“How on earth did this happen?”
The relationship of practical consciousness and institutional evolution

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Abstract
Institutional theory assumes that actors’ reflexivity—their discursive consciousness—is the precondition that enables institutional change. We argue that such focus on discursive consciousness disregards one elementary source of institutional change: practical consciousness—the domain of nonreflective cognitive processes. Our article offers a major contribution to the literature: By elaborating the important difference between discursive consciousness and practical consciousness, we contribute to the theorization of the cognitive apparatus of actors in institutional theory. We apply this theorization to highlight institutional evolution as a previously unnoticed mode of institutional change that explains why, and how, institutions change in a nonreflective way. We also provide implications for the ways in which our work might stimulate future empirical research.

Keywords
actor, cognition, consciousness, institutional change, institutional evolution, institutional theory, memory, praxis

Introduction
Institutions are cognitive structures that provide order to actors’ experiences of the social world and inform everyday praxis. To explain institutional change, institutional theory has focused mainly on actors’ reflexivity—their discursive consciousness (for an overview, see Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017; Smets, Aristidou, & Whittington, 2017).
Discursive consciousness motivates actors’ pursuit of self-interests to purposefully engage with or oppose institutions, a behavior which may yield unintended and gradual consequences (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Flistein & McAdam, 2012; Seo & Creed, 2002; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Sudabby, Viale, & Gendron, 2016).

In contrast, we build upon the idea that actors, in general, behave without much discursive consciousness (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Lizardo, 2017; Vaisey, 2009). We thus propose that through nonreflective reference to institutions during praxis—in practical consciousness—institutional change often goes unrecognized. For instance, in the context of the apparently stable institution of marriage, the organized praxis of a wedding has changed significantly over time. Traditionally, the church praxis of weddings founded the cohabitation of spouses, but today, couples usually live together before marriage. Weddings have become a secular bureaucratic praxis of the nation-state, whereas church weddings have become supplemental, even for believers.1 Such a fundamental institutional change in praxis can hardly be attributed to continuous discursive consciousness in everyday activities. We argue that such change is grounded in ongoing marginal shifts in meanings inscribed in the practical consciousness of actors that, over time, accumulate into institutional change. In this paper, we theorize institutional evolution as type of institutional change, which provides an explanation as to why and how institutions are able to evolve even in the absence of discursive consciousness.

The focus on discursive consciousness in institutionalism is understandable as a reaction to repeated criticism that the theory overemphasizes institutional persistence (Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, & Kallinikos, 2017; Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Seo & Creed, 2002). Institutionalists have responded by arguing that actors are, of course, capable of reflecting institutions (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Lawrence & Sudabby, 2006; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). However, by focusing on the ability of actors to reflect institutions, institutionalism limits its analysis to processes of institutional change that are based on discursive consciousness (Cardinale, 2018; Giddens, 1984; Lizardo & Strand, 2010; Vaisey, 2009). Discursive consciousness is evoked by triggers that may be either exogenous or endogenous to institutional arrangements (Greenwood et al., 2011; Seo & Creed, 2002; Zietsma, Groenewegen, Logue, & Hinings, 2017). The commonality in these situations is that they force actors to actively, and in a reflexive way, make decisions on how to act (Smets et al., 2015). Institutional theory thus assumes that practical consciousness, that is, the nonreflective reference to institutions, ceases at some (unspecified) point in time, whereupon institutions subsequently re-enter actors’ discursive consciousness (Battilana, 2006; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Seo & Creed, 2002; Sudabby et al., 2016).

In this article, however, we approach the question of how institutional change is possible through nonreflective reference to institutions, that is, in the absence of actors’ discursive consciousness. We argue that this is enabled by the acquisition of institutions through two distinct modes of cognition (Lizardo, 2017)—discursive cognition and practical cognition—which, as has been shown in studies on the philosophy of mind, exist in parallel (J. S. Evans, 2008; Van Gulick, 2012). These two modes of cognition are based on two distinct types of memory, declarative memory and non-declarative memory, which are respectively accessed through one of the two distinct modes of consciousness, discursive consciousness or practical consciousness. By arguing that discursive consciousness and practical consciousness operate in parallel, we emphasize the fact that institutions may often be represented separately or—in the extreme—individually in these two different types of memory. Further, because discursive consciousness and practical consciousness are rooted in two different modes of cognition, we also theorize the relationship of discursive cognition and practical cognition.
We argue that institutions are not necessarily accessible through both types of consciousness, but often only through either discursive consciousness or practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984; Lizardo, 2017). Past research has indicated this loose coupling of discursive consciousness and practical consciousness. For example, actors may reproduce praxis in a non-reflective manner even if they reflexively are aware of alternative and better ways of acting (Battilana & Dorado, 2010).

This article’s contributions, namely the conceptualization of the cognitive apparatus of actors (Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Powell & Rerup, 2017) and the clarification of the parallelism of discursive consciousness and practical consciousness, will aid researchers in analyzing a mode of institutional change that has, to date, been largely overlooked but that likely accounts for a common way in which institutions change: institutional evolution (Goldenstein & Walgenbach, 2020). Institutional evolution is based on practical consciousness, and this concept explains how even a nonreflective reference to institutions may induce change. We thus provide a theoretical apparatus for understanding when and why institutions evolve even when actors’ discursive consciousness is not involved. This does not downplay earlier reflections on institutional change that provided important insights into reflexive reference to institutions (for an overview, see Micelotta et al., 2017). However, we argue that taking into account the parallel existence of discursive consciousness and practical consciousness broadens the ability of institutional theory to theorize and analyze institutional change. Further, we outline the methodological consequences of our theorization. Specifically, we propose that institutionalists can use ethnography, experimental designs, and forced-choice surveys to study practical consciousness.

The Cognitive Accessibility of Institutions

Outline of the argument

According to institutional theory, institutions may best be understood as cognitive structures that provide order to actors’ experiences of the social world and inform everyday praxis. In the following sections, we describe how institutions are acquired through distinct modes of cognition—discursive cognition and practical cognition—which exist in parallel. Based on this parallelism, institutions are represented as discursive knowledge in declarative memory and as practical dispositions in non-declarative memory. Institutions represented as discursive knowledge provide generalized propositions about the world that actors apply as scaffold for possible ways of acting. In contrast, institutions represented as practical dispositions emerge directly from the experience of praxis and provide strong impetuses for specific ways of acting in similar situations. Institutions represented in declarative memory and non-declarative memory differ regarding their accessibility through discursive consciousness and practical consciousness. Table 1 provides an overview of our theorization of the cognitive apparatus of actors. We describe the content of the table in detail in the next two sections. Even if the analytical distinction of discursive cognition and practical cognition is reasonable, in the remainder of this article we, however, also theorize the relationship between the two modes of cognition.

Institutions and discursive consciousness

The notion of discursive cognition is informed by the discovery of a specific area in the human brain known as “declarative memory.” This type of memory can be accessed through discursive consciousness (Lizardo, 2017). This memory stores cognitive networks of discursive knowledge derived from symbolically mediated institutions (Lizardo, 2017). Institutions of this type have a “know-that” characteristic and consist of propositions about the world that exclude or contain only fragmented reference to personal experience and praxis (e.g., every candidate for ordination to the clergy knows that no Christmas Eve church service is complete without the Gospel of Luke). Institutions internalized as
discursive knowledge thus mean that actors not only possess knowledge about these institutions but also can become aware that they have it. The idea of discursive knowledge fits in with seminal notions in sociological phenomenology (Schütz, 1967; Schütz & Luckmann, 1973) and contemporary conceptualizations in institutional theory, namely, that “culture is best understood as a network of learned knowledge structures, distributed amongst cultural members” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 83). Discursive knowledge is defined as (1) generalized, (2) reflexible, and (3) contentual (Clark, 1997; Evans, 2008; Squire, 2004).

(1) Declarative memory implies that institutions are internalized as a generalized system of typifications—as the prototypical attributes of objects, actions, or actors—linked to an externalized and objectified system of symbols as their perceivable materialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Douglas, 1986; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Hatch & Zilber, 2012; R. E. Meyer, Kornberger, & Höllerer, 2021). Typifications generalize and abstract across concrete events, thereby forming amodal representations in declarative memory (i.e., representations disconnected from concrete experiences). The symbols can take on an aural, visual, or kinesthetic gestalt (Höllerer et al., 2019; Höllerer, Daudigeos, & Jancsary, 2017; R. E. Meyer, Jancsary, Höllerer, & Boxenbaum, 2018). Yet, institutional theory commonly exhibits a strong focus on language, namely, vocabularies, which encompass words and their meanings shared by social collectives (Ocasio, Loewenstein, & Nigam, 2015). For example, during the organized training of clergy,

| Table 1. Discursive and practical cognition. |
|---------------------------------------------|
| **Discursive cognition** | **Practical cognition** |
| **Memory** | Declarative memory stores networks of discursive knowledge, which is defined as generalized, reflexible, and contentual | Non-declarative memory is destined for non-contentual, durable, and schematic practical dispositions |
| **Consciousness** | Discursive consciousness: objectified symbols enable access to generalized representations of institutions (i.e., discursive knowledge) for reproducing an institutionalized praxis | Practical consciousness: nonreflective understanding of the emotions, normative pressures, and intentions that underlie praxis (i.e., practical dispositions). The enactment of an institutionalized praxis is nonreflective |
| **Transmission** | Language is the primary mechanism in the transmission of institutions. The connection between objectified symbols and their meaning is subject to learning | Institutions are mainly transmitted via mimesis. Image-schematic representations of situationally dependent praxes are internalized |
| **Scope of validity** | Symbols provide guidance for the enactment of institutions. Decoupling of verbal accounts and actions is possible | Practical dispositions provide strong guidance for the enactment of institutions. Practical dispositions are closely intertwined with situations in institutional environments |
| **Maintenance** | Institutions are maintained because actors acquire them as generalized and legitimate cognitive representations. Institutions are objectified in language and are reflexible | Institutions are maintained because actors mimic other actors’ praxes. Practical dispositions are linked to praxis, are not reflected, and cannot be verbalized |
an experienced clergy imparts specific religious vocabulary to candidates for ordination to explain and justify the roles of the clergy and the couple during an organized wedding ceremony. Consequently, language is conceptualized as an important tool in the process of institutionalization, as it enables the legitimization and transmission of institutions via systems of symbols (Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015; Loewenstein, Ocasio, & Jones, 2012; Purdy, Ansari, & Gray, 2017).

(2) To date, institutional theory regards internalized institutions as potentially reflexible. Reflexible reference to institutions becomes visible, for example, through the phenomenon of decoupling (Pope & J. W. Meyer, 2016). Decoupling implies that behavior and verbal reference to institutions may be disconnected. In this sense, institutions are only referred to ceremonially, that is, without unfolding behavioral consequences (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Thornton et al., 2012). Consequently, Suddaby and colleagues (2016, p. 229) concluded that actors “can acquire moments of self-awareness in which they gain clear insight into the constraints imposed on them by the broader social structures (i.e., institutions) within which they are embedded.” In line with this argument, previous work has proposed that actors’ discursive consciousness is facilitated in institutional environments that expose actors to contradicting institutional demands (Smets et al., 2015), thus liberating actors from institutional constraints by opening space for alternative ways of acting (Greenwood et al., 2011). A special case of discursive consciousness is purposeful improvisation, which sometimes yields unintended and gradual effects on institutional development but requires that actors move from “awareness to action” (Smets et al., 2017, p. 374). In summary, actors are, in principle, able to reflect typifications and may perceive institutions as contingent and man-made (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Smets et al., 2017; Thornton et al., 2012; Zilber, 2002). However, discursive consciousness is constrained, because it normally refers only to situations in which different ways of acting are applicable. Thus far, however, arrangements that lack this ambiguity remain unexamined in institutional research on institutional change (Seo & Creed, 2002; Voronov & Yorks, 2015).

(3) Discursive knowledge stored in declarative memory is contentual knowledge and is accessed linearly, meaning that discursive consciousness accesses it in the form of logic-based reasoning (Evans, 2008). Research on vocabularies in the context of discursive knowledge therefore focuses on logic-based reasoning. For example, in their recent attempt to link vocabularies, cognition, and institutions, Ocasio and colleagues (2015) argued that existing representations of institutions—typifications—are buttressed by vocabulary structures. The authors suggested that these vocabulary structures define the institutional meaning of typifications. Typifications are then recurrently mobilized in communication to maintain or change institutions using discursive strategies. Ocasio and colleagues (2015) noted that when discursive knowledge is coherently established through typified communication, institutions do not need to be constantly renegotiated, but remain open to such renegotiation.

Institutions and practical consciousness

The notion of practical cognition refers to a specific area in the human brain known as “non-declarative memory” (Lizardo, 2017). Non-declarative memory cannot be accessed consciously. This type of memory is a cognitive depository for internalized (1) non-contentual, (2) durable, and (3) schematic practical
dispositions (Clark, 1997; Evans, 2008; Squire, 2004). Institutions of this type have a “know-how” characteristic, namely, impetuses for appropriate praxis in specific situations (e.g., the way in which a clergyperson conducts a worship service on Christmas Eve without reflecting upon it). Thus, institutions internalized as practical dispositions refer to institutions that order the experiences of the social world, but which actors do not know in the literal sense but that they apply in a nonreflective way. Practical dispositions have not received systematic attention in institutional theory (Lok & Willmott, 2018) but were thoroughly elaborated in Bourdieu’s praxis theory (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Lizardo, 2004) and in streams in the philosophy of mind (Barsalou, 2008; Clark, 1997; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). We draw upon Bourdieu because he was among the first scholars to provide a coherent account of practical consciousness (Vaisey, 2009). We combine his ideas with concepts from the philosophy of mind to provide a more detailed account of Bourdieu’s notion of practical consciousness and the role of practical dispositions in everyday activities (cf., Lizardo, 2004, 2007).

(1) Practical dispositions as a fundament of institutions are non-contentual because they are internalized through bodily mediated exposure to a given experiential environment: the perceived and performed praxis in specific situations (Bourdieu, 2000). Practical dispositions are grounded in the implicit meaning behind a praxis, which implies that actors grasp the aims of other actors and the motivation of their behavior (Tomasello, 2000). We argue that the key to grasping the meaning of praxis is inherently connected to the bodies of actors (Bourdieu, 1984). Through the experience of one’s own movements and the movements of the bodies of others in specific situations, actors are able to intuitively understand individual intentions, social conventions, or the means to accomplishing certain purposes (Tomasello, 2000; Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). This form of “embodiment,” upon which we build our argument, involves the multi-modal experiences of praxis via actors’ visual, haptic, auditory, motor, and vestibular systems (Barsalou, 2008; Clark, 1997; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) and the ability of actors to grasp the meaning behind these bodily states (Carpenter, Uebel, & Tomasello, 2013; Sieweke, 2014; Tomasello, 2000). Bodily states are directly perceived to be meaningful (Bourdieu, 1977) because the same brain areas responsible for the comprehension and representation of practical dispositions are also responsible for the enactment of praxis (Gallese, 2006; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004). In other words, practical dispositions are non-contentual because they are mapped within actors’ sensomotoric systems and represent the meaning of praxis through the way in which the actors’ bodies interact with the world (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Glenberg, 1997).

(2) Institutions grounded in practical dispositions are durable because they are transmitted via the mimesis of the implicit meanings of reoccurring praxis (Sieweke, 2014). They achieve the status of durable practical dispositions when actors mimic the meaning behind the praxis of others and accept praxis as externally given, without reflecting upon it (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Therefore, actors exposed to the same situations develop similar and compatible practical dispositions (Sieweke, 2014). In contrast to discursive knowledge, which is formed of typifications that are generalized across certain events and that are maintained through the regular establishment of explicit rules and communication (Cornelissen et al., 2015; Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000), practical dispositions represent institutions as moments of purposefully intertwined and sequentially occurring praxis. In other words, praxis is linked to specific situations that evoke
practical dispositions, which become (re)activated in similar situations. To put it in Bourdieu’s words (1984, p. 474), “Everything takes place as if the social conditionings linked to a social condition tended to inscribe the relation to the social world in a lasting, generalized relation to one’s own body.” Practical dispositions are resources which are applied in situations that share a structural similarity with those situations in which they were originally formed (Bourdieu, 1984; Gallese & Lakoff, 2005).

(3) Practical dispositions are **schematic**, because they are represented in non-declarative memory as image-schematic representations that directly emerge from the bodily states involved in the enactment of praxis (V. Evans & Green, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Image-schematic representations are formed by situation-dependent combinations of different image schemas that are inherently meaningful because they directly (i.e., imagistically) encode the sensorimotor experiences that undergird practical dispositions (Johnson, 1993; Mandler, 2004; Mandler & Pagán Cánovas, 2014; Rohrer, 2005). In other words, image-schematic representations reflect “motor schemes and body automatisms” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 69). Institutions grounded in practical dispositions thus are cognitively represented as embodied inscriptions of the situations in which they were internalized.

In what follows, we illustrate the bodily experience of praxis (i.e., image schemas) in the context of the institution of marriage (for a more detailed description of the image schemas mentioned, see Clausner & Croft, 1999; Evans & Green, 2006; Johnson, 1993; Lakoff, 1994).

From the clergy’s perspective, the institution of marriage requires an organized wedding ceremony that involves certain bodily postures and movements needed to transform couples into spouses. Practical dispositions in this context are represented bodily by image-schematic representations that encompass multiple image schemas all at once (Mandler & Pagán Cánovas, 2014). The specific postures and movements of bodies are reflected in “space” image schemas, which represent how actors behave in church during the praxis of getting married. “source-path-goal” image schemas, in turn, represent the specific goal that human actors are apparently pursuing. In a wedding, this encompasses, among other things, the procession to the altar and the exit from the sanctuary after the kiss. Furthermore, “object” image schemas represent the kind of sensomotoric actions that can be performed by referring to a certain object. This implies that practical dispositions do not represent what an object (e.g., the altar) is, but rather what it is good for and how it is used. “force” image schemas convey social norms through bodily actions that express, for example, permissions and obligations. The image-schematic sense of an obligation may best be understood as a force that moves a passive subject (“compulsion”) (e.g., the bride’s father guides the bride to the altar). Exclusion as social vigor in a wedding ceremony is expressed in the removal of the bride from the desire of other men (“blockade”). “link” represents causation and construes “if-then” relationships that are important for structuring how and in what order image-schematic experiences occur during praxis.

In summary, institutions based on practical dispositions are, on the one hand, grounded in the bodily experiences of praxis. On the other hand, through the internalization of image-schematic representations, bodily experiences greatly modify actors’ abilities to act and, consequently, establish practical dispositions for perception and action (Bourdieu, 1990, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The wedding example can easily be translated to situations in which actors are exposed to organizational contexts. An example is a situation in which a new job incumbent is introduced to the practices of a department. Comparable to a wedding, actors in organizations are exposed to situations involving bodily experiences that refer to
“SPACE,” “SOURCE-PATH-GOAL,” or “FORCE.” In the remainder of this article, we theorize how the image-schematic nature of practical dispositions enables institutional evolution as mode of change. To do so, we revisit the example of the wedding ceremony.

The relationship between discursive knowledge and practical dispositions

So far, we have described the parallel existence of discursive cognition and practical cognition. In this context, we explained that the two modes of cognition involve either a declarative or a non-declarative type of memory in which institutions are represented and which are accessed either through discursive consciousness or through practical consciousness. We now suggest that the manner in which actors are exposed to institutions determines the way in which those institutions become cognitively represented (Ignatow, 2007; Lizardo, 2017).

Institutions that have been encountered primarily in the form of symbols are cognitively accessible through discursive consciousness. Institutions that have been internalized as practical dispositions through bodily mediated exposure to perceived and performed praxis in specific situations are cognitively accessed through practical consciousness. For institutional theory, the way in which the actor is exposed to institutions yields an important implication: institutions can be represented in a redundant and dissociated way.

Actors are necessarily exposed to and may experience institutions through both discursive cognition and practical cognition, indicating that some (but not all) institutions become cognitively represented in both declarative memory and non-declarative memory, in what is known as redundant representation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Lizardo, 2017). That is, actors internalize discursive knowledge and practical dispositions associated with the same institution, making the institution accessible through both discursive consciousness and practical consciousness. Redundant representation is likely when actors are simultaneously exposed to an institution via mediating symbols and praxis. For instance, a clergyperson can conduct the praxis of a wedding (practical disposition) while using the respective institutionalized vocabulary to verbalize and justify certain actions (discursive knowledge).

Distinguishing between discursive consciousness and practical consciousness also sheds light on the possibility that the representation of institutions may be dissociated in memory. For example, actors may be exposed to an institution that is transmitted via symbols, without ever even experiencing its associated praxis. In an extreme case, this transmission would mean that actors might internalize discursive knowledge about an institution and take the reference to vocabulary structures for granted, but would be unable or unwilling to produce the attendant praxis (Durand, Hawn, & Ioannou, 2019).

Furthermore, the distinction of the two modes of consciousness also points to the possibility that actors may reproduce praxis without being able to verbalize it discursively (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984). For example, actors who have internalized certain practical dispositions tend to stick to this enacted praxis, even if they have internalized discursive knowledge that promotes alternative ways of acting (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). Further, research has also demonstrated that various groups of actors who were exposed to comparable institutional environments behave similarly while they, simultaneously, give contradictory but situationally appropriate discursive accounts of their behaviors (Hsin & Xie, 2014). Our discussion so far suggests that institutions may become represented in declarative memory and/or non-declarative memory and that their representation may be redundant or dissociative. Differences in representation, in turn, imply that the change of institutions differs depending upon whether they are accessed through either discursive consciousness or practical consciousness. In the following section, we apply our insights in describing an elementary mode of institutional change that occurs through practical consciousness: institutional evolution.
The Relationship of Practical Consciousness and Institutional Evolution

In contemporary institutional theory, the change of institutions is explained by the discursive consciousness of actors (Micelotta et al., 2017; Sewell, 1992). For example, external shocks may cause the deinstitutionalization of an established praxis and create institutional voids that may be put to strategic use by actors (Zietsma et al., 2017). Other research has focused on the role of actors who, based on verbal accounts, purposefully oppose existing institutions (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Hoffman, 1999; Lawrence & Phillips, 2004). In this context, processes of institutional change are regularly discussed in the context of situations in which different ways of acting are applicable (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). Several studies have pointed to the impact this ambiguity has on actors’ discursive consciousness (Battilana et al., 2009; Suddaby et al., 2016; Voronov & Yorks, 2015), even if the existence of ambiguity does not necessarily lead to institutional change (Reay & Hinings, 2009). While several studies have investigated actors’ motivations for intentionally challenging institutions (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Seo & Creed, 2002; Voronov, De Clercq, & Hinings, 2013), other work in this area has found that discursive consciousness may also cause unintended and gradual change (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012; Wright & Zammuto, 2013). Overall, in this context it is discursive consciousness that motivates actors’ pursuit of self-interests and improvisation in everyday activities.

However, as the literature suggests, institutional change may also be driven by the accumulation of a number of uncoordinated actions (Micelotta et al., 2017, Goldenstein & Walgenbach, 2020). This fundamental idea, however, remains underdeveloped. We elaborate on this idea using a mode of institutional change that we term institutional evolution. We theorize that institutional evolution occurs at the level of practical consciousness and does not require discursive consciousness.

As described above, the basic notion of practical consciousness implies that actors cognitively access practical dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977), which are grounded in image-schematic representations of situations (Lizardo, 2007). It is important to keep in mind that the notion of practical dispositions does not imply a simplified and deterministic picture of praxis (Bourdieu, 1990). The (re)activation of praxis always involves the mechanisms of embodied metaphors, namely, the match between an image-schematic representation and the given situation, which enables actors to enact appropriate praxis in a given situation in a nonreflective way (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). It is important to note that embodied metaphors refer to a nonreflective cognitive process and not to metaphors as trope. In this sense, the meaning of praxis is cognitively represented in non-declarative memory by image-schematic representations that function as an analogical source domain, helping actors intuitively grasp whether a target domain, a given situation, and the praxis observed in it correspond with their practical dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990; Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

We can illustrate the functioning of embodied metaphors by revisiting our example of a wedding, from a clergyperson’s perspective. An organized wedding ceremony is bodily represented by an image-schematic representation, that is, a situation-dependent combination of multiple image schemas (Mandler & Pagán Cánovas, 2014), which, in total, encompass the bodily postures and movements of the clergy, the bridal couple, and other attendees involved in the ceremony as well as their interactions with each other and their environment. An embodied metaphor in turn captures the structural similarity between the image-schematic representation of a wedding (source domain) and the given situation (target domain). When the postures and movements of bodies in a given situation correspond, for example, with the image schemas referring to “SPACE,” “SOURCE-PATH GOAL,” “OBJECT,” or “FORCE,” an
embodied metaphor enables the activation of an appropriate practical disposition. However, because they share structural similarity, even when conducting a wedding for the first time, clergy are able to metaphorically transfer specific practical dispositions they have internalized in the praxis of regular worship services. An embodied metaphor thus enables actors to apply those practical dispositions they have internalized that best fit the given situation. Actors who have been exposed to the same situation share the same embodied metaphors and thus act in similar and predictable ways (Bourdieu, 1990).

Actors transmit their practical dispositions to other actors and thus maintain an institution’s stability. However, actors’ embodied metaphors differ in terms of how deeply the actors have internalized the practical dispositions that refer to an institution (Lizardo & Strand, 2010). The difference in the depth of internalization between actors may have inter-generational and intra-generational causes. Inter-generational differences do not exclusively refer to demographic cohorts but are foremost due to the fact that succeeding actors who enter a specific institutional environment have not yet comprehensively internalized the institution’s praxis (Lizardo & Strand, 2010). From an intra-generational perspective, the depth of internalization of actors may be affected by the instant of time in which actors were exposed to the praxis of an institutional environment (Thornton et al., 2012). Thus, in the context of embodied metaphors, institutional change may happen on the level of practical consciousness in two ways: during the process of transmission itself (i.e., inter-generational) and through shifts in the situation in which a praxis is enacted (i.e., intra-generational).

**Process of transmission.** The process of transmission builds on an actor’s practical capability to mimic the meaning behind others’ praxis without reflecting it. In other words, mimicry implies that actors do not simply imitate the behavior of others but grasp the meaning behind praxis. Mimicry is at the core of stabilizing institutions in practical consciousness (Bourdieu, 1984). In contrast to institutions accessed by discursive consciousness, reflexive efforts to maintain an institution are not required (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). However, transmission should not be considered to be a process of sheer replication. As we propose, even if transmission also supports institutional maintenance, practical consciousness nevertheless involves the possibility that the image-schematic representations of situations, which actors internalize, will differ. This implies that the embodied metaphors linked with actors’ practical dispositions will differ as well. As a result, praxes enacted in similar situations may vary. These variations may accumulate over time and thus lead to institutional change. This possibility of change implies that the process of transmission does not entail the creation of an exact copy of a praxis. As explained above in more detail, the transmission of an institution depends on the acquisition of image-schematic representations and, consequently, on the mimicry of other actors in the same situations. Mimicry, however, remains fuzzy, and therefore the transmission of praxes across actors remains incomplete. Recent evidence from the philosophy of the mind suggests that not all facets of a praxis are transmitted with the same probability. Rather, a praxis may be subject to a nonreflective selection and transformation process (Mesoudi, 2016).

Selection refers to the fact that actors usually do not reproduce the praxis of all actors they observe with the same probability and consequently may not internalize all image-schematic representations that form the basis of the metaphorical understanding of certain praxis situations. For example, actors prefer to mimic others who stand out or whom they perceive as superior (Henrich & McElreath, 2003). This selective mimicry corresponds with the idea that an actor’s social position affects the probability of institutional change (Battilana, 2006; Pache & Santos, 2013). Social positions thus not only influence actors’ discursive consciousness: they also influence the internalization of practical dispositions by affecting which other actors are mimicked and the way in which other
actors’ praxis is mimicked. Furthermore, the frequency with which a distinct chain of actions is observed affects the selection of a praxis by actors (Boyd & Richerson, 1985). In this sense, the argument for selective mimicry adds to recent practice-driven work in institutional theory, which highlights mimicry as important for the transmission of institutions (Sieweke, 2014).

Transformation on the level of practical consciousness refers to the fact that the transmission of a praxis is error-prone (Giddens, 1984). For example, this can be identified in Zucker’s (1977, p. 735, figure 2) seminal experiment, in which she found that the impact of institutionalized contexts on a praxis declined after a certain number of transmissions to succeeding actors, finally dissolving more or less completely without any variation in the transmission’s context. Zucker (1977) argued that the change is due to the fact that the institutionalized praxis is incompletely transferred, which is in line with our notion of mimicry. We underline her argument and claim that incomplete transmission of praxis should not be considered to be the exception but rather represents the rule. In this way, even marginal transformations of a praxis may accumulate and change the nature of a given institutional environment. Because the transfer of an institution across actors is subject to selection and transformation processes, the likelihood of an imperfect transfer is omnipresent (Tomasello, 2000).

Exposure to institutions. Institutions may change because the situation under which a praxis is enacted has shifted. In this context, actors differ depending on whether they were exposed to the situation before or after the situational shift. Consequently, they differ in terms of their internalized practical dispositions, which may in turn cause modifications to the metaphors embodied by the actors. Bourdieu (1984) noted that situations may differ moderately without causing significant tensions (for an illustration, see Abdelnour et al., 2017; Ansari & Phillips, 2011; Compagni, Mele, & Ravasi, 2015). For example, in the past, some members of the clergy may have been strongly socialized to situations in which appropriately organized weddings necessarily take place in churches. Today, however, civil marriage ceremonies are common as well. From a bridal couple’s perspective, this change transforms weddings insofar as the participants now attribute the character of a special event to a church wedding, which the ceremony must fulfill. As a result, a situation in which a clergy’s practical dispositions are enacted is modified. Further, today’s members of the clergy are less frequently involved in traditional wedding ceremonies and thus lack a strong internalization of practical dispositions that refer to the specific contingencies of such situations in the past.

Bourdieu (1984, 2000) underscored the relevance of the propensity of actors for maintaining the praxis in which they have been socialized, which has important implications for our argument. Embodied metaphors ensure that actors enact a praxis that is appropriate in a specific situation. However, the perceived appropriateness may either differ between similar situations or decline considerably over time. According to Bourdieu (1990), in situations in which a praxis is repeatedly proven to be ill-suited, hysteresis occurs. Hysteresis implies that actors sense that the praxis they are enacting does not meet a situation’s demands. However, because hysteresis is a phenomenon of practical consciousness, it does not lead to reflexivity on the level of discursive consciousness (Strand & Lizardo, 2015, 2017). A consequence is that actors who have strongly internalized a given praxis (almost defiantly) stick to their practical dispositions. That is, “previously developed modes of perception and appreciation are applied under circumstances which are no longer objectively appropriate” (Lizardo & Strand, 2010, p. 221). However, some actors who lack this strong internalization immediately recognize how ill-suited the praxis is in a specific situation and therefore acquire different practical dispositions. This difference implies not that the actors do not mimic the praxis of others who have strongly internalized praxis but rather that they mimic the praxis...
selectively. They subsequently internalize practical dispositions that are more appropriate in the current situation (Strand & Lizardo, 2017).

Our conceptualization of institutional evolution focuses on the object that changes when institutions evolve (Lizardo, 2020)—practical dispositions and thus the praxis. In comparison to the change in discursive knowledge resulting from actors’ discursive consciousness, institutional evolution requires the transmission of practical dispositions from one actor to another and therefore tends to be slow and continuous. Similarly, actors may recognize the poor fit of a praxis to situational conditions. In such places, they will only mimic the praxis selectively and will internalize practical dispositions that better fit the situation. Consequently, adaptation to the changing situation occurs slowly. Further, the adaptation will occur continuously and slowly when moderate situational shifts are the rule rather than the exception. Figure 1 visualizes our theorization of institutional evolution.

**Discussion**

By focusing on discursive consciousness, institutional theory has disregarded the possibility of institutional change through nonreflective cognitive processes at the level of practical consciousness. Our theorization of the cognitive apparatus of actors in institutional theory thus provides extended theoretical and methodological ground for the investigation of institutional change. It calls for being explicit on whether institutional change is grounded in discursive consciousness or practical consciousness.

**Investigating institutional change as institutional evolution**

Our theorization has implications for future research that aims at empirically testing the process of institutional evolution. First, we suggest ethnographic studies as an appropriate method for tracing actors’ practical consciousness (Croidieu & Kim, 2018; Glynn, 2008; Navis & Glynn, 2011; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003; Roberts, 2020). Following our theoretical approach, the internalization of a set of practical dispositions in non-declarative memory shapes the specific manner in which actors act in specific situations. In this sense, ethnographic studies are well suited for analyzing the change of individual and collective practical dispositions. With ethnographic studies—i.e., by being exposed to the same situations as the actors studied—researchers can dig deeper into
the ways in which practical dispositions emerge and change. For example, Wacquant (2004) studied the milieu of boxing by becoming a fighter for three years, and Dalton (1959) became an employee in a business corporation to study interactions among managers, between managers and workers, and between managers and corporations. Both researchers internalized the practical dispositions in their research environment and thus gathered valuable insights into the ways in which actors navigate in their respective environments without necessarily being able to verbalize the underlying rules and patterns of praxis. While interview data involves the risk that only the discursive knowledge of interviewees will be analyzed (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013), ethnography prioritizes actors’ behaviors and practical dispositions. The reorientation towards ethnography, however, does not imply that verbally expressed data are useless. Interview data are indeed valuable for ethnographic research, as they can be used for purposes of triangulation. Ethnographic research should therefore be based on the long-term observation of everyday activities (i.e., praxis) and changes in these activities, which should subsequently be subject to joint analysis with the actors observed (for methodological avenues of doing so, see McDonnell, 2014).

Second, to analyze institutional evolution, we suggest the usage of experiments (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Glaser, Fast, Harmon, & Green, 2016; Lauer, Rockenbach, & Walgenbach, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012; Zucker, 1977). For example, according to the results of Zucker’s (1977) experiment, institutional evolution can be approached by studying the impact of the transmission of practical dispositions to subsequent institutional generations with and without changes in the situations in which actors perform a praxis. The value of experiments lies in the opportunity to isolate cognitive processes so as to control the interference of external variables and thus provide evidence of causality. To investigate the evolution of practical dispositions as a fundament of institutions, a reduction in the impact of discursive consciousness is required. To this end, recent experimental designs have, for example, drawn on evidence from cognitive psychology and applied the technique of cognitive loading. Cognitive loading implies that researchers first ask a participant to accomplish tasks that deplete discursive consciousness. For example, a task such as remembering numbers significantly impairs participants’ capacity to reflect. After carrying out this task, participants are asked to complete tasks relevant to studying practical consciousness (Miles, 2015; Srivastava & Banaji, 2011). Moreover, experimental designs should, in general, minimize the use of symbols as triggers (e.g., the image of a clergyperson) for participants’ reactions in the experiment. This does not imply that no cues should be used in experimental designs. Instead, research on practical consciousness should construct situations as cues (e.g., an organized wedding or an office as in Zucker’s (1977) seminal study), on which actors are forced to (re)produce praxis by relying on their embodied metaphors that match their practical dispositions in non-declarative memory to a given situation. Such experimental designs should focus on the direct measurement of praxis, because, for clarifying the nonreflective nature of underlying praxis, it is considered essential that a measurement does not rely on self-reports of participants (for an overview of methods, see Nosek, Hawkins, & Frazier, 2011). Experimental designs of this kind activate practical consciousness more directly and thus minimize the reflective influence of discursive consciousness (Lizardo et al., 2016).

As another way of capturing institutional evolution, we suggest forced-choice survey studies, which allow, for instance, for comparing members of social groups that differ in the strength to which they have been socialized to specific situations. For example, Vaisey (2009) suggested that real-time decisions put actors into situations in which they are forced to make decisions quickly and to give an answer that feels right. Forced-choice surveys thus repress the reference to discursive consciousness
because they expose actors to a practical problem. Vaisey (2009, p. 1689) stated that “well-designed survey questions may measure practical knowledge better because they present the respondent with situations that are homologous with everyday decision-making processes.” By constructing surveys that refer to situations that can be observed as a part of actors’ life worlds and/or by asking experts to describe their specific life world, researchers can ensure that their implicit assumptions do not bias the construction of surveys. For example, in his real-time decision study on the general impact of practical dispositions on prosocial behavior, Miles (2015) selected a situation in which actors had to decide whether they wanted to share their achievements with other actors who had achieved nothing—a situation relevant in various life worlds. His findings demonstrated that practical dispositions and their non-reflective enactment significantly influenced whether the actors were willing to share their achievements.

**The relationship of discursive consciousness and practical consciousness**

Our theorization of institutional change at the level of practical consciousness also provides insight into approaches that acknowledge the relevance of everyday activities (i.e., praxis) in institutional processes (Cardinale, 2018; Smets et al., 2017). Because institutional research does not distinguish between the effects of practical consciousness and discursive consciousness (Cardinale, 2018; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013), it does not take into account the fact that institutions, depending on the way that actors have been exposed to them, may be cognitively represented in two fundamentally different ways, namely as discursive knowledge in declarative memory (“know-that”) and/or as practical dispositions in non-declarative memory (“know-how”). As a result, institutions may become represented in a redundant (declarative and non-declarative memory) or dissociative way (declarative or non-declarative memory). If institutions are represented in a dissociative way, the source of institutional change (i.e., discursive consciousness or practical consciousness) depends on whether institutions have been internalized as discursive knowledge or practical dispositions. In the following, we illustrate the necessity for institutional scholars to make explicit whether institutional change rests on discursive consciousness or practical consciousness.

In situations in which institutions represented as discursive knowledge are relevant, actors are likely to show a marked propensity for discursive consciousness in processes of institutional change. The importance of this insight can be illustrated through McPherson and Sauder’s (2013) study on the change and application of the shared body of knowledge applied in the institution of a drug court to achieve an organizational goal. The authors found that actors with diverse professional backgrounds were able to acquire and apply knowledge of other professional backgrounds, even if this knowledge was unconnected to their professional backgrounds. The authors also found, however, that actors tended to use the language of their own professional backgrounds to justify their actions.

Our description of practical consciousness emphasizes that the enactment of practical dispositions is closely interlinked with the situations in which they were acquired; that is, actors internalize practical dispositions, which are grounded in image-schematic representations (Bourdieu, 1990). In McPherson and Sauder’s (2013) study, the actors were primarily acting in institutional environments connected to their professions, which made the internalization of practical dispositions in a drug court only subordinately relevant. Consequently, all of the actors probably lacked deeply internalized practical dispositions regarding the court’s praxis. Such a lack of internalization may cause actors to experience ambiguity (Bourdieu, 1984) which, as McPherson and Sauder (2013) reported, has arisen in multiple court cases. As past institutional research has argued, it is exactly this experience of ambiguity that
facilitates actors’ discursive consciousness (Seo & Creed, 2002; Thornton et al., 2012). Due to their involvement in the drug court, the actors changed their way of assessing drug court cases by acquiring discursive knowledge (“know-that”) of all professional backgrounds available in that context. However, due to their own professional backgrounds, they more frequently tended to apply primarily discursive knowledge connected to their own professional background, because such was what they knew best. However, McPherson and Sauder (2013) also found that the actors who most often acted in the drug court context had a higher propensity to mobilize discursive knowledge from other professional backgrounds more fluently. Thus, we argue, the actors’ discursive consciousness played the dominant role in the change of discursive knowledge available in the drug court, because the actors lacked a deep internalization of practical dispositions.

If institutions are deeply internalized as practical dispositions, then institutional change is grounded in practical consciousness. We elaborate on this insight by revisiting a seeming paradox reported by Battilana and Dorado (2010), who observed it in the institutional change of two microfinance organizations in Bolivia. Both organizations emerged from nonprofit organizations and aimed at providing loans to the poor. Thus, they combined an economic banking praxis and a social development praxis. Both organizations attached great importance to hiring bankers and social workers whom they expected to be able to reconcile both praxis types. The two organizations invested in socializing all employees into both types of praxis. However, surprisingly, Battilana and Dorado (2010) found that while organization 1 faced significant internal conflicts, organization 2 succeeded in reconciling both praxis types. The authors speculated that this result may have owed to the focus of organization 1 on hiring experienced professionals and training them on the organization’s mission while neglecting to train them in how to accomplish said mission. Our argument provides a key to understanding the results of Battilana and Dorado’s (2010) study: The professional background of all employees was in either banking or social work, both of which can be considered as the primary source of the employees’ practical dispositions. The bankers and social workers lacked discursive knowledge and practical dispositions in the domain of the respective other group. In addition, the institutional change manifesting in the establishment of the microfinancing organizations forced both groups of employees into a situation in which two different kinds of practical dispositions should be applied simultaneously. Consequently, to ensure that bankers and social workers would mutually internalize the practical dispositions of the other group’s domain and thus reconcile their practical dispositions, the organizations should have focused on the practical dispositions of both groups (i.e., on the “know-how” in non-declarative memory). In fact, the two organizations differed significantly in how they trained their employees. Battilana and Dorado (2010) reported that organization 1 focused foremost on classroom training and communication of the organization’s mission. Thus, organization 1 addressed discursive knowledge (i.e., the “know-that” in declarative memory), which did not support the reconciling of the practical dispositions of the bankers and social workers. In contrast, organization 2 focused on extensive practical training in addition to classroom training. For example, during the first month, actors worked as “shadows” of loan officers. Furthermore, candidates for job promotions in organization 2 were asked to demonstrate their praxis through role-playing tests. We consider this strong focus on praxis to be a necessary condition for a successful institutional change that resolved the ambiguity experienced by the workers. This argument is supported by Battilana and Dorado’s (2010) finding that once the praxis of banking began to prevail in organization 1, social workers began to rebel against this prevalent logic, sticking instead (almost defiantly) to their practical dispositions. This is exactly what Bourdieu (1990) termed “hysteresis,” an effect caused by shifts in the situation in which the praxis is executed.
As we have described, hysteresis results not in discursive consciousness but in a successive adaptation of a praxis. As Battilana and Dorado (2010) reported, subsequent employees increasingly adopted the praxis of banking, while actors who stuck to the praxis of social development left the organization.

The aforementioned examples indicate that studying the relationship between discursive knowledge and practical dispositions in everyday activities will be a fruitful endeavor for future research, as it allows for clarification of the relationship between institutional change based on discursive consciousness and institutional change based on practical consciousness. For future research on institutional change, we here suggest a combination of traditional research methods—such as interviews, which are well suited to capturing discursive knowledge (Lizardo et al., 2016; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013)—with research methods designed for measuring practical dispositions (see above). Such a combination could, for instance, be used to assess the (dis)association of discursive knowledge and practical dispositions. In general, a combination of research methods dedicated to studying discursive consciousness and practical consciousness will allow for studying on which mode of consciousness institutions rest, how long actors stick to their practical consciousness in changing environments, and when discursive knowledge is able to influence actors’ practical consciousness in situations of institutional change.

Implications for the further development of the theories of taken-for-grantedness and multimodality

Our article also provides suggestions for reconsidering other central concepts of institutional theory that institutionalists may want to study in processes of institutional change: taken-for-grantedness and multimodality.

*Taken-for-grantedness*. Institutional researchers can theorize two different ways in which institutions achieve the status of taken-for-grantedness. The existing literature conceptualizes practical consciousness as the source of taken-for-grantedness and discursive consciousness as the source of institutional change (Cardinale, 2018; Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997; Micelotta et al., 2017; Smets et al., 2012; Suddaby et al., 2016; Zucker, 1977). We argue, however, that the nature of taken-for-grantedness varies with the way in which institutions are cognitively accessible—through discursive consciousness or practical consciousness. This argument is in line with Jepperson’s (1991, p. 147) early notion that the phenomenological concept of “taken-for-grantedness is distinct from conscious awareness.” Jepperson (1991, p. 147) further argued that taken-for-grantedness may be based on nonreflective cognitive processes; however, he also noted that actors may subject an institution “to substantial scrutiny, but still take it for granted.” Accordingly, institutions acquired as discursive knowledge may be taken for granted but nevertheless remain available to actors’ discursive consciousness (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; R. E. Meyer et al., 2018). As a consequence, institutions internalized as discursive knowledge require the establishment of well-defined rules and convincing accounts (Hassebladh & Kallinikos, 2000). When Jepperson (1991) states that institutions may be examined with substantial scrutiny, he emphasizes that actors not only take discursive knowledge for granted but can become aware that they do so. In contrast, institutions acquired as practical dispositions are available for practical consciousness. In this case, taken-for-grantedness involves institutions being enacted in a nonreflective way as durable practical dispositions (Bourdieu, 2000; Lizardo, 2004).

*Multimodality*. Our theorization also yields insights for research on multimodality (Höllerer et al., 2017, 2019). This stream of research has highlighted the role of the visual gestalt of symbols in (de-)institutionalization processes on the level of discursive consciousness (Meyer et al., 2018). We argue that by taking into account the role of practical consciousness, multimodality research may also be able to explain why the visual gestalt of symbols is relevant in processes
of institutional change. Meyer and colleagues (2018, p. 395) note that visual texts exhibit an “embodied form, meaning that it positions the viewer spatially and corporeally with regard to the depicted scene and/or objects.” This type of embodiment is, of course, different from the one that we introduced in the context of an actor’s practical consciousness—namely, embodiment in terms of practical dispositions that are mapped within actors’ sensomotoric system (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004). However, the visual gestalt of symbols brings actors into a situation in which they may imagine what it would be like to experience the visualized praxis, even if they have never been exposed to this praxis before. Even if the actors’ imagination lacks the direct multimodal experience of a praxis via the visual, haptic, auditory, motor, and vestibular systems (Barsalou, 2008), it may serve as a proxy for the direct experience of praxis (Jeannerod, 2001) and thus “naturalize social reality and reify ideas as material facts” (Meyer et al., 2018, p. 408).

Conclusion

In this article, we have theorized the cognitive apparatus of actors in institutional theory. With our theoretical approach, we facilitate studies that investigate the scope of discursive and practical cognition. The parallelism of discursive and practical cognition indicates that institutions may become represented in both declarative and non-declarative memory and thus may be maintained and/or changed at the levels of actors’ discursive and/or practical consciousness.

Consequently, such parallel existence of discursive cognition and practical cognition enables institutional researchers to be more precise in defining whether the behaviors they are investigating are rooted in discursive consciousness or practical consciousness and, accordingly, to be more aware of the different groundings of institutions. The promise of our theorization is twofold. First, it enables the study of institutional change in contexts where actors differ with regard to the way in which they have internalized institutions (i.e., whether they have internalized institutions as discursive knowledge or practical dispositions or both). Second, it also allows for considering the effect of actors’ membership in different institutional generations (i.e., the depth to which actors have been socialized within certain situations) on institutional change.

In this context, we emphasized institutional evolution as an elementary avenue of institutional change that explains why institutions evolve without the mobilization of actors’ discursive consciousness. In this respect, we lay the groundwork for future institutional research that is primarily interested in the subtle nature of institutional change. This type of research will complement the theoretical development of institutionalism by taking into consideration the existence of different sources for institutional maintenance and change.

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Note

1. Throughout this paper, we use examples referring to Christianity. We would like to emphasize that our argument is general in nature and applies across many cultural contexts.

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