship with others.

(ii) **Paying appreciative attention** describes practices whereby organisation members attend to each other's experiences in a relational manner where those experiences can be noticed, appreciated, and understood.

Below, I delve into the role these practices played in connecting subjective experiences of organisation members experientially with social purpose goals of the organisation. Through these surfacing practices, organisation members were able to transgress their specific organisational roles and breach public/private dualisms towards experiential legitimacy.

i) Check ins - surfacing self

The simplest and clearest practice of surfacing subjective experiences was 'check ins'. Participants shared with me obvious and intentional moments where they are invited to surface their inner subjective experiences through individual and collective 'check ins'. As one participant at the Sustainability Hub explained,

In our meetings we have time, before the day starts, to give the personal stuff. When we give each other a check in we then run so smoothly for the rest of the day, because it's not weighing so heavily. Because we give each other the space to express the problem or challenge addling in our heads. (Former leader, SH - Interview)

This quote illustrates how the practice of giving space to express emotions, feelings and sharing organisation members 'inner state' is seen as a necessary part of work life. These intentional moments for checking in were spoken about across all three case studies. A participant at the Women's Empowerment Project highlighted the effect on organisation members if check ins do not happen:

On the days when we don't [do our check in], we just get so consumed, we feel like something is off. We are less present. It's such a simple thing but it is amazing. We don't need to pull in external rocket scientists to help us. (Counselling team member, WEP - Interview)

Check ins are a "simple" practice, not rocket science, inviting organisational members to

bring more of themselves to work and into the workplace. Underlying this practice was the belief that, “I don’t believe in that thing of ‘don’t bring your personal stuff to work’. I believe that’s impossible as a person” (Counselling team member, WEP - Interview). Through check-ins, the organisation members make space to take notice and understand the present state of each person at the beginning of the day.

We can’t expect you to pitch up at 7am everyday and be happy and just go on as if there’s nothing else going on in your life... it’s that we see and we understand that we are not all in the same situation (Support team member, SH - Interview)

I noted that surfacing through check ins can take place anytime, anywhere. It does not have to be in a formal meeting or a team setting as explored above, rather check ins are a *continuous practice* of checking in with each other, playing a role in connecting the organisational members to each other and the organisation at large. This excerpt below on ‘the power of a cup of coffee’ provides a compelling illustration of the power of check ins:

With our youth, walking into the coffee shop with them, I’ve noticed the power of a cup of coffee.... It’s easy to see all the negative things amongst a broken community... where there’s deep trauma and deep hurt... people become so resilient to hurt. It’s so normalised... it’s actually what the offer [of a cup of coffee] unleashes... It’s the conversation around the cup of coffee so, you invite them, ‘Hey let’s go down for a cappuccino’ and this immediately lifts their spirits, because it’s something of integrity, of dignity, of ‘I’m worth a cappuccino’... **I mean that’s what we’re really attending to. The small things.** (Project Coordinator, SH - Interview)

The power of a cup of coffee illustrates the power of taking the time to check in. It is an invitation to be present and connect, making the other person feel seen and appreciated. Through the practice of check ins organisation members feel noticed, they feel a sense of worth. The story above is unique but it resonates with how organisation members feel ‘seen’ within these organisations - each person is unique, each person has their own story to share and to be appreciated. It seeds an *intimate knowing*.

I think that’s how we started walking individual journeys, not just with them, but getting to know the family dynamics. Who’s your dad? Who’s your mum? Do you have a dad? What about your sister? **We know the insides and outsides of our people** (Project Coordinator, SH - Interview)

Moreover, the check ins are not limited to a particular group of organisational members, i.e. only management or teachers or lawyers, rather it is a practice that manifests across the

organisation. As such, as highlighted by Nilsson (2009) surfacing as a practice transgresses roles in the organisation. For example at the Sustainability Hub, one of the finance team shared their experience of checking in on a child who was based at the school. Through the practice of checking in, they made time to 'see' this boy even though this engagement had nothing to do with their role - as in finance - and was obviously not part of their job description. Granted, in the Women's Empowerment Project, it was more common for the counsellors and social workers to lead check-ins with their teams during their routine meetings, or team support leads at the Sustainability Hub, but the practice was not limited to these particular roles.

A participant at the Feminist Legal Clinic described the way they have tried to create a more inclusive space through check ins:

We have tried to create a much more inclusive space but that, I think, is much more informal. Where it's just the chaotic Monday morning meeting that we have. Where we really make an attempt so that everyone feels like they can contribute or say something... maybe that's why it sometimes feels like it's all over the place, it doesn't have a lot of structure to it. This is so that people are not are not intimidated by the idea of formality or structure. But really I feel like if I wanted to talk about, you know, who I slept with over the weekend, then that would be completely fine (Finance team member, FLC - Interview)

As described above, this practice of checking in challenges the normal structured routines of organisational life. There is a feeling of intimacy brought about by the *informality of check ins* because the informal nature of what is shared gives the organisation members a feeling that they can share experiences that in any other circumstance, within the Feminist Legal Clinic (rooted in a professional legal logic), might be deemed inappropriate or uncomfortable or unwelcome.

Reminiscent of Thomas et al. (2018), through check ins, the organisational collective is also able to reconcile individual experiences of the work into a collective understanding that helps them know how to move forward collectively.

Me and my team have check in meetings everyday at 430pm. We ask each other: 'What was good for the day? What didn't go well? What is the next step?' We decide as a team. **We make it a team response.** (Project Coordinator, SH - Interview)

Through this practice the organisational collective is surfacing, questioning and being in relationship with each other, as highlighted by this participant: "we are still asking

questions, we are still having the conversation, opening up opportunity for internal dialogue...**continuing to be in relationship with each other**" (Lawyer, FLC - Interview).

De-individualising the check-in process encourages organisation members to focus on the relational quality of organisational life: how they are connecting with each other, building an awareness and empathy for each other's different internal worlds, and collectively connecting to their collective purpose through collective inquiry. This relational reality was a key finding in understanding experiential legitimacy in these organisations.

(ii) Paying appreciative attention - surfacing other

The second surfacing practice manifested in various examples of *paying appreciative attention* as organisation members' surfaced individual joy and personal success within the organisational collective in authentic and genuine ways where it was appreciated and understood. When asked when they felt most connected to the organisation and its purpose, the majority of members mentioned some form of celebration, specifically of individual achievements (their own and others), showing appreciation and sharing joy:

I think we make moments of celebration. Whether that's a graduation or, last week I got a flower plant from [the Director] to say thank you for my work. So that was amazing for me. Because I don't expect it to happen... (Community outreach team member, SH - Interview)

Importantly, many of these celebrations of success were outside of specific projects or work. At the Sustainability Hub it was evident when one participant shared:

At [the organisation] we celebrate these individual achievements. I'm amazed at what other people do. Every person is an individual, and every person matters. (Field note, SH - Observation)

I noticed that where each success and victory was celebrated there was a sense that each individuals' success is success for the organisational whole, that the joy of one is the joy of many, and that the strengths of one, strengthens the whole. Whether it is a graduation or a wedding. These experiences of paying attention create a foundation of care felt across the organisation, evidence that *paying appreciative attention is part of the work* of social purpose organising.

The organisational member above went on to share another organisational example of surfacing joy:

That's not even the most incredible story... I mean, like, the guy who works at reception, we walked into his family's house a couple of years ago and we saw amazing drawings all over his room. And so, we invited him to be part of the youth programme. He failed to matriculate even though he studied day in and day out, um, just because the system doesn't cater for him... But his motto is 'I will never give up'.

And so, he came in and we said, "if you can volunteer here, maybe we can extend it and we can hustle some funding for a salary for you" He was here every single day volunteering for, I think, 2 months, coming in, doing whatever it takes. Now he's here and he's earning an income and he's an advocate for the youth and the youth programme. So, he came with a brand new phone one day and everyone was, like, "Did you buy that?" and he said, "Yes". And they said, "Is it on contract?" He said, "No, it's cash" and we said, "Yo!"

And that gives a sense— where we all share that pride. If you just take a step back and let them enjoy the success, and the success it means for the community - that pride that we share that someone of us bought a cash phone. (Project Coordinator, SH - Interview)

This is a powerful contextual example because in South Africa it is uncommon for people to be able to afford to buy a phone with cash money; because of the economic poverty and over-indebtedness (Ssebagala, 2016), especially amongst populations previously disadvantaged by Apartheid and colonialism (James, 2014), most appliances like phones are bought on credit. The celebration of this success recognises that this one young man's achievement represents something bigger to the wider community, and it is worth being celebrated collectively. This practice of paying appreciative attention invites a kind of group visibility where organisation members take time to notice and be noticed. Through this act they are seen and witnessed by the collective.

By surfacing experiences of achievement, the metaphor of 'mirroring' came up and resonated with this sense of being seen and appreciated.

People don't often get to see mirrors of themselves. We don't often take time to reflect on our own successes, we don't take time to be like, 'Whoa, actually that's true, I did this thing and I'm from this place, and yeah, I've come a long way.' (Project Coordinator, SH - Interview)

The other examples that organisation members shared when asked when they felt most connected to the organisation were ones of grief and illness. In this sense, it includes surfacing the 'messiness' that organisation members are holding on a daily basis, for example:

She said [in the meeting], ‘We’re all menstrual. We’re all menstrual’... [laughter] even before the meeting started, she wanted to talk to us, she wanted to apologise... **[But] we get it, because we all have those and we all understand that we lose our shit on that day.** (Paralegal, FLC - Interview)

And the sick days: “Here [at the organisation] **they take notice of you**... when I was sick one day, people noticed. They checked in on me” (Support team member, SH - Interview). Both these examples show how surfacing becomes a space for empathy. There was a sense of care between members in the organisation that was “attuned to relationships and to place” (Woodly et al, 2021).

The practice of paying attention includes the full spectrum of being human: the sharing and surfacing of sickness and grief. One of the interviewees who had lost a close family member said she felt held by the organisation in her time of grief, specifically because those around her in the organisation understood and appreciated the cultural dynamics she experienced as a Muslim woman. This feeling of being cared for emerged in how comfortable and supported organisation members felt to authentically share their experiences of grief.

Paying attention to grief seemed to be a key indicator of positive institutional work as it indicated organisation members' comfort to share the most intimate, vulnerable parts of themselves. NGO-ization and underlying neoliberalism has encouraged a strong dualism between the private and public spheres of life, therefore experiences of grief and trauma are often not acknowledged, and sometimes deliberately stifled, framed as an individualised (Horn, 2020) and part of the private sphere (Waller & Wrenn, 2021). Paying appreciative attention opens up more possibilities for organisation members to feel comfortable to share (if they choose to) their ‘messy’ emotions and experiences traditionally associated with the private sphere of life.

Challenge to Surfacing in practice: Trauma

Participants at the Women’s Empowerment Project spoke of the emotional weight carried in their daily work and how it blurred the line between professional care and personal vulnerability. One counsellor reflected:

Dealing with the nature of rape counselling work... for a group who are holding others through profound trauma the stakes are higher because they themselves are more vulnerable. They are also dealing with their own struggles and traumas. (Counselling

team member, WEP - Interview)

Such accounts reveal how organisational life is shaped not only by the immediate demands of work but by the broader histories that infuse it. The staff's experiences were intertwined with enduring social and structural wounds—poverty, racism, and gender-based violence—that continued to shape both those they served and their own lives. These resonances of harm created a fragile equilibrium: supporting others' recovery while navigating one's own. This pattern illustrates that trauma within social purpose organisations cannot be understood solely at the individual level. It is carried collectively, embedded in social histories and institutional contexts that reproduce inequality and vulnerability. Wineman (2003) similarly observes that trauma in social purpose work is systemic rather than episodic, arising from the historical and structural conditions in which such organisations operate. The findings here extend that argument by showing how these inherited traumas manifest not only in community relations but in the relational dynamics of organisational members themselves, shaping how care and legitimacy are enacted on a daily basis.

Turning the lens inside these organisations, many of the members of these organisations are from the communities they work with, so they experience their own social vulnerability and come into the organisation with their own trauma (Tehrani, 2010). As one of my sense-making participants recognised, “When people come to organisation, they come with hatred and brokenness and fragmentation” (Sense-making Interview 4). This trauma has an impact on the practice of positive institutional work as it inhibits organisations members, hindering their ability to consciously and effectively participate in the organisation.

In my case organisations, trauma was acknowledged as part of their collective experience. As one participant at the Women's Empowerment Project shared, “Here [at the organisation], it's ok to be broken” (Field note, WEP - Dialogue). In the face of unjust histories and personal trauma, surfacing emotions, feelings and expressions of different organisations members, along with their experiences of trauma, invited a deep empathy where that trauma is noticed and understood collectively. As such, positive institutional work cannot force organisation members to be friends, or even to like each other. However the general consensus is that it encourages a relational dynamic that supports organisation members to more openly and honestly connect with each other and the organisation's purpose. As this participant summarised beautifully, “There is an essence: focus on the

individual that you are working with in the space right now, the person sitting right in front of you” (Communications team member, WEP - Interview 1).

In conclusion, surfacing practices of checking in and paying attention invite organisation members to bring more of themselves into the organisation, deepening the connection between organisation members and to the organisation’s purpose. Through positive institutional work organisations members disrupt NGOization’s managerial disassociation between self and others. In fact, these practices play a transformational role, “as both therapeutic and political” (Field note, WEP - Dialogue). This opened up possibilities for organisation members to not only be tools to achieve particular roles, routines and outcomes, but to be whole people with complex experiences and needs and offerings. Through surfacing complex and multiple subjective experiences and paying attention to others, as a participant at the Sustainability Hub summarised, “*You are looked after, your whole self*” (Support team member, SH - Interview).

4.1.2 Communing as whole persons

Definition: Practices that consciously bring organisation members together renewing the connection between individuals, and with the organisation, and its purpose, ideally in an experiential manner

Across the three case organisations, members repeatedly described and enacted ways of coming together that renewed their sense of connection and purpose. These moments varied in form—from spontaneous conversations and informal gatherings to intentional retreats and welcoming rituals—but shared a quality of relational attentiveness that made the organisation feel alive. Participants often spoke of these spaces as vital to “keeping the energy going” or “remembering why we’re here.” They were occasions where boundaries of role and hierarchy softened, allowing people to reconnect to each other and to the organisation’s wider purpose.

From these accounts, three recurring forms of communing practice became visible.

(i) **Congregating practices** refer to the informal, organic ways in which members gather—sometimes briefly, sometimes repeatedly—to renew connection through shared presence.

(ii) **Liminal practices** describe more formal or ritualised spaces of gathering, often taking place outside usual work time or setting, that allow members to reflect and reconnect to purpose together.

(iii) **Welcoming practices** denote intentional gestures of inclusion that invite both new and existing members into relationship with the organisation's purpose and community.

These practices were experienced as embodied, situated, and relational. They were *embodied* in their felt, material, and sensory dimensions; *situated* within particular personal and social histories that shaped how belonging was experienced; and *relational* in the way members' interactions produced and reproduced connection through mutual recognition. As Heney (2020) notes, organisational experience carries a "visual, material and felt nature," while Crean (2018) emphasises that relationality involves the co-production of human meaning through interaction. The findings here extend these insights by showing how communing practices make institutional purpose *felt*—translating symbolic values into lived experience. Through these embodied enactments, members stretched beyond their formal roles and routines, sustaining experiential legitimacy through relational renewal.

(i) Congregating practices

Congregating practices focus on the *informal* ways that organisation members come together renewing their connections with each other and with the organisation's purpose in an experiential manner. There are moments in the course of everyday organisational life when members interact and connect with other members in routine ways. Participants across all three organisations shared examples of 'water cooler moments' of going down to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee, standing in the corridor between offices, chatting and catching up.

Those **water cooler moments** when there are no frills and no fuss. You are just yourself. **That's the truest form of connection**, when you are able to speak freely, having coffee or making them coffee, talking about life, about hardships... going back upstairs your demeanour changed. (Leadership team member, WEP - Interview)

These 'water cooler' moments or congregating practices manifested informally in various ways across the case organisations. There were two trends that stood out as catalysts for experiential congregating practices: (i.i) sharing physical spaces (i.ii) sharing nourishment.

i.i) Sharing physical space

Spending time in each organisation, I observed that congregating practices are often situated in physical spaces where members informally and organically came together to connect and engage. The quintessential illustration of congregating practice was *The Purple Table* at the Women's Empowerment Project:

In the office there is a purple table in the kitchen. **If that purple table could talk...** the stuff we talk about, the lessons that you learn... I started at [the organisation] in my 20s, sitting at that table with older women in their 50s. When I was young I was taught you don't listen to older peoples' conversation, but **the environment that [the purple table] creates, it's not that I am over stepping a boundary, but that I am a young woman learning about the world.** The older women come to the table to teach me, and I become a sponge. These women don't have tertiary education but I knew [the organisation] was the place I was going to learn. This is where I am growing up to be the woman I am going to be... (Counselling team member, WEP - Interview)

The Purple Table was a place where organisational members routinely congregated informally on a daily basis. As described above, it had symbolic significance as a physical place where members come together to converse, to engage deeply, to make sense of each other and their work collectively.

I remember my mother would come to the office if she got off work early. She would sit around the purple table. She would ask me when I am going back to work. But we would tell her, 'this is working!' Because we are working with social challenges and it sounds like we are talking normal conversations, but I'm learning a lot from these conversations... Every organisation needs to find their own purple table. **It's the place where you build relationships.** (Counselling team member, WEP - Interview)

The Purple Table was the physical manifestation of a place to build relationships, a place to learn about each other and the world they were engaging with.

At the Feminist Legal Clinic, congregating took place in "the common area", "an informal space" where "there's quite a lot of talking... about work, actual work and other work, but you're not in a [formal] meeting" (Lawyer, FLC - Interview). The common area referred to here was at the back of the office with two unassuming couches placed next to each other creating a cosy corner. This was a place where organisational members came together to discuss politics, legal cases, sex, belly-dancing and much more, as one participant shared "we talk about actual work and other work". Everyday, at some point in the day, I would find at least two or three organisation members in that space chatting.

At Sustainability Hub, organisation members congregated at the Café based downstairs at the Hub. I would see staff come to get a coffee or a juice, connect with each other, and then head back upstairs to their offices. This was a common occurrence throughout the day. From there organisation members would go for a walk together during the day, or sit

outside for lunch.

Congregating practices resonated with the ways feminist writers write about material spaces and places as cultural work inspired by a publishing house *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* (see more in hooks, 1993; Smith, 1989). Spaces like the Purple Table at the Women's Empowerment Project or the kitchen at the Feminist Law Clinic challenge notions regarding what counts as disruptive and transformative practices, in part because they are objects often associated with oppressive representations of domesticity. Scharnhorst (2019:6) writes about kitchen tables:

"Kitchen tables bear the weight of our lives in motion; in this way, they function as ephemeral archives. **By an archive, I mean a record, even fleeting, of the things that matter, that need tending to, that are important enough not to throw away yet, that need to be handy.** They bear the detritus of everyday living alongside the work of ourselves and others within our communities."

Across all three organisations, the image that came to mind was one of organic flow through these spaces, where organisation members would merge together, tend to themselves and each other, and then disperse. The rhythm of each organisation was embodied in how organisation members came together in space, intermittently, throughout the day, a feeling that the organisation and those inside it were connecting and caring, in flow, together.

(i.ii) Sharing food

I found that there were also symbolic congregating practices, not physically bound in a particular space, but rather the act of sharing food and drink. Sharing food creates a symbolic exchange. "*We give to each other... We share food, we all make tea.* Instead of just going to our desks, you can pop into anyone's office" (Finance team member, FLC - Interview). Whether it was daily or a few times a week, organisation members shared with each other and got to know each other in a *low stakes* environment over food.

Sharing food with someone... **it happens at a pace when people get to know you...** assumptions have space to be explored (Advocacy team member, WEP - Interview)

The temporal element, "at the pace when people get to know you" disrupts the fast pace pressure of "getting things done". A reminder that when sitting together and sharing food slows time down and the relational work happens. The food ritual becomes a place where the body is permitted, where it's recognised (Menezes de Souza, 2019:11).

Participants at the Sustainability Hub shared several poignant examples of how food plays a role in deepening connections across the organisation through challenging the usual professional relationship flows of who connects to who in the organisation:

Community food day... The tenants were invited, and the students, interns, volunteers, anyone that was here... there was a long table with breakfast or lunch. **Everyone just brings their own food and then we just sit together and share. So it's really about bringing people together and connecting with those around you,** not just on a professional level, but also getting to know the person. Yes, that sense of community is important (Support team member, SH - Interview)

In the examples above sharing food is a communing practice that connects: food not only as sustenance so one can keep living and keep working but as a gift to be shared; food not only as a routine to take a break but with which members engage more fully and learn from one another; food not only as something tedious and biologically necessary but as relationship building.

Another example mentioned by a few participants was the organisation-wide breakfast hosted by a group of students:

Last year was really a beautiful one, when our postgrads organised the breakfast themselves and that was completely led by them... the thing was also to give back to the staff and not having the Green Café or the hospitality team serve the food, but they [the students] all brought food and we sat and we set up some tables and we all sat in a row and it was a stunning winter's day. It was really colourful... Those are the kinds of things that I remember, where you really feel like this is what it's all about... And there wasn't enough food and lots of things weren't perfect. But I think it was important that it happened... (Support team member, SH - Interview)

I imagine this slightly disorganised group of students organising this 'gift' for the whole organisation. It becomes an expression of gratitude from students to the staff and the organisation more widely. As the same participant expanded, "It's the principle of appreciation and *giving back*, and however they choose to express that is up to them." (Support team member, SH - Interview). It also becomes a learning opportunity. When the participant said 'this is what it is all about', it's not about the perfect meal, or the perfect execution, rather it's about moments of connection, being situated and embodied in the sun together. Sharing food holds symbolic significance to the ways these organisation members practice coming together continuously, as relationship building by coming together across the organisation in an embodied way.

(ii) Liminal practices

Liminal practices are communing practices that are more formalised, organised spaces for organisation members to come together outside of the 'workplace' and sometimes outside 'work time'. Liminal practices shared by participants included events such as staff wellness sessions, team-building workshops, and even protests.

Example 1: Staff Wellness session at Clay Cafe

When asked the question around experiences that made participants feel most connected, the majority of members of the Feminist Legal Clinic mentioned their most recent 'staff wellness session' where the organisation went to an outside venue, Clay Cafe, for ceramic painting. There was something significant about the relationship-building that took place in the process of painting clay.

At the Clay Cafe team building session everyone painted and that was, actually, a very interesting study of people. I think it was one of those **'take people out of their comfort zones' and really get to figure out who they are...** what was nice was the informality. (Finance team member, FLC - Interview)

In this liminal space outside of work space and time, professional roles were suspended. Through this informality organisation members discovered new and interesting personal and professional insights about themselves and others outside the confines of the office. As one participant highlighted,

Getting everybody together to hang out, outside of the work space... it's not based in this office space where you fall into your [work] roles. To get out of that and interact with each other... Once you take people out of the confines of the work context and put them in a much more relaxed space you get to understand, **'Who are you? And why do you want to be here?' And then how can we help each other get there...** (Communications team member, FLC - Interview)

Organisation members were able to relax and play, and they felt comfortable to share more of themselves with each other. The physicality of playing together through painting and creating became an embodied form of learning; learning about each other and their individual and collective ways of being in the world. These insights deepened the connections in the organisation as they disrupted who connects to whom and how. This felt particularly significant for the Feminist Legal Clinic where the roles, routines and structures felt more rigid. Through play, there was an invitation to relax and to engage differently with each other, breaking down the usual hierarchies and communication lines. Members began

to see each other differently and connect with one another in a more holistic way. I noticed during my time spent at the organisation that many of the members had their piece of painted clay from Clay Café on their desk, pointing to it and speaking fondly of the experience. From my perspective it felt like a symbol of their connectedness to others and the organisation.

Example 2: Participating in Protests

When I asked about experiences of connectedness with other organisation members and the organisation's purpose, participants at the Feminist Legal Clinic and Women's Empowerment Project mentioned specific protests they had participated in.

For the Feminist Legal Clinic, the #TotalShutDown protest march in 2019 exemplified this. The administrative staff described how they came early to the office to prepare placards, the whole organisation turned out in their matching t-shirts. There was a sense of ceremony and pride in the collective preparation. A participant who was part of the finance team said, "we don't often get to come out of the office and hit the streets." There was a deep sense of collective purpose through action across the organisation; an embodied expression of the organisation's purpose as a whole.

For the Women's Empowerment Project, participants spoke about mobilisation efforts around the rape trial of then President Jacob Zuma in 2016. A participant reflected:

It was therapeutic and political. It was development at every level. There was a **high level of engagement** and a **collective sense of mobilisation** across the organisation.
(Counselling team member 3, WEP - Interview)

These liminal practices feel different not necessarily because of what they are doing but *how they are doing it* - in an embodied, situated and relational manner. I draw on Tempest & Starkey's (2004:509) understanding of liminality as "the ambiguous condition of being between, at the limits of existing social structures and where new structures are emerging". Through being physically present together, disrupting existing routines of everyday work rhythms, being in solidarity with each other and their organisation's purpose, these events formed an intimate part of experiencing the organisation and each other anew.

(iii) Welcoming practices

The third communing practice that I observed were *welcoming practices*. These practices focused on *how organisation members are (continuously) welcomed new and old members*

into relationship with the organisation. This includes new members' first impressions upon joining the organisation, but also plays the role of renewing existing members' connection to others and the organisation itself.

I observed two obvious welcoming practice examples: (Example 1) *Community Work* at Sustainability Hub and (Example 2) *Counselling Training* at Women's Empowerment Project. I also noted that the Feminist Legal Clinic did not have a clear welcoming practice, the implications of which are discussed further later in this Findings Chapter.

Example 1: Community Work at Sustainability Hub

My experience of being invited and welcomed into the Sustainability Hub began with one of the first engagements I had with the organisation when I was invited to join Community Work. One participant invited me:

You can just join us. So, we start at quarter past eight on Tuesday. And we gather at the amphitheatre. You can just show up and you can choose... so, the way we do it is we do a reading and then we do a bit of movement, stretching, breathing, something like that. And then we divide into groups and go to different stations... you're welcome to join as many of them as you like. (Support team member 6, SH - Interview)

This invitation provided insight into the role Community Work played in welcoming new organisation members into the organisation. One participant described Community Work emphasising its welcoming nature:

[Community work] helps understand what [the organisation] is all about. So, just imagine I say I am happy in the garden, but if you allocate me to the kitchen, I'm not so keen. How am I going to know what is happening in the kitchen? When I joined the organisation, [they] gave me a tour of the entire place, and I was thinking to myself, how long will it take to absorb all the information that [they have] given me or to fully understand what is going on in each space? **But once you start tapping into those spaces through community work you get to understand what is happening.** (Support team member 5, SH - Interview)

As highlighted above, Community Work breaks down the organisational silos, as "you get to understand what is happening" across the organisation. The embodied experience is key, as it is through the physical experience of the different spaces that organisation members connect and learn about each other and the organisation. One participant commented that, "through community work creates unity. You get a chance to work together. And everyone interacts with different people." (Field note, SH - Observation).

Moreover, through Community Work, one participant emphasised that it is a practice that *embodies the philosophy of the organisation*,

The philosophy being participating in the day-to-day, in the community and what it takes to keep this place [this organisation] going... I think through that you establish quite a strong relationship to the organisation and I've started to feel like it's a part of me and a part of home. (Support team member 6, SH - Interview)

As such, it was possible to see how Community Work becomes the practice through which new members are introduced to the purpose and politics of the organisation and existing members have the opportunity to reconnect with the organisation.

Example 2: Counselling training at the Women's Empowerment Project

The welcoming practice at the Women's Empowerment Project took the form of introductory training for new counsellors, and other new members joining the organisation were encouraged to attend. One participant described the training as follows:

In the early days [the organisation's] secret sauce was the way you are brought into the organisation... we called it the initial personal growth course. It is here where you unpack your own stuff in the context of feminism with skilled facilitators; thinking about race and your assumptions; thinking about how you grew up and challenging your preconceptions with a group you have never met before. (Field note, WEP - Observation)

One of the trainers explained to me that the training includes information on the history of rape in South Africa through a feminist lens, and more personal content around self-discovery and self-knowledge (Field note, WEP - Observation). Importantly, participants shared that it was not only the content or information that made them feel connected to others and the organisation, it was *the experience* of the training, the process itself, that was more important. As one participant highlighted:

The content is important but the process is more important. There is something in the way it is facilitated where people see themselves as advocates for change. If it is just information, if people are just facilitating the content, the essence is lost; if people don't feel connected to self or others. (Operations team member, WEP - Interview)

Several participants shared how the training created space for them to deeply connect with others very different to them. As another participant shared,

The training at [the organisation] helps you think further. It's not just the content, **it's the other people you are meeting that you might not have the opportunity to**

meet. I felt and saw my privilege. I would ever have that opportunity ordinarily. We all had to go through the same learning, and you pick up from other people from their insights into things. 'I would never have known this shit if I hadn't sat next to you.' **We are from such different worlds. It levels you. It humbles you. You can't not be changed by it.** (Finance team member, WEP - Interview)

Moreover, in the process of telling their personal stories, participants, many of whom are rape survivors, were telling their stories for the first time. As one participant said, "The training was deep, you have to confront yourself. I had the opportunity to tell my story, *there are many who don't get to tell their story*" (Field note, WEP - Observation). This opportunity, to share their personal experiences of gender-based violence, embodies the purpose of the organisation to disrupt the silencing around rape culture and women's stories of rape and abuse.

The training was a space for individuals to tell their own stories, but it connected these stories to the systemic nature of the issues, the systemic exploitation and oppression common to all experiences of rape and sexual abuse. There is something powerful and disruptive about organisation members becoming active participants in their own storytelling and ultimately their own healing. "The internal training is our own personal practice... *it's about finding your freedom*" (Operations team member, WEP - Interview). Participants described the experience and its effect on their way of being in the organisation and with each other, "you can't not be changed by it" (Finance team member, WEP - Interview). By embedding the purpose and politics of the organisation into the content and into the process, new members experientially understand what the organisation is about as they deepen their connection with each other and the organisation.

Looking across both examples, it was possible to see the ways that these welcoming practices enhance the connection between members of the organisation and the organisation's purpose. Instead of more symbolic mechanical outcomes-based 'onboarding' processes, welcoming practices consciously embody the purpose of the organisation. These become 'rites of renewal' as they consist of "symbolic actions that are periodically staged to reassert the dominance of certain organisational values" (Islam & Zyphur, 2009:125), rejuvenating and reproducing accepted values over time (Trice & Beyer, 1993). One participant at the Sustainability Institute said, "*You have to do; you have to get your hands dirty*" (Field note, SH - Observation). It is not merely a meeting of staff, or a tour around the office, rather these home-grown practices were an invitation into the embodied

purpose of the organisation.

Challenge to Communing in practice: When space and time are disrupted

As detailed above, all the communing practices described come from being physically present with each other. This was severely affected by COVID-19 and the national lock down which resulted in the closing of offices for almost a year due to the pandemic. All three organisations' ability to commune in person was impeded, more so at the Sustainability Hub and the Women's Empowerment Project because of the nature of their work as social workers and educators involved more in-person work. After discussions with participants during and after the national lock down, it was evident that physical presence was essential for these organisation members to feel connected to each other and their shared purpose, and that without being present, physically, with each other, some unknown magic was missing.

During lockdown it felt very fragmented and dislocated. We are usually **the kind of people who gather** - we gather - we missed our water cooler moments. **The sense of community isn't there in the same way.** (Advocacy team member, WEP - Interview)

There are big questions that remain about the consequences of not being able to come together physically and the impact this has on the experiential nature of the work, especially when the practice of being physically together is disrupted. Organisations are still grappling with how to adjust to working arrangements that mean less time spent together in person and how to create organic spaces to come together and connect with each other as whole persons and to their shared purpose.

As summarised by a participant at the Women's Empowerment Project when describing these simple 'water-cooler' moments:

Those water cooler moments are most NB. They are not just mini meetings. **You are building relationships with people**, getting their perspective, sharing your own, getting corrected. **Through that strong relationship you can work together.** (Advocacy team member, WEP - Interview)

In analysing all these communing practices it was the intention and importantly the embodied, situated and relational experience that determined whether or not these practices deepened organisation members' connection to each other and felt like an embodiment of their shared organisational purpose.

In conclusion, communing through congregating practice, liminal spaces and welcoming practices work to bring organisation members together to enhance the connection between individuals, the organisational collective, and their collective purpose in an experiential manner. Because communing practices involve organisation members renewing their connection to each other and to the organisation's purpose, recognising that there is no resting place for a person or the organisation's purpose. They invite organisation members to continue to find ways to invite each other into relationship. There is no particular form that these communing practices take, rather it is *the quality of communing, the quality of relationship*.

The final practice I observed was that of dialoguing around purpose and meaning.

4.1.3 Dialoguing around purpose and meaning

Practice Definition: Practices that consciously invite organisation members to explore, exchange ideas and make sense collectively around their shared purpose and the meaning of their work

Across all three organisations, participants spoke about the importance of being able to engage in difficult conversations—questioning one another, naming tensions, and staying present with discomfort. They described dialogue as both challenging and necessary, a practice that kept their organisations responsive and alive. As one member explained, “It’s not always easy, but if we can talk about what’s hard, we can move differently together.” These conversations were moments of mutual reckoning where the meaning of their shared purpose was re-examined in real time.

From these accounts, dialoguing emerged as an experiential practice through which members collectively surfaced and made sense of difficult issues that unsettled assumptions about their work, relationships, and purpose. Dialogue became a way to navigate difference and to question whose experiences were recognised, whose voices were heard, and whose concerns were taken into account.

This resonates with Freire’s (1970) emancipatory definition of dialogue as a critical interaction between equals who work together to analyse and name their world. In the organisations studied, dialoguing was not merely an exchange of ideas but an ethical and political act: a means of reclaiming agency through relational honesty and shared reflection. These practices exemplify how dialogue, grounded in respect and co-agency, sustains

experiential legitimacy by keeping purpose open to continual reinterpretation.

Below, I explore three examples of dialoguing around purpose and meaning as experiential practice: Example 1: Experimenting with names at the Sustainability Hub; Example 2: Brave conversations at the Feminist Legal Clinic; and Example 3: Collective meaning-making at the Sustainability Hub.

Example 1: Experimenting with names and their meaning at the Sustainability Hub

A good example of dialoguing around purpose and meaning was the way that organisation members at the Sustainability Hub collectively engaged around the meaning behind particular names, surfacing the power behind particular terms or ‘names’ given importance by organisation members, and experimenting with them. Specifically, they surfaced and consciously experimented with the term ‘management’. The majority of my participants highlighted this when giving examples of the organisation living its purpose. These three quotes came from three different interviews:

‘Management’ is like a swear word around here. (Support team member 6, SH - Interview)

We don’t call ourselves the management or senior, higher, or whatever you want to call it, ‘executive’. We don’t call ourselves managers. Because in corporate work, a manager manages people... so **we call ourselves ‘the support team’**. **We support the rest of our team instead of managing them....** That’s why we’re not a top down organisation (Support team member 2, SH - Interview)

In my interviews, participants, especially those who had been at the organisation a long time, deliberately named the negative associations with the term ‘management’. The traditional idea of management is associated with hierarchy and ‘power over’ or “the ability of actors to constrain the choices available to other actors in a nontrivial way” (Allen, 1998). Participants acknowledged that the term ‘management’ is associated with power inequities - those in management are viewed as “higher than everyone else”. Conversely at the Sustainability Hub,

I like how everything is termed. It’s like, you’re not a project manager, you are a co-ordinator. You just help coordinate the people, so the project can run. You’re not executives, you’re support. Even the terminology that is used. I don’t know, it’s so impactful in terms of how to engage. Because if you have this huge title, you’re already creating this mental boundary and it says that [certain] person is higher. (Project Coordinator 7, SH - Interview)

I noticed that those in the ‘support team’ individually reflect on their role and identity as ‘support’ to other members in the organisation rather than as traditional ‘managers’ - a term traditionally associated with being more important and “higher than” others. Moreover, organisation members not on the ‘support team’ expressed a positive relationship with those on the ‘support team’, reiterating that their purpose is “not just to simply manage them in a top-down manner” (Project Coordinator 7, SH - Interview). Re-naming ‘management’ to ‘support team’ allowed organisation members from across the organisation to create new meaning that was more aligned with their shared purpose and how they wanted to experience each other.

As organisation members dialogued around the renaming, the process had transformatory potential to give new meaning and to deepen connection between organisational members and the organisation's purpose as it was informed by the multitude of experiences inside the organisation, and the structural institutions and power dynamics influencing and affecting them. Therefore, I noticed that re-naming was only effective as a dialoging practice if it was also met with an experiential shift by organisation members.

While the Sustainability Hub’s social purpose centres on relational learning, its symbolic legitimacy is anchored in the logic of professionalised higher education. The organisation acknowledges academic outputs, credentials and the maintenance of university-like norms of expertise and professionalism. This symbolic order shapes how legitimacy is recognised externally — through research, language, and formal presentation — but internally it becomes a point of tension. Members without formal academic status sometimes feel peripheral to the Hub’s ‘intellectual’ community. Experiential legitimacy here, therefore, invites members to rework what counts as legitimate knowledge and belonging beyond the credentialed hierarchy.

Challenge to experimenting with names in practice: All talk and no action

At the Women’s Empowerment Project, a participant reflected on how the organisation previously used the term ‘Head Office’ for the physical office based close to the centre of Cape Town in a former white suburb:

The idea of ‘Head office’ feeds into the patriarchal organisation structure...There is a perception that everything happens in [our Head Office], that it is the seat of a lot of power, a seat of envy, where all the goodies come from. (Advocacy team member, WEP - Interview)

Another participant highlighted that the organisation “battled for the Khayelitsha office to be integrated... we were using satellite language like ‘they/we’. (Field note, WEP - Observation). The ‘satellite’ offices were contrasted against the framing of the ‘Head Office’, “where everything happens” (Training and development team member 7, WEP - Interview). When discussing when they feel most disconnected from the organisation, some of the participants of the Women's Empowerment Project voiced their feelings of exclusion based on where resources and attention were focused. Organisation members at the ‘satellite’ offices voiced feeling excluded by the formal rules and structures whereby resources and engagement was prioritised towards the ‘Head Office’. The terms ‘Head Office’ and ‘satellite offices’ only served to re-entrench the inherited power dynamics of spatial Apartheid, which was reflected in the ways the organisation members based at the ‘satellite’ offices saw themselves as separate and excluded from the seat of power. One of the participants who had been at the organisation over 10 years explained the history of the term ‘Head office’ which was originally used “for the funders and donors to know where we are located” (Advocacy team member, WEP - Interview). However, as is evident above, these names also represent wider historical socio-political power structures and they were experienced by organisation members as exclusionary and unjust.

Over the course of this research being completed, based on several internal dialogues, the organisation decided to drop the term ‘Head Office’ and to refer to each office as an office in its own right. Though this change might symbolically disrupt the narratives associated with spatial Apartheid by recognising all offices equally, it remains to be seen if the organisation members in those different offices experience a shift in how they experience each other and the power and resource flows within the organisation - do those who felt they were on periphery feel more included? Harking back to literature on the form trap, re-naming may fall into the form trap when the names have changed but the underlying unequal power dynamics remain firmly entrenched.

Example 2: Brave conversations at the Feminist Legal Clinic

The Feminist's Legal Clinic provided a beautiful illustration of dialoging around purpose and meaning through brave conversations:

We were looking at photos for one of our reports and one of us addressed the issue that in one of the pictures at a protest we had attended, she had worn a t-shirt that said something about stop killing lesbians. And she said she doesn't mind, but can we blur out the word ‘lesbian’ because she'd really like to show people at church... That

the issue of lesbians was difficult in her community. It opened up the opportunity to have a completely different conversation (Lawyer, FLC - Interview)

In this example, a self-identified feminist organisation that fights women's rights could have responded to the request to blur out the word 'lesbian' by shutting it down and saying if members refuse to have their picture with the word lesbian then they can't have their picture included at all because that response goes against their values of equality and justice. Instead, the organisation members saw this as an opportunity to have a "completely different conversation". When the participant who shared this story later reflected on that particular conversation with me, they said that the organisation members who asked for the word to be blurred talked about how proud they were of their work and the organisation, they wanted to show off to their peers and their community, but they were also navigating the beliefs (and prejudices) of their church group. This example exemplifies how a brave conversation worked to surface organisation members' personal motives and personal narratives, and also to collectively engage with their shared purpose as a feminist legal organisation.

A participant at the Feminist Legal Clinic emphasised "sitting together" with others who share the same shared purpose:

It's about collaboration. It's when you find people, and I don't want to say of the same mind, but people who actually stimulate you, and you understand that you are going to do some good work together... It's sitting together as equals and when you know what you say will be respected... your opinions and questions are valid (Communications team member, FLC - Interview)

But this does not mean avoiding differences and conflicts and contradictions. In fact, another participant from the Feminist Legal Clinic reflected:

When we have arguments, with different personalities, [the Director] will always bring people back and ask: 'Why are we having this conversation, **remember who we are, what we do and why we are doing this?**' We will always go back to '**why do we want to do this?**' (Field note, FLC - Observation)

Through 'remembering why we do this', the organisation members were able to collectively negotiate congruence between their individual beliefs, their shared purpose, and their organisational practice.

There were examples from across all three case organisations which highlighted that

dialoguing around purpose and meaning was more than individual conversational moments, but rather a culture of dialogue across the organisation. A participant at the Feminist Legal Clinic said, “We robustly talk things through” (Field note, FLC - Observation). And at the Sustainability Hub, “If something is not working in our team, our support supervisor sits in to hear and assist with the conflict. And we work together to decide what to do” (Field note, SH - Observation). There was a willingness to challenge and be challenged, as highlighted by this participant at the Feminist Legal Clinic, “What if they [the lawyers] don’t respect your views? It’s not like that here. You can walk through the door, say your opinion, get challenged, but find a compromise (Field note, FLC - Observation). The practice of dialoguing around purpose and meaning became a source of connection for organisational members deliberately inviting difference and debate and dialogue (Wallin-Ruschman & Patka, 2016). And through the process of dialoguing, organisation members felt more connected to the organisation’s purpose, as “when they feel part of the process then they appreciate the goal more.” (Field note, SH - Observation).

Example 3: Collective meaning-making at the Sustainability Hub

The example below illustrates how facing a collective dilemma becomes an opportunity to practice building the organisation’s collective muscle for meaning-making:

It’s been quite a journey to try and figure out how we can build a sense of community and **how do we draw them in and how do we make them want to be a part of this [organisation]...**

We just had an example with a lot of toilet paper disappearing from the toilets, and we figured out that it was really around the time that some of the students arrived in the mornings. So we had a good sense of who was taking the toilet paper, like, full rolls of toilet paper! I mean, students do that, they want to save money and they are like, ‘it’s a well-off institution and I can just take the toilet paper’.

Initially the idea was to call them all together and crap on them, you know, telling them ‘This is a non-profit and you can’t be stealing toilet paper dah, dah, dah’... And then we spoke about it and one of us said ‘What if you were to take a completely different approach to it and rather than calling them out why don’t you call them in...

It was just trying to get them to think differently and put themselves in our shoes. It’s just an example of how we are trying to approach a problem from a different perspective. It’s also fun and it’s the stuff that keeps you engaged and it’s the rewarding side of it (Support team member 6, SH - Interview)

This example emphasises the role of dialoguing and inquiry in collective sense-making and

relationship building in the organisation. By surfacing the issue of toilet paper disappearing and making sense of it collectively through presenting the 'problem' to the students - Calling them in! - the organisation was calling the students and organisation members into relationship to collectively make sense of the problem together. Through inviting dialogue about the issue, the organisation members were able to approach the problem by "putting themselves in the others' shoes", deepening connections across the organisation. This example showed how the organisational collective engaged their ability to create change through meaning-making together and finding a solution collectively. In one of my sense-making conversations we talked about how: "It is in the collective meaning-making that people feel themselves connected to the organisation and each other - then the organisation IS you (Sensemaking Interview 1).

This summarises how these practices work to bring privately held meanings into a shared space for joint exploration and collective meaning-making (Shani & Coghlan, 2021). I remember one participant in a leadership position at the Women's Empowerment Project emphasising the importance of collective meaning-making to their organisational practice, even though it is work that is often invisible and not deemed important or necessary by funders or outside partners. However, for them,

In order to find collective agreement we have to disagree, this takes courage, it means taking risks. People outside the organisation don't see building collective agreement as important (Field note, WEP - Observation)

At the Sustainability Hub and the Feminist Law Clinic, organisational members were continuously experimenting with different ways to dialogue around purpose and meaning so that all organisation members feel comfortable to surface themselves and to participate and co-create meaning.

Challenge: Silence factory

I noticed that this dialoguing practice was less present at the Women's Empowerment Project. For example, a couple of experiences shared by participants who worked as volunteers felt like there was no point in engaging because they felt nothing would change.

Even when we are given a platform to speak, sometimes we don't speak because you know things won't change, so what's the point? (Field note, WEP - Observation)

Experiences such as this can reflect 'powerlessness' as organisation members feel a lack of agency and participation (Ashforth, 1989). And this powerlessness can create behavioural

patterns that affect organisational functioning in profound and disturbing ways (Batliwala, 2011) as organisation members feel helpless and become silent and disengaged from the organisation and their fellow organisation members. Wineman (2003:42) elucidates how systemic oppression is in itself traumatising rendering people powerless:

“To be a member of a disenfranchised race or ethnic group or gender or class or sexual orientation... is to be bombarded on a daily basis with messages that who you are as a person does not matter in the larger scheme of things; that you are not as good, not as smart, not as powerful, not as valid in the core of your being as the enfranchised others.”

There were examples of this powerlessness across all three organisations, especially reflected in experiences shared by those with less institutional power, a reminder that these experiences of powerlessness are not socially neutral ones. I noticed that when people feel their needs are not met, when they do not feel seen or heard within their organisational ecosystem, they tend to blame ‘the organisation’.

I have a mistrust of the organisation in general. It’s almost like there is the people in the organisation; and then there is the organisation as a beast on its own that f*cks you - almost like it’s out of the hands of even the management. Even the management can’t make stuff happen because ‘the organisation’ (Operations team member, WEP - Interview)

There is [the organisation], and then there is you. The organisation sits separately, it’s like its own being (Training and development team member 7, WEP - Interview)

However, across all three organisations there was a hyper awareness of the silent voices. It was at the Women’s Empowerment Project that one participant articulated the role that dialoging as a practice plays in is trying to understand why the silencing is happening, by asking ‘why?’:

We know that people are silent. Why? How does the organisation go to find out what is silencing people? What needs to be done to break the silence? It’s not something that is spoken about. We have to look at the different levels of silencing. It might take time, but we cannot keep on saying people are silent and just let it be. (Field note, WEP - Observation).

Dialoging around purpose and meaning can disrupt the deep structures (the hidden rules and norms) that shape organisational realities as these practices support organisation members to deliberately name and engage with power dynamics that affect their quality of connection with each other and with the organisation.

Conclusion to Practices Findings section

The three practices discussed in this section - surfacing subjective experience, communing as whole persons, and dialoguing around purpose and meaning - were key to the experiential nature of these three organisations:

- The practice of surfacing subjective experiences encouraged individuating through the surfacing the subjective experience recognising and celebrating the individuals that make up the organisational whole;
- The practice of communing strengthened the organisations connective tissue, recognising that as human beings organisation members find each other through the things they share (space and food), the things they believe, and the things they practice together;
- The practice of dialoguing around purpose and meaning deepened that connective tissue, recognising that as individuals they can differ and challenge each other bravely and safely, and collectively make sense of their world together.

These practices work to connect the organisations social purpose end goals to the experience of organisation members, enhancing the connection between members and their organisational purpose, towards experiential legitimacy.

In the next chapter I explore the specific capabilities that organisation members showed which encouraged their deeper participation and connection with others and the organisation's purpose - experiential agency.

4.2 Capabilities in the pursuit of shared social purpose goals

Below I explore the different capabilities that I noticed cultivated through (and in turn deepen) positive institutional work. In this context, I use the term *capability* to describe the inter-relational abilities developed as organisation members become more conscious and effective in the process of collective ongoing inquiry into their shared social purpose.

Importantly, capabilities in this study are understood as relational operating across levels of the organisation. While they are enacted through individual awareness and embodied action, their continuity depends on collective reinforcement through shared routines, language, and norms. For example, the capability of reflexivity may begin in a person's willingness to question taken-for-granted assumptions, but it becomes an organisational

capability when that questioning is encouraged, modelled, and held within group practice. This understanding aligns with feminist theories of agency that view individual and collective experience as co-constituted (McNay 2016; Ahmed 2017) and with institutional theory that recognises the recursive relationship between actors and structures (Lawrence et al. 2011; Nilsson 2015). Thus, capabilities are not static attributes possessed by individuals but emergent relational phenomena sustained through collective participation. They represent the connective tissue that allows experiential practices to be renewed and adapted within organisational contexts.

The following three capabilities (summerised in the table below) were common across all three organisations:

4.2.1 **Purposivity** as having the potential to express a conscious personal purpose/intention towards a shared social purpose;

4.2.2 **Reflexivity** as the reflexive potential for critical awareness and consciousness of all the different emotions, values, and beliefs framing institutional experiences (Nilsson, 2015);

4.2.3 **Creative will** as the innovative potential for the conscious creation of “new meaning, new loci of meaning, and new ways of being, together, in the world” (Marilyn Frye, 1992 in Ahmed, 2017:50).

TABLE 5: Summary of Capabilities

Capability definition	Evidence of capability	Challenge in practice
1) Purposivity <i>Capability to express a conscious personal purpose/intention towards a shared social purpose, ideally within a relational space where those expressions can be noticed, appreciated, and understood</i>	Individual level: Individual organisation members’ experience of finding their voice and expressing their personal purpose/intention towards a shared social purpose with others in authentic and genuine ways Organisational level: The organisational experience prioritises these expressions and experiences through making time and space for them to be noticed, appreciated, and understood	Personal struggles
2) Reflexivity <i>Capability to situate their needs and interests in relation to others and the organisation as a whole</i>	Individual level: Individual organisation members’ reflexive awareness of who they are and how they fit into the organisation Organisational level: The organisational experience supports individuals to develop critical self awareness through mirroring and dialoguing	Backpacks of Privilege

3) Creative will <i>Capability to create change by exploring new ideas, questions, and experiments while pursuing shared social purpose goals in a willful manner</i>	Individual level: Individual organisation member's experience of autonomy/creative freedom in relations to others and their work Organisational level: The organisational experience invites organisation members to explore new ideas and ask questions through failure and experimentation	Fear of freedom
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4.2.1 Purposivity

Definition: Capability to express and act with a conscious personal purpose/intention, ideally within a relational space where those expressions can be noticed, appreciated, and understood

The first capability that I observed across all three organisations was that of *purposivity*.

Across all three organisations, participants frequently connected their work to deeply personal stories. When asked why they had joined, many traced their commitment back to childhood experiences, family relationships, or formative moments of care and injustice that shaped how they understood their place in the world. During my early fieldwork at the Sustainability Hub, I noted how openly people shared these narratives and how often they located their motivation in intimate histories rather than professional ambitions. This reflective storytelling created spaces where personal identity and organisational purpose were held together—where members spoke of who they were and why their work mattered in the same breath. Such moments revealed a collective capacity for sensing and expressing purpose. Members not only articulated their own intentions but also listened for the intentions of others, allowing individual purpose to be recognised and connected to the collective. Across all three organisations, time was consciously made for these purposes to be noticed, appreciated, and understood—through check-ins, reflection sessions, and informal conversation.

From these patterns emerged what I call the **capability of purposivity**: an organisational capacity to cultivate awareness of personal and shared purpose as intertwined sources of meaning. This capability was fostered through practices of positive institutional work that encouraged people to align their personally fulfilling goals with broader commitments to social good. In Nilsson's (2015) terms, purposivity links the experiential and social dimensions of institutional life, grounding agency in both fulfilment and contribution.

As one participant at the Feminist Legal Clinic summarised, there was a general recognition

that, “Aspects of our personhood bleed into our organisational narratives, into our work...” (Finance team member, FLC - Interview). This metaphor of ‘bleed into’ is visceral: the intertwined embodied nature of who an organisation member is as a person and who they become in relationship with others as they pursue a shared purpose. It also reflects new institutional literature explorations of institutions as flesh (Gehman, 2021).

When speaking about who or what has shaped their sense of purpose, one of the legal organisation members reflected:

I guess, as much as your history shaped you, mine shaped me. **My parents were both teachers and they raised me to believe that we don’t exist alone in this society...** so I didn't see anything else in the sense that, we grow up and we help (Lawyer 7, FLC - Interview)

Moreover, across the organisations there was an *intergenerational element* as many members felt an ‘inherited’ sense of purpose. For example, one participant from the Feminist Legal Clinic shared how her mother showed her what it means to live a feminist life:

My mother, as far as I’m concerned, is the most extraordinary person who lives. She would probably not identify as a feminist, but she lives a feminist life. She’s a doctor and for the first 15 years of my life she worked in Sharpeville. She is very self-sufficient and strong. And she sets an amazing example for what a woman can do and what a woman can be. So I guess, although there was no feminist flag waving, it was just living by example... doing something that she loved and something she believed in. And she really did believe in it and she lived it... that is very real for me. (Paralegal, FLC - Interview)

I noticed that the individual ability to explore and express their purpose was nurtured through the different practices as each organisation member was encouraged to find and express their own voice. At the Women's Empowerment Project this was evident in many participant interviews, one member reflected on the welcoming practice: “You can’t not be changed by it [the counselling training]... *My voice has been a lot more confident having been part of this extraordinary organisation*” (Lawyer 4, FLC - Interview).

There were different examples across the case organisations of organisation members feeling like they have been supported to *find and express their voice* through their connection with others and with the organisation. This continuous invitation nurtured participation and connectedness, encouraging individuals to see themselves as essential parts of the ecosystem, therefore enhancing their own ability to enact change. This is

especially necessary when there are dynamics at play that may feel silencing or discourage people to share their voice.

Challenge: Personal struggles

There are challenges to finding one's voice and expressing oneself. Just as each organisation acknowledged the impact of historical inequality and injustice on their strategy and work, there was also a recognition that these histories impact the individuals and their sense of self. Across many of the interviews with the Sustainability Hub participants, the effect of personal and systemic challenges on the ability to participate in organisational life was mentioned:

I think it starts from school. You don't expect anything of yourself. You think you don't deserve anything. Organisation members were abused in the past and so they don't trust, they are always asking, 'what's your angle?' (Field note, SH - Observation)

These personal struggles and traumas have direct consequences for the individual and their sense of self and this affects their ability to work and connect with others and to the wider organisation. As one participant at the Feminist Legal Clinic highlighted:

In my opinion you can't separate the two: connection to self and connection to others. One has to fuel the others, you can't connect to others if you can't connect with yourself. For example, simple things like people feeling insecure, not feeling confident, it means you don't own your own story. (Finance team member, FLC - Interview)

The warning - "you can't connect to others if you can't connect with yourself" - was reiterated by one of my sense-making interviews when they said, "We come injured and I'm going to injure everyone I see unless I tend to that injury." (Feminist Academic, Sensemaking Interview 13). Personal trauma has consequences for the collective and for the work. Because of the trauma that individuals walk into the organisation with, one of my sense-making participants reiterated that there is a high potential for conflict and re-trauma (Organisational development practitioner, Sensemaking Interview 3). Across all three organisations there was a sense that organisation members' willingness to understand themselves and their personal traumas has a direct effect on their ability to do the work they want to do in the world. It is a mutually beneficial relationship as this participant from the Women's Empowerment Project explained,

There is a level of work you have to do yourself, the organisation can only do so much,

it's mutually beneficial. If the people inside the organisation aren't willing to transform, the organisational transformation will fall flat (Leadership team member, WEP - Interview)

Positive institutional work practices like surfacing invite each organisation member to take individual responsibility to grow their capability to understand and express their emotions, feelings and impressions. As one participant at the Sustainability Hub expressed, "*Your feeling is your healing*" (Field note, SH - Observation). However, importantly, positive institutional work practices encourage organisation members "to bring their privately held meanings into a shared space" (Shani & Coghlan, 2021) and in this shared space become less hidden.

In these organisations, trauma was not separate from the work, not something to be hidden or shunned, but rather part of their social purpose work and part of the care they showed for each other. This does not make this work easy or smooth, or always kind and loving, it is messy and can be hurtful, but it is necessary if there is to be congruence between organisational purpose and experience. These organisations do not take on the responsibility to heal all individual and collective trauma; however, organisation members' capability for their sense of self and others opens up space to collectively identify the individual and collective care needed.

Through positive institutional work organisation members develop the ability to express their purpose/intention through their individual voice, in a relational space where these expressions are noticed, appreciated and understood, which in turn creates more spaces for expressive, purposeful organisation members within an organisation; which in turn creates spaces for more purposeful organisational collectives.

4.2.2 Reflexivity

Definition: Capability to situate (contextualise) their needs and interests in relation to others and the organisation as a whole

The second capability that I observed across all three organisations was that of *reflexivity*.

Across all three organisations, participants spoke about moments of self-questioning and awareness that deepened their understanding of themselves in relation to others. These moments often arose through everyday encounters — feedback from a colleague, reflective discussions, or counselling sessions — that invited members to pause and notice their own

emotions, reactions, and motives. At the Sustainability Hub, one participant described how this ongoing process shaped her engagement with the organisation:

“The personal journey is an outlet... I can reflect on my personal growth and where I stand in all of this, and what were some of the contentious issues for me, reflecting very much, not just the theory, but where I stand and how I feel in relation to different issues.” (Support team member, SH - Interview 6)

Similarly, a participant at the Women’s Empowerment Project explained:

“Personal growth doesn’t end after the training. It’s for as long as you are at the organisation. I wish this for everyone. It teaches me to continuously reflect on myself, to check in with myself — am I okay? Why am I making these decisions? Is it to please other people or am I making it for me?” (Counselling team member, WEP - Interview 3)

These accounts reveal how participants came to see themselves not as isolated actors but as affective beings situated in relation to others. Feelings of connection, care, and engagement coexisted with those often excluded from organisational life — grief, mistrust, frustration, even anger. These practices provided the relational conditions for such reflection, helping members surface and work with this full spectrum of emotion.

From these observations emerged the **capability of reflexivity** — the ability to locate oneself affectively and ethically within one’s organisational and social relations. Reflexivity here involves an awareness of one’s motives and narratives as they interact with others’ experiences. This understanding resonates with Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998:968) view of agency as temporally embedded and relational, and with feminist scholars such as Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), who link reflexivity to recognising one’s positionality within power-laden contexts. The practices thus cultivate a *reflexive self* — one attuned to how emotions and histories shape organisational life and how awareness itself becomes a form of agency.

Through these practices, organisation members begin to engage differently, disrupting ‘usual’ patterns of power and privilege from a point of relationship. As such reflexivity invites critical awareness of self (power and privilege) that does not weaponise power but opens up space for dialogue and engagement.

Challenge in practice: Backpacks of privilege

In both Women’s Empowerment Project and the Feminist Legal Clinic, where the staff are all

women and most are women of colour, there were examples of self-awareness by white minority organisation members of their identities and their institutional power and privilege:

I felt very aware of my own privilege as a white woman... I asked myself: **'How do I want to be in the world for the rest of my life?'** (Advocacy team member, WEP - Interview 4)

[As an educated white woman] I probably come across as thinking I have more power than I really do believe I have, but I think that comes with the privilege of privilege. I don't really mean to be, but it does exist and **I have to check myself around that sometimes** (Paralegal, FLC - Interview 3)

The above examples illustrate the organisation members' critical awareness of their complex identities as white privileged women living in a patriarchal, racist world, and how these identities affect others within the organisational collective, in this case, organisations that are majority women of colour. These examples exemplified the self-awareness that organisation members have of their own inherited power and privilege, but also how this affects others and the broader organisation they are working in. As one of the Directors highlighted, "We have an extreme legacy, people are walking with massive invisible backpacks of privilege" (Field note, SH - Observation). As organisation members develop a critical self-awareness of those inheritances and how they privilege some and silence others, they are then able to move with more consciousness and empathy.

The organisation members in these organisations surface, name and reflect on their multiple identities (and the power dynamics that underpin them), but they are not necessarily bound by them. There is a recognition that history and positionality are inextricably linked to how organisation members experience each other, making reflexivity a necessary part of the work to grapple with power and support organisation members to cultivate their awareness of self in relation to others. Positive institutional work opens up space for dialogue and inquiry in relationship with others, and through this organisation members build their self-awareness.

The practice of nurturing connections through courageous interactions with others acts as a stimulant for reflexivity.

So, I feel like I've learnt more here in the three years than I did in 15 years [at the previous organisation], particularly around race stuff. **We have the big conversations.** I mean, as you may have noticed, I'm the only white woman here and I feel very

privileged around that... **We've worked together and we've become connected in a way that I hadn't before...** I'm, actually, amazed and I often think about it...

(Paralegal, FLC - Interview 3)

The evidence showed that through these practices, organisation members are able to see themselves more clearly through the eyes of the collective. As this one participant reflected, "So I'm not really good at looking at myself, I need to hear what other people say, because sometimes I miss things about myself" (Project Coordinator, SH - Interview 7). Thus, the *collective becomes a mirror*, recognising the limitations of self; that agency is necessarily relational if it aims to create more critically conscious effective social beings. This relational aspect recognises that individuals can't do this work alone.

Therefore, through these practices organisation members develop a critical self-awareness as they become more reflexive, purposeful participants in their organisational worlds; which in turn creates spaces for more reflexive purposeful organisational collectives. In summary, the key question that reflected this individual situating of self reflects each organisation members' awareness of who they are and what their purpose is and within the collective, their organisational awareness of who they are and what their collective purpose is.

4.2.3 Creative Will

Definition: Capability to create change by exploring new ideas, questions, and experiments while pursuing shared social purpose goals in an embodied manner

The third capability that I observed across all three organisations was that of **creative will**.

Across all three organisations, participants described an active sense of responsibility for change—an awareness that transformation begins with the self before extending outward.

As one member put it:

"Change starts with me, as an individual person. If I cannot be the change in my own family, how am I going to be that person in my work every day? We are telling people to shift their mindsets, but this is MY community. We need to be those people first, we need to be those people at home." (Counselling team member, WEP - Interview 3)

This emphasis on inner work reflected a belief that institutional change depends on personal integrity. At the Feminist Legal Clinic, another participant used the example of wearing a headscarf to illustrate how agency begins internally:

For example, if I'm a Muslim woman I'm supposed to dress in a certain way. [The organisation] will say, 'If that's what she wants to wear, it stays here.' [points to head]* It starts here [points to heart]* before we can go out there into the community [points across the room].'* (Field note, FLC - Dialogue)

This participant has a strong sense of *locus of control* - the extent to which she feels internally in control of the events that influence her life (Adeyemi-Bello, 2001) - a sense of power over her life, her decisions, her actions. This is fundamental to her level of connectedness to others and to the organisation. The deeper the perceived locus of control, the deeper the openness for engagement with others in the organisation and their shared work. As another member reflected:

"We have so many things happening [in the organisation]. Something came my way and I'm dealing with it now, even though I didn't know I was five minutes before. I didn't know how I was going to deal with this, you know... But I don't feel powerless, because I feel like I can." (Support team member, SH - Interview 2)

Across sites, this confidence in self-directed action coexisted with collective accountability, shaping how members navigated uncertainty together. From these accounts emerged the **capability of creative will**—the felt capacity to act purposefully and imaginatively within constraint. This capability embodies what McNay (2016:39) describes as "the ability to have a transformatory effect or impact on one's world." Here, will is not imposed but cultivated through reflection, care, and practice. Empowerment is not granted by others but generated in and through the self (but importantly with others).

As this participant from the Sustainability Hub said,

I'm not here to talk nice words. I must do what I preach... It's in my blood. I don't want to just talk. I don't want a lot of meetings. **I want to pull up my sleeves and do the work** (Community team member, SH - Interview 8)

Across all three organisations, I got the sense that organisation members had this strong locus of control. Many participants shared examples of this:

I discovered I don't need someone to stand behind me... **Now I can spread my wings** (Field note, SH - Dialogue)

The organisation **gives me the power to solve situations on my own** (Field note, SH - Dialogue)

Moreover, this feeling of agency was most clear when I asked participants to tell me about

when they felt most connected to the organisation and they shared experiences of creativity and freedom in their work. For a participant at the Feminist Legal Clinic they arrived to start a new project with a clean slate: “I really like going where there are no rules, where there’s no-one else there... So it was nice coming and there was nothing. *It was a space I had to create.*” (Paralegal, FLC - Interview 3). Whereas, another participant shared the same sense of agency but they joined a more established project, that the space to create was still felt: “We have our deadlines, but *you have freedom.* It’s never forced or tight. It’s a vibe.” (Field note, SH - Dialogue). This feeling of agency was beautifully articulated as “... *somewhere I could feel I was shaping something*, not just doing the work, but that I was living the work.” (Field note, FLC - Dialogue). This freedom to create manifested in the ways people spoke about trying new things and exploring new ideas manifests in different ways. As a participant at the Sustainability Hub said, “We have a space *to be creative; for freedom, for love.*” (Field note, SH - Dialogue). There was an invitation for ‘wild ideas’, where a participant from the Feminist Legal Clinic described how they are encouraged to join different spaces and share ideas, even if not in their work purview.

Moreover, participants at the Sustainability Hub and at the Feminist Legal Clinic exemplified a different relationship with failure, where organisation members felt comfortable to give it a go even if it doesn’t work out.

We use the ‘if not, why not?’ mantra.... It is amazing because it also builds your confidence, because people believe in you. To say: ‘Yes, take the lead. Yes, do it. Give it a go and even if it doesn’t work out, at least you tried, rather than not trying at all’... You may be an expert in this, and you may be hired for that, but if you see that there is a need somewhere and you have the capability and interest to support that, why not? I found this very freeing (Project Coordinator, SH - Interview 7)

Participants shared different examples of how permission to fail was necessary for building confidence and getting things done.

I think getting things wrong is, actually, a very good way to do things. Um [laughter], we don’t admit, too often, when we are wrong. But we should. It’s more useful to be wrong than it was being right (Lawyer, FLC - Interview 8)

“Getting things wrong” is seen as a way to explore, grow and learn. There was a sense of being supported by the organisation to fail, to learn, to make mistakes.

We have the freedom to explore and take time, there is no one who will hold you back... I find this very free-ing. In a lot of places people are not encouraged to fail. **But**

the learning is through the journey, through the failure (Field note, SH - Observation)

Creative will as a capability was reflected in organisation members willingness and openness to explore, to discover, to fail, to learn and to grow.

The learning is through the journey, and you know, 'If you fail, we ask what are the learnings that have come out of that?' (Field note, SH - Observation)

This sense of agency is not developed in isolation nor is it only supported at a leadership level, rather it happens in relation with others and it is supported by other organisation members in an experiential manner. For example, this participant at the Sustainability Hub highlighted how check in practices with their supervisor, who asks 'are you still enjoying your work?', invited them to check on the work and check on how they feel, which supported their creative will by identifying possible (individual and team) struggles and helping them navigate them:

I feel well supported. I mean, I had check-ins with [supervisor] every week and they were always making sure, like checking in with the work, but also checking in with how you feel. **Are you still enjoying it? I think that is a very important question.** They always ask this question, 'Are you still enjoying your work?'... Uh, what sort of question is that? [laughter] Because I think a lot of the time, if you say no, then you think you might get fired. That is not the purpose of that. It's just to see that you're fine, that you're not overwhelmed and if you're struggling, how can we help?... it helps you identify where the problems may arise and how to address them, personally but also as a team (Project Coordinator, SH - Interview 7)

There is no one size fits all; it depends on the members, their personal backgrounds and bodies (embodied), their collective historical context (situated), and the present context in which the organisation is rooted and in which they are relating (relational).

Challenge in practice: Fear of freedom

Creative will requires individual organisation members to see themselves as active participants in their organisational life. It means each person shows up to engage fully with each other and the work, in turn building the capability of the whole system to act. But as one participant at the Feminist Legal Clinic reflected:

I've definitely seen with organisations that there are some people who just want to be told when to punch in and punch out. They want to be told exactly what their job consists of. **This kind of freedom would freak them out** (Lawyer, FLC - Interview 8)

This punch-in-punch-out approach has the opposite effect to nurturing free creative self-solving organisation members. “People don’t want to spend their energy for the organisation, it’s ‘just a job’, not for the common good. It’s a very individualised way of thinking” (Field note, SH - Observation). Instead creative will saw organisational members grasping the freedom to create and question and experiment, spending their energy towards a shared purpose. They are no longer apathetic participants in an exploitative system, instead they become active participants in creating the kinds of organisations and worlds they want to live in.

Conclusion of Capabilities Finding Section

The three capabilities discussed in this section - purposivity, reflexivity and creative will - are key to the experiential nature of the three case organisations. They are developed through organisation members engaging in practices as they connect with each other and the organisation's purpose, making them more effective and conscious participants in organisational life. Recognising the multilevel relational quality of capability clarifies how experiential legitimacy depends on both individual consciousness and the shared conditions that nurture it, bridging the micro and institutional levels of analysis.

In the next section of this chapter, I explore what I observed are the broader implications of positive institutional work practices and these agentic capabilities on experiential legitimacy in social purpose organisations.

4.3 Challenging NGOization through relational ways of working

The participants experienced how the macro level NGO field shaped and constrained everyday organisational life. The inherited legacies and power patterns embedded in South Africa’s NGO landscape filtered into each organisation’s structure and daily experience. Across all three organisations, participants described how the pressures of NGOization were felt in daily routines and relationships. Formalisation, donor reporting, and professional hierarchies were experienced as both necessary and constraining parts of organisational life. A leader at the Women’s Empowerment Project reflected:

When the organisation registered in terms of Non-Profit Organisations Act, we couldn’t be just a bunch of people volunteering meeting on a park bench anymore. [The organisation] had to become a structure, with a director, and staff. **With NGOization and donor requirements spawned the need for bureaucratisation and**

standardisation of certain skills sets, background, qualifications (Operations team member, WEP - Interview 1)

In sense-making conversations and interviews, participants described three key features of the NGOization logic that affected their experience and organisational practice:

1. the prioritisation of professionalisation,
2. the centralisation of power and managerial dominance, and
3. the standardisation of practice.

Each organisation also developed its own ways of responding to or challenging these features through embodied, relational practice.

TABLE 6: Summary of Challenging of NGOization

Features of NGOization	Examples of Challenging NGOization
Prioritisation of professionalisation <i>Instrumentalising individuals into specific roles and routines</i>	Disrupting Professional Hierarchies [e.g. challenging hiring processes] Moving beyond the constraints of professional expertise [e.g. teach ins]
Centralisation of power and managerial dominance <i>Instrumentalising processes and structures</i>	Revealing Hidden Hierarchies [e.g. surfacing taken-for-granted norms of class, language, and geography that shape power] Redistributing Knowledge [e.g. budget sharing]
Standardisation of practice <i>Instrumentalising organisational life through fixed practices</i>	Moving from rigid predictable practice to emergent practice [e.g. negotiating structure in the development of job descriptions] Moving from fast solutions to small and slow relational practice [e.g. slow work in a busy world]
Prioritising symbolic legitimacy <i>Instrumentalising the meaning of what it means to be in organisation</i>	Care work as institutional work - foregrounding people and relationships as the foundation of purpose [e.g. “putting people first”] Relational belonging – cultivating family-like connections that hold complexity and difference [e.g. “family vibe,” “holding space”] Interconnectedness – deepening and widening the social field to include communities and marginal voices beyond organisational boundaries

4.3.1. Prioritisation of *professionalisation*

People think the donor requirements come first. They become so involved in doing the

work that the social justice aspect starts getting lost... It feels like we are saying 'no, we can't pay attention to this person's development or needs because I need someone with more skill.' **With formalisation you start marginalising people** (Advocacy team member, WEP - Interview)

Example 1: Disrupting Professional Hierarchies

Across all three case studies, participants reflected on the impact of professionalisation on their organisational practice, which elevated certain roles and types of professional expertise. This was well illustrated when two participants from the Women's Empowerment Project mentioned that certain organisation positions, funded by the governmental Department of Social Development, were strictly reserved for social workers with formal qualifications. These requirements excluded the majority of the councillors within the organisation who started out as volunteers and did not have the required formal education experience. For them, the bounded nature of the requirements for those roles, reserved for those with specific professional qualifications, reinforced tacit knowledge about what kind of expertise is valued in the organisation. As an organisation committed to women's empowerment struggles, organisation members at the Women's Empowerment Project felt the effect of professionalisation as it affected whose expertise is considered legitimate in the organisation - specifically those with formal qualifications - and less legitimate - those with different and diverse life experience. This affects how different work and roles are experienced and valued within the organisation; where volunteer councillors feel excluded, disempowered and less 'important' within the organisation compared to how those with formal education are considered.

One leader actively challenged this dynamic by encouraging internal applicants who lacked formal qualifications:

I never had a master! I came here as myself. My life is my diploma! (Field note, WEP - Dialogue).

She explained that formal qualifications should not eclipse experiential knowledge, arguing that "different people have different strengths" (Counselling team member, WEP - Interview 3). This orientation shaped a hiring practice that prioritised lived experience and community connection. However, externally imposed criteria from the Department of Social Development created ongoing tension with this internal practice. These tensions prompted ongoing reflection within the organisation about how to define expertise and whose voices matter.

Example 2: Moving beyond the constraints of professional expertise

Sustainability Hub illustrated the ways that the organisation is a space where everyone gets to bring more of themselves moving beyond constraints of professional expertise through staff teach-ins. There were a couple examples where staff members were invited to share their passions, interests and expertise outside of their job description, which were welcomed and celebrated by the collective:

What we've also been trying to do is encourage staff to lead a session on something they feel comfortable with... For example, [one of our staff members] who works in the garden, he is a Rastafarian and we asked him to share more about his beliefs... It was very interesting and we all learnt a lot from it. So I think it builds confidence and just to know that 'it's okay and what you say is valid, and yes, you can do it, no matter how you do it (Support team member, SH - Interview 4)

I think if, you know, just maintaining the view of people as individuals. That if they are passionate or interested in something, like sewing, then giving them an outlet to incorporate that. So instead of leading cleaning, they can lead a knitting circle, you know (Support team member, SH - Interview 6)

The two examples above show the way that there are conscious efforts to encourage staff from historically disadvantaged backgrounds and outside the usual academic professional positions to find their voice and share their experiences. Experimenting with who is an expert and who has important knowledge to share seeds new ideas of agency in organisation members. Through the practice of positive institutional work, organisation members are afforded the opportunity to contribute "the way I know how" and to see themselves as unique contributors to the organisation's purpose. A participant at the Sustainability Hub reflected:

You have a feeling you are contributing. In other places decisions are made behind closed doors but here everyone is considered. The person from the garden who says something, they have a platform, and it can be implemented (Field note, SH - Dialogue)

As one participant put it: "I'm able to assist and show up in a different way that counts, and that's priceless." (Support team member, SH - Interview 5). I remember the same participant who works in the finance department saying, "I would like to think that as much as I am an accounting person, that there is more that I can offer" (Support team member, SH - Interview 5). There is a sense of purpose outside of a particular job or role with this continuous invitation that nurtures participation and connectedness. These experiences

show a flexible approach to organisational roles and routines that are usually strictly defined by standardised roles within an NGOization context .

Furthermore, by engaging with each other's diverse experiences and perspectives, there is a feeling that “people give freely of themselves”. This resists the traditional NGOization assumption whereby expertise and experience are seen as resources traded for a salary in a work setting. One of the participants at the Sustainability Hub spoke about their previous place of employment saying: “I don’t mean to bash them but they’re not people centric, they very much *use people as resources* and that became very apparent” (Project Coordinator, SH - Interview 3).

By valuing engagement over professionalisation, the organisation enacted a relational approach to expertise, grounded in contribution, care, and recognition.

4.3.2 Centralisation of power

The second feature of NGOization that participants reflected on was the *centralisation of power and managerial dominance* —where particular roles, routines, and structures are seen as legitimate, reinforcing managerial dominance and reproducing broader hierarchies of power (SM 1).

Example 3: Revealing Hidden Hierarchies at the Women’s Empowerment Project

Participants at the Women’s Empowerment Project described how some organisational norms—rooted in colonial and Apartheid-era spatial and class divisions and more recent NGOization—shape what was seen as “normal” practice:

The geographical location of [the organisation’s] offices is still from the old apartheid kind of system. The Khayelitsha office is far from headquarters and Observatory, previously known as Headquarters, is based in a [previously designated by the Apartheid government for only] ‘white’ community (Operations team member, WEP - Interview 1)

Working class women are forced to take public transport [across the city]. Or the kind of food [we order for meetings]. The language we speak. Every tiny little thing. The point of reference is white-middleclass-feminist, it is not intersectional (Advocacy team member, WEP - Interview 4)

These reflections revealed how power (particularly managerial power as majority of the managers were white middle class women) becomes embedded in geography, language, and routine. The “centre” of the organisation, both spatially and symbolically, remains

aligned with white, middle-class feminist norms. Meetings are held at the “Headquarters” far from where many working-class members live; they start at 9am, disregarding the realities of long commutes on public transport; and they are conducted in English, even though most staff speak Xhosa or Afrikaans.

One participant recognised this as a continuation of historical inequality where “the apartheid disadvantage plays out in the organisation showing our country’s history within the organisation” (Field note, WEP - Dialogue). Another observed:

[The organisation] feels like a microcosm of our country... you expect somehow people will live in harmony but it can never be... if you have this level of inequality [in the country and in the organisation] (Operations team member, WEP - Interview).

These examples show how everyday organisational practices can quietly reproduce structural inequities. Hidden rules about what counts as “professional”—language, location, catering, time—reveal how NGOization reinforces social distance between leadership and staff. Yet, by naming and questioning these practices, participants began to surface and unsettle these inherited hierarchies.

Example 4: Redistributing Knowledge at the Feminist Legal Clinic

One participant at the Feminist Legal Clinic reflected on their experience with the previous director who hoarded information, leaving those in the organisation feeling powerless: “When she left, that’s when we realised we did not know anything, because she used to do everything herself... she was the only one that knew what was going on” (Paralegal, FLC - Interview 5). This hoarding of knowledge mirrored broader NGO patterns of managerial control, where authority is maintained through restricted access to information. The arrival of a new director marked a deliberate shift toward transparency:

[The Director] she’s got that, everything is transparent. We know we got this much from this fund, we’ve got this from that fund... everything we know. It wasn’t like that in the past (Paralegal, FLC - Interview 5).

Budget sharing became an intentional redistribution of power through shared understanding. Through sharing information and being transparent about funding resources, there was a recognisable institutional shift from the hoarding of resources with the previous director to the sharing of resources. As a result, organisation members felt more connected to the organisation and its purpose, as well as to others in the organisation, as they were

able to see the bigger picture of where resources were going and why.

We discuss the budget collectively. So that it doesn't feel like only one person - ie the director - is holding everything. **If it's important to the organisation, it's important that you know it** (Field note, FLC - Dialogue)

Through this process, staff members not only gained information but also a stronger sense of belonging and investment in the organisation's direction. Transparency thus operated as a relational practice, strengthening trust and accountability.

This example illustrates how shifting from managerial dominance to collective sense-making expands the field of agency. Power becomes a shared responsibility rather than a protected domain. In this way, the Feminist Legal Clinic disrupted a key feature of NGOization: the belief that efficiency and control depend on hierarchy.

4.3.3. Standardisation of practice

The third characteristic of NGOization raised by participants was the pressure toward *standardisation* of practice: codifying roles, processes, and outcomes to ensure uniformity and predictability. Participants reflected on how these pressures can undermine relational work, constrain creativity, and reduce organisations to measurable outputs.

Example 5: Negotiating structure at the Sustainability Hub

At the Sustainability Hub, a participant in the support team described a process underway to introduce generic job descriptions for programme coordinators:

It's the first time we are having generic descriptions including all the tasks they are expected to perform... We're trying to structure and put these things into place. Initially it wasn't made clear from the beginning that 'This is the role of the programme co-ordinator. These are your roles and responsibilities. This is, actually, what we expect of you.' (Support team member, SH - Interview 6)

When I asked why the organisation was doing this, the participant explained that it was to provide support and guidance to organisation members in what they describe as a "chaotic system". They had been reading books about organisational management and Human Resources where job descriptions and job title standardisation were framed as essential for clarity and guidance. This was in contrast to experiences shared by organisation members (including this particular participant) who were given freedom to explore and define, in collaboration with others, their role, how they wanted to be, and how they wanted to

contribute when they first arrived at the organisation.

When I asked why the support team had a desire to formalise job descriptions, this participant explained that,

I have a theory and I think that we've been so extremely hands off that we haven't maybe supported enough. Because of our hands-off approach we're not really passing on skills or training on how to really deal with teams and conflict resolution... for some of them, we feel there is a lot of training and guidance and skills that need to be passed on for them to be able to really perform those tasks... I mean, it's something we are figuring out as we go along...

When I asked how the programme coordinators felt about this new approach:

We haven't had that conversation yet. The next step is for us to call them into a room together and lay that out and say 'If you're at programme co-ordinator level, these are the kinds of roles and responsibilities you have and where do you feel you need more help and training and guidance? How can we help you get there?

When I asked about how people might feel about this approach:

I don't know. I don't know. I think that is also part of the flip side of being such a fluid organisation. We are trying to structure and put these things into place, but it wasn't clear maybe from the beginning, and now, after years of being in the job, we're kind of saying 'Okay. Well. This is the level you should be at' (Support team member, SH - Interview 6)

Her reflections reveal the tension between structure and emergence—a tension common to many purpose-driven organisations. On one hand, standardisation can bring clarity; on the other, it risks re-inscribing hierarchical control. This shifts the question from *whether* to standardise, to *how* it gets done and *by whom*. If standardisation is approached as collective sense-making, it can strengthen shared purpose. If imposed unilaterally, it can stifle agency and relational learning. As I observed in this case, the danger lies in what one participant called “the form trap”—the moment when structure replaces relationship as the organising principle.

Avoiding the Form Trap

Job descriptions, as Waller and Wren (2021) note, were historically designed to maximise efficiency and control in industrial settings. When NGOs adopt these templates without reflection, they risk reproducing the same extractive logics they seek to resist. At the

Sustainability Hub, participants were alert to the risk of overemphasising efficiency and control to the detriment of relationships and engagement. The move toward generic descriptions could be read as an attempt to professionalise, but also as a moment to reflect collectively on *why* and *how* form is used.

You can't make it too routine and too structured. You know, those types of engagements need to flow naturally and organically... There needs to be that flexibility of allowing space for that to emerge (Support team member, SH - Interview 6).

If you institutionalise it, it feels like you have to do something. But this [practice] was the institution acknowledging you without it feeling forced (Field note, SH - Dialogue).

Here, participants identified an important paradox: practices that are repeated too rigidly lose their vitality. The “magic” lies in their organic, relational nature. Thus, institutional life depends less on maintaining the same form than on continually renewing connection through shared intention.

We talk about practices as living. Therefore they need to evolve over time. It is not about foregrounding the form but rather foregrounding the intention. The practice then needs to evolve, mutate. It should be lightly held and our work is to attend the practice (Organisational development practitioner, Sensemaking Interview 3).

Across all three case organisations, I observed this orientation toward *living practices*: home-grown, embodied routines that evolve with context and people rather than following fixed templates. One participant at the Women's Empowerment Project expressed it memorably:

Every organisation needs to find their own purple table. It's the place where you build relationships (Counselling team member, WEP - Interview 3).

These evolving forms of practice embody what I call *experiential legitimacy*—organisational authenticity grounded in felt experience rather than formal compliance.

Practising with Intention

When I asked participants when they felt most connected to the organisation, they often described the connection in sensory or affective terms:

What do you **feel a pulse** for? (Field note, WEP - Dialogue).

It's an impulse, not just something we say (Support team member, SH - Interview 5).

We asked ourselves, ‘How are we going to do this differently? **Where is our energy?**’
Field note, FLC - Dialogue).

This focus on energy, pulse, and intuition challenges NGOized notions of performance based on measurable outputs. Here, practice is understood as lived, embodied, and relational, articulated in different ways in each organisation. When the “feeling” of connection is lost, the organisation revisits the practice to restore vitality.

It’s the things that really do happen organically, that’s where you feel most connected, because you feel the fabric... You’re not just saying that it’s happening... you are practising it (Support team member, SH - Interview 6).

This orientation requires ongoing attentiveness. As one sense-making participant explained:

We ask newcomers to share their experience [of our check-in practice] with the organisation. The old timers become habituated, and this can lower their expectations. So we invite this questioning, before someone has become inculcated...

They continued:

We should ask people who occupy the margins how they experience these rituals. Do they feel welcomed or excluded? Are the internal practices a place where they can make home? Ask them what they can bring to enlarge these practices for their own sense of belonging. So they know, ‘I can shape this place’ (Organisational development practitioner, Sensemaking Interview 3).

These reflections suggest that sustaining vitality requires both inclusion and inquiry—an openness to being reshaped by those who arrive. As such, experiential legitimacy required actively engaging with organisation members to shape the space/place they collectively occupy, with their multiple voices, their diverse identities, their contradicting ideas through collective meaning-making.

Experiential Evaluation of Organisational Life

A lawyer at the Feminist Legal Clinic shared a good example of how it might be possible to evaluate the experience of what it means to be in organisation in this experiential way:

I was thinking what if you would go so far as to say [any organisation] is transformative on paper. The majority of staff are black, the people sitting on Executive and at management level are black. And so, when someone comes along and says, ‘But then what’s the problem?’ You have to ask yourself, why is there such a high turnover rate in the organisation? It’s the fact that there is no support for those black staff members. **You have to ask: how do they feel about knowledge sharing?; how do**

they feel about succession?; do you feel you have a place here?; do you feel taken care of? And the answer would be different (Training and development team member 7, WEP - Interview 7)

This reflection reframes “impact” through an experiential lens. Instead of counting outputs, it asks whether members feel recognised, supported, and able to belong. Two participants at the Sustainability Hub reflected on this, the one emphasised how the “copy and paste thing doesn’t work” (Support team member, SH - Interview 6) and the other that “it’s an individualized journey that you have to walk with everyone... there is no one-size-fits-all approach” (Project Coordinator, SH - Interview 3).

These insights challenge NGOization’s efficiency-driven definitions of success. Relational depth and collective meaning-making become alternative measures of impact.

Example 6: Slow work in a Busy world

Across the organisations, time emerged as both a constraint and a form of care. One participant at the Sustainability Hub described the pace of NGO work:

I think days can get crazy. So, days are made up with problem solving last minute requests. So there’s a lot of things that fill your day that don’t really allow for thinking time and planning time... I think it’s a trap of making decisions too quickly, reacting to a problem and not sitting with it. It’s a lot of reaction, rather than being proactive about things (Support team member, SH - Interview 4)

Busyness—driven by donor deadlines and reporting requirements—often displaced reflection and relationship-building. As one participant put it: “It’s literally that thing of where do we get the time?!?” ((Support team member, SH - Interview 4)).

A sense-making participant explained the stakes clearly:

To be able to do this work, to stay attentive to relationships, and what’s implicit—it is demanding. It can’t happen by-the-by. Even when it is embraced, it is so easy for it to be wedged out, because the outside/external work is urgent... It is highly likely that the external demands and environment squeeze out the time for reflection and internal work. Business just drowns it out... if people want to do this work the space must be carved out, it must be sacred to the organisation, and it must be fiercely protected (Organisational development practitioner, sensemaking interview 3).

At the Sustainability Hub, this commitment to slow, attentive work was described as:

Small and slow solutions, drawn from observations, inclusivity and resources in the

soil (Field note, SH - Dialogue)

By slowing down and attending to relationships, the organisations cultivated resilience—what one participant described as “responding to shocks as part of the rhythm.” When individuals surfaced personal challenges such as grief or trauma, the collective paused and adapted, strengthening rather than straining their shared fabric. Through these practices, the organisations redefined productivity. Time spent attending to relationships became integral to the work itself, not ancillary to it. This capacity to slow down and “hold” internal life challenges the instrumentalising logics of NGOization and reclaims the organisation as a living, caring system.

In the field, it was evident that the NGOization has shaped the instrumentalising of organisations and their practices, processes and structures. Through positive institutional work, my case organisations provided evidence of disrupting this meaning by approaching practices as living, slowing down to make space and time for relationships and collective meaning-making. As a result, organisation members felt more connected to each other and their organisation’s purpose. Moreover, there is an increased sense of agency with more purposivity, creative will and reflexivity.

4.3.4 Challenging what it means to be in organisation

My final finding I observed across my fieldwork was that these organisations experimenting with questions of coherence to purpose were not only resisting NGOization—they were reimagining what it means to *be in organisation*. Their practices re-centred care, connection, and mutual recognition as organising principles.

In a sense-making reflection, a leader of an international NGO articulated this shift:

Over the years, for me as a leader, building a thriving organisation just means **the best thing you can do is support and care for your team...** What I learnt was how vision and strategy is a collective effort. And that if you are a leader, **you really just need to say it's almost care over mission.** And that's a scary thing to articulate. You can be very intellectual and say, ‘Well, aren't you only here because of the mission?’ **But I think if the care is not there, then you would achieve your mission at a huge cost to the people that are doing the fighting.** In other words, you haven't achieved things in the right way. There are people who may really disagree with me and say it doesn't matter if it comes at a cost and we achieve human rights changes, then it's okay. But I just feel that's wrong, and it harms the movement. It doesn't help the movement (Leader, Sensemaking Interview - 7)

This reflection encapsulates a central finding across all three case studies: care was not peripheral to purpose—it was the purpose.

Islands of Sanity and the Practice of Care

At the Sustainability Hub, one participant offered a vivid metaphor for how members across the organisations experienced their collective work. They described feeling as though their organisation were “*an island*” in the wider world:

“We feel like we can take on the world when we are here, but when we go back to reality, it’s so difficult, because we don’t have the support structure. We are not surrounded by people that think the same way. So, in that sense, we sometimes see ourselves as an island in this bigger crazy world. I mean it’s difficult. How do you translate what you learn here and take it with you? You have to surround yourself with people that can keep supporting you.” (Support team member, SH - Interview 4)

This image captured a tension that surfaced repeatedly across all three organisations: the experience of solidarity and coherence within, contrasted with dissonance and fatigue in external systems. Members described their workplaces as temporary refuges where care, reflection, and shared purpose could still be practiced — fragile yet vital spaces amid broader institutional pressures.

Wheatley (2012, 2017) describes such bounded spaces as “*islands of sanity*”—communities of practice that sustain moral courage and collective coherence as “the dark ocean... continues to storm around us” (2012:36). The participants’ metaphor resonates closely with this image. Each organisation, in its own way, functioned as an island of sanity: a small, purposeful ground where members sought to live out the values they hoped to extend into the world. Participants described their spaces as places of care:

[The organisation] is caring for things: for people, for plants and for the earth (Field note, SH - Dialogue).

We are all about people, we forget this; we are all social beings... For me, it’s fundamentals about how you treat people, which is often overlooked for some reason (Communications team member, FLC - Interview 1).

The experience of care was palpable. It was enacted through everyday gestures, rhythms, and relationships that made members feel held and seen.

Belonging and Relational Practice

In all three organisations, organisation members likened their experience to that of family:

It's hard to explain. When you see it... when you experience it... when people walk through the gates.... Everybody crisscrosses... **It's a family vibe** (Field note, SH - Dialogue)

In corporate you're just a number. You just have to push for deadlines. **Here, it's more like family. People care for each other** (Paralegal, FLC - Interview 5)

We are sisters in this space... In the office you can often hear laughter and lots of talking. People get irritated with each other, they question each other... You have your right to say and you know people will listen to your voice. (Field note, WEP - Dialogue)

When you arrive at the organisation, they would say, '**Welcome to the family.**' I can imagine what it's like to have lots of sisters. You share clothes, there are fights - but they are productive fights - we have to fight, our opinions differ and we challenge each other. Weirdly enough they make us grow closer. You get to learn from the other person, you respect that person's opinions even more. The bonds get stronger. (Paralegal, FLC - Interview 3)

It's like any family. From the outside you are like, 'That family is crazy'. And then when you are in the family you are like, 'This is the best thing ever!'. That's how you build culture. It's practice. (Support team member, SH - Interview 6)

When describing the relationships in the organisation, organisation participants described expressing personal and professional sides of themselves with "laughter and lots of talking", and expressions of conflict, irritation and questioning. Their sense of being in relationship over time like a family, "bonds get stronger" and "growing closer" by being in organisation together, through practice. I remember one person saying to me, after the death of their husband, "*This organisation is a holding space*, ensuring everyone feels supported... a place where you can bring all of yourself." (Field note, FLC - Dialogue) This 'holding space' is an expression of a spirit of care that organisational members continuously expressed: a place where "people care for each other" (Field note, FLC - Dialogue). The idea of a 'holding space' resonated across all three organisations, the word 'holding' resonant with shouldering, carrying, supporting those within the organisation.

If you're only interested in a person's work, it feels like an extractive relationship, not like having a real genuine relationship... I just felt that in this space you bring all, all of you here. And more importantly, it's not just bringing all of you, it's knowing that people accept all of you, and **you're in a space that is holding you**, and respecting

you for who you are. (Project coordinator, SH - Interview 7)

[The organisation] is a safe space for me.... When I have personal things going on the organisation shows up for me and I do not feel not overlooked. **It is not an organisation where people just come to work.** (Field note, WEP - Dialogue)

The resonance of the organisation as “a space that is holding you” found evidence through the common close knit nature of the relationships; the relational ways in which members relate to each other and interact in caring ways that is unusual in most workplaces; the intentional shared space they curate through these practices towards a common social purpose.

People First – Relationships as Foundation

When I delved deeper into why organisation members’ felt they could show up in their organisations and engage with the organisation and each other in genuine and caring ways, there was a common thread of *putting people first*:

We focus on **people first** and because we focus on people first and not the task first there’s an **immediate relationship**... Not because there’s a need and you just provide some sort of system or structure. If there’s a breakthrough it’s because someone [at the organisation] **has a point of relationship with them.** (Project coordinator, SH - Interview 3)

Across all three organisations there was a focus on being “in relationship” and “building relationship” as a basis for their work.

I think it’s a cultural thing [when people think], ‘You are my boss [as my manager], I can’t go against what you say’. **We try to change that. I think that’s also why there is always such a big focus on building a relationship with someone.** So that they can see I’m just a normal person. (Support team member, SH - Interview 4)

You are building relationships with people, getting their perspective, sharing your own, getting corrected. Through that **strong relationship you can work together.** For example, you can take on a race issue, **not feeling offended or like it's an assault because you are in relationship.** (Advocacy team member, WEP - Interview 4)

This relational dynamic doesn’t happen automatically or quickly or easily as “it takes time to develop a relationship with someone, in order to talk and share frustrations.” (Paralegal, FLC - Interview 3). It was not limited to specific parts of the organisation but rather a characteristic of how most organisation members related to each other across the organisation. Participants spoke about being witnessed, seen, and understood by their

colleagues. They described moments when emotions were shared openly—whether joy, frustration, or exhaustion—and how these exchanges deepened their sense of connection and trust.

Through these practices, members created spaces where diverse and sometimes difficult experiences could be acknowledged rather than hidden. This willingness to engage with vulnerability allowed organisation members to name and respond to challenges such as burnout, trauma, or isolation, and to recognise how these affected both individual wellbeing and collective purpose. Several participants noted that making time for such reflection sometimes disrupted conventional rhythms of productivity. Meetings were paused, events rescheduled, or projects reconsidered in response to what emerged. Yet, rather than being seen as inefficiency, these pauses were understood as necessary to sustaining members and the organisation's vitality—one in which members acted more consciously and relationally in their daily work.

This orientation stands in contrast to the logic of NGOization, which tends to separate the personal from the professional, privileging hyper-individualism and relegating emotion to the private sphere (Waller & Wren, 2021). The organisations studied resisted this separation by embedding care within everyday practice, suggesting that practices of surfacing and communing and dialoging can be forms of institutional maintenance—a means of keeping purpose alive within relational life.

The organisation's social field is strengthened with a purposeful sense of acting in concert with others towards shared social purpose goals.

I think it is those moments where you feel like you are coming together as a community and you really feel connected to one another. You feel that what has been achieved has not been something that was due to your personal work that you contributed, but that **it was genuinely a team effort and without everybody and the organisation as a whole being there, it wouldn't have happened** (Support team member, SH - Interview 6)

Through experience of *interconnectedness* each organisation member feels valued for who they are and what they bring to the organisation. And in turn, the collective is strengthened through each individual's strengthening and expressing of self. As one participant at the Feminist Legal Clinic summarised "When I am appreciated for the value that I bring... I realise I step up to the plate much more readily in terms of what needs to be done and I feel

more fulfilled” (Finance team member, FLC - Interview 2). As this participant put it, “This means understanding where you fit in the organisation, understanding that your contribution is important... I think it is about finding your space, within this space” (Finance team member, FLC - Interview 2). In fact, the overall feeling of connectedness is quite powerful.

We have chosen consciously - **this connectedness** - it is based on human interaction. It is based on empathy and consideration for people in your world - how do you help them and how do they help you get to a better place? (Operations team member, WEP - Interview 1)

In these organisations, attention and care is given to all the organisation members who are present. This attention can be felt in the *quality of relationships* inside the organisations because “We are part of a body, every one of us is an essential part of that body. *We are all linked.*” (Field note, FLC - Dialogue). As such, these organisations recognise the interconnectedness and thus widen their definition of who is noticed, appreciated and understood. At the Sustainability Hub this was most evidence as I observed that the idea of ‘organisation’ includes everyone *who cares and is cared for*:

It was not just one tree, but a forest. It is wider than just this valley, or this organisation. (Field note, SH - Dialogue)

In their example, the lines between organisational collective and external community are less defined by organisational boundaries; whether with student, external partners, or with partner communities within which the organisation is based. Noticing, appreciating and beginning to understand from these diverse spaces, experiences and perspectives invites learning from multiple parts of their wider ecosystem.

All three organisations give attention to the organisation members, communities and relationships that were included, and importantly notice who is not included. For example, one participant at the Women’s Empowerment Project reflected: “*I think the women we work for are not included enough in our organisation.* I think the divide is too big. And the separation is too big... How do we include the voices of the organisation members we are working for?” (Field note, WEP - Dialogue). At the Sustainability Hub expressed: “*I feel for me the communities’ voices are missing.* This is one of the things I have been grappling with, for me the organisation has existed for so long but there is still a huge gap between the organisation and the local community... the community voices are not in this space” (Project coordinator, SH - Interview 7). These examples express a need to deepen and

widen relationships to align more to their organisational purpose. Each is aware of whose voices or experiences are silent or excluded from the current organisational voice. These organisations widen their definition of who they do their work for.

All three organisations sit with the question of ‘who’ ultimately makes up the organisation. They are continuously asking whose voices are heard and included, and whose voices are essential to their purpose and part of the field of learning that guides the organisation’s purpose, but who may be missing in the current configuration.

Conclusion to challenging NGOization

Across the three case studies, I found that small, embodied, and relational practices carry transformative potential far beyond the immediate organisational setting. These micro practices, often simple gestures of attention, care, or dialogue, act as quiet counterpoints to the dominant logics of NGOization. Through them, organisational members reconfigure how authority, value, and legitimacy are distributed within their institutions.

At the **micro level**, everyday interactions—welcoming a colleague, questioning a routine, sharing power through transparency—sustain a culture of attention and care. These are not symbolic or performative acts; they are practices through which members collectively shape meaning, identity, and belonging. They make care visible as a form of agency.

At the **meso level**, these micro practices accumulate into organisational routines that resist bureaucratic standardisation. By embedding reflexivity and participation into decision-making, the organisations cultivate flexibility and responsiveness. Hierarchies flatten; authority becomes relational rather than positional. The routine itself becomes a site of learning and recalibration. In this way, positive institutional work interrupts the reproduction of rigid NGO structures and creates space for emergent, context-specific ways of organising.

At the **macro level**, these practices ripple outward into the broader NGO field. They question the inherited assumptions that define what counts as legitimate work—assumptions tied to professionalisation, efficiency, and control. These organisations cultivate *experiential legitimacy*—grounded in relational knowing, embodied practice, and care for one another and their shared purpose. Experiential legitimacy asserts that institutional vitality arises not from compliance with external norms but from the lived

coherence between purpose and practice.

Taken together, these three levels—micro, meso, and macro—illustrate how systems are continuously made and remade through relationship. Each act of care, transparency, or inclusion within these organisations becomes a micro-intervention that subtly shifts the larger field. Rather than opposing NGOization directly, positive institutional work transforms it from within by reorienting attention from form to feeling, from control to connection, and from performance to presence.

In this sense, the organisations studied here demonstrate how the work of care is also the work of social change. Their practices show that institutional transformation begins not with grand redesigns but with the capacity to stay in relationship—to one another, to purpose, and to the living systems of which they are a part.

The following chapter builds on these findings by examining how positive institutional work functions as a systemic practice of care—tracing its implications for organisational change and for reimagining the NGO field itself. In doing so, it connects these grounded examples of experiential legitimacy to broader theoretical debates on institutions, institutional maintenance and disruption, agency, and the politics of care.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This research adds to developing literature on institutional work and its transformatory possibilities. It argues that positive institutional work in conversation with feminist institutionalism and politics of care literature can be useful to address the question of how to create more purposeful, caring institutions. As such, this research engages and deepens scholarship around the practice of institutional work by putting it in conversation with feminist theories of power, politics of care and agency.

Discussion Part 1: Theory and Practice Building Towards Experiential Legitimacy

I begin my discussion by exploring *practice-building* by connecting empirical findings to a thorough exploration of the practice of positive institutional work and experiential agency in the construction and maintenance of experiential legitimacy.

5.1) The first section - **Active Institutional Maintenance** - explores how experiential legitimacy is maintained through active institutional maintenance: deepening theorising

around what constitutes ‘experience’ in positive institutional work through an understanding of agency as embodied, situated and relational. My findings demonstrated a kind of institutional vitality (Gehman, 2020) and institutional stability that comes from *the quality of relating* and *quality of creating* inside. Because I took this lens I was able to shift the theoretical focus from institutional maintenance to the *experience* involved in actively maintaining experiential legitimacy within social purpose organisations.

5.2) The second section - **Institutional Disruption** - explores how experiential legitimacy is constructed through institutional disruption, reconnecting institutions with complex understandings of agency and power, recognising that the conceptualisation and analysis of power has been notoriously under-explored in new institutionalism. This was demonstrated in my findings which revealed the multiscalar effects of power, why certain ideas become dominant and how that affects the experience and agency. As such, I was able to see how organisation members disrupt the deep structure associated with NGOization as they deepen their connections between each other and their shared social purpose through opening up possibilities for *alternative modes of relating* (Benschop, 2021).

5.3) Then I expand on the developing literature on positive institutional work by delving into the moral underpinnings of positive institutional work drawing on politics of care literature - **From Relational Practice to Moral Inquiry**. Recognising that positive institutional work is rooted in social goods, I explore it as ‘political’ and institutional by its very nature of being ‘social’ and therefore ‘moral’. My findings demonstrated the underlying **care work** being done “to trouble power relations, imagine better worlds, and work to achieve them” (Ferguson, 2017:283) within my case organisations. Because I took this stance, I was able to join scholars in re-politicising new institutionalism and bring to light the transformative potential of positive institutional work as a disruptive and transformatory force in social purpose organisations.

5.4) **Summary of main contributions to the literature**

Discussion Part 2: Other research implications

5.5) **Research limitations:** I briefly outline the research limitations involved in this research project.

5.6) **Practical implications:** This research opens up new intervention points inside organisations by reconceptualising power and a deeper understanding of experience. I

enumerate several practice implications for social purpose organisations.

5.7) **Future Research Directions:** I finish my discussion chapter by elucidating some of the possible future research directions that would join this research in supporting the transformative potential of institutional work.

Below I begin my Discussion Chapter.

5.1 Active Institutional Maintenance

"What if learning how to see the world was also about learning to *encounter* the world?" (Roy, 2018: 64)

This section examines how experiential legitimacy is sustained through active institutional maintenance. I argue that a deeper understanding of what constitutes experience in institutions is required to theorise how it contributes to the ongoing evaluation of legitimacy. By connecting new institutionalism with feminist theories of experience and agency, this research advances current debates in positive institutional work and introduces experiential agency as a generative mechanism through which legitimacy and institutional vitality are actively maintained.

In contrast to institutional perspectives that treat maintenance as the reproduction of established norms or structures, this research positions maintenance as an ongoing, relational process of renewal. Prior scholarship has already begun to move beyond the idea of institutional maintenance as the preservation of stability (Thelen & Conrad, 2016; Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Kenny, 2007). Nilsson's (2015) work on experiential legitimacy marked a crucial turn, showing that legitimacy in social purpose organisations is not secured through formal compliance or symbolic coherence, but through members' lived sense that their experience reflects the organisation's espoused purpose. My findings build on and extend this insight by demonstrating how experiential legitimacy is sustained through active engagement—the deliberate, embodied, and relational work of reconnecting purpose and practice.

In the theorising around positive institutional work, there has been progress in identifying the kinds of practices (Nilsson, 2015; Thomas et al., 2018) and affective relations (Ashforth & Humphrey, 2022) that contribute to sustaining experiential legitimacy. However, scholars also note that the experiential quality of these practices is often undermined "when these

same practices become bureaucratically formalised in an attempt to increase their sustainability, replicability, and scalability” (Thomas et al., 2018:3; see also Delmestri & Goodrick, 2016). My research shows how members’ embodied and situated agency becomes critical precisely at this juncture—when the vitality of an institution depends on the capabilities of its members to respond to, rather than replicate, inherited norms.

Nilsson (2015:373) argues that organisations committed to social purpose goals such as equality, freedom, and justice must attend to whether “internal subjective experiences of field members do or do not reflect legitimated regulations, norms and beliefs.” This was clearly evident in my case study of the Feminist Legal Clinic, where the organisation’s symbolic purpose—feminist equality and justice—was expressed in its language and public commitments, yet did not guarantee equality in members’ lived experiences in key instances. Those who occupied non-legal roles often described limited access to decision-making and resources, highlighting how inherited professional logics reproduced inequalities within an organisation formally devoted to dismantling them. This incongruence between symbolic and experiential legitimacy revealed a loss of institutional vitality, where purpose became detached from lived experience.

Gehman (2020) uses the concept of *institutional vitality* to describe the energy that sustains an institution when its practices remain responsive and reflective. Vitality is lost when the “vital practices that sustain an institution have given way to unreflective inheritance or concealed prejudice” (Gehman, 2020:237). In this light, active institutional maintenance entails a form of relational reflexive work—continually collectively questioning inherited boundaries of expertise, authority, and belonging. This aligns with recent explorations into the limits of symbolic legitimacy and the need to account for affective relations in institutional stability (Delmestri & Goodrick, 2016; Ashforth & Humphrey, 2022).

Whereas symbolic legitimacy is maintained through conformity to visible structures and rules, experiential legitimacy depends on the vitality of relationships and the quality of engagement. Through positive institutional work, members engage in “a perpetual dance” that maintains “a dynamic equilibrium” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 2022:1504), freeing them to “step out of their established roles” and become more conscious and effective participants in their institutional worlds (Lawrence et al., 2011:56).

These shifts parallel what Tronto (2013) describes as movements from “power over” to

“power with”. Within social purpose organisations, this marks a reconfiguration of power through care: influence exercised not as control but as attentiveness to others’ experiences. Legitimacy, then, is renewed through relationship rather than imposed through position. Miller and Stiver (1998) similarly conceptualise *connection* as a generative form of power that expands mutual capacity to be seen, heard, and understood. My findings reveal how such “power with” relations sustain experiential legitimacy, as members’ reflexive engagement transforms everyday practices—meetings, reflection circles, feedback processes—into spaces that redistribute voice and recognition.

When members perceive coherence between what an organisation symbolically claims and how it is actually experienced, institutional vitality is replenished. A sense of shared purpose, belonging, and alignment generates the affective energy that keeps institutions alive. Conversely, when the gap between symbolic and experiential legitimacy widens, vitality diminishes and organisational life contracts into compliance, fatigue, and withdrawal. Experiential legitimacy thus functions both diagnostically and generatively: it reveals where institutional life is fraying and provides the means through which it may be renewed.

In the following section, I develop the concept of experiential agency by examining the embodied, situated, and relational dimensions of agency through which members enact this form of active maintenance.

I expand on the three dimensions in the figure below:

FIGURE 4: Nature of experiential agency

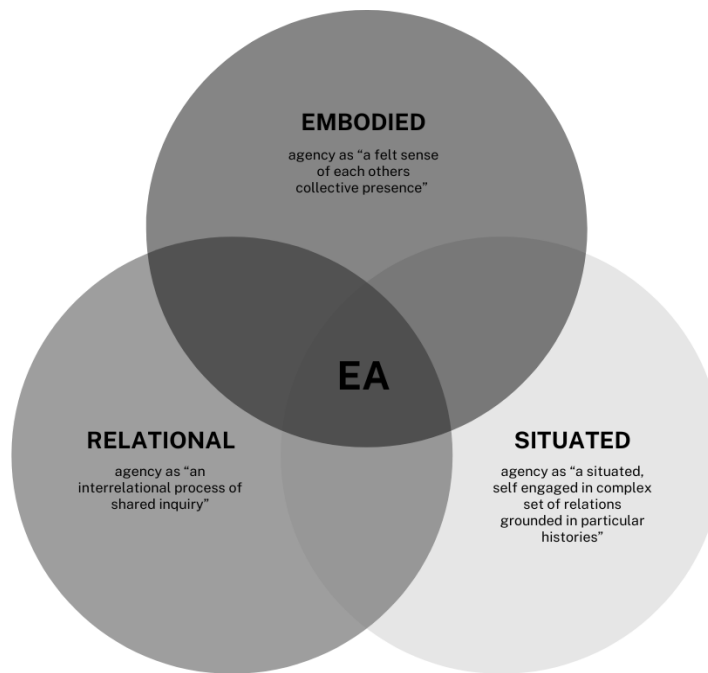


Figure 4 above illustrates how experiential agency emerges at the intersection of embodied, situated, and relational experience. Each dimension represents a distinct yet interdependent mode through which organisation members sustain and rework the institutional life around them.

5.1.1) Agency as an **embodied** phenomenon relates to the *emotional and fleshy* dimensions of agency. It highlights the “visual, material and felt nature” of organisational life and the bodily implications on agency as multiple and uncertain (Heney, 2020:13). It refers to the sensory and affective awareness through which organisation members perceive dissonance or coherence between espoused purpose and lived practice. This felt sensitivity is the first signal of institutional vitality or decay, shaping how members notice what feels aligned or misaligned.

5.1.2) Agency as a **situated** phenomenon relates to *time and space* dimensions of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). It suggests the importance of temporality to allow for an understanding of agency as “an unending negotiation, rather than a single, distinct experience”, which always exists in relation to complex personal and social histories (Heney, 2020:18). It is rooted in the specific social, cultural, and historical contexts that give institutional norms their meaning. It also explains why the same practice—a check-in, a collective reflection, a silence—takes on different significance across organisational

settings.

5.1.3) Agency as a **relational** phenomenon relates to the *indivisible nature* of agency (Bateson, 2016) as a *process of shared inquiry* (Nilsson, 2015; Heney, 2020). It emphasises the relational concept of a person whose dialogic relations with others shape and are shaped by their bodily interactions as they co-produce each other as human beings (Crean, 2018) and their world. It is expressed in acts of mutual recognition, questioning, and invitation that turn private perceptions into collective inquiry. Through these relational exchanges, members co-create the conditions under which institutional norms are reaffirmed, revised, or resisted.

The overlap of these three dimensions of experiential agency represents **active institutional maintenance**: the continual process through which organisational members individually and collectively keep institutions alive by re-embodiment, re-situating, and re-relating their shared experiences. Experiential agency thus becomes the micro-level dynamic that links lived experience to the macro-level renewal of institutional legitimacy.

Below I flesh out each dimension drawing on feminist politics of care literature and my empirical evidence, building a framework for experiential agency and deepening the theorising around experiential legitimacy in social purpose organisations.

5.1.1 Experiential agency as embodied

Below, I join new phenomenological institutionalists like Gehman (2020) expanding on the idea of institutions as flesh within new institutionalism. Then I explore embodiment in my case organisations and the role my research found that it plays in actively maintaining experiential legitimacy in my case organisations.

(i) No flesh, no institution

My research found a strong relationship between the practice of positive institutional work and the experience of agency as an embodied phenomenon. However, I found very little in existing new institutionalism and institutional work literature on embodied phenomena. My findings regarding the embodied experience of participants in this research were noticeable in the ways that organisation members experienced organisational practice (physically) in an embodied way (inviting their emotions, feelings, sensations and physical senses) alluding to the ways that the practices invite organisation members to bring their whole embodied

selves into the organisation as they collectively work towards their social purpose and goals. As Fiske describes:

“the body [as] the primary site of social experience. It is where social life is turned into experience. To understand the body we have to know who controls it as it moves through the spaces of our daily routines, who shapes its sensuous experiences, its sexualities, its pleasures in eating and exercise, who controls its performance at work, its behaviour at home and school and also who influences how it is dressed and made to appear in its function of presenting to others” (in McDowell, 1997:76).

Feminist philosophers have shown us how social differences effects how bodies inhabit spaces with others (Ahmed, 2006) and have emphasised the inter-corporeal aspects of bodily dwelling (Ahmed, 2006; Bartky, 1990; Butler, 1997; Diprose, 2003; Grosz, 1995; Young, 2005; Weiss, 1999). As comprehensively explored by feminist scholar Judith Butler (1990, 1993), embodiment has consequences for organisation members lived reality. Butler (2020:519) argues that social construction and social positioning of self take place through embodied existence and “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds” constitute self. Therefore, embodiment not only affects material and sensational aspects of self, but also practices, emotions, thoughts and the consciousness of the embodied human being in organisation. Consequently, institutional theory needs to reflect upon embodiment whenever agency and human identity is at stake i.e. always.

Institutional theorists have started to recognise the importance of the phenomenological approach, with Gehman (2020:238) writing “no flesh, no institution’, but this requires more exploration within the context of new institutionalism. As Gehman imagined institutions as ‘sensed’, feminist theorists have long since highlighted the “visual, material and felt nature” of life (Heney, 2020:13). This felt nature was demonstrated in my case organisations in the way participants spoke about their individual bodily experiences of feeling connected to the organisation and its purpose, but also in how they deliberately mentioned how they felt connected to the physical structures of the organisations offices, corridors and gardens. This embodied sense of purpose was not owned by any one person, but was described in a way that was *diffused* across bodies and the physical structures, and was experienced by those who came into contact with the organisation.

Feminist political theorist Syedullah (in Woodly et al, 2021:21) poetically writes about

experience when she says

“...daring to feel more than flesh. It allows people to express more than consent, to labor for more than mere survival, to embody more than the will of another, to have a **felt sense of each other’s collective presence** that could not be contained, commodified, or consumed.”

This expansive collective ‘felt sense’ resonated with what I found in the case organisations. For example, the experience of stretching and moving and breathing with others at the beginning of Community Work was a powerful way for organisation members to collectively presence themselves with each other; the feeling of connectedness to self, to others, and to the organisation’s purpose, standing in a circle moving in collective rhythm.

My experience and conversations with participants during Community Work highlighted the importance of the *shared* felt nature of the practice. Feminist theorists write about a *shared empathetic connection* (Elg & Jensen, 2012) and this was reflected in my Findings as organisation members engaged in purposeful practice together - though to varying degrees of depth. Understanding institutions in this collective felt sense is consistent with more recent institutional theorists who have begun to question the use of static metaphors to describe the relationship between institution and individual actor in institutional theory, stating that they are poorly adapted for institutional theory (Eckardt et al, 2019). Instead, the idea of institution as flesh (Gehman, 2020) is perhaps a better metaphor suited for positive institutional work and to capture the experience of organisations.

(ii) How experiential agency as an embodied phenomenon helps maintain experiential legitimacy

It was within existing practice literature that I found a strong association between embodiment and the experience of actors within institutions. One of the cornerstone theorists on the practice turn, Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and Von Savigny (2001:3) explain that “the social is a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organised around shared practical understandings”. This is important because practice theorists such as Fuchs and Koch (2014) emphasise that if there is *sufficient reiteration of the feeling* (the embodied experience) within and between individuals, the imitation will be incorporated into practice by the collective. Then the pattern of movement that produces that feeling, based on shared practical embodied understanding, becomes practice. Therefore, to answer the question of how experiential legitimacy is maintained, it was evident that the *shared feeling*

experienced by organisation members participating in these practices in the pursuit of their shared social purpose goals played a large role in their sense of agency and congruence in the organisation.

One of the most striking findings was highlighted when organisation members were asked when they felt most connected to the organisation and its purpose, organisation members named collective activities in which they felt most alive, within their bodies and their minds engaging with their shared purpose. For example, the feeling of being physically present for the collective purpose of joining a protest, or spending time tending to the garden with others during Community Work. At the Women's Empowerment Project, the Purple Table gave the felt sensation of organisation coming together at the table, bodies flowing together to talk about life and work around a shared purpose, and then flowing back out again. A shared feeling that left organisation members feeling alive and connected to others and the organisation's purpose. Similarly, Monday morning meeting at the Feminist Legal Clinic and check-ins at the Sustainability Hub.

Human embodiment shapes this reoccurring relational sensation. It was *the shared feeling, not the particular movement or form*, that was essential for maintaining experiential legitimacy. This shared feeling was crucial for learning and for building recognised habits (Elg & Jensen, 2012) across the organisation, as each organisation member needed to embody it and reiterate it. Importantly, for the purposes of this research, it is the shared sensation that was centered not any specific pattern of movement. This resonates with feminist theorists like Hannah Arendt's definition of power as "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (1969:44) and is understood as "a collective ability based on the receptivity and reciprocity that characterise relations among members of the collectively" (Allen 1998:35). There has been very little written about agency as embodied and how it might be incorporated into the evaluation of legitimacy. This research seeks to remedy this by bringing considerations for the shared sensations of organisation members "pursuing meaningful, long-term social goods *with a collaborative spirit*" (Nilsson, 2015:382) as a source.

5.1.2 Experiential agency as situated

Below I reconnect with theorists who have a more critical framing of agency in new institutionalism through the concept of situatedness. Then I explore affective situatedness in

the context of my case organisations and the role it played in actively maintaining experiential legitimacy in my case organisations.

(i) Situated in the experience of time and space

Theoretically expanding on agency as a situated phenomenon gives a more critical framing to new institutionalism and sets the scene for a complex conceptualisation of institutional work, power and agency within social purpose organisations. Existing new institutionalism theories on agency have not critically engaged with the histories behind particular narratives and how and why those particular ideas, ways of being, and doing became dominant (Haraway, 2010; Findlay, 2012). But my empirical evidence revealed the need to understand why, for example, a particular ‘expert’ role like ‘lawyer’ is considered more legitimate than other ‘non-expert’ roles in organisations, in the professional context of the legal professional logic and wider societal logic of NGOization, and how that affects different organisation members’ experiences of each other and the organisation’s purpose connecting the multiscale nature of power.

I found that to understand how experience might be incorporated into the evaluation of legitimacy inside social purpose organisations, an understanding and positioning of situatedness was necessary. Harking back to *affected situatedness*, (Hankivsky, 2014) involves

“confront[ing] the intertwined nature of domination rather than focus[ing] on specific identities or concerns... point[ing] to the need to acknowledge the challenges related to diversity and power differentials within existing organisations.”

There has been some recognition of the affective nature of situatedness in new institutionalism, but it has been limited to the generic institutional effects of difference without attention paid to the how and why those differences are experienced. Institutional theorist Scott (1992:25) explains that making visible experience only goes so far because:

“Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don’t understand it as constituted relationally. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that... position subjects and produce their experiences.”

In contrast, drawing on feminist theorists, there is a necessary *process of historicisation* involved in understanding how experience is constituted relationally, “creating the

emergence of concepts and identities not as unproblematic givens but as historical and discursive events” (McNay, 2004:179). I refer specifically to feminist care theorists who emphasise the *socio-political institutional context* (Lynch et al, 2021).

The feminist phenomenological approach outlines *how structures of power allow bodies to inhabit space differently, enabling some to move with ease while fixing others in place* (Heney, 2020; Ahmed, 2006). This was illustrated in my findings section as different participants at the Women's Empowerment Project named some of the hidden and invisible beliefs, values and practices that shape *what is acceptable as the norm* in the organisation. The deep structure, influenced by societal and professional logics, enabled some organisation members to move with ease depending on where they live, what language they speak etc, while those that fell outside the white middle class feminist norm were markedly less comfortable.

Importantly, this supports the supposition that *positive institutional work is political work, it is not neutral*. It is rooted in a deep understanding of the complex, multiscalar and experiential nature of power. If positive institutional work links the experiential nature of practice to organisation's social purpose goals, then it must seek to surface and understand the *affective situatedness* of organisation members agency to resist and transform how and why particular interests are foregrounded and others are excluded.

(iii) How experiential agency as a situated phenomenon helps maintain experiential legitimacy

Drawing on a feminist intersectional approach, this study found that through positive institutional work, organisation members bring their fuller situated selves into the organisation, “a self which is grounded in particular histories and presents situations of violence and vulnerability” (Michaeli, 2017:53). There were examples across my findings where organisation members reflected on their situated selves, where organisation members self-awareness of their ‘backpacks of privilege’ played a key role in making them more conscious and effective organisation members in relation to others in their organisations. The empirical evidence drawn from the case organisations points to the importance of attending to the historical processes that position subjects and co-produce their experiences. Specifically, the collective awareness and understanding of the impact of the history of Apartheid on organisation members, their identities and relationships, and their environment, was evident across all three case studies with participants naming the

legacies of the past (McNay, 2004) that continue to shape their current reality and experiences of each other and the organisation. This critical self and collective awareness was not weaponised or used to create division, but rather used as an invitation towards inquiry and dialogue, deepening their experience of their shared purpose.

Building on this understanding of affective situatedness, the case studies provide empirical evidence of organisation members engaging in critical individual self-reflection and authentic surfacing of institutional narratives to understand their different experiences and their shared purpose in time and place with others. Through dialoguing around purpose and meaning, organisation members did not shy away from the difficult conversations about power and privilege and the experience of hegemonic institutions like race, religion and other socio-political identity-forming aspects of life. In the example at the Feminist Legal Clinic, organisation members unpacked their particular individual identities and experiences, one being a young African Christian woman working for a feminist organisation and the other being a middle class privileged white feminist woman in an organisation that has positioned itself as “unapologetically African and feminist”. The dialogue meant surfacing what it means to live different values, identities and experiences in the same organisation, some of which fundamentally contradict.

Importantly, this example demonstrates care theorists' calls to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2010, 2016). The use of the word ‘trouble’ “not only acknowledges the necessary, and difficult, alliance and compromises that constitute our everyday material reality, but [also] emphasises how it is necessary to get into trouble” (Haraway & Goodeve, 2019:336). As Woodly et al (2021:23) highlights,

“When contradictions are revealed, something new can enter the frame...[noticing] how we learn, not just with our minds but with our whole bodies, absorbing lessons we may or may not have chosen for ourselves, then creating the conditions that can support... shedding what no longer serves the kinds of learning [we] notice [we] are missing.”

Through practices, members surface their differences, their contradictions, and therefore invite new ways of relating, doing and being together. By being in relationship with each other, organisation members begin to disrupt hegemonic power and transform the institution they are a part of. In the example above, the result was that the young African Christian woman could express her desire to have herself seen and acknowledged in the annual review, but not with a picture of herself with a t-shirt that displayed the word lesbian,

which would have isolated her from her Christian community. In dialogue, they were able to explore the complexities of this experience without judging or shutting down. By being in dialogue with each other, towards a shared purpose, they surface those differences and engage in collective sense-making. This creates more space for individual organisation members to bring more of themselves (even the contradictory parts) into organisational practice, and to develop a shared muscle for continuous learning/inquiry.

By authentically surfacing diverse experiences across the organisation and through collective questioning and exploring of the power differentials experienced, these practices invite conscious and critical co-creation of the organisation and its deep structure (the informal and hidden rules that form an organisation's unquestioned way of working). Instead of confronting power to manage, or to control, as has been written about extensively by institutional theorists historically, what is animated in my case organisations is the affective situatedness of agency, where power is confronted collectively as a way towards relationship rather than away from it.

Institutional theory has been more concerned with power as an instrument for change. However, in line with feminist institutionalists and care theorists, this research seeks to remedy this. It does this by framing power as complex and relational and unmasking who benefits and how in order to disrupt existing power inequalities, and to engage in relationships where organisation members learn together and critically reimagine ways of being and doing more aligned with their shared purpose.

5.1.3 Experiential agency as relational

Below I frame institutional actors as interdependent relational beings. Then I explore agency as a relational phenomenon and the role it played in actively maintaining experiential legitimacy in my case organisations.

(i) The social reality of institutions

This research joins feminist theorists in recognising that social goods are by their nature enhanced and constrained by *inter-dependency* (Lynch et al, 2021). This broadly supports the recognition by feminist care theorists Lynch et al. (2021) that “the resistance to recognising the interdependency of the human condition... and the failure to appreciate the complex ways in which values, especially those arising from other-centredness, are not just

regulatory but constitutive of social life” (Lynch et. al, 2021:60).

This relational reality challenges the current framing of agency within new institutionalism. Waller & Wrenn (2021) argue that existing conceptions of agency that are “rooted in the neoliberal context teach that each individual should be accountable to themselves, and thus the responsibility to others and to the collective is eroded” (Waller & Wrenn, 2021:52). In the neoliberal dualist framing of agency, organisations are composed entirely of self-interested, atomistic individuals seeking to forward their own agendas emphasising individual accountability and responsibility which naturally segues into the power of the individual acting alone (Wrenn, 2015). This is resonant with the dialectical portrayals of agency in institutional theory. Theorising positive institutional work recognises that the work is not just an individual capability/endeavour/manifestation, joining the feminist perspective it gives attention to “everyday practices, social relations and spaces of creativity and social reproduction where people come, share and act together” (Clement et al, 2019:2; also see Federici, 2011, 2018).

However, there is very little language for agency experienced as a social relation in new institutionalism.

(ii) How experiential agency as a relational phenomenon helps maintain experiential legitimacy

Institutional theorists have begun to explore social relations as core to organisational functioning (Thomas et. al, 2018) and institutional maintenance (Ashforth & Humphrey, 2022) but this is rare. In fact, there was more acknowledgement of the essential role of affective relations in positive organisational theorists like Gittell and Douglass (2012) who have explored the kinds of relational work intended to manifest connectedness, empowerment, and mutuality within organisations. However, this work has yet to be linked to how affective relations might be incorporated into the evaluation of legitimacy.

Recognising agency as a relational phenomenon, as an inter-relational process rather than just an individual one, confirms the significance of the relational self that is central to research on social purpose organisations (Kittay, 1999). Lynch et al. (2021:58) define affective relations as

“constitute distinct ethically-informed, nurturing-led social relations, that take different manifestations culturally, but whose primary intent is **to be with and**

co-create others relationally in a non-alienating, non-exploitable way.”

My findings joined Nilsson (2015) in beginning to explore the specific capabilities developed, specifically purposivity, reflexivity and willful creativity as organisation members become more effective and conscious participants in their organisational world. Nilsson (2015:382) acknowledged the experience “involved pursuing meaningful, long-term social goods with a *collaborative spirit*” and specific characteristics of that spirit including “respect, tolerance, openness, sympathy, and critical reflection”. Despite my findings highlighting both the individual and collective dimensions of these capabilities, existing framing of agency is still more personal than collaborative, more individual than relational.

Building on Nilsson’s (2015:383) exploration of *agency as inquiry* “enacted by seeking exposure to a diversity of ideas, people, or fields and developing dialogic relationships that explore assumptions and potentials” (Nilsson, 2015:383) in my Findings there were many examples of agency as an inter-relational process of inquiry. For instance, the Toilet Paper discussion at the Sustainability Hub and calling in the students and staff into dialogue to collectively make meaning of the problem together, exploring possibilities, and in the process opening them up to other experiences and deepening their relationships. This example reflects the affective relations underlying the “perpetual dance” mentioned by Ashforth & Humphrey (2022) that fosters a dynamic equilibrium in the organisation.

With this in mind, experiential surfacing practices provided persuasive evidence for the ways that positive institutional work deepens feeling with others’ emotions, feelings, sensations and senses. Affirming affective relations (Delmestri & Goodrick, 2016) and the centrality of emotions (Hobart & Kneese, 2020) among the interpersonal relations within the organisation, this research acknowledges the “*emotional work involved in producing [each other as] human beings*” (Lynch et al, 2018:59). Organisation members shared how they shared the full spectrum of human emotions: sickness, grief and loss, joy and success. For example, when participants from the Women’s Empowerment Project described their experiences at The Purple Table, it involved the surfacing of diverse experiences including counselling work that was emotionally traumatic, grief over the loss of a husband, struggles with supporting and raising an autistic child, anger at a system that continues to treat women as second class citizens. Participants did not focus on solutions to these challenges, but rather ‘feeling with others’ keeps them coming back.

This relational dimension of agency was illustrated by how the organisation members

experience each other and the organisation through positive institutional work. People are seeing and appreciating others while feeling seen and appreciated; people connecting to others and the purpose of the organisation while others connect to them; people are caring for others while feeling cared for. Even when the experiences are on the surface ‘negative’, such as the emotional surfacing of grief, or when participants shared experiences of feelings of exclusion, there was still “an understanding of relationships as *experientially positive in and of themselves*” (Nilsson, 2010:24) because they presented opportunities for organisation members to notice/be noticed, appreciate/be appreciated and understand/be understood, deepening connections among members and lowering boundaries between themselves and others. This does not negate individual personalities and group intrigues as individuals do not leave their identities, histories and multiple selves at the door.

The answer about the role of experiential agency in the maintenance of experiential legitimacy lies in this relational dimension. But as mentioned in the literature review it needs a lot more fleshing out. My findings were consistent with systems theorist Bateson’s (2018) description of *individuals in vital relationship with others*, where their interplay and their mutual learning is their source of agency as they seek to express, reflect and create with others. It is through this inter-relational process that organisation members are willing to fail (and even welcome it), that they are willing to express their complex multitudes even when those are uncomfortable or difficult, that they are willing to experiment and create new ideas and ways of being in the world.

Towards active institutional maintenance

“The goal is not to crack the code, but rather to catch the rhythm” (Bateson, 2016: 140)

Challenging existing new institutionalism’s static approach to ‘institutional stability’ as institutional maintenance, this research joins recent institutional explorations of *institutionalisation as a verb*, encouraging a focus on dynamism and mechanisms of (im)permanence highlighting more micro-matters (Höllerer et al, 2020; Glynn, 2021). This brings to mind the Deleuzian distinction between being and becoming, embracing a process, a transformation, a discovery, a journey, that is not static nor defined (Deleuze, 1990). By recognising the embodied, situated and relational nature of agency, this research joins recent institutional theorists Ashforth & Humphrey (2022) who invite new approaches to institutional maintenance recognising alternative ways to understand institutional stability through turning the lens inwards to account for affective relations and emotions.

The analytic focus on experiential agency was informed by three interrelated dimensions—embodied, situated, and relational—explored above, which together shape a continual process through which organisational members individually and collectively keep institutions alive by re-embodiment, re-situating, and re-relating their shared experiences. An embodied reading attends to how participants described experience as felt through the body: tension, fatigue, joy, energy, or relief were treated as individual and collective signals of alignment or strain within organisational practice. A situated orientation recognises that such experiences are produced within particular histories and power dynamics, including the racialised, gendered, and professional hierarchies that structure South Africa's NGO field. Finally, a relational lens emphasises that meaning arises through interaction—how people respond to, listen to, and affect one another in practice. Together they illuminate experiential agency as a process through which individuals and groups continually negotiate coherence between how work feels and what it stands for, thereby contributing to experiential legitimacy.

This research emphasised that social purpose organisations are *a social product of our imagination* (Mills, 1959; Berger & Luckman, 1967). It found that, each organisation felt different, i.e. the embodied, situated and relational nature was different with its own nature, shape and flavour (Russ, 2018); but institutionally, the modes of relating were familiar, shifting something deep in how the people in the organisation connected with each other, their organisation, and the world. The embodied, situated and relational nature of experiential agency explored in this section underscores the transformatory potential of positive institutional work, as organisation's experimented with *alternative modes of relating* (Benschop, 2021) by supporting the ongoing inquiry towards their shared social purpose (Nilsson, 2015). By further articulating the nature of agency as an embodied, situated and relational phenomenon, this research augments theorising on how experience might be incorporated into the evaluation of legitimacy with a deeper understanding of what constitutes experience inside organisations.

In the next section I explore how this active institutional maintenance through positive institutional work invites organisation members to disrupt institutional boundaries that entrench hegemonic inequalities and injustices, thereby challenging the *effects* of power. Importantly this challenges existing institutional literature that has theorised institutional disruption as punctuating the equilibrium that the institution is maintaining (Zietsma &

Lawrence, 2010). Rather through positive institutional work, focusing on experiential legitimacy, and working to maintain the quality of relationships within institutions, organisation members are able to disrupt towards a more equitable, just equilibrium.

5.2 Institutional Disruption: A Greater Understanding of Institutional Work and Power

This section argues that understanding how experiential legitimacy is accomplished in social purpose organisations through positive institutional work, which invites an embodied, situated and relational experience of agency within their institutional context, connects with more complex theories of power. By prioritising the experiential nature of positive institutional work, it is possible to explore the ways this work disrupts institutional boundaries that entrench hegemonic inequalities and injustices, and by extension who benefits and who interests are normalised, in everyday organisational life, thereby challenging the *effects* of power.

This is important because this research recognises that the ways that power dynamics are embedded within any institutional change and therefore need further understanding. Instead of new institutionalism's limited engagement with conceptions of power focusing more on its functionalist usage (Hampel et al., 2017; Zhao & Wry, 2016), this research joins feminist institutionalism exploring *why and how specific ideas became dominant* (Thelen 2003; Chappell 2010; Findley, 2012). Through empirical examples, this research *reignites conceptualisations of power* in new institutionalism to reflect the deeper societal forces at play (societal and professional logics) that affect the institutional work of organisations and the experience of individuals that embody them and uncovers pathways to disrupt and transform those institutional boundaries. Drawing on more complex conceptualisation of power - including organisational feminist's notion of deep structure (Rao et al., 2015) which surfaces unwritten rules that guide organisation members behaviour, practices and processes - places organisations within social (and power) relations (Batliwala, 2011). Importantly, this conceptualisation allows me to consider why and how power is experienced as "macro found local activity" (Höllerer et al, 2021) by engaging with individual voices and subjective experiences (Nilsson, 2015) and affective relations (Ashforth & Humphrey, 2022) within organisations.

In the next section I build this multiscalar conceptualisation of power by drawing on my

empirical evidence, specifically that of the experience of NGOization.

5.2.1 The Case of NGOization

In this section, I begin by situating the case organisations within the broader societal logic of NGOization and its effects on internal organisational life. I then explore how these organisations disrupt the usual role, routine, resource, and purpose boundaries through practices that connect purpose to experience and experiential agency. Finally, I consider how professional logics and deep structure shape the permeability of these boundaries, drawing examples from the Feminist Legal Clinic and the Women's Empowerment Project.

A central finding of this research is that all three organisations consciously recognised the ways they are historically constituted by racism, cis-heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism (Woodly et al., 2020; Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). Organisation members showed a reflexive awareness of how these legacies and patterns of power distribution (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001) continue to influence the everyday life of their organisations. In institutional literature, such enduring formations are described as *societal logics*—hegemonic systems that shape interests, identities, and practices, often in invisible ways that define the experience of institutional work itself (Zhao & Wry, 2016). Across my cases, NGOization emerged as the dominant societal logic shaping organisational life, influencing not only external operations but also the internal experiences and relationships of those who work within them.

Most scholarship on NGOization has focused on its impact on organisations' external strategies for change—the ways neoliberalism reoriented activism toward professionalised, apolitical, and donor-driven forms of practice (Roy, 2015; Bernal & Grewal, 2014). The term itself describes how donor and state interventions promote particular organisational norms, practices, and ideas of “good governance” aligned with neoliberal rationalities (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2001; Kamat, 2004; Veltmeyer, 2007). Scholars have warned that NGOization reproduces the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle, sustaining the status quo under the guise of “strengthening civil society” (Abu-Assab, 2020). Yet little attention has been paid to how this logic also shapes internal organisational life—how NGOization quietly defines what legitimacy looks and feels like from within.

My research addresses this gap by taking the critique of NGOization *inside* organisations. All three case studies revealed how NGOization's inherited material legacies and patterns of

power distribution (MacKay, 2014) affect both interpersonal relations and organisational practices. Building on Zhao and Wry's (2016) call to examine how societal logics shape practices across sectors, I observed how NGOization has fundamentally influenced not only structures and strategies but also subjective experiences and modes of being. It was possible to see how some forms of marginalisation occurring within mirrored the systemic inequalities each organisation sought to challenge externally.

As was noted across interviews, symbolic legitimacy—measured through reports, donor metrics, and strategic plans—sometimes eclipsed the lived experience of purpose. As such, agency was constrained: organisational boundaries became defined by what could be justified to funders, not by what sustained connection or vitality within. My sense-making conversations echoed Nilsson's (2009) observation that donor-driven logics prioritisation of financial sustainability and external accountability (Nazneen & Sultan, 2009) tend to “structure current explorations and place rigid boundaries on future work,” limiting the space for reflexive and experiential engagement.

These constraints were mirrored in reflections around internal hierarchies of expertise and worth. In all the organisations, there were examples where professional logics privileged those with formal education or institutional credentials (lawyers, academics, social workers) over those in administrative or support roles. These distinctions—often invisible, yet deeply felt—encoded classed and racialised assumptions about competence and legitimacy. In this way, the deep structures of NGOization reproduced social hierarchies under the guise of professional order, objectifying and instrumentalising individuals through depersonalised roles that excluded personal identities, values, and lived experience.

The concept of *deep structure* provides a way to theorise how these hidden codes operate within social purpose organisations. Beneath formal policies and declared values lie tacit norms that privilege certain voices and ways of knowing (Batliwala & Friedman, 2014). These norms are experienced as “natural” and thus remain unchallenged, perpetuating harm in subtle yet persistent ways. As one participant at the Women's Empowerment Project reflected, the point of reference for “normal” organisational behaviour was the experience of white, middle-class women—a revelation that exposed how invisible power narrows what is possible. Gaventa and Pettit (2011) note that such power works precisely by making alternative choices unthinkable, limiting the agency of those at the margins, with the rules set to be biased against certain people and issues (Rao & Kelleher, 2008).

Surfacing these hidden rules became a critical site of positive institutional work. Through collective reflection, dialogue, and care practices, organisation members began to expose the ways NGOization—and its accompanying neoliberal management ideologies—structured their own experiences. This work of exposure aligns with Alvesson and Deetz's (2006:260) call to “ferret out situations of domination and distortion” in everyday organisational life. By making the deep structure visible, these organisations could begin to resist and reconfigure the internal patterns that sustained inequality.

Writer and activist Arundhati Roy (2005) cautions that the professionalisation of social change movements carries real risks: volunteers become employees accountable not to each other but to managerial hierarchies and key performance indicators. My findings echo this concern—systems and procedures proved useful only insofar as they supported members' capacity to experience each other in embodied, situated, and relational ways. Against this backdrop, many participants—particularly working-class and Black women—crafted alternative ways of relating that refused NGOized norms. It was *felt* through the quality of shared experience: storytelling, embodied learning, mutual care, and the everyday work of tending to each other's wellbeing. These practices became quiet acts of subversion, challenging neoliberal ideals of efficiency and control by asserting that care sustains organisational life. In doing so, they revealed how experiential legitimacy can serve as a living counterlogic within NGOized environments—one maintained through attention, connection, and the exercise of experiential agency. I explore specific examples of these alternative ways of relating that disrupted NGOization below.

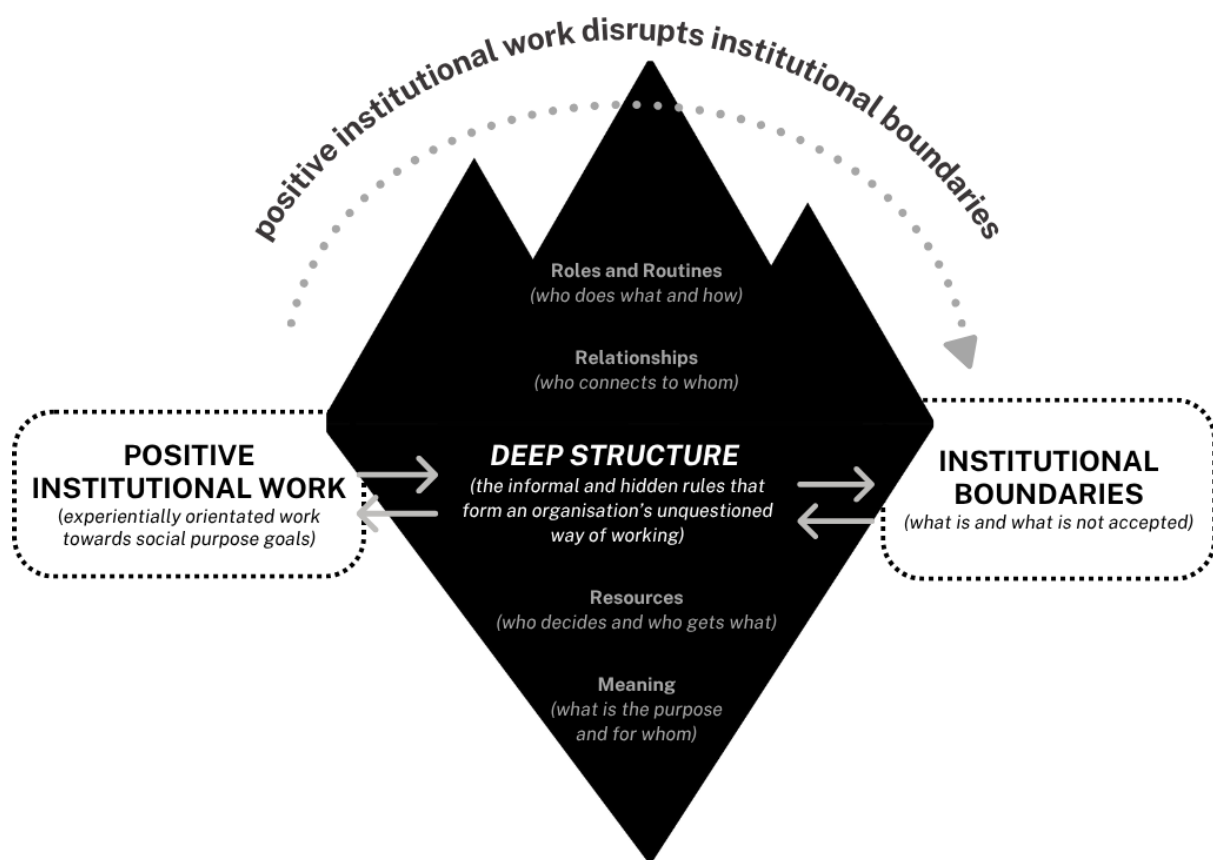
5.2.1 Troubling NGOization through Positive Institutional Work

In line with recent discussions on the relationship between organisations and their environment (Ringel, Hiller & Zietsma, 2018), I draw on the notion of *institutional boundaries* as the primary institutional mechanism for determining *what behaviours, modes of relationship, and practices are appropriate from those that are not*, in order to explore the relationship between the positive institutional work, power and institutional disruption. I specifically draw on work by Nilsson (2019), which invites an understanding of radical forms of institutional work that challenge and disrupt the fundamental purpose of an institution, by building on and adapting his specific performative dimensions.

Below I provide examples from my case organisations of positive institutional work that

disrupt what is, and what is not, accepted inside the organisation (institutional boundaries), by challenging NGOization and associated informal and hidden rules (deep structure) that determine who does what and how (roles and routine boundaries), who connects with whom (relationship boundaries), and who decides and who gets what (resource boundaries). The figure below highlights this disruptive relationship as positive institutional work disrupts institutional boundaries of what is and what is not accepted by challenging the deep structure inside organisations.

FIGURE 5: Positive Institutional Work as Institutional Disruption



Below I provide specific examples from my case organisations:

i) Disrupting role and routines

In organisations, where members are often defined by their role - the job that they are assigned to do - the 'importance' or rank of their role is often determined by an symbolic acknowledgement of 'expertise'. As Nilsson (2019:289) explains "roles are arguably the primary structuring feature of institutional fields, inscribing who does what and how". Importantly, roles extend to how people in the organisation understand and recognise

expertise within the organisation. Within my case organisations, it was possible to see how certain roles within the organisations, like the lawyers at the Feminist Legal Clinic, the academics at the Sustainability Hub, and the lawyers and social workers at the Women's Empowerment Project, were highly formalised and professionalised, contingent on specific expertise, knowledge and ritualised technical practice.

Building on existing literature around experientially oriented practices (Nilsson, 2015, Thomas et al., 2018), my case organisations illustrated how certain positive institutional practices invite organisation members to explore *beyond the limits of their job descriptions* (Nilsson, 2009) instead of being limited to narrow roles and strict routines usually associated with NGOization. Specifically, my case organisations provided further empirical evidence of the practice of *surfacing* as “surfacing the inner experiences of organisation members during the normal course of everyday work” (Nilsson and Paddock, 2014:4). My Findings supported Nilsson and Paddock (2014) who indicate that by inviting the sharing of subjective experiences of diverse members of the organisation through practices like surfacing, role and routine boundaries of who does what and how are made more diffuse. It is difficult for power (and the vested interests associated with it) to remain hidden when alternative experiences are voiced and acknowledged, when other concerns are considered, when hidden biases are unmasked. A simple example was the Community Work welcoming practice at Sustainability Hub through which organisation members were invited to experience different parts of the organisation (and the organisation itself) outside of their narrow job descriptions and daily rhythms and routines. Where the NGOization logic (which focuses on professionalisation) excludes the voices and experiences of those who don't have the right qualifications, these organisations' practices invite organisation members to see and experience the organisation and fellow organisations members beyond the limits of their job descriptions.

Traditionally when something needs to happen inside an organisation, the questions are: *Who is expert? Who is responsible? Whose role is this?* But in the case of experiential practice, the questions become: *Who is here? What are our individual and collective strengths? What do we want to experience with each other?* These experiential questions do not assume there is one right response or way of doing things, rather the response is interdependent with context and the relationships between who is present and what is needed. With this perspective, professional expertise is acknowledged as essential for the

work; but there is a wider understanding and recognition of what is needed (both personal and professional) in the pursuit of the organisation's social purpose.

Another illustration of disrupting role and routine boundaries is how previously undervalued behaviour that had been treated as abnormal or even pathological under NGOization - for example sharing personal grief and collective trauma - is seen as valuable outside of the so-called 'private sphere' across all three case organisations. The practice of surfacing the *personal and professional* parts of self supports the work of feminist care theorists Waller & Wren (2021) in challenging the neoliberal dualism between actors' private and public lives. As my Findings highlighted, taking someone for a coffee and other practices that involve noticing, appreciating and understanding others, what Nilsson (2009) terms 'paying appreciative attention', becomes a *revolutionary act* of care. Linking with feminist care theory (Lynch 2021:63), my findings showed the ways that through surfacing subjectives selves and communing as whole people, organisation members "learn how to nurture and feel for others, intimately, locally and distally" by engaging with the organisation and others outside of their established roles and routines. There were a myriad of examples where organisation members felt cared for and were caring, disrupting these boundaries of who does what and how.

ii) Disrupting relationships

Relationship boundaries determine '*who connects to whom and how?*' (Nilsson, 2019). Through disrupting relational boundaries of who connects to whom and how, these practices disrupt the way NGOization logic works to isolate organisation members by instead encouraging and supporting deepening of relational connections inside. Across the practices, whether checking in at Monday meetings at the Feminist Legal Clinic or congregating around the Purple Table at the Women's Empowerment Project or physical movement through Community Work at the Sustainability Hub, it was evident that these practices disrupted who connects to whom and how. My Findings reflected institutional and organisational theorists (Nilsson, 2015; Thomas et al, 2018; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2017) who emphasise that at the core of meaningful collaboration towards shared social purpose goals are what Stephens, Heaphy & Dutton (2011:2) refer to as 'high-quality connections' which are dynamic interactions that are "positive in terms of the subjective experience of the connected individuals and the structural features of the connection". These connections are the core of positive institutional work as a practice working to

connect organisation members to each other and their collective social purpose goals in vital ways.

Instead of looking for one form/practice, the common denominator was the relationships working to “*reshape social relations on a deep level*, interrogating the construction of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, class, nationality, family, ability, health and well-being” (Cornish et al, 2016:116). For example, dialoging around purpose and meaning organisation members at the Sustainability Hub *challenged who speaks, whose voices are heard, and who is taken into consideration* within their organisation by redefining and reimagining management through a diverse ‘Support team’ from different backgrounds and expertise. This moves away from what Nilsson (2019) refers to as the ‘vertical instinct’ in most social systems that can typically lead to fragmentation and stratification, instead inviting organisation members to deepen their understanding of themselves and of each other. Moreover, the deepening of capabilities like reflexivity increases reflexivity across the organisation by “cross-pollinating the different forms of knowledge (histories, cultures, experiences, technologies and so on)” (Nilsson, 2019:292) held by individuals and different groups within the organisation. Working at this relational field level, the organisation members develop new forms of social engagement, prefiguring relations desired of a more just society within their organisation, without waiting for large-scale structural change.

iii) Disrupting resource boundaries

Resource boundaries determine ‘*who decides and who gets what?*’ (Nilsson, 2019). Instead of a focus on limited fixed resources and power, organisation members recognise and engage with the unequal relations inherent social life and their interdependence on each other. The simplest example was at the Feminist Legal Clinic and the practice of playing with power by sharing *different kinds of resources beyond their daily sphere of control/expertise*, specifically organisation’s budgets. Organisation members felt more connected to the organisation and its purpose, and to others in the organisation, as they were able to see the bigger picture of where resources were going and why. As implied in the example above, resources boundaries of who decides and who gets what are not limited to material goods per se - who sits next to who, who attends what, who decides what. As such, resource flows are structured through complex arrays of property rights, physical and relational infrastructure, and assumptions about what roles and classes of people should have access to what type of information.

Building on feminist theorist Ahmed (2017), disrupting who decides what and who gets what means also reflects diverse knowledge and experience in a way that invites complexity and context within the organisation. For example, staff teach-ins at the Sustainability Hub were invited to share their passions, interests and expertise outside of their job description, which were welcomed and celebrated by the collective. By inviting different experiences and *other-centered* ways of knowing (Engster, 2005) into who decides what, these organisations make the boundaries that determine who decides what more diffuse towards more caring relations. Another helpful illustration of disrupting resource boundaries, specifically who decides what, was the toilet paper example at the Sustainability Hub. In this example, organisation members ‘called in’ the students to help them solve the question of the missing toilet paper, using it as an opportunity to collectively sense-make with a “collaborative spirit” (Nilsson, 2015), surfacing multiple perspectives and creating new meaning together.

iv) Disrupting meaning boundaries

Meaning boundaries determine what counts as legitimate purpose within an organisation—*what is the work for, and for whom?* (Nilsson, 2019). Nilsson (2019:296) describes disrupting these meaning boundaries as

“moving an institution away from a narrowly defined functional purpose and seeking to make it more responsive to the ‘whole person’ and more reflexive about the needs and opportunities in the ‘whole system.’”

Across my case studies, participants could readily articulate their organisation’s social purpose. Yet, in practice, this purpose was treated not as fixed but as *experiential*. As Nilsson (2009) notes, the first encounter with an organisation—often through a concrete task or role — tends to define purpose narrowly. Over time, however, the broader implications of that work, and the multiple relationships it generates, expand the individual’s experience of purpose. In my cases, members described this expansion through language of *freedom* and *care*, framing purpose as something felt and enacted rather than prescribed. Each new project thus became an opportunity for collective reorientation: a way to re-enter and reimagine the shared purpose together. Through this ongoing process, members stayed responsive both to their own lived experience and to shifts in their organisational environment. This fluidity did not dissolve the individual into boundlessness; rather, it required maintaining *porous boundaries* around purpose—boundaries held open through collective inquiry and relationship. Members used their daily work to renew their

relationship with the organisation's purpose and with one another.

Building on Nilsson's (2015:218) insight that positive institutional work is

“embedded in complex intersubjective contexts and cannot be reproduced via a set of fixed boundaries around things like roles, tasks, groups, and purposes; **they can only be reproduced via ongoing inquiry into existing boundaries.**”

This research conceptualises this kind of boundary work as a continuous and formative process. It is *not formless*, but *forming*: a perpetual recalibration of relationships between purpose, practice, and experience.

In contrast, symbolic legitimacy lends itself to external evaluation through visible forms—behaviours, procedures, outputs, and metrics such as attendance, productivity, or measurable participation. Yet these indicators reveal little about how members experience organisational life. How included do they feel? How engaged are they in the process? How connected are they to the purpose that supposedly unites them? As Nilsson (2015:382) argues, “a consistent, mutual, ongoing inquiry into the experiential nature of positive phenomena seems more likely to help maintain an experiential pattern over time.” This inquiry requires continual attention not just to *what* is being done, but to *how* it is being lived together.

Drawing on Bateson's (2016:179) theorising of living systems, these dynamics can be understood as a “perpetual process of positioning and repositioning, calibrating, shifting, and responding to responses within contexts of multiple, simultaneous reactions.” Through such movement, the social field within the organisation deepens and widens. Purpose becomes distributed rather than centralised, extending beyond those with titles or formal authority to include all who engage with the organisation's broader aims.

This extends theorising on the *form trap* (Nilsson, 2015; Thomas et al., 2018; Scheepers & Lakhani, 2020). The form trap describes the tendency to overemphasise a particular behaviour, language, or practice as *the* expression of positive purpose, while neglecting how it is actually experienced. As Nilsson (2015:278) cautions, “even institutional work sincerely intended to maintain positive experiences can slip into a kind of form trap.” New, ostensibly “disruptive” practices can easily reproduce old certainties, drawing on familiar institutional boundaries for comfort. What begins as meaningful inquiry can solidify into ritual performance.

For example, the *development of job descriptions at the Sustainability Hub* which were originally designed to provide support and guidance for staff might be experienced as restrictive and performative rather than transformative. In such cases, the *form* of the practice endures, but the *experiential purpose* is lost. Nilsson (2015:382) warns that even practices strongly associated with inquiry can, when routineised, “be experienced as mechanical or artificial, closing down conversation rather than opening it up.”

No single structure can contain the dynamism of active institutional maintenance. To sustain vitality, organisations must *hold form lightly*, treating practices as experiments rather than fixtures. This does not mean avoiding formalisation—rituals such as the Sustainability Hub’s orientation or weekly check-ins still provide connection, rhythm and coherence—but it changes the evaluative lens. When a practice ceases to embody its purpose, the question becomes: *why?* Are people disengaged, overburdened, or disconnected? The answer lies in the experience itself, not the form. Building on theorists who emphasise institutional work as process (Hampel et al., 2017), these positive institutional practices are best understood as iterative experiments—moments to test and rediscover shared purpose.

Traditional institutional theory assumes that boundaries create predictability and stability in social encounters (Nilsson, 2009). When these boundaries are breached, actors experience disorientation as their sense of the world as “stable, knowable, manageable, and objective” is shaken (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Yet, under an experiential legitimacy lens, stability arises not from fixed boundaries but from *ongoing engagement*. Predictability comes through *purposeful responsiveness* rather than rigid repetition.

As Nilsson (2009:215) writes, “the consistency that made the ensuing practice a practice lies not in the form of interaction, but in the relationship between form and subjective experience.” Instead of competitive hierarchical extractive relationships inherited from NGOization, my Findings reflected “a collaborative spirit of respect, tolerance, openness, sympathy and critical reflection” (Nilsson, 2015:382) that enabled a collective experience of agency inviting multiple perspectives and experiences, developing new mindsets and new meaning creation (Shani & Coghlan, 2021). This builds on the idea of agency as collaborative inquiry (Nilsson, 2015). What endures is the relationship between practice and meaning—how each member explores their own and each others experience and collectively contributes to the unfolding story of the organisation. This emergence runs counter to the stable ideal of the neoliberal institution, yet it is precisely this flux—this

willingness to inquire into the lived experience of purpose—that sustains institutional vitality over time.

Supporting Nilsson’s (2009) assertion that this kind of ‘transboundary’ work does not necessarily mean getting rid of a boundary altogether (although it might), it does mean lessening the boundary’s “boundedness” by expanding it, by “making it more pliable, or making it less bounded” (Nilsson, 2009:136). Organisation members do this by making more space for affective relationships and agency through mutual inquiry. As Nilsson (2009:210) explains “boundaries weren’t erased; they were explored, reinterpreted, and extended or softened” making room for a diversity of experiences. Boundaries are disrupted, loosened, experimented with by organisation members who are connecting with each other and with the organisation’s purpose. In this understanding, (1) *practices become a set of resources* to connect with each other and the organisation’s purpose, rather than static forms, (2) *boundaries become a set of questions* that invite organisation members to engage deeper and to find meaning together towards their shared social purpose.

Below is a table summarising examples of the shift from rigid instrumental boundaries shaped by NGOization on the left, towards more experiential boundaries through positive institutional practices explored on the right-hand side. The rigid boundaries examples are drawn from existing literature on NGOization and the experiential boundaries examples are drawn from empirical evidence and backed by diverse literatures on positive institutional work, agency and care.

TABLE 7: From rigid boundaries to more experiential boundaries

Rigid boundaries	Experiential boundaries
ROLES and ROUTINES (who does what and how)	
• Universalisation of managerial reasoning and dualism between public/work rational-self and private/ personal emotional-self (Waller & Wren, 2021) • Routines limited to narrow tasks/daily activities associated with particular professionalised roles (Nilsson, 2010) • Strict work conditions where intrinsic work qualities (creativity, variation, meaningfulness) are ignored or subordinated to instrumental values (Alvesson, 1987) to meet external requirements (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006)	• Members surface their personal and professional experiences and “learn how to nurture and feel for others, intimately, locally and distally” (Lynch, 2021:63) • Members “attuned to relationships, to place, constantly improvising” (Murphy, 2015) inviting them to step beyond the limits of their job description/daily routines • Encouraging agency in the form of freedom (Freire, 1970, Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), creativity (Hou, 2021) and meaningfulness (Rosso et al, 2010)

RELATIONSHIPS (who connects to whom)	
• Prioritisation of efficiency and competition between members • Patriarchal models of ego-led authoritarian leadership and reinforcement of strong hierarchical relationships rooted in professionalisation between expert/non-expert staff members (Hollway, 1984, Fischer, 1990) • Suppression of engagement preventing potentially important negotiations of personal identities, knowledge and values (Deetz, 2003; Deetz & Simpson, 2004)	• Understanding relationships as “experientially positive in and of themselves and generative” (Nilsson, 2010) • Prioritising relationships that are ‘life giving’ (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) working with a collaborative spirit (Nilsson, 2015) • Collaborative nature provides for integration of multiple perspectives, enables discoveries, which trigger mind shifts, development of new mindsets, and new meaning creation (Shani & Coghlan, 2021)
RESOURCES (who decides and who gets what)	
• Centralisation of power and resources, and managerial dominance (Gianni et al., 2021; Lang, 2022; Ana, 2023) • Prioritisation of strict ‘money code’ (external donors or internal hierarchies) as a yardstick for values and individuals and collective decision-making (Klein, 2000) • Views relationships as primarily means for the exchange of fixed resources	• Recognising mutually interconnected, interdependent, and often unequal relations (Hankivsky, 2014) life and how people are relational and interdependent” (Lynch et al., 2021) • Operating under an ethic of <i>other-centeredness</i> normatively driven with basic well-being of another as their direct end (Lynch et al., 2021)
MEANING (what is the purpose of the work and for whom)	
• People and institutions have narrowly defined functional purpose (Nilsson, 2019) • Predictable forms create a stable, knowable, manageable reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967)	• People and institutions more responsive to the ‘whole person’ (Nilsson, 2019) and more reflexive about the needs and opportunities in the ‘whole system’ (Nilsson, 2019) rooted in the wider social purpose outside ‘boundaries’ of the organisation itself (Nilsson, 2009) • Predictability comes from continual purposeful engagement and agency • Organisational becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) as org members collectively reweave practices in response to new experiences

Below, the Feminist Legal Clinic serves as a counter-example to illustrate how entrenched deeply professional and patriarchal norms can inhibit the permeability of institutional boundaries. The case highlights how efforts toward experiential legitimacy can be constrained by internalised hierarchies, revealing that institutional disruption is not uniformly emancipatory but contextually contingent.

Example: Feminist Legal Clinic - Rigid Boundaries from Internalised Patriarchy

The Feminist Legal Clinic illustrated how attachment to specific objective forms and professional logics can produce firmer institutional boundaries, leaving less space for

alternative ways of relating. This example expands on Zhao and Wry's (2016) exploration of the invisible power of internalised patriarchy—the ways in which patriarchal assumptions shape what actions and behaviours are deemed acceptable and legitimate within organisational life. The Feminist Legal Clinic presents a distinct case: an all-women organisation which on the surface might appear to neutralise patriarchy, yet where the internal culture remained structured by deeply embedded patriarchal logics.

At the Clinic, patriarchal assumptions about whose voice carries authority were inseparable from the professional logic of law itself. Legal practice, as Henderson (1991) argues, is historically rooted in patriarchal norms that define propriety and competence in narrow, codified terms. These norms were reproduced, often unconsciously, through the Clinic's deep structure—its habitual ways of organising, communicating, and valuing expertise. Members' experiences revealed that professional identity and status continued to mediate legitimacy. Lawyers were seen as the natural custodians of expertise and, consequently, as the most legitimate decision-makers. Even in moments of apparent inclusivity, such as collective budget discussions, deference to professional hierarchy persisted, and authority gravitated toward those with legal training.

Although the organisation had introduced several practices aimed at sharing power—such as participatory planning sessions—these efforts were frequently undermined by informal cliques of qualified lawyers who held disproportionate influence over decision-making. As a result, many of the Clinic's hidden rules and norms remained anchored in patriarchal assumptions about knowledge and authority. Professionalism thus became an unconscious gatekeeping device that maintained boundaries rather than opening them, reinforcing patterns of legitimacy that were formal rather than relational.

This example underscores that not all organisations experience or respond to positive institutional work in the same way. As Ringel, Hiller, and Zietsma (2018:11) remind us, the permeability of institutional boundaries is an empirical variable: “differentiating between fields, organisations, individual actors and the institutional logics which operate within and across them allows for a nuanced take on permeability.” In the Clinic, the boundaries between professional and non-professional roles were comparatively rigid, limiting opportunities for transformational agency. This rigidity also makes visible the mechanisms through which deep structure constrains relational practice and experiential legitimacy.

Empirically, this case reveals how deep structure—shaped by the interplay of societal logics such as patriarchy and professional logics such as legal rationality—directly affects both individual and collective experience. The Clinic’s methods of practice and underlying logic combined to reinforce the very hierarchies it sought to challenge. Even where members possessed the critical language to identify inequality, this awareness did not necessarily translate into changed practice. Lawyers at the Clinic often acknowledged that colleagues in non-legal roles had less voice.

As feminist institutionalist Mackay (2014:566) observes, even actors who attempt to experiment with new institutional forms

“are likely to fall back on authoritative modes—firmly anchored and recognisably so—which tend to be older, more traditional, and hegemonically masculinised rules, dominant norms of appropriateness... and ways of doing things.”

This pattern was evident at the Clinic: despite genuine intention and experimentation, members frequently defaulted to what felt professionally “appropriate.” In effect, the symbolic legitimacy conferred by legal professionalism continued to dominate, shaping behaviour and experience even within a self-declared feminist space.

Nevertheless, glimpses of *experiential legitimacy* emerged in small relational acts that disrupted hierarchy. Participants described moments when senior lawyers listened differently, when the boundaries between “admin” and “advocate” softened into mutual recognition, or when care replaced procedure in navigating conflict. These were significant instances where purpose became felt rather than prescribed—where feminist ethics of care briefly unsettled the legal logic of order and control.

The Feminist Legal Clinic thus offers a textured illustration of how the permeability of institutional boundaries varies within organisations and how this variation shapes members’ experience and agency. It highlights both the fragility and the necessity of experiential legitimacy: how deeply entrenched professional logics can stifle the relational experimentation required for institutional vitality, and how, conversely, small moments of recognition and care can momentarily restore it.

Towards Institutional disruption

In this discussion section, I explored the ways in which hegemonic institutions (using the

case of NGOization) and associated certain interests and power dynamics, are taken for granted and assumed as the norm. They shape the deep structure of organisations and consequently organisation members' experiences. I then explore the ways that the institutional boundaries of what is accepted are disrupted as organisation members experience deeper more purposeful relationships with each other and their organisation's purpose, making boundaries less bounded as they experiment with who does what and how, who connects to whom, who decides and gets what, and what is the purpose of the work. *This analysis points to positive institutional work as a generative pattern for organisations to disrupt the NGOization status quo as it impacts affective relations inside social purpose organisations.* To do this, I deliberately drew on a more complex understanding of power because "it is not about creating well-managed organisations that maintain the status quo, but *working to transform the relations of power* in society, and to *create alternate models of power* within their own structures" (Batliwala, 2010:16).

To understand the generative role of experiential legitimacy in positive institutional work, it is necessary to confront the fact that the current models of organising, through existing societal and professional logics and deep cultures, do not promote positive affective relations and agency inside organisations, but instead often reproduce injustice and inequity. This confrontation is the first step towards transformation. But *surfacing power is not sufficient* to disrupt invisible walls erected by hegemonic institutions, the experiential quality of organisations requires *active maintenance* through practice. Instead of seeing institutional disruption as punctuating the equilibrium that institutions attempt to maintain (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), this research invites an alternative theory: through maintaining experiential legitimacy disruption is enabled as part of the stabilising project.

Although these dynamics are situated within particular organisations, they operate at the institutional level of meaning and legitimacy. The practices through which members sustain coherence, negotiate norms, and renew purpose are not only organisational routines but forms of institutional work that reproduce or challenge field-level logics. In this sense, experiential legitimacy functions as a mechanism linking lived organisational experience to broader processes of institutional maintenance and change. Joining Ashforth & Humphrey (2022), it explores practices and ways of being that invite organisation members into a perpetual dance that fosters a more dynamic institutional equilibrium towards a more caring institutional system.

5.3 From Relational Practice to Moral Inquiry

“Care is difficult work, but it is the work that sustains life” (Toronto, 1991:117)

Finally, and importantly, I turn to the moral and political significance of this research. This section explores the moral underpinnings of positive institutional work and experiential agency in social purpose organisations. Drawing on feminist politics of care theories, I argue that positive institutional work carries the potential “to trouble power relations, imagine better worlds, and work to achieve them” (Ferguson, 2017:283).

As this research unfolded, it became clear that my questions required not only empirical attention but axiological reflection. In line with recent institutional theorists (Jepperson & Meyer, 2021), this study re-centres meaning-making as a moral and political practice. It reignites concern for the value systems that organisations embody, situating institutional work within broader struggles over purpose, power, and care (Lawrence et al., 2011). While institutional theory has advanced our understanding of how actors create and sustain institutions, several scholars have cautioned that its transformative potential remains under-realised, detached from its moral and political roots (Nilsson, 2015; Cloutier & Langley, 2013; Shadnam & Lawrence, 2011; Creed et al., 2010; Marti & Fernandez, 2013). This research re-politicises new institutionalism by illuminating how positive institutional work functions as a moral project within social purpose organisations.

My interest lies in how social purpose organisations *live* their change goals—in how they disrupt the experience of hegemonic institutions from within. Following Nilsson (2015), I take a critical view of ‘social purpose,’ understanding it as an inherently moral orientation concerned with the distribution of power, resources, and recognition. Questions of who decides, who connects, and who benefits lie at the heart of their work. By seeking to transform these distributions, social purpose organisations carry an ethical obligation to interrogate the moral foundations of their own practices. The disruption taking place through positive institutional work is therefore not disruption for its own sake. As Brown (1995, in McNay, 2016:46) warns, “when resistance goes nowhere in particular, has no inherent attachments, and hails no particular vision, resistance becomes an effect of and reaction to power, not an arrogation of it.” The kind of disruption observed in my cases is purposeful—aimed at realising social change rooted in different meanings and more caring ways of relating.

Existing theory on positive institutional work has largely focused on the practices that encourage experiential legitimacy. The findings here show that such work is grounded in an *ethic and practice of care*. This extends the conversation in institutional theory by making visible the politics of care and the affective realities that sustain it. Focusing analytical attention on these affective relations “incorporates what matters to people in their relational lives into the analysis of institutions and systems” (Lynch et al., 2021:62). I join care theorists such as Raghuram, Madge, and Noxolo (2009) in urging scholars to reflect on the world-making effects of their theories—to ask, as Slater (2016:116) puts it, “what worlds flourish and what worlds are diminished” through them.

Joan Tronto (2013) observes that under late capitalism we live within systems that fail to care, while Fraser (2016a:31) adds that capitalist societies treat the “capacities available for social reproduction”—the maintenance of social bonds—as if they were infinite, requiring neither attention nor replenishment. This assumption underpins a moral economy that extracts care while devaluing it. In the organisational realm, critics of NGOization have noted how professionalisation and managerialism similarly erode caring relations, delegitimising solidarity and mutual concern in favour of competitive performance (Dolšák & Prakash, 2022; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2018; Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2018). Neoliberalism’s cultural dominance (Leyva, 2018) and its institutionalisation of self-referential individualism (Kentikelenis & Babb, 2019) have reshaped how we imagine institutions and the moral norms that govern them.

In response, Fisher and Tronto (1991:40) call for a politics of care as a central ethic:

“Caring includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible... That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”

Care stands in stark contrast to the individualism of liberalism (Lynch et al., 2021). It offers a radical basis for rethinking human nature, human needs, and how democratic decision-making might distribute power more equitably (Tronto, 1993, 2005, 2013, 2019). This research, like other feminist projects, does not stop at critique; it takes the next step “to develop alternative value systems” (Benschop, 2021:2).

Across my fieldwork, I saw how these organisations recognised their situatedness within wider social systems and their responsibility for justice, equality, solidarity, and care

(Benschop, 2021). Within a politics of care framing, positive institutional work becomes a *moral act*—an effort to unmake and remake institutions toward more caring forms of relation (Woodly et al., 2021). Anthropologist Povinelli (2010:19–20) reminds us that “to care is not a socially divested action.” Care is a claim, a small theoretical gesture, “an argument about what a good life is and how such a good life comes into being.” Through this lens, caring becomes both moral inquiry and institutional practice: a way of knowing and remaking the world.

Positive Institutional Work as an Ethically Charged Practice

“We have fallen out of relationship with our institutions.” (Bateson, 2016)

This research responds to care theorists’ call for closer connection between care practices and theory (Hankivsky, 2014). The empirical evidence from my case organisations demonstrates how positive institutional work cultivated more purposeful, caring relations among members—showing that institutional maintenance can be an ethically charged practice. As Lynch et al. (2021:63) describe,

“Ethical dispositions are learned experientially by doing and being loving, caring, and solidaristic, and by seeing the harm the absence of these dispositions has on humanity, other species, and the environment.”

Traditional notions of social change often treat freedom, equality, and justice as measurable outcomes. Yet such framings overlook the experiential dimensions of organisational life—*how care is enacted in the everyday*. As Syedullah (in Woodly et al., 2021:24) notes, “we have been conditioned to know justice, not as a process, but as a place.” The organisations in this study show that justice can be lived as a relational process—embodied and continually maintained through care.

In recognising that humans live within “affective care-relational realities” (Tronto, 1993:134), this research aligns with the politics of care tradition, which insists that these realities extend beyond the private sphere and infuse all areas of social life, including work. Affective relations, as Lynch et al. (2021:54) describe, have “no clear boundaries, and no career structure; [they are] governed by [their own] ethical-relational logic and cannot be completed in the measurable time that both bureaucratisation and commodification require” (see also Folbre & Bittman, 2004; Mol, 2008). It is “not a matter of doing politics differently,” but, as The Invisible Committee (2018, in Woodly et al., 2021:16) suggest, “of doing

something different from politics altogether.” Within this framing, positive institutional work becomes “an ethically and politically charged practice” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011), one that operationalises care towards liberatory ends—“despite, through, and alongside unequal power structures, by focusing attention on the work of caring” (Hobart & Kneese, 2020:7).

Recognising care as foundational redefines what institutional work can be. In this sense, positive institutional work *feeds the daily practice of being human* (Woodly et al., 2021:21). It directs institutional theory to reconsider what it calls the “micro-processes” of organisational life—not as marginal details but as the moral infrastructure of social change.

Social purpose organisations, by their very nature, carry an ethical obligation to question how they transform the world—inside and out. Experiencing care as a form of relating should not be conflated with comfort or positivity (Murphy, 2015), a trap that institutional work could easily fall into. The aim of positive institutional work is not to create happy organisations, but to cultivate moral vitality—to “trouble power relations, imagine better worlds, and work to achieve them” (Ferguson, 2017:283). I share with these theorists a cautious hope: that care, even when entangled with inequality, remains a generative site of resistance and renewal (Hobart & Kneese, 2020).

Here, the concept of *workplace dignity* (Hodson, 2001; Sayer, 2007; Gibson et al., 2023) provides a resonant parallel. These scholars examine how individuals sustain meaning, respect, and moral worth within hierarchical systems. Hodson (2001) highlights the agency involved in defending dignity under constraint, while Sayer (2007) underscores the moral dimension of everyday work—the striving for recognition and self-respect as a form of resistance. This research extends such insights into the context of social purpose organisations, showing that experiential legitimacy enables members to preserve coherence and agency amid institutional pressures. Both dignity and experiential legitimacy rest on the same moral ground: that value, purpose, and humanity are enacted through relation rather than structure. In the cases examined, practices of reflection, attentiveness, and mutual care functioned as quiet defences of dignity.

This focus on care, dignity, and moral vitality reframes institutional maintenance as an ongoing ethical project. It situates institutional work within the texture of lived experience, where vulnerability, conflict, and compassion intertwine. Following McNay (2016:45), I align with feminist theorists who see institutions not as fixed structures but as “open-ended and

experimental forms of politicised ethics.” Norms, in this view, are not only instruments of domination but potential sources of meaning, pleasure, and care. There can be no blueprint for emancipation, only continuous experimentation with more caring ways of being together. By connecting the moral and experiential dimensions of institutional life, this research interprets positive institutional work as a caring, ethically charged practice—one that sustains vitality by bringing institutions back into relationship with life itself.

5.4 Main contributions to Literature

This research contributes to institutional theory by bringing empirical, theoretical, and methodological advances into conversation through the lens of experiential legitimacy and experiential agency. Taken together, these contributions do not prescribe a single pathway or set of necessary conditions for institutional transformation. Instead, they highlight the generative interplay between experience, power, and care through which organisational members *co-create* legitimacy and vitality and how positive institutional work can transform inherited logics into more caring and equitable institutional forms.

The table below outlines the main contributions I have made towards the existing literature:

TABLE 8: Summary of Main Contributions to Literature

Type of Contribution	Specific Contribution	Explanation and Empirical Link
Empirical: Identifying relational practices that sustain experiential legitimacy	Towards an experiential understanding of agency in institutions	Drawing on Nilsson’s (2015) conception of <i>agency as inquiry</i> , this study theorises experiential agency as the iterative collective process through which actors connect social purpose goals to their everyday experiences through positive institutional work. Empirical evidence from the three case studies demonstrates that organisation members experience agency as embodied, situated, and relational (McNay, 2016): embodied through the <i>visual, material, and felt nature</i> of organisational life (Heney, 2020); situated through personal and social histories shaping action (Heney, 2020); and relational through dialogic interaction in which members co-produce one another as human beings (Crean, 2018). These findings advance an experiential account of agency grounded in lived organisational practice.
	Contributing to the transformative potential of	Moving beyond a view of institutional work as maintaining stability, this research demonstrates active institutional maintenance through practices that disrupt and reconfigure institutional boundaries. Empirical examples show how

	positive institutional work	members challenge <i>deep structural rules</i> governing who does what and how (<i>role and routine boundaries</i>), who connects with whom (<i>relationship boundaries</i>), and who receives what (<i>resource boundaries</i>). These relational disruptions reveal alternative modes of relating inside organisations (Benschop, 2021) that strengthen collective purpose and experiential legitimacy (Nilsson, 2015).
Theoretical: Linking experiential legitimacy to institutional vitality	Contributing to a greater understanding of power in institutional work	Extending Hampel et al. (2017), this study offers a multiscalar conceptualisation of power linking macro-level hegemonic institutions with micro-level experience. It connects <i>societal logics</i> —widely shared beliefs that sustain dominance (Zhao & Wry, 2016)—to <i>deep structures</i> (Rao et al., 2015) that shape daily practice. Empirical illustrations of NGOization expose how neoliberal and patriarchal norms become embedded in organisational operations (Abu-Assab et al., 2020) and how positive institutional work can reveal and challenge them. By situating organisations within broader social relations (Batiwala, 2011), the study explains why certain ideas and arrangements become dominant (Thelen, 2003; Chappell, 2010; Findlay, 2012).
	Linking experiential agency to institutional vitality	Building on Gehman's (2020) notion of <i>institutional vitality</i> , the study shows that vitality depends on the continuous renewal of organisational boundaries through reflexive, care-oriented practice. Experiential agency thus becomes a dynamic source of institutional strength rather than a by-product of conformity.
	Towards more caring institutions	Building on Tronto (1993, 2013), the findings situate care as an institutional principle that re-politicises positive institutional work and connects it to moral inquiry. Caring institutions are thus understood as affective, political, and experiential systems. In dialogue with Tronto (1993, 2013), the findings re-politicise positive institutional work as a moral and affective practice. Organisations are understood as <i>affective care-relational realities</i> in which care, power, and purpose circulate through everyday relations. This orientation reaffirms institutions as socio-political systems that embody meaning and moral concern (Jepperson & Meyer, 2021).
Methodological: Integrating feminist reflexivity in institutional analysis	Feminist reflexive methodology	The study demonstrates how reflexivity—attending to emotion, power, and embodiment—can illuminate the moral and affective dimensions of institutional life often omitted from traditional analysis. This approach makes visible the affective and moral dimensions of institutional life often omitted from traditional organisational research and offers a pathway for future inquiry centred on experience, care, and relational ethics. This provides a methodological pathway for future institutional research centred on experience and care.

5.5 Limitations of the research

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, although the study aimed to identify rich case studies that spanned significant contextual scope, case studies are inherently limited in their generalisability. By providing a thick description of the case studies in question, I hope that readers and researchers building on my findings will be able to judge applicability to their own contexts.

Second, as a qualitative study of agency and experience, the research timeline and data collection methods were insufficient to document systematic change in relationships and overall institutional change. Therefore, the research relied on participant reflections of past experiences and relationships, which were (by their nature) influenced by present orientations. The research protocol was designed to provide opportunities to augment these reflections (in particular, focus groups and observation of present interaction between participants), however it is acknowledged that these historical personal narratives will always be shaped by time.

Finally, the subjective nature of the study may prove limiting in that participants were asked to interpret their own experiences using language to bring forward feelings and experiences that are often held subconsciously. This is a difficult exercise, particularly when subject to time limitations. The research tried to overcome these limitations by: spending significant time with research participants to establish rapport and trust prior to delving into experiential conversations; presenting findings back to organisations at different points in the research process to collectively reflect on experiences; using multiple data collection formats, including extensive participant observation; and using archival data to increase the reliability of self-reported interview data.

5.6 Praxis implications for Social Purpose Organisations

As I wondered how to make this research useful for the work we do in the world, so that it does not collect dust, but finds purpose, I was asked: *How do we make this a legitimate conversation in the normal course of work?* I'm hoping this research inspires thinking more deeply about what it means to invite experience into the course of everyday life. This work is not just once a year at a retreat, or 'when there is time', rather it asks for a kind of agency that is deeply personal, deeply political. This work lives in asking the question: 'what are we paying attention to?' In social purpose organisations I worked in previously, it was evident

that we knew how to make changes to laws and to mobilise hundreds, but we didn't make time to ask how we are relating to each other. This research was a reminder that how we relate to each other IS our politics, therefore it is necessary to ask the experiential questions. Just like we would ask - what are the literacy numbers or did we win the case? - we would also ask experiential questions like - how did you feel about the project or how did you feel about delivering the case?

This research acknowledges that living our social purpose means leaning into when people feel most connected to the organisation - celebration, connection, gratitude, relationship. These moments become clues into another world and other possibilities, though they don't blind us to the spaces of incongruence. From the case studies it was obvious that surfacing subjective experiences, finding ways to commune and be in dialogue together were common practices, but at the same time there was no magic formula. Rather what I could taste were the quality of the relationships, the vitality of the social field, across the whole organisation.

Practically, this means legitimising a certain kind of conversation and a certain way of relating in the day-to-day. This relational quality then seeps into the fabric of the organisation. It means continuously inviting people to tune into this particular group of people, in this particular time and space. This requires finding the collective courage to surface and be curious about power and how it plays out, even if the external world doesn't see the work as important. If we can stay curious individually and collectively, away from habitual reactions of what is comfortable and predictable, every moment becomes an opportunity for shared inquiry. Instead of restricting our imagination to what justice and equality look like on paper, can we explore what justice might feel like and look like in this time, place and in these bodies, offering new arrangements and opening up new possibilities.

But then how do we not fall into complacency? I loved the idea of a perpetual dance, as this work invites every individual to tune into what is happening, not necessarily how good or bad they are feeling but an awareness of others and their sense of agency, not just individually but relationally. In times of change, shifting international funding landscapes and global pandemics like COVID-19, organisations have the potential to fall back on what is familiar and safe. These include hierarchical models of practice and more symbolic forms of organising because the 'old' has provided a repertoire of tried and tested techniques for

tackling problems. These pressures inhibit the capacity of organisation members to act in collaborative and caring ways through practices that connect purpose to experience. Positive institutional work, as an ethically charged practice of care, invites dialogic practices to deal with conflict and disagreement, with organisation members who are more purposive, reflective and creative.

5.7 Future Research Directions

The scholarly conversations in which this study is situated are vibrant and active. This study opens space for a new generation of research into how experience, power, and care animate institutional life.

TABLE 9: Summary of Future Research Directions

Experience Inquiry as	Future studies could deepen the <i>experiential turn</i> in institutional theory by drawing on phenomenological and embodied approaches (Heney, 2020; Kelly-Thompson et al., 2023). Such work might examine how organisational actors <i>sense, interpret, and co-create meaning</i> through daily practice—treating experience itself as a generative method of institutional inquiry.
Relational Boundaries of Legitimacy	While this study privileged internal perspectives, legitimacy is relational and negotiated (Nilsson, 2015; Thomas et al., 2018). Future research could follow the movement of experiential legitimacy across organisational boundaries—between staff, partners, funders, and communities—to illuminate the <i>ecologies of care</i> that sustain coherence and purpose in social purpose organisations. This might include other considerations for experiential legitimacy including, for example, values, networks, structures.
Institutional Work from the Margins	Scholars have noted that institutional research often centres powerful actors and global-North contexts (Marti & Mair, 2009; Lang, 2022). There is considerable scope to study positive institutional work at the margins, especially in organisations navigating NGOization and intersecting inequalities (Abu-Assab et al., 2020; Batliwala, 2011) enriching the understanding of how vitality is generated under constraint.
Cross-Sector and Temporal Extensions	Comparative studies could explore whether profit-driven or hybrid organisations can cultivate experiential legitimacy without instrumentalising care (Tronto, 2013; Gehman, 2020). Longitudinal and field-level research might trace how <i>positive institutional work practices travel, stabilise, or decay over time</i> (Delmestri & Goodrick, 2016; Ashforth & Humphrey, 2022), revealing the temporal dynamics of institutional vitality.
Practice-oriented theory building: design for relational infrastructure	The notion of “care infrastructure” and “institutional vitality” could inspire applied, practice-based research in organisational design and change. Future projects could prototype relational infrastructures for care—exploring what organisational forms, rhythms, or rituals foster experiential legitimacy. This would bring the theoretical model into conversation with practitioners and

	organisational architects (Nilsson, 2019; Jones, 2022). What kinds of structures best sustain care and vitality in complex systems?
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Collectively, these directions position the experiential nature of institutional life as an emerging field of inquiry—one that studies not only how institutions function, but how they *feel, adapt, and care*. Future research is invited to pursue relational, feminist, and affective methodologies that keep open a central question: *How do institutions stay alive through the quality of relationship they sustain?*

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUDING REMARKS

I began this research in awe of the organisations brave enough to open up their worlds to me. My respect only deepened as I observed their courage and care for one another. I realised that to understand experiential agency is to experience it - and thanks to these organisations experience it I did. In the face of burn out (Cox, 2011; Horn, 2020), economic crisis, and increasing polarisation (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019), these organisations continue to foster a certain quality of relating and creating. Positive institutional work rooted in a politics of care offers a way forward. Inspired by Slater (2016), instead of social purpose organisations asking, 'what can we do?', care theorists encourage the question, 'what have we been caring for?', or 'what are we paying attention to?' (brown, 2019).

This work is hard. It first involves getting organisation members in relationship with each other and their shared purpose through practice so that they experience that purpose in their bodies (embodied), their minds (situated) and their hearts collectively (relational). Through these experiences organisation members engage deeper with each other and their shared purpose consciously stepping outside of their established roles towards shared inquiry. This involves not just disrupting how they do their work internally but it also increases their capacity to see their institutional structures to disrupt them further. To overlook these everyday practices that make up the everyday experience for these people, and the relationships that make them possible, is to misunderstand the nature of positive institutional work in social purpose organisations: why people join them, why people stay and what they actually pay attention to.

As we are living in an era of growing polarization (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019), my research suggests that organisations can consciously and deliberately embody disruptive and transformative practices that lead to more purposeful, caring and innovative

workplaces, and this in turn leads to an improved capacity of organisation members to reflect, learn and willfully create, to ultimately live the social change they are striving for. The construction and maintenance of experiential legitimacy is not merely for better internal social relations, it is the political work of building more just, affective organisations. Reflecting on this work I'm inspired by Paddock's question, "How can we become a living expression of the change we seek?" (Gathering Report, 2019:3). Ultimately, small intimate moments of care can shift deep structural dynamics as we shift our attention to our experience of agency and our quality of relating in any given ecosystem.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Excerpt from the zine created for Feminist Legal Clinic

A celebration of ***, a social justice, feminist, legal organisation in South Africa. A place that has taught me so much about what brings different feminisms to life.

“The Giving Field”

The Monday morning meeting goes something like this.

It's a fresh new week. Mid-morning, people slowly trickle through the narrow dark corridors to the 'conference room' at the furthest end of the building. Everyone gathers around the large conference table in the middle of the room claiming seats at random. Those who can't fit bring in chairs and creating an outer circle. It's a tight squeeze, but instead of overcrowded it feels like a women's auspicious gathering.

A war room from another era.

The starkness of the white walls broken by the rows of legal books, soldiers lining the back wall. A reminder of the legacies of old white men that haunt this work and this place. The room alive with chatter and quick laughter, a deep sense of ease as each woman takes her seat.

Getting down to the business of the day – an agenda of announcements, invitations, possibilities - the normalcy of everyday organisational life.

Connecting, reflecting, storming, together.

This feels different. Each agenda item is shared and considered with equal attention. Voices are quick but relaxed and punctuated with laughter. There is a playfulness to the discussion, a sense of familiarity. Input comes from every angle. Intense debates, spitfire sarcasm, earnest pleas, considered insights - raising the temperature of the room.

What is the purpose? What are we passionate about? How do we want to experience it? What are our fears?

Sometimes it's a simple yes; sometimes a simple no. But each matter is given its due attention, thoroughly explored through the different bodies and minds present. Each offers a deep dive, a new invitation to show up, a new way to connect with each other and the work. A gift.

Appendix 2: Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Open-ended questionnaire	Theme addressed
Question Set 1: Institution, the individual and collective identity	Used to locate the interviewee in their institutional context
How and why did you find yourself working for ORG?	
Had you heard about ORG before coming to work here? What did you imagine your work at ORG would be?	Institutional work and symbolic legitimacy - used to understand the work that the organisation builds its legitimacy upon and the social goals underlying
Which external actors/power dynamics do you think influence this mission the most?	Institutional Logics - used to understand the hegemonic institutions and professional logics affecting positive institutional work
What do you understand is the purpose of ORG?	Symbolic/internal legitimacy - used to understand how the purpose of org is understood within org to compare with what org says it does in the world
Question Set 2: When do you feel most connected to your work?	Practices - exploration of specific examples/instances of when org members felt most connected to the purpose of the organisation and the most fulfilled
A time/instance when you personally felt/experienced the social purpose? When you felt connected and in flow?	
What would help to create that <i>dynamic more consistently</i> /make these types of practices easier?	
Are there broader organisational processes/practices that you think exemplify/highlight the orgs purpose	
What were the challenges? Were there contradictions or incoherencies in peoples experiences?	
Question Set 3: A time/instance when this didn't happen or even worse was oppressive? Disconnected	Exploring power relations affecting positive institutional work
How was this resolved/not resolved?	
What role did the individuals and their identities play in assisting/resisting the purpose?	
Whose voices aren't heard in the organisation? Who is missing? Why?	

Follow up questions (where necessary)
How would you suggest we engage your team?
Any documentation/engagements/stories you suggest I take a look at?
Picture/photo that describes/represents the organisation to you?

Experiential Guiding Follow-up Questions for each topic (where necessary)

Make personal concrete	Tell me about a time when that happened
Dig into organisation dimensions	Why is that true? What are the organisational conditions that make this possible?
Focus on specific practices	Behaviours/beliefs/attitudes/structures/rituals/symbols
Consider long-term consistency	How has this changed over time? What would help to create that dynamic more consistently?
Consider intention	To what degree are people conscious about the intention of the practice? Do they think/talk about it explicitly together? How do they create that dynamic on purpose?
	Is this different from experiences in other contexts?
Inquire into the negative	Tell me a time when you have struggled? When you felt frustrated?
Go past verbalisations	If you had to describe that experience in one word (metaphor/picture) what would it be?

Appendix 3: Sample of Cross-Case Quotations Supporting Aggregated Themes

Aggregate Theme	Organisation	Supporting Quotation
Practices		
Surfacing Subjective Experience	Sustainability Hub	We started each meeting with check-ins, just to see how people are doing, how they are arriving into the space.
	Feminist Legal Clinic	Sometimes it feels like the check-ins are the only time we can be real about what's happening for us as women here.
	Women's Empowerment Project	In the debriefs, we talk about how the cases make us feel – it helps to keep going.
Communing as Whole Persons	Sustainability Hub	We cook together every Friday; it's how we remind ourselves that we're more than our roles.
	Feminist Legal Clinic	The tea breaks are sacred here – that's when you can exhale and remember we're all human.
	Women's Empowerment Project	We dance when the week ends. That's how we shake off the heaviness.
Dialoguing around Purpose and Meaning	Sustainability Hub	We ask, 'Why are we doing this?' often. It's our way of checking if the purpose still feels right.
	Feminist Legal Clinic	Our meetings are not just about tasks – we debate what justice means here.
	Women's Empowerment Project	Sometimes we stop mid-meeting to ask, 'Is this still true to what we believe in?'
Capabilities		
Purposivity	Sustainability Hub	Everyone here knows why they are doing this work – it connects back to their life stories.
	Feminist Legal Clinic	Purpose is political for us. It's tied to being feminist lawyers in a system that resists that.
	Women's Empowerment Project	My purpose is shaped by my own survival. I work here to make sure other women have a voice.
Reflexivity	Sustainability Hub	I've learnt to stop and ask: why am I reacting like this? What's being touched in me?
	Feminist Legal	We reflect on our positionality as feminists – where our privilege

	Clinic	shows up, where our silence does too.
	Women's Empowerment Project	The counselling training forces you to look at yourself – it's not easy, but it changes you.
Creative Will	Sustainability Hub	We can experiment here. No one punishes failure; it's how we learn.
	Feminist Legal Clinic	We find creative ways to speak truth to power – sometimes through art, sometimes through policy.
	Women's Empowerment Project	Change starts with me. If I can't live it at home, I can't expect others to do it out there.

Appendix 4: Case Study Organisation Consent Letter

Dear DIRECTOR and HEAD OF OPERATIONS,

My intention is to carry out a research project at the **ORGANISATION**, as part of a doctoral degree in management studies with the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation, Graduate School of Business at the University of Cape Town.

The focus of this research is to work with social purpose organisations to explore and to understand how they live out their values and social purpose, focusing on the internal organisational connections and experiences that take place on a daily basis. This includes explorations of:

- The relationship between the mission and values of the organisation and the experience of members;
- The nature of peoples experiences with the organisation (personally and/or collectively);
- Practices and processes that explore how people experience their work, their relationships with each other, and their own personal development.

Over the next two years I aim to investigate individual and collective experiences of **ORG's** social purpose and work. This research builds on and develops the work being done in wider civil society exploring how to build more just, inclusive social justice organisations from the inside out.

My data collection methods include some or all of the following: interviews, story-telling, photographs, observations, and internal and external documentation. This research is voluntary and I intend to engage with **ORG's** staff carefully and to collaborate on which methods would be most appropriate for different data gathering and also how the organisation would like to receive the findings.

I guarantee confidentiality of information as I am very conscious of the sensitivity of this nature of research. If I intend to use information that is any way sensitive, I will seek the permission of the originator before using it. There will also be total confidentiality of interviewees and I will not name the organisation without permission. I would be grateful for your permission and support.

Warmest regards,

Ella Scheepers

Appendix 5: Summary List of Interview Participants

Interview no	Actor type
Organisation 1 - Sustainability Hub	
1	Former leadership
2	Support team
3	Project Coordinator
4	Support team
5	Support team
6	Support team
7	Project coordinator
8	Community team
9	Support team
10	Research & teaching
11	Project coordinator
12	Project coordinator
13	Facilities team
14	Communications team
15	Former leadership team
	Focus group farm team
	Focus group hospitalities team
	Focus group children's team
Organisation 2 - Feminist Legal Clinic	
1	Communications team
2	Finance team
3	Paralegal
4	Lawyer
5	Paralegal
6	Lawyer
7	Lawyer
8	Lawyer
9	Administrative and office support team
10	Administrative and office support team
11	Director/Lawyer
12	Administrative and office support team
	Focus group interns

	Focus group lawyers
Organisation 3 - Women's Empowerment Project	
1	Operations team member
2	Leadership
3	Counselling team member
4	Advocacy team member
5	Finance team member
6	Communication team member
7	Training and development team member
8	Counselling team member
9	Counselling team member
10	Former leadership
11	Volunteer team member
12	Former leadership
13	Sewing Project member
14	Training and development team
	Focus group technical team
	Focus group Counselling team Khayelitsha
	Focus group Counselling team Athlone
Sense-making Interviews	
1	Organisational development practitioner
2	Feminist Organisational development practitioner
3	Organisational development practitioner
4	Organisational development practitioner
5	Feminist Activist
6	Feminist Donor
7	Leader in SPO
8	Feminist Organisational development practitioner
9	Leader in SPO
10	Feminist Donor
11	Feminist Activist
12	Feminist Academic
13	Feminist Academic
14	Organisational development practitioner
15	Activist Organisational development practitioner

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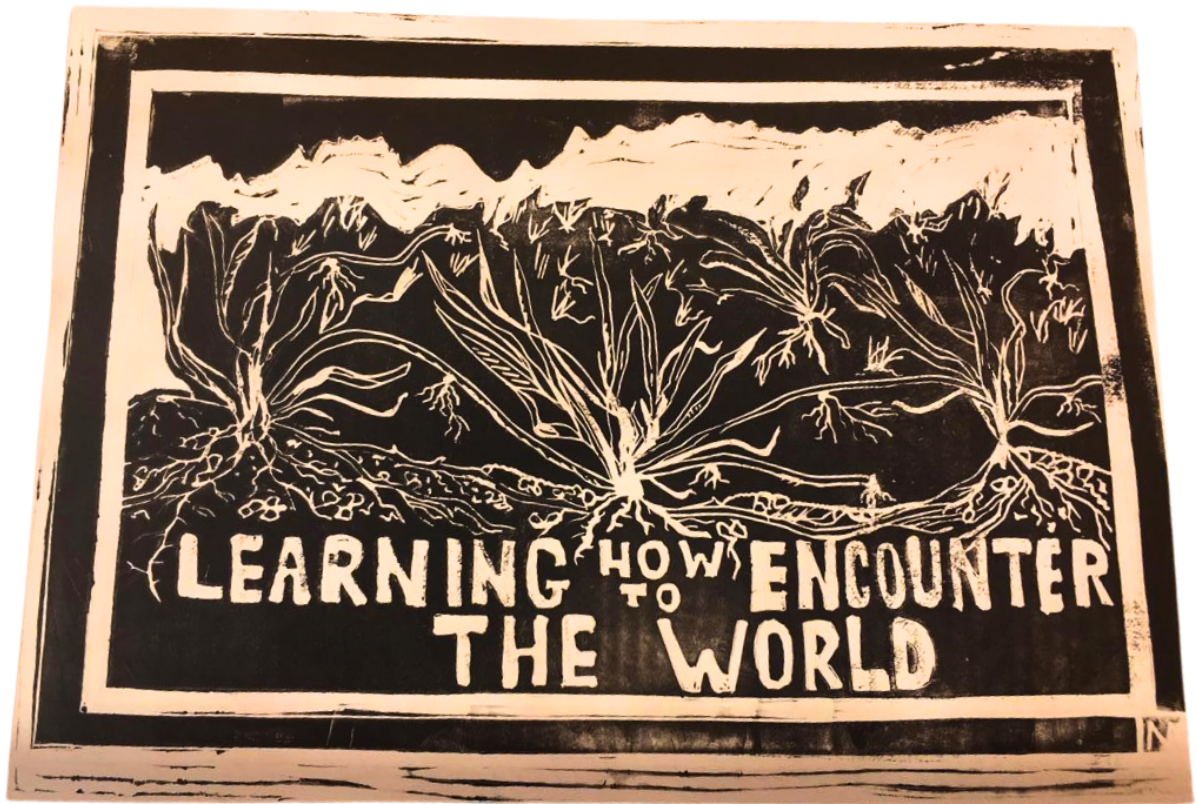
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Linoprint by Natasha Vally, created in dialogue with this research, evokes the textures of collective care and institutional transformation explored in the study.



Illustrations by Emma Dulski, developed in dialogue with this research, trace the relational and affective dimensions of organisational life, giving visual form to the study's explorations of care, agency, and institutional change.



