Abstract: In this paper, I examine how clergy’s value orientations and congregations’ relationships to the superordinate organizations in their institutional environment are reflected in congregations’ organizational cultures. My analysis of nearly 50 qualitative interviews with clergy, members, and former members of four Southern Baptist Convention congregations and one Independent Christian megachurch indicates organizational cultures are (1) reflections of their leaders’ value orientations and the congregation’s engagement with superordinate organizations and (2) an important indicator of how congregations establish legitimacy. I describe three unique organizational cultures and their relationship to clergy’s value orientations and the congregations’ ties to the superordinate organizations in their institutional environment. In the discussion, I argue there is a need to focus on specific components of the institutional environment beyond superordinate organizations, and I consider the role the three organizational cultures described in the text play in congregational growth and decline and church conflict.

Keywords: congregations; institutional theory; organizational culture; Southern Baptist Convention

1. Introduction

Congregations are organizations embedded in institutional environments (Eiesland 2000). These environments may include the congregation’s denominational body, theological schools and seminaries, local agencies and nonprofit organizations, the local media, and other congregations and religious bodies. Congregational studies utilizing an institutional approach tend to speak in broad terms about the relationship between congregations and the different components of their institutional environment (e.g., Becker 1999; Edgell 2006; Ellingson 2007), but without zeroing in on the specific components, social scientists miss an important opportunity to engage in relevant discussions about the nature of these relationships and their impact on multiple outcomes such as church growth and decline or internal and external conflicts.

In this paper, I examine the nature of the relationship between two key features of congregations and the connection between this relationship and congregations’ organizational cultures. Specifically, I focus on the relationship between congregations’ ties to the superordinate organizations in their institutional environment (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and their leaders’ value orientations (Jeffries and Tygart 1974). For congregations, denominations and theological schools and seminaries are considered superordinate organizations because they confer congregations with legitimacy (Ammerman 1990; Chaves 1993). It is impossible to capture the relationships between a congregation and every organization in its institutional environment, but congregations generally relate to one denominational body and few theological schools or seminaries. Additionally, congregations’ value orientations shape these organizations’ responses to changing institutional environments (Song 2019) and clergy are best positioned to define their congregations’ value orientations (Ellingson 2007). The purpose of this paper is to examine how clergy’s value orientations...
and congregations’ relationships to superordinate organizations are reflected in congregations’ organizational cultures. Based on my analysis of qualitative interviews with clergy, members, and former members of five congregations in the same institutional environment, I argue that congregations’ organizational cultures are defined by the interaction of clergy’s value orientations and congregation’s engagement with superordinate organizations and an important indicator of how congregations establish legitimacy. In the discussion, I consider the role these cultures play in congregational growth and decline and their potential for fostering internal and external conflict.

Organizational Culture and Legitimacy

Organizational cultures are the collection of shared beliefs and values held by the organization’s members (Schein 1990). There is little consensus about the best theoretical framework for identifying and describing an organization’s culture (Martin 1992, 2002) because organizations are “inherently fuzzy” and their cultures “are not monolithic single sets of ideas, but rather incorporate contradictions, ambiguities, paradoxes, and just plain confusion” (Trice and Beyer 1993, p. 8). Thus, attempts to describe the cultures of formal organizations point to consensus (McDonald 1991), disagreement (DiMaggio 1991), and utter chaos (Vaughan 1996) as some of their key features. Nevertheless, studies of congregational life point to a direct link between congregations’ organizational cultures—however varied—and multiple performance outcomes.

Congregations’ organizational cultures shape members’ civic participation (Polson 2016), the organization’s support for certain programs (Trinitapoli et al. 2009), church growth (Wilson et al. 1993), and conflict resolution (Becker 1999). Congregational cultures are also associated with several indicators of optimal church performance including member participation, member giving, staff development, and the implementation of new ministries (Givens 2012). Since organizational cultures are created and recreated through the interactions of members within the specific context (Fine 1984), a critical assessment of the relationship between congregations and their institutional environment can reveal how congregations engage members and the secular society.

Studies of church growth, decline, and conflict document the creation and recreation of congregations’ organizational cultures in the interactions of church leaders, members, and the secular society (Nauta 2007). Lutheran pastors in California engage in selective isomorphism in order to walk the line between traditional Mainline Protestant Christianity and the Evangelical megachurch movement (Ellingson 2007). Pastors in upstate New York make important distinctions between their traditional viewpoints (e.g., the official Church position on family life) and their progressive actions (e.g., support groups for single mothers) (Edgell 2006). Similarly, congregations’ attempts to balance “who we are” with “how we do things here” is one of the defining features of church conflict (both internal and external) (Becker 1999). These studies all utilize an institutional approach (Meyer and Rowan 1977). For U.S.-based Christian congregations, the institutional environment includes the church’s denominational body, theological schools and seminaries, local agencies and nonprofit organizations, the local media, and other congregations and religious bodies. Clergy and members work within this environment to create (and recreate) the organizational culture of the congregation, but the symbolic power of certain individuals gives them greater power to define the situation and, thus, the organizational culture (Hallett 2003).

For the formation and maintenance of organizational cultures, “symbolic power is the power to define” the situation in which the interactions that comprise the negotiated order take place” (Hallett 2003, p. 133, italics in original), but these actions are constrained by the organization’s institutional environment. For congregations, this means clergy and influential members must strike a balance between their own views and interests and the constraints of their denominational structure, other organizations, and the secular society (Song 2019). A “congregation’s value orientation has a bearing on its perspective as it affects the way it construes the external world or situations” (Song 2019, p. 10), and clergy and other influential members are in a unique position to define their congregation’s value orientations toward other churches and the secular society (Nauta 2007).
Studies of congregations grounded in an institutional framework acknowledge this process, but none explicitly examines the connection between congregations’ organizational cultures and congregations’ relationships to superordinate organizations like the denomination or affiliated theological schools and seminaries. Instead, congregational studies tend to assume uniformity in the relationship between congregations and the institutional environment and focus on variations in congregation size, structure, or member demographics to explain variability in congregations’ organizational cultures (Becker 1999). This is problematic because the vitality of all organizations is largely based on their ability to establish their legitimacy in the public’s eye (Suchman 1995), and legitimacy is not uniformly distributed among organizations of the same type.

Legitimacy is the “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” (Suchman 1995, p. 574). According to Suchman (1995), there are three types of organizational legitimacy: pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy, and cognitive legitimacy. Organizations build pragmatic legitimacy by supplying something of value. Congregations are suppliers of “other-worldly” rewards like salvation (Stark and Bainbridge 1980) and more tangible products like personal relationships and service to the larger community (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004). Similarly, congregations are imbued with cognitive legitimacy because they are a taken-for-granted part of the American religious landscape (Chaves 2004; Warner 2005). Congregations must work to build their moral legitimacy, though; they must establish their “rightness” vis-à-vis other congregations.

Suchman (1995) describes four types of moral legitimacy: procedural, structural, consequential, and personal. Procedural legitimacy refers to the adoption of “socially acceptable techniques and procedures” like sending messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention’s annual meeting or establishing Catholic parishes organized around purpose rather than geography (Suchman 1995, p. 580; Ammerman 1990; Bruce 2017). Structural legitimacy, on the other hand, refers to “structural characteristics locating the organization” within a morally favored taxonomic category like employing a youth minister or associating with a formal denomination (Suchman 1995, p. 581; Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004). Both procedural and structural legitimacy tend to flow through normative pressures resulting in normative isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Professionals in organizations, for instance, adopt similar worldviews because they receive similar training, and they adopt similar structures and practices for their organizations because ideas diffuse through their professional networks (Mizruchi and Fein 1999).

Although all organizations experience normative pressures, organizations of the same type do not necessarily experience these pressures in the same way. This opens the door for variability in practice whereby some organizations may engage in practices that do not closely align with their formal structures (i.e., loose coupling) (Weick 1976). Loosely coupled organizations rely on consequential or personal legitimacy to achieve “a positive normative evaluation of the organization and its activities” (Suchman 1995, p. 579; see Chaves 1993; Whitehead 2017 for examples of loose coupling in religion).

In order to establish consequential legitimacy, organizations that deal in intangibles like salvation, must provide compensators that prove their value to potential participants. Among congregations, this is achieved through community engagement, adult programming, youth groups, and other church-sponsored activities (Ammerman 2005). Establishing consequential legitimacy requires substantial resources, but personal legitimacy may be the most difficult type of moral legitimacy to hold onto because it rests on the charisma of individual organizational leaders (Suchman 1995). Nelson (1993), for one, highlights the dubious role of personal legitimacy in the sacred sphere, but his focus is on multinational denominations and not individual congregations. Individual congregations must negotiate their relationship to superordinate organizations—including their denomination—in order to procure different types of moral legitimacy. To understand this process, social scientists need to consider the connection between congregations’ organizational cultures and congregations’ relationships to superordinate organizations. How these relationships impact their legitimacy in the eyes of members, other organizations, and the public is a key predictor of congregational vitality.
Below, I make the case that congregations’ organizational cultures are reflections of the interactions between their engagement with superordinate organizations and their leader’s value orientations; in the discussion, I note several implications for studies of congregational growth, decline, and internal and external conflict.

2. Methodology

The themes described below are based on 48 semi-structured interviews of leaders, members, and former members of 5 religious congregations conducted between 2013 and 2014. The congregations—4 Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches and 1 Independent Christian megachurch located in a southeastern county—were identified using a form of purposive sampling (Lune and Berg 2016). More specifically, I followed Patton (2002) guidelines for critical case sampling to select the research site and the 5 congregations in my sample. “If it doesn’t happen [here], it won’t happen anywhere,” is the basic logic behind this sampling strategy (Patton 2002, p. 236). In this case, I selected congregations that were likely to develop unique organizational cultures because the purpose of this study is to examine how clergy’s value orientations and congregations’ relationships to superordinate organizations are reflected in congregations’ organizational cultures.

Adams County—the research site—is situated in the American “Bible Belt,” an area known for its conservative Christian values and exceptional rate of religious service attendance (Zelinsky 1961). With more than 750,000 residents, Adams County is home to more than 140 SBC congregations (May 2018). The SBC is a cooperative of religious congregations that affirms the autonomy of the local church and the priesthood of all believers. The SBC’s member congregations pool their resources for foreign and domestic missions, but the Convention exercises no authority over its member organizations. Instead, SBC churches are governed by the Baptist principle of congregationalism; this means the local church is independent and self-supporting (sbc.net 2014). Since SBC churches are afforded the flexibility to adapt to the unique challenges of their institutional environment, they are an ideal organizational form for a study of the relationship between superordinate organizations and congregations’ organizational cultures.

I selected the 4 SBC congregations in this study because of their unique connections to the SBC and the local Baptist seminary as well as their physical locations within Adams County. Covenant Baptist Church and Newport Baptist Church work closely with the SBC and the local seminary; seminary students and their families are the majority of these congregations’ leaders and members. Leaders and members of Endeavor Community Church and Avondale Road Baptist Church, on the other hand, are less likely to attend the seminary, and these congregations maintain a weak formal relationship with the SBC.

The physical locations of the congregations in my sample serve to further parse out the significance of congregations’ ties to superordinate organizations versus other features of the institutional environment in the formation and maintenance of their organizational cultures. Covenant, Newport, and Endeavor are all located less than 4 miles from the seminary in Adams County’s working-class zone (Park and Burgess 1925); Covenant and Endeavor are so physically close to one another their members compete for street parking near their churches every week. Avondale, on the other hand, is about 10 miles away in a more affluent neighborhood on the county’s east side. Because of its distance from the seminary and the other SBC congregations in this study, it provides a useful contrast to the other 3 SBC churches and a closer approximation—geographically and demographically—to the Independent Christian megachurch on the county’s south side.

Hillview Christian Church is an autonomous Christian congregation with more than 20,000 weekly attenders at its main campus. Members and leaders of the 4 SBC congregations routinely brought up Hillview as a congregation that Southern Baptists in the area visited, joined (and sometimes left),

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1 The names of all places, organizations, and people are pseudonyms.
and compared or contrasted to their own church. It is virtually impossible to talk about congregations’ organizational cultures in Adams County without discussing the Evangelical megachurch on the county’s south side. Since this is a study of the organizational cultures of religious organizations—and not a study of SBC congregations—I included leaders, members, and former members of Hillview in my sample because the congregation is an important part of Adams County’s conservative religious climate. The formal disconnect between Hillview and the SBC provides an important contrast to the 2 SBC churches with weak ties to their denomination and the local Baptist seminary. Table A1 of the Appendix A provides additional context to the similarities and differences between Hillview Christian Church and the 4 SBC congregations in my sample.

The 48 people I interviewed across the 5 congregations in my sample were identified through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Lune and Berg 2016). Leaders were contacted directly and asked to participate in my study. Additional participants were recruited via the congregation’s website or social media page(s). The members I interviewed were also asked to identify additional members and former members who might be willing to participate. I interviewed 6–14 people associated with each congregation, including at least one leader (typically the senior minister) and one former member of every congregation. My sample is not a representative sample of each congregation since those who agreed to participate in this study were generally more involved in their congregation than the typical church member. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 83; the average age is 43. Twenty-one of the 48 participants (44 percent) are female, 34 (71 percent) are married, and 9 (36 percent) had 1 or more children under 6 living in their home at the time of our interview. Nearly all the sample is white (46/48 participants including all clergy). Table A2 of the Appendix A lists the affiliation, membership status, and some basic demographic information for the 48 participants in my sample.

All interviews were conducted in-person and audio-recorded. The typical interview lasted approximately 1 hour and focused on 4 themes: (1) the participant’s religious biography (e.g., “How do you see religion fitting into your life?”), (2) the culture of the congregation (e.g., “How would you describe the personality of your church?”), (3) the congregation’s institutional environment (e.g., “Tell me about your church’s relationship with the SBC.”), and (4) the congregation’s vitality (e.g., “Why are you confident people will continue to join your church?”). The audio files were transcribed, and the transcripts were coded for thematic content using the Qualitative Data Analysis Software Program Atlas.ti. Sampling continued during the coding process until thematic saturation was achieved within each congregation. During this process, several themes emerged. These themes are directly related to this paper’s purpose: to examine how clergy’s value orientations and congregations’ relationships to the superordinate organizations in their institutional environment are reflected in congregations’ organizational cultures.

3. Results

3.1. Congregations’ Superordinate Ties and Clergy’s Value Orientations

Article IV of the SBC’s Constitution states: “While independent and sovereign in its own sphere, the [Southern Baptist] Convention does not claim and will never attempt to exercise any authority over any other Baptist body, whether church, auxiliary organizations, associations, or convention” (sbc.net 2014). The Convention’s emphasis on church autonomy permits great latitude in SBC congregations’ superordinate ties, value orientations, and organizational cultures. The five congregations in my sample exhibit three different organizational cultures. The differences in these congregations’ organizational cultures are reflections of the variability in their engagement with the superordinate organizations that confer them with legitimacy in conjunction with the variability in their leaders’ value orientations. Two of the SBC congregations in my sample work closely with the SBC and the local seminary. The other two are weakly affiliated with these organizations, while Hillview Christian maintains no ties to the SBC or any other denomination. Any similarities between congregations with weak ties and no ties to the superordinate organizations in the institutional environment are superseded by their leaders’
value orientations because clergy maintain the symbolic power to control the negotiation of their congregation’s culture (Ellingson 2007).

The current SBC makes it virtually impossible for theologically liberal congregations to maintain strong ties to the denomination or its affiliated colleges and seminaries (see Ammerman 1990 for a detailed empirical analysis of the conservative takeover of the SBC in the late 1970s and early 1980s). A 2013 publication in Southern Seminary Magazine, for example, praised Albert Mohler, the school’s president, for purging the institution of the liberal faculty who gave him a vote of no confidence shortly after his hire and refused to sign his conservative “Abstract of Principles” (Hanbury and Smith 2013). Conservative value orientations, however, are not limited to SBC-affiliated congregations (Harris et al. 2020). Thus, the combinations of superordinate ties and leaders’ value orientations in my sample include (1) strong ties and conservative values, (2) weak ties and liberal values, and (3) no ties and conservative values. In this section, I describe these combinations of superordinate ties and clergy’s value orientations using evidence from my in-depth interviews. In the following section, I describe the organizational cultures present in these congregations relative the combinations of superordinate ties and clergy’s value orientations described below.

3.1.1. Strong Superordinate Ties and Conservative Values

Covenant and Newport maintain strong ties to the SBC and the local Baptist seminary. These superordinate organizations provide Covenant and Newport with two key resources: funding and people. Covenant’s work with the SBC’s International Mission Board highlights the monetary relationship between the congregation and the SBC: “The [SBC] enables us to send way more overseas missionaries than we could ever send by ourselves . . . we have 15 people overseas. We wouldn’t be able to have that if we were a lone church” (Robby, pastor). Similarly, Newport works closely with the SBC to “see the Gospel go to every nation of the world” (Jason, pastor). The church also sends the maximum 10 representatives to the national convention each year. According to Pastor Jason, this helps Newport keep a “pulse” on the Convention in order to maintain strong ties.

In addition to funding, Covenant and Newport draw upon their ties to superordinate organizations to sustain their membership totals. Despite being one of the oldest Baptist churches in the area (see Table A1 of the Appendix A), Newport was on the brink of dissolution when the congregation merged with a group of seminary students who were meeting regularly without a permanent worship space. According to Jeremiah (Newport member), the merger saved the “small, liberal, dying church” (emphasis mine). The merger took place over a decade ago, but seminary students (current and former) and their families remain the congregation’s largest demographic. Pastor Robby (Covenant) noted the significant impact seminary students have on his congregation while describing a year in the life of his church: “We brought in 100 members and lost 100 members.” Similarly, Leah described her fellow members at Newport as “a revolving door.”

The strong ties Covenant and Newport maintain with the SBC and the local seminary are both a cause and consequence of these congregations’ conservative values. Keaton (Covenant member), for example, described his congregation as “definitely conservative,” explaining its leaders and members “believe that the Bible is authoritative and infallible.” Members and leaders described both congregations as “Bible believing,” and they were quick to criticize other congregations in Adams County for their liberal beliefs and practices like Jeremiah quoted above or Jeff (former Newport member) who told me his church did not collaborate with theologically liberal congregations in the area during his time as a member there because “if [they] did, [the church] would be sending a very unclear, confusing message about what the Bible says is essential.” Members and former members of these congregations noted their pastors preached the “whole Bible,” and did not avoid challenging or controversial topics for the sake of making people feel comfortable. Pastor Jason (Newport) confirmed this sentiment:
It’s God’s Word itself that sets the agenda for what I’m doing. If I only preach topically … there is a sense in which I get to sort of choose what I want to talk about … but if I’m preaching through a book [of the Bible] and I come up to a passage on divorce, I come up to a passage on homosexuality, I come up to a passage on giving … I’ve got to deal with it.

Leslie, a former Covenant member, expressed similar thoughts about her former church: “I wanted a church committed to the Gospel … where [the pastor] would preach all of God’s Word” (emphasis mine). Pastor Robby’s account of his church’s recent growth corroborates Leslie’s description. He explained to me that Covenant’s recent growth was due to “the simple preaching of the Gospel,” implying that Covenant’s previous pastor—who pastored a congregation one quarter Covenant’s current size—did not preach the whole Gospel. He added, “I would say that every church that isn’t concerned with faithfulness is giving the Jesus we’re preaching a black eye.” Here, “faithfulness” refers to the literal interpretation of scripture. To be “faithful” in these congregations means making no concessions to the changing world outside the Church (capital C, meaning the global Christian Church); this position in consistent with the current leadership of the SBC and the local seminary and not at all surprising given the strong ties Covenant and Newport maintain with these superordinate organizations. This combination of strong superordinate ties and a conservative value orientation is reflected in the organizational cultures of these congregations described below.

3.1.2. Weak Superordinate Ties and Liberal Values

Avondale and Endeavor are weakly tethered to the SBC and the local seminary. Avondale, for one, supports its own missionaries without assistance from the IMB. According to Pastor Cary, distancing itself from the IMB was critical for Avondale to maintain its Baptist identity: “[The IMB] can be counter-productive to what we’re trying to do in the [mission field] … every Southern Baptist church is independent and autonomous … you can kick us out [of the Convention]. You don’t tell us what to do.” Pastor Cary is highlighting the Baptist principle of congregational autonomy by noting that Baptist churches should not be told what to do. For this reason, I asked Pastor Cary to tell me why it was important to be associated with the SBC; he laughed as he replied: “I ask myself that same question.” Similarly, Pastor Craig (Endeavor) compared his church’s relationship with the SBC to the sponsorship model used in auto racing:

I guess one of the ways we describe it is like we’re NASCAR drivers and one of our stickers is Southern Baptist. And one of our stickers used to be Acts 29—which is the church planting network—now it’s Endeavor Network. One of our stickers may be something else.

This quotation captures the weak association between Endeavor and the SBC, and it highlights the congregation’s tendency to limit ties with other superordinate organizations by creating organizations within the church to serve its needs (e.g., Endeavor Network). Weak ties between SBC congregations and the denomination or its related organizations are a consequence of, and an opportunity for, congregations to adopt theologically liberal value orientations. This is the case at Avondale and Endeavor where women serve communion (Avondale) and members question the significance of common Baptist practices like believer’s baptism (Endeavor).

Endeavor is a theologically liberal congregation by current SBC standards with a reputation for being the “hipster church.” “We believe the Bible is inerrant. Infallible. All that stuff” (Craig, pastor). The end of Pastor Craig’s statement (i.e., “All that stuff.”) captures the difference between Endeavor and the more conservative congregations in my sample. Leaders and members describe Endeavor as a congregation for the “unchurched,” the “over-churched,” and people “burned by the Church.” Pastor Craig explained, “[Endeavor’s first members] were kind of anti-church. Anything a church would do, they wanted to do differently.” In its early years, Endeavor’s members met in “borrowed” spaces and never passed a collection plate during the worship service. These things—a permanent meeting space and passing a collection plate—were too “church” for this group of Southern Baptists. A decade later, the congregation owns its own building and passes the offering plate at
all four weekend services, but many things traditional Southern Baptists do—like abstaining from alcohol—remain at odds with Endeavor’s theologically liberal leaders and members. Mark (Endeavor member)—a former Catholic—described the church as “nondenominational Baptist.” And Patrick (Endeavor member)—also a former Catholic—informed me there were elements of Baptist life like the emphasis on baptism by immersion that he did not agree with: “Being saved by Christ is first and foremost. You can go to Heaven if you were never baptized.” Patrick did not feel like Endeavor put too much stock in these things—though the church does encourage baptism by immersion—and he did not think he could continue in the congregation if they did: “If Endeavor started doing some of the things [I associate with other SBC churches], I might have a little bit more hesitation [about attending the church].” Avondale’s current leadership takes a similar approach to finding a balance between secular progressivism and conservative Baptist values.

The young families and suit-wearing seniors filling the church’s pews may make Avondale look more like a traditional Baptist church, but the congregation’s members and leaders know they hold some “un-Biblical” beliefs by most conservative Baptist standards. Bonnie, a 57-year-old business analyst, grew up attending SBC congregations, and she feared she might not be accepted into another SBC church when she divorced her husband and moved to Adams County seven years ago. She describes her time at Avondale as exactly what she needed, though:

> It’s absolutely more liberal than other [Southern Baptist churches] I’ve been a part of. But at the same time, it’s curiously traditional. It’s absolutely Scripture based, and that’s vital. I wouldn’t have anything to do with the church if it was not ... I believe the Bible is the inherent, absolute Word of God. It’s not a story. It’s not a myth. It’s not an analogy. It’s not an allegory. I believe every word. If that’s not what was being preached from the pulpit, I wouldn’t be here ... but I think that God puts us in places where we need to be for where we are in our heart and in our walk ... and I’m just thankful that God put me here.

Many of the women I spoke with at Avondale expressed their desire to serve their church and their thankfulness for being able to do so in a “Bible-believing” congregation. “Bible-believing” at Avondale (and Endeavor) allows for “ambiguities of translation and interpretation that arise when scripture is subjected to critical analysis” (Ammerman 1987, p. 5). In the most traditional Baptist congregations, the Bible makes no place for women in Church leadership—or in Bonnie’s case, divorce—and Pastor Cary recognizes this may alienate some people who grew up in more traditional SBC congregations: “When a black woman serves the Lord’s Supper, it may be the end of the Mississippi boy coming to church here,” he explained. For people like the “Mississippi boy” in Pastor Cary’s example, though, there are plenty of theologically conservative congregations in Adams County, Baptist or not.

3.1.3. No Superordinate Ties and Conservative Values

Hillview Christian Church is an Independent Christian church with no ties to any denomination, seminary, or other superordinate organization. Thus, Hillview’s conservative value orientation is not a cause or consequence of its relationship to other organizations but a reflection of its own leadership; a position many members noted for better or worse. Jack, a retired schoolteacher, spent more than 30 years living in the Chicago area before he and his wife moved to Adams County and joined Hillview Christian Church. According to Jack, Hillview maintains a larger presence in Adams County than churches of similar size in the Chicago area because it directly engages with Adams County’s “Bible Baptist” culture. Like Newport and Covenant, Hillview’s official positions on women in leadership, homosexuality, divorce, and other “social questions” are derived from a traditional interpretation of the Bible. Bruce and his late wife attended Hillview for 27 years before joining a Baptist church closer to their home, but he was always bothered by Hillview’s stance on women in ministry, and he told me he is thankful his new congregation is “opening up to the females.” The implication here is that Hillview is not “open” to women in leadership. Dan (Hillview member), does not think his church’s pastors should change their preaching or modify the church’s practices to accommodate a changing
world, though. “They [Hillview’s leadership] are not there to be liked. They’re there to preach right out of the Word” he explained. When I asked Dan to tell me if viewed Hillview as theologically liberal or conservative, there was no ambiguity in his response:

We’re definitely not theologically liberal, okay. Now, the reason why I’ll say that is because, first of all, [Pastors Paul and Kevin are] not gonna water down the message. [They’re] gonna preach right out of the Bible. And [the church’s] views on marriage or [the church’s] views on homosexuality are gonna be right out of the Word of God. So, in answer to your question, I would say that [the church is] theologically conservative.

Lisa (Hillview member) agreed: “They teach what’s in the Bible, and they don’t stray from it.”

Despite its similarity to the other conservative churches in my sample, though, Hillview Christian is not an SBC congregation. Consequently, the organizational culture of Hillview differs markedly from the organizational cultures present in Covenant and Newport. This is evidence that congregations’ organizational cultures are a reflection of the interaction between their ties to superordinate organizations like denominations and theological schools and seminaries and the value orientations of the key figures who maintain the symbolic power to define the situations where organizational cultures are (re)created (Hallett 2003). In the following section, I elaborate on the three organizational cultures present in the five congregations in my sample.

3.2. Congregations’ Organizational Cultures

The variability in congregations’ superordinate ties and value orientations is reflected in their organizational cultures. Congregations’ organizational cultures are key facets of their ability to maintain/strengthen members’ commitment and grow the congregation and the Church (Nauta 2007). The congregations in my sample exhibit organizational cultures built around costs, community, and consumerism. The specific culture of the congregation depends on the combination of superordinate ties and value orientations described above. The relationship of the three organizational cultures to the congregations’ superordinate ties and value orientations are shown in Table 1. In the following section, I elaborate on each of these cultures with examples from my interview data.

Table 1. Congregations’ Organizational Cultures.

| Leaders’ Value Orientations | Strong | Cost-conscious | Weak/None | Consumer-oriented | Community-minded | N/A |
|-----------------------------|--------|----------------|-----------|-------------------|------------------|-----|
| Congregations’ Superordinate Ties | Conservative | Liberal |

3.2.1. Cost-Conscious

Participation in religious congregations is costly. For some, these costs are a matter of time or tithing, but for others they may include the forfeiture of certain rights and liberties. Congregations with a cost-conscious culture, though, are less concerned with the specific sacrifices and more concerned with acknowledging the sacrifices made. This became clear when I spoke with leaders, members, and former members of Covenant and Newport. The specific costs described to me varied between the two congregations, but the congregations’ insistence that members pay these costs to show their commitment to the Church and some members’ excitement recounting their own and other members’ payments was the same. Though varied, all the costs described to me were reflections of the congregations’ conservative value orientations and their strong ties to the SBC and the local Baptist seminary.

One example of the cost-conscious culture’s emphasis on paying the price of membership is Covenant’s use of disciplinary action when members are not living in accordance with the church’s moral
ideals. Every member (and former member) of Covenant I spoke with mentioned the congregation’s commitment to church discipline. Pastor Robby explained it like this:

... my understanding is that the local church is made up of people that are generally born again ... and they are really committing themselves to walk in obedience with Jesus Christ together—so hold each other accountable in that. When someone begins to clearly and repeatedly disobey Jesus, then the instructions in Matthew 18, Romans 15, 2 Thessalonians 3, Titus 3, 1 Corinthians 5, is basically to go after them for their good, for their redemption, to see them restored. But if they refuse to be restored, then they’re to be—Jesus says they are to be treated as a gentile and passed over. Which doesn’t mean treated rudely, it just means treated like an unbeliever.

Matthew: Could you describe a typical church discipline case?

There’s no such thing as a typical church discipline case, but maybe a typical thing would be, let’s say you have a person that joins the Church—and really, clearly Jesus teaches sexual purity before marriage—and they begin to indulge in fornication. There would be members of Covenant going after them, encouraging them to live a life of holiness. If they refuse, then Jesus says, “Tell it to the church.” So, we would go before the church and say, “Hey, our brother”—and this is often done with tears—“our brother or sister is in sin. Won’t leave it.” We usually sit on it for a month or two and if they just continue to walk in unholiness, they would be released from the membership of the church.

This practice draws a hardline between those inside the Church (i.e., living a “life of holiness”) and those outside the Church (i.e., “are in sin”), but Pastor Robby’s quote also highlights the sacrifices the church makes to discipline wayward members (e.g., “often done with tears”).

The cost-conscious cultures of Covenant and Newport appeal to people who consider most churches too timid to engage every component of the Scripture or reject contemporary worship practices. When Leah’s husband Adam, a former seminary student, characterized Newport’s Sunday morning worship service as more “serious and somber than your average SBC church,” for example, Leah agreed with her husband’s characterization of the church and told me about the problems she sees with contemporary worship services:

The goal [of worship] is to help you recognize your sins, see what Christ did on the Cross for you, and it brings you to the Gospel each week. That being the goal, it is kind of serious.

If you’re just singing songs always about “God is so good,” you know, you can kind of—you can kind of miss the rest of the Gospel.

While members like Leah and Adam expressed their appreciation for the costs, they pay to hear the whole Gospel, it limits their church’s appeal to certain demographics. Not surprisingly, Newport is one of the smallest Baptist churches in Adams County. This is also the case at Covenant where—despite the contemporary worship style—the weekly sermons hold no punches.

Callie (Covenant member) told me—with great excitement—about the first time she visited Covenant. The theme of Pastor’s Robby’s sermon that day was printed on the bulletin she received at the door: “Hell is Real!” By the end of the service, Callie knew she found her church, and she filled out a membership card the very next day. Describing her first visit to Covenant to me, she recounted the members’ meeting she attended that evening and its powerful impact on her decision to join the church:

The first day I come here—so I go to “Hell is real!” right? —later that evening, someone says, “Come to our members’ meeting.” Well later that night they were disciplining someone [laughs], and I was like “What?!?” But in that moment, I was like “man, this is good.” If we see injustice in the world, we want it paid for. We want it taken care of. And when there’s injustice in the Church, there’s room for church discipline too.
Unlike Callie, many people find the cost-conscious culture off-putting. Courtney (former Covenant member), for instance, does not view the distinction between “saved” and “sinner” in such black and white terms. For Courtney, the cost-conscious culture neglects the unique circumstances of people’s “walk with Christ.” In fact, Courtney decided to leave Covenant and join a different Baptist church when her roommate, a new Christian, found herself “caught up in sin.” For Courtney, Covenant’s leaders were too quick to call out her roommate’s sinful behavior in front of the entire congregation without acknowledging the impact 25 years of being outside the Church played in her roommate’s life. Interestingly, Courtney did not question the church’s faithfulness when she shared her perspective on her roommate’s experience with me. Instead, she pointed out that the congregation was simply not right for her at the time: “They’re definitely holding to the Gospel—and preach it faithfully. But is this a place that I personally can grow and help other people grow?” For Christians like Courtney, the cost-conscious culture misses out on opportunities to do right by others for the sake of paying and celebrating the payment of high costs. This strategy may limit growth, but it also limits free-riding and encourages active participation in the church (Iannaccone 1994).

3.2.2. Community-Minded

The community-minded culture emphasizes this-worldly practices in order to showcase the congregation to people outside the Church. These practices center around acts of service for various organizations, individuals, and the community at large. The community-minded culture emphasizes “doing good” for its own sake, but it also grows congregations by increasing the congregation’s visibility and appealing to people turned off by churches with an other-worldly focus (see Wood 2002 for more on this-worldly and other-worldly congregations).

Avondale and Endeavor work to serve the community in several ways. The aid these congregations provide ranges from in-house medical screenings for low-income families to collaborative ministries assisting at-risk populations. Endeavor’s members cited several examples of the recurring and one-off events held at the church or a nearby public space (e.g., a neighborhood park): free dental screenings, a free medical clinic, a fall festival, and a youth basketball camp, for example. These events are staffed by volunteers from the church, but they are open to anyone in the community free-of-charge. Endeavor and Avondale also partner with other congregations and secular organizations in the area to serve their neighborhoods. These partnerships include making neighborhood home repairs (Endeavor), volunteering in the local schools (Avondale), and renovating rooms for a local domestic violence shelter (both), among other things.

For many congregations, community outreach is about evangelism, or sharing their faith, but Pastor Craig (Endeavor) recognizes there is a time and a place for sharing the Gospel: “When we’re picking up trash, we just pick up trash.” Similarly, Pastor Cary (Avondale) described the intentional way his church orchestrates its community presence:

> Newspapers and television stations are not overly Church friendly, but there are things that they get revved up about. If you’re raising 15,000 pounds of food, they like that. If you’ve just renovated a room for [the local domestic violence shelter]—where every girl has been taken away from their families and has been severely abused—and you renovate a room there that causes a whole different feel to that campus, they want to show up and see that.
>
> And so we’ve been really good about making sure we get that stuff out and do that.

Pastor Cary does not mention anything about the Gospel, evangelism, or making converts out of the people his congregation serves. Instead, the focus is on serving the community and being seen.

Not surprisingly, Avondale and Endeavor are two of Adams County’s most successful Baptist congregations in terms of sustained growth (Endeavor) and member giving (Avondale) over the past decade. Serving the broader community (and not just their own members) distinguishes congregations like Endeavor and Avondale from other Baptist churches in the area, and many members I spoke with attributed their decision to join these congregations to this fact:
“I guess for one it seems like those [other Baptist] churches, even though they claim to be Baptist and evangelistic, they don’t really seem to reach out to the community. That’s a striking difference for me” (Riley, Endeavor member).

“I think that we do a great job of going out into our surrounding community . . . and I think people associate our church with doing good things and having people that care” (Sheila, Avondale member).

“This church has worked really hard, especially in the recent years, to reach people, to be community-minded . . . this church just deliberately makes an effort to try to befriend the businesses [nearby] and the community” (Sam, Avondale member).

Sam, for one, recognized how his church’s community-minded culture showcases its value to people in the community: “My guess is that it probably brings more [people] in who see the church is helping out than those who are actually being helped out” (emphasis mine). This is also the case for Endeavor, but the organizational culture is quite different when an absence of strong superordinate ties is coupled with a conservative value orientation.

3.2.3. Consumer-Oriented

Consumerism is the key feature of Hillview’s organizational culture, the only congregation in my sample with no superordinate ties. Hillview markets the personal charisma of the pulpit preacher and other church leaders while providing churchgoers numerous insular amenities. Like other megachurches, the congregation provides patrons with “accessible, uncomplicated religious experiences—particularly ones that correspond to the stimulation of consumer desires” (Sanders 2016, p. 84). The consumer-oriented culture institutionalizes personal charisma through a complex system of rules and procedures (i.e., formal bureaucracy); the result for Hillview has been extraordinary growth.

More than 30,000 people attend the 10 worship services across Hillview’s three campuses every weekend. Serving so many people requires nearly 300 full-time staff and many more part-time employees. My first engagement with Hillview’s bureaucratic structure occurred when I requested to interview Paul, the church’s senior minister and primary pulpit preacher. A church gatekeeper informed me that Hillview’s pulpit preachers get too many interview requests from students affiliated with the local seminary and other institutions to participate in any interviews for academic/research purposes. It is also impossible for Hillview’s pulpit preachers to do house calls, provide pastoral counseling, perform weddings and funerals, and prepare the weekly sermon—a fraction of the senior minister’s responsibilities in many congregations—because of the church’s extraordinary size. As a result, Hillview’s pulpit preaches focus almost exclusively on preparing the weekly sermon and delegate other responsibilities—including interview requests—to another pastor on staff. The result is a perfectly polished Sunday morning (or Saturday evening) sermon fitting the congregation’s consumer-oriented culture; it is the defining feature of Hillview according to many members’ accounts.

Lisa (Hillview member) attended the same small Christian church most of her life, but she joined Hillview after attending the church’s annual Easter pageant—a Broadway-scale production featuring professional actors and real livestock. During our interview, Lisa recounted one of her early interactions with the church’s pulpit preachers to me:

Anytime I’ve been introduced to (Senior Minister) Paul or (Teaching Pastor) Kevin, they always made me feel like they knew me, I guess. Paul really impressed me the first time I went before [the church] and became a member. He took my name, there in the crowd, he heard me say my name. Then probably 20 minutes after he’d met a whole bunch more people and they pray and everything, he still remembered my name, and I thought ‘that’s pretty impressive.’ . . . They [Pastors Paul and Kevin] were a huge draw for me in the beginning.

Lisa’s account of Paul’s charismatic qualities is not unique. Every Hillview member I spoke with mentioned the polished delivery of the church’s pulpit preachers and the personal connection they felt
to these men—even if they had never personally interacted with them. Lisa’s account is particularly interesting, though, because she and her family currently attend the satellite campus nearest their home. Hillview’s two satellite campuses attract a few thousand worshippers every weekend, but there is no live preaching at either site. Instead, sermons are transmitted from the main campus to the satellite congregations and broadcast on several large screens during weekend services. Lisa’s rationalization of the impersonal nature of these services further illustrates the personal connection she feels to Pastors Paul and Kevin:

You kind of forget. It looks like you’re standing there. When I was at the [main] campus, I thought about that [no live preaching]. I thought, that’s kinda strange and that’s gonna bother me. But then I realized I was usually watching the screen anyway. You’re watching the screen anyway, so what’s the difference? And I’ve said to several people that if they would have just had a different preacher, and not had Paul and Kevin, I wouldn’t have gone to the [new] campus. I would have stayed at [the main campus].

For Lisa and many members, Hillview’s appeal rests in the polished delivery of the weekend service’s and the pulpit preachers’ charismatic qualities.

In addition to personal charisma, Hillview also provides many (secular) services to satisfy members’ consumer appetites during the workweek. These services include a full gym, a bookstore, and a café. Staff Pastor Doug told me about the church’s decision to open the café where we met for our interview:

Well, it’s nice to have a café in the building. A lot of people—when we first built this—said, “Uh, you’re getting into the restaurant business?” and “This is too much like Panera Bread or something.” But actually, it is a very good place. A lot of guys coming out of their Bible studies [stop] here, or they come in for a cup of coffee and they bring their computer and work for an hour or so, and it becomes, it just makes this sort of a social place, and we’re glad for that. We don’t encourage [or] discourage [using the café]. It’s here and we’re just glad to see people [using it].

The café, the gym, and the bookstore serve to insulate Hillview’s members from the secular world, but they also appeal to their (and church visitors’) consumer-centric tastes. Some people—like Covenant’s Callie (quoted above)—are turned off by the general appeal of congregations like Hillview. These people are in the minority, though. Generalist congregations like Hillview strive to “mollify rather than shame” through their consumerist culture (Sanders 2012, p. 6; Stark and Finke 2000). As a result, they appeal to a much larger segment of the religious market (Ellingson 2009). This is only possible, though, when weak/no superordinate ties limit the need or pursuit of external resources—distinguishing Hillview from Newport and Covenant—and a conservative value orientation turns the congregation’s focus inward instead of toward the community—distinguishing Hillview from Avondale and Endeavor.

4. Discussion

Congregations are organizations embedded in institutional environments, and their organizational cultures are reflections of the interaction between their engagement with the superordinate organizations in these environments and their leaders’ value orientations. This is most apparent in a sample of congregations embedded in the same institutional environment where the denomination permits local congregations’ considerable latitude to define their own structures and cultures. My findings from a sample of five congregations with such characteristics indicate that strong ties and conservative values produce a cost-conscious culture that reflects the institutional myths of the denomination (i.e., procedural legitimacy), whereas weak/no ties and liberal values allow congregations to pursue consequential legitimacy by focusing on the community outside the congregation, and weak/no ties and conservative values give congregations the freedom to build personal legitimacy by appealing to participants consumer appetites.
While the cultures identified here may be unique to congregations affiliated with theologically conservative denominations and embedded in a generally conservative (theologically and politically) social milieu, the implications of my findings for studies of other religious traditions and other institutional environments are worth considering. First, my findings point to variability in the strength of congregations’ relationships to superordinate organizations like denominations whereas previous research—particularly quantitative research (e.g., Pitt and Washington 2020)—tends to assume the denomination itself is indicative of the congregational culture. Future research will benefit from closely examining the unique relationships between congregations and their denomination. Second, my findings point to tight coupling between congregations’ organizational cultures and denominations’ institutional myths (e.g., “Bible-believing”) when congregations maintain strong ties with superordinate organizations.

Though my study’s cross-sectional design prevents me from knowing if these congregations’ organizational cultures are the cause or consequence of their ties to superordinate organizations, future research must consider the possibility that loosely coupled congregations benefit from weaker ties with superordinate organizations when loose coupling results in innovative responses to changing societal norms (Whitehead 2017). Future research should also consider whether tight coupling between congregational cultures and institutional myths among congregations with strong superordinate ties is a feature of conservative Protestant denominations like the SBC or if this holds in Mainline Protestant denominations too. Asking how organizational cultures reflect the relationship between superordinate ties and clergy’s value orientations in Mainline Protestant congregations will also make it possible to think about the specific organizational cultures present in congregations with strong superordinate and liberal value orientations—an impossible relationship within the current SBC.

Despite the uniqueness of my sample and the three congregational cultures described above, my findings carry several implications for research on church growth, decline and conflict where similar congregational cultures prevail. First, a cost-conscious culture builds strong churches, but strong (i.e., strict) churches are often small (Iannaccone 1994). The examples of Covenant and Newport highlight the importance of maintaining strong ties with superordinate organizations and a culture closely aligned with the views of these superordinate organizations in order to procure the resources—chiefly members and money—necessary to survive. Second, congregations that are unburdened by their relationships to the superordinate organizations in their institutional environment and/or only loosely dependent on these organizations for legitimacy and key resources can maintain organizational cultures with more widespread appeal (Ellingson 2009). The examples of Endeavor, Avondale, and Hillview highlight the opportunities for growth when congregations’ organizational cultures align with secular values, like community service and consumerism. Lastly, the negotiation of congregations’ organizational cultures is also the negotiation of internal conflicts—like the conflict between members’ and leaders’ interpretations of scripture—and external conflicts—like the conflicts between congregations and the superordinate organizations in their institutional environment. According to Hallett (2003), organizations reduce conflict by limiting the number of audiences. For congregations, this may mean restricting membership to only those who exhibit strong commitment to the organization’s beliefs and values (i.e., Covenant and Newport) or restricting the strength and number of ties to outside organizations (i.e., Endeavor, Avondale, and Hillview). Ethnographic research will be useful in identifying how these processes take shape.

5. Conclusions

By examining how the interaction between clergy’s value orientations and congregations’ relationships to superordinate organizations is reflected in congregations’ organizational cultures, this paper illustrates the benefits of applying a narrow lens to the study of congregations as organizations embedded in institutional environments (see Song 2019 for another notable example). The social scientific study of religion misses out on opportunities to fully understand the relationship between congregations and their institutional environment when the focus is too broad. Our collective
understanding of religion and religious organizations will become stronger when future empirical studies consider the relationships between congregations and local agencies or nonprofit organizations, the local media, and other congregations and religious organizations—but perhaps not all the above.

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**Appendix A**

| Table A1. Congregations in the Sample. |
|---------------------------------------|
| Avondale Road Baptist Church | Covenant Baptist Church | Endeavor Community Church | Hillview Christian Church | Newport Baptist Church |
| **Denomination** | SBC | SBC | SBC | Independent Christian | SBC |
| **Founding** | Early 1960s | Late 1880s | Early 2000s | Early 1960s | Early 1900s |
| **Average Weekly Attendance** | 500–999 | <500 | 2000–2999 | 20,000+ | <500 |
| **Setting** | Suburban | Working-class Zone | Working-class Zone | Suburban | Gentrifying Neighborhood |
| **Worship Style** | Mixed | Contemporary | Contemporary | Contemporary | Traditional |

1 Main-campus.

| Table A2. Qualitative Interview Participants. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Name** | **Congregation** | **Status** | **Sex** | **Age** | **Marital Status** |
| Cary | Avondale Road | Clergy | M | 50–59 | Married |
| Bonnie | Avondale Road | Member | F | 50–59 | Married |
| Jamie | Avondale Road | Member | F | 30–39 | Single |
| Lori | Avondale Road | Member | F | 60–69 | Divorced |
| Megan | Avondale Road | Member | F | 30–39 | Married |
| Rhonda | Avondale Road | Member | F | 50–59 | Married |
| Sam | Avondale Road | Member | M | 60–69 | Widowed |
| Shelia | Avondale Road | Member | F | 40–49 | Married |
| Stan | Avondale Road | Member | M | 70+ | Married |
| Terri | Avondale Road | Member | F | 50–59 | Married |
| Todd | Avondale Road | Member | M | 60–69 | Married |
| Mitch | Avondale Road | Former Member | M | 40–49 | Married |
| Brad | Covenant | Clergy | M | 30–39 | Married |
| Robbie | Covenant | Clergy | M | 40–49 | Married |
| Callie | Covenant | Member | F | 20–29 | Single |
| Keaton | Covenant | Member | M | 20–29 | Single |
| Courtney | Covenant | Former Member | F | 20–29 | Single |
| Leslie | Covenant | Former Member | F | 30–39 | Married |
| Craig | Endeavor | Clergy | M | 40–49 | Married |
| Erica | Endeavor | Member | F | 20–29 | Single |
| Jessica | Endeavor | Member | F | 30–39 | Single |
| Karen | Endeavor | Member | F | 50–59 | Divorced |
| Katrina | Endeavor | Member | F | 20–29 | Married |
| Kayla | Endeavor | Member | F | 20–29 | Married |
| Mark | Endeavor | Member | M | 30–39 | Single |
| Nate | Endeavor | Member | M | 20–29 | Married |
| Patrick | Endeavor | Member | M | 20–29 | Married |
| Riley | Endeavor | Member | M | 20–29 | Married |
Table A2. Cont.

| Name   | Congregation | Status          | Sex | Age  | Marital Status |
|--------|--------------|-----------------|-----|------|----------------|
| Sandra | Endeavor     | Member          | F   | 40–49| Married        |
| Wade   | Endeavor     | Member          | M   | 40–49| Single         |
| Wesley | Endeavor     | Member          | M   | 30–39| Single         |
| Amy    | Endeavor     | Former Member   | F   | 30–39| Married        |
| Doug   | Hillview Christian | Clergy    | M   | 70+  | Married        |
| Betsy  | Hillview Christian | Member   | F   | 50–59| Married        |
| Carol  | Hillview Christian | Member   | F   | 60–69| Married        |
| Dan    | Hillview Christian | Member   | M   | 50–59| Married        |
| Jack   | Hillview Christian | Member   | M   | 70+  | Married        |
| Lisa   | Hillview Christian | Member   | F   | 30–39| Married        |
| Tom    | Hillview Christian | Member   | M   | 50–59| Married        |
| Troy   | Hillview Christian | Member   | M   | 50–59| Married        |
| Bruce  | Hillview Christian | Former Member | M | 70+ | Widowed        |
| Jason  | Newport      | Clergy         | M   | 30–39| Married        |
| Adam   | Newport      | Member         | M   | 30–39| Married        |
| Jeremiah | Newport  | Member         | M   | 30–39| Married        |
| Josiah | Newport      | Member         | M   | 20–29| Single         |
| Leah   | Newport      | Member         | F   | 30–39| Married        |
| Jeff   | Newport      | Former Member  | M   | 30–39| Married        |
| Levi   | Newport      | Former Member  | M   | 30–39| Married        |

1 Former Hillview Member.

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