Tackling hunger through dialogue? The institutional agency of dialogue in social innovation

Ralph Hamann, 1 Warren Nilsson, 1 Scott Drimie 2

1 University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business, Cape Town, South Africa
2 University of Stellenbosch Centre for Complex Systems in Transition, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Corresponding author email: ralph.hamann@gsb.uct.ac.za

Abstract

In the face of grand challenges such as food insecurity, social innovation is becoming increasingly systemic in ambition and institutional in practice. But while social innovation praxis is largely dialogical, the theory of institutional work is largely framed in terms of dialectic agency. We know little about the institutional practices and accomplishments of dialogic agency. Through an in-depth analysis of the Southern Africa Food Lab, we identify five dialogic practices – enrolling, hosting, surfacing, regenerating, and reflexivity – that interact to give rise to four institutional accomplishments: increasing boundary permeability, relational depth, value reflexivity, and categorical differentiation. We thus identify and explicate dialogue as an important and distinct mode of agency, especially in the face of grand challenges, and we show how dialogic agency can be sustained even in dialectic encounters. We propose that dialogic agency heightens the social innovation capacity of a given institutional field while dialectic agency constrains that capacity.

Keywords

Dialogue, Social Innovation, Institutional Work, Food System, Grand Challenges
Introduction

Discussion on social innovation has put curiously little emphasis on power, conflict, and protest – notions that have been centre-stage in more established debates on social change (e.g., Fairclough, 1992; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Tarrow & Tollefson, 1994). Perhaps that is part of the term’s popularity: The idea that human suffering can be reduced by means of novel ways of thinking and acting, and that this displaces the need for disruptive conflict between the poor and the rich, or the powerless and the powerful. This is likely to be particularly appealing for powerful incumbents in society, with social innovation and related terms becoming prominent in the strategies and branding of large corporations (Christensen, Baumann, Ruggles, & Sadtler, 2006; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Saul, 2010).

These ostensibly competing approaches to social change are both prominent among efforts to address the social and ecological problems faced in the food system, including widespread hunger and malnutrition, obesity and food-related non-communicable diseases, and current and expected environmental impacts and constraints on food production (e.g., Battisti & Naylor, 2009; Bohle, Downing, & Watts, 1994; Godfray, Beddington, et al., 2010; Moodie, Stuckler, et al., 2013). Indeed, food is a particularly resonant domain for such efforts – and their contradictions – because of its multifaceted and paradoxical nature. Food is a basic need and an intricate part of our personal lives – we are all “eaters” and hence implicated in and dependent on the food system. Simultaneously, food is a highly competitive industry dominated by powerful corporations driven by anonymous, global markets, interacting in complex ways with political, economic, and ecological systems at various scales.

Some describe these complexities as fertile ground for social innovation through consumer action, social entrepreneurship, or better coordination and collaboration among
diverse role-players (Green & Foster, 2005; Lowe, Phillipson, & Lee, 2008; McLachlan et al, 2015; Sage, 2003; Senge, Hamilton, & Kania, 2015). Others highlight the underlying, structural causes of problems in the food system and hence call for social and political activism for “food sovereignty” to reduce corporate control of the food system (Alkon & Mares, 2012; Desmarais, 2012; Patel, 2009). Though there are issues on which innovators and activists may agree – such as opportunities related to localizing food value chains (Hinrichs, 2003; Seyfang, 2006) – they are at odds with each other in their stance on whether to engage in dialogue or dialectic contestation with powerful incumbents in the system (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Jarosz, 2014).

These manifest tensions in efforts to change the food system resonate with tensions in institutional theory. On the one hand, institutional theory highlights impediments to social change due to political manoeuvring of powerful actors and the taken-for-granted nature of institutions (Selznick, 1996). On the other, more recent work suggests that initiatives that convene dialogue between different role-players can become agents of change in their institutional field (Mair & Hehenberger, 2014). Yet while we have a blossoming array of research on institutional entrepreneurship (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004; Svejenova, Mazza, & Planellas, 2007), institutional work (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011), and the role of social movements (Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003), we still know little about how dialogue achieves agency for institutional change, and how it might interact with dialectic forms of agency in contexts characterized by high degrees of contestation, such as the food system.

We explore these questions through an analysis of an eight-year action research project focused on facilitating “collaboration and dialogue between stakeholder groups… towards a thriving, just, and sustainable food system” in South Africa (SAFL, 2016). We
identify five practices—enrolling, hosting, surfacing, regenerating, and reflexivity—that interact to give rise to four institutional accomplishments: increasing boundary permeability, relational depth, value reflexivity, and categorical differentiation. We contribute to the institutional theory literature by identifying dialogue as an important and distinct mode of agency, especially in tackling grand social-ecological challenges like food insecurity, with a corresponding set of practices and resulting institutional accomplishments. We contribute to the social innovation literature by theorizing social innovation practice in terms of dialogic agency, and by showing how dialogic agency can be sustained even in dialectic encounters. Finally, we propose that dialogic agency heightens the social innovation capacity of a given institutional field while dialectic agency constrains that capacity.

We commence by sketching the theoretical contours of dialectic and dialogic agency in social innovation. We then introduce our case study and our approach to collecting and analysing the data. Our findings section describes our process model, which we then discuss with reference to the literature on social innovation and institutional theory.

**Dialectic and dialogue as modes of agency in social innovation**

Social innovation scholarship is adopting an increasingly systemic lens. Earlier definitions of social innovation—drawing on social entrepreneurship practice—emphasized discrete responses to social needs. From this perspective, social innovation was framed as the creation and diffusion of novel “solutions” to a specific social-environmental “problems” (Mulgan, 2006; Philips, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008). Propelled by the complexity of current social-ecological challenges (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006) and by the conceptual limitations of social entrepreneurship theory when confronting those challenges (Dey & Stayaert, 2010), many researchers began taking a
more institutional tack, focusing on innovations in social structure and practice (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Howaldt, Butzin, Domanski, & Kaletka, 2014; Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010). In this view, a social innovation not only solves a social problem but also disrupts the underlying institutional patterns that contribute to that problem in the first place. The deepest social innovations “profoundly change the basic routines, resource and authority flows, or beliefs of the social system in which the innovation occurs” (Westley & Antadze, 2010: 2), fostering “new social relationships or collaborations” (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010: 3) by altering regulative, normative, and/or cultural structuring (Heiskala, 2007).

Hence, what underlies the path of social innovation is not a social problem to be solved, but the social change it brings about. From this standing point, one can better perceive the specificity of the process of social innovation creation as new ideas manifested in social actions leading to social change and proposing new alternatives and new social practices for social groups (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014: 44).

Social innovation, then, can be seen as subcategory of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009), rooted in experimental change and oriented toward some conception of a public good. Institutional work scholars in sociology and organization studies explore “the efforts of individuals and collective actors to cope with, keep up with, shore up, tear down, tinker with, transform, or create anew the institutional structures within which they live, work, and play, and which give them their roles, relationships, resources, and routines” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011: 53). To date, however, there has been little research explicitly linking theories of social innovation with theories of institutional work. Empirical research on institutional work foregrounds the lived, iterative practices that actors use to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) and links particular kinds of practices to particular institutional accomplishments. Empirical social innovation literature, on the other hand, typically foregrounds processes (Mulgan, 2006) and links them to outcomes such as changes in income, education, health, access to resources. While social
innovations often do provoke institutional accomplishments, these are rarely explored in detail as such in the literature.

On the one hand, theories of institutional work offer a rich set of frameworks for exploring social innovation, particularly with respect to embedded agency, power, conflict, and hybridization. On the other hand, institutional work research has privileged a dialectical mode of agency that may not fully reflect the dialogical modes of agency invoked via social innovation. Institutional work has largely been conceived of as a contested process in which change occurs as different institutional interests compete over scarce resources via political and discursive efforts (Nilsson, 2015). Three aspects of dialectic agency in institutional work inform our analysis:

1. The institutional dialectic is not between individual humans but between institutional categories. Actors act as expressive agents of functional system categories (sectors, professions, technical roles), system governance categories (various loci of decision making power) and/or social identity categories (educational or economic class, gender, race, religion, etc.).

2. Actors pursue their interests by defining and controlling categorical boundaries (Nilsson, 2015), using “binary cultural codes” (Weber, Heniz, & DeSoucey, 2008) to create sharp distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate patterns of who gets to do what where (Lawrence, 1999). Dialectic agency works against holistic or unitary conceptions of social structure. It manifests through boundary work (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), organizing social structure via typified routines, roles, and meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

3. Actors interact primarily via advocacy. They work to privilege their own interests and to weaken, coopt, or defeat the interests of others. They “articulate, sponsor, and defend” practices that serve their institutional positions (Lawrence, 1999: 163) using
social, political, and cultural skill (Fligstein, 1997; Suddaby & Viale, 2011) to frame issues and mobilize resources accordingly (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2009; Nilsson, 2015; Seo & Creed, 2002; Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011; Zietsma & McKnight, 2009).

Social innovation is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) framed in a much more dialogic way. Dialogue is a concept and practice with many roots. Philosophically, we focus here on the existential tradition of Martin Buber (1970) and others (e.g., Bakhtin, Jaspers, Gadamer) who took up the question of intersubjective relationship. How can we meet as person to person, subject to subject, rather than as subject to object? And to better understand dialogue in practice, we draw on Paulo Freire’s (2000) concept of praxis – the participatory, dialogic interplay of action and reflection in the pursuit of social transformation. Freire’s exploration of dialogue as an intentional, co-creative pursuit is also echoed in the work of physicist David Bohm (1996), as well as in various dialogic approaches to organizational development (Bushe & Marshak, 2014; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001; Isaacs, 1999). Dialogic agency in this tradition is not enacted through interest-based contests. In fact, it problematizes the whole notion of ‘interests’ by not taking the seemingly clear delineation between self and other for granted. And rather than championing specific worldviews, ideologies, or beliefs, participants in dialogue work to suspend their own assumptions in order to co-create new ways of seeing and new expressions of meaning (Bohm, 1996; Buber, 1970; Isaacs, 1999).

While social innovation can certainly be pursued through dialectic agency, the general picture painted in the literature is strongly dialogic. First, social innovation is not sectional. It is fundamentally inclusive and co-creative, driven by the engagement of multiple stakeholders across social boundaries (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Hassan, 2014;
Heiskala, 2007; Howaldt et al., 2014). It is oriented toward the common good, catalyzing collective action that can co-evolve with its structural context (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014).

Second, social innovation is focused less on enacting projects through planning than on learning through experimentation (Hassan, 2014; Heiskala, 2007; Howaldt et al., 2014). Early descriptions of social innovation were often framed instrumentally, but theorists are challenging this framing by suggesting that the root drive of social innovation is not a particular social outcome, but “the achievement of mutual understanding among individuals interacting in order to coordinate their actions based on a collective interpretation of the social context” (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014: 47). Like dialogue itself, social innovation can be seen as a praxis oriented pedagogy (Freire, 2000), the ultimate goal of which is enhanced system reflexivity (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010).

Third, just as dialogue draws heavily on experiential modes of knowing (in dialogue, even scientific or analytic ideas are often passed through an experiential lens as they are shared), social innovation is driven by the lived experiences of “ordinary people in their own localities” (Howaldt et al., 2014: 40). Social innovation is rarely amenable to crude, generalized institutional diffusion, as most social innovations must be re-adapted with each new context they encounter. Consequently, many social innovations draw on principles of human-centered design, via continued experiential and contextual engagement. “Some of the most effective methods of cultivating social innovation start from the assumption that people are competent interpreters of their own lives and competent solvers of their own problems” (Mulgan, 2006: 150).

Fourth, social innovation depends not just upon the fact of encounter but on its relational quality. Trust, care and cohesion are critical to a social innovation’s ultimate generativity (Howaldt et al., 2014). And attentional practices that foster collective
presence both spark emergent innovation and deepen the experience of mutuality (Hassan, 2014; Scharmer, 2009).

Dialogical agency is thus strongly implied in much of the literature on and practice of social innovation. But what are the contours of dialogic agency from the perspective of institutional work? As an ideal type, dialogic agency differs starkly from the three features of institutionally framed dialectic agency outlined above (see Table 1):

1. Dialogic agents act and are received as whole persons. A dialogic interaction explicitly rejects seeing the self or the other as a representation of a broader social category (e.g., social identity, role, class). A person will express aspects of various social categories, but those expressions are assumed to be unique to the person and non-delimiting. Dialogic agency involves the interaction not of categories but of people, engaging the world and each other idiosyncratically through mind and heart (Buber, 1970). It presumes we are larger and wilder than our categorical expressions, thus the repeated emphasis on experience and context (Freire, 2000; Norander & Galanes, 2014). From a dialogic perspective, every encounter is unique and non-repeatable (Shotter, 2000). Consequently, meaningful social knowledge cannot be fully encoded in generalities; it can only be explored via the sharing of individuated experiences.

2. Dialogue takes place through analogic learning. A paradox at the heart of dialogue is that individuated expressions of meaning are presumed to reflect a deeper, emergent, collective whole (Bohm, 1996; Shotter, 2000), a shared meaning that can only be accessed through the interaction of individual expressions. Thus, while dialogue honors and preserves difference, it also seeks similarity. Philosophically, this paradox requires a lot of work to unpack. But in practice it is simpler. In dialogic conversation, system knowledge is apprehended and made plastic through analogy. People seek first
not to distinguish their points of view from each other but to discover hidden connections (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999) – similarities of experience among divided social groups, say, or similarities of values across antagonistic political positions. Part of dialogue’s generative power – its ability to disturb taken for granted social categories and to suggest new arrangements – arises from exploring underlying coherence of seemingly divergent social perspectives (Isaacs, 1999; Poonamallee, 2006). Dialogue disrupts the social categories that hold a system together by revealing that social experience is both infinitely variegated (thus resistant to categorical reduction) and also unitary (thus rendering social categories arbitrary in some sense). Consequently, the capacity to deconstruct and then recombine elements of the system is strengthened, and this kind of institutional bricolage is the foundation of almost all social innovation (Biggs, Westley, & Carpenter, 2010).

3. Dialogical interaction is grounded in and oriented toward inquiry. Whereas dialectic agency involves advocacy for personal or sectional interests – attempting in some sense to change, defeat or win over those with competing interests via contest – dialogic agency cannot be framed in terms of contest at all. Competing interests do not drive dialogic agency for two reasons. First, dialogue invokes an ethic not of justice but of care wherein concern for the other’s well-being is primary (Murray, 2000). Second, foundational interests related to human dignity and freedom are presumed to be universal goods, applicable to everyone. Because it is rooted in an underlying wholeness, a dialogic perspective presumes that when any one person is deprived or oppressed the humanity of all people is degraded (Freire, 2000). The problem then becomes not that interests are competing, but that they are opaque. The way forward toward fuller realization of universal goods is unknown because by their nature universal goods require ongoing regeneration. They must be continually
created in each encounter and in each emerging historical-cultural context. Thus, dialogue relies on inquiry. It does not see specific arrangements as final solutions, nor does it seek to resolve tensions and paradoxes (Driskill, Arjannikova, & Meyer, 2014; Poonamallee, 2006). It is primarily attentional, seeking to understand each present context and then to recognize opportunities for experimentation within that context.

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, 2000: 72).

----- Table 1 somewhere here ----- 

Dialogue thus represents a potentially powerful and distinct mode of institutional agency. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) highlight the generative power of dialogue and call for an expansion of institutional work research in this direction:

A fruitful approach to studying institutional work through dialogue, therefore, would involve the detailed analysis of a dialogical process over time... the focus would be on the practices through which participants accomplish (or fail to accomplish) the production of generative dialogue aimed at creating, maintaining or disrupting institutions” (241-242).

Dialogue may be a particularly important mode of institutional work in the face of highly complex, grand social-environmental challenges – precisely the sorts of challenges social innovation addresses. Dorado (2005) argues that “convening” is a potentially catalytic process for bringing strategic agency to bear in opportunity-hazy institutional fields. But while the broad category of dialogue as a general category of institutional work has occasionally appeared in the institutional work literature (see, e.g., Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville, & Scully, 2010; Mair, Marti, & Ventresca, 2012), dialogic practices and accomplishments have not yet been explored in detail. This is what we seek to address with our study.

Data and methods

Case study and data collection
We address our research question by means of “a detailed analysis of a dialogical process over time” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 241), focusing on a social innovation lab. Social innovation labs offer an especially rich empirical context, as they typically have explicit institutional change ambitions that they pursue via dialogic practices. They bring together diverse stakeholders, often over an extended period of time, to explore and experiment with the system dimensions of a given problem domain (Gryszkiewicz, Toivonen, & Lykourentzou, 2016; Hassan, 2014; Westley et al., 2015). They are intentionally transsectoral and transdisciplinary (Hassan, 2014), informed by systems thinking and intended to bring a given system into the room (Westley et al., 2015) via broad inclusion of representative institutional actors. At the same time, social innovation labs draw on various praxis traditions (e.g., action research, social movements, design thinking) to enact convening practices that connect people across and beyond institutionalized roles (Westley et al., 2015). These practices descend from and reflect the humanizing, role-transcending interventions that form the historical core of organization development (e.g. T Groups) (Westley et al., 2015), and are fundamentally dialogic in nature (Bushe & Marshak, 2014). Similarly, social innovation labs use attentional practices (e.g., Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), ethnography) designed to disrupt institutionalized routines and taken-for-granted assumptions by heightening awareness of hidden but intuitable institutional dynamics.

Our specific focus is on the Southern Africa Food Lab, a social innovation lab focused on food security that was formally established in 2010. Its stated purpose has been to “facilitate the interaction, communication, and collaboration between different stakeholders, including those with conflicting interests, to highlight the need for and to design and implement coherent, systemic responses to the food system through
collaborative learning and experimental action” (SAFL, 2016). Given the Food Lab’s explicit purpose and its eight-year life, and given its immersion and engagement in a food system characterised by high degrees of socio-economic inequality, complex interactions between formal and informal economic activity, and high degrees of conflict and contestation, it offers a fruitful case study for analysing the institutional agency of dialogue and its relationship with dialectic approaches to social change.

Two of the authors have been intimately involved in this initiative, thus giving us access to many years’ worth of direct exposure to personal and organisational tensions and responses to them. We complemented this experiential base with data collected by ourselves and others, as outlined below. In addition, the second author has not had any direct exposure to the Food Lab, so in our discussions and analysis he has played the role of a critical outsider (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) to address biases and other validity threats.

The Food Lab’s activities during the period of analysis included four rounds of interviews, numerous meetings and workshops, and the preparation of various internal and external reviews and studies, all of which provide us with data for our analysis. Specifically, we collated and collected the following data:

- 33 interviews conducted during 2008 with a broad range of stakeholders, focusing on how they perceived the problem of food insecurity and different stakeholders’ roles in addressing this problem. Given that 2008 was a year characterized by significant public concern about food price inflation, we also documented our observations at two public meetings.

- Reports on a large multi-stakeholder workshop in February 2009 attended by about 80 participants from business, government, and civil society. This workshop established the motivation and rationale for establishing the Food Lab.
A range of documented activities were undertaken during 2010 to establish the Food Lab, including 20 “dialogue interviews” with diverse actors in the food system; two three-day “Learning Journeys,” in which participants travelled to important and diverse sites in the food system; and a two-day workshop in early September 2010, which resulted in the formation of “innovation teams” focused on issues including smallholder agricultural production and the need for a “national conversation” on food security.

A similar process modelled on “Theory U” was implemented in 2012-2013 with a focus on supporting smallholder farmers. It involved an inception workshop with about 30 people in April 2012 and five “learning journeys” to smallholder farming areas and downstream parts of their supply chain. The workshops and learning journeys were documented in dedicated reports.

A third dialogue process focused on developing “Transformative Scenarios” during 2014-2015, following principles and guidelines proposed by Kahane and Van der Heijden (2012). This was meant to complement the smallholder farming work with a more high-level, national dialogue on possible futures for the food system. It involved 29 “dialogue interviews,” followed by three workshops, in which participants developed four scenarios. It also included an event in March 2015 at which the scenarios were formally launched. The interviews and workshops were documented, and a detailed report on emerging lessons was compiled.

Over and above these specific programs within the Lab, there have been numerous strategy workshops, in which the steering group and other invited participants discussed the opportunities and challenges confronting the Lab. Two of these – in 2013 and 2015 – involved three-day retreats to remote locations in the mountains. Discussion during each of these was documented in a detailed report by a dedicated
rapporteur, and one of the authors also took detailed notes during these strategy workshops.

- In addition to collating these data generated during activities undertaken by the Lab, we collected data focused more specifically on the emergent themes in our analysis, which we initially coded in terms of confrontation and collaboration, and the interaction between them. Given that the tension between the Lab’s perceived focus on dialogue and collaboration was criticized overtly by activists or academics in an emerging “food sovereignty” movement, we sought to understand their perspective better. We thus had informal discussion, as well as dedicated interviews, with key representatives of this movement, and we also included in our dataset articles written by these activists.

These various sources of data gave rise to over 1,000 pages of interview transcripts, workshop reports and notes, articles, photos, and drawings. In our first round of coding, it became clear that not all of these data sources provided valuable concepts for our analysis, and so subsequent rounds of coding focused on a smaller subset of our data. Those data sources included in this more dedicated coding process are listed in Table 2, together with a label that we use to reference data in our findings.

----- Table 2 here -----  

_Data analysis_

The first round of coding focused on the role of contestation and collaboration in the Food Lab’s work. This led to the delineation of a narrower dataset, as outlined in Table 2, which we combined with numerous vignettes on illustrative events or processes during the Lab’s more recent history, in order to contextualize and foreground key themes emerging from the data. These data were then analysed in a second round of coding using Nvivo software. Our focus was not so much on individual speech acts in the form of a
discourse analysis, but rather on the interaction patterns manifest in speech, intention, apprehension, and engagement. This was also enabled by the fact that numerous data in the form of interviews and workshop discussions were interacting with each other, especially during 2015 and 2016. For example, interviewees were present at meetings, at which certain themes were discussed, and we subsequently probed their reactions to these discussions in follow-up interviews.

This coding process gave rise to nine overarching concepts and 39 more detailed, or nested, codes. For instance, one of the higher-order concepts was “Identities and boundaries,” and this included sub-concepts on, among others, “Actor types” and “Identity of the lab,” giving attention also to actor types identified in the literature (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011) and discussed explicitly in some interviews and the 2015 strategy retreat. This second round of coding resulted in two models; one focused on the role of the Food Lab as an “interstitial group” within a broader issue field, and the other identified different groups of actors that engaged in the Food Lab in different ways. However, discussion with peers and among the authors discounted the contribution of these models.

In connecting our analysis more carefully to the institutional theory literature and specifically Lawrence and Suddaby’s (2006) call for more work on dialogue as a form of institutional work, we conducted a third round of coding with greater attention to the practices and accomplishments reported and visible in our case study. By consolidating and prioritizing our codes, we eventually focused on five practices, and it also became apparent that four of these were related to each other in a processual, iterative dynamic. We also coded for “dialectic encounters,” which represented episodes or interactions, in which we saw a dialogic mode of agency interacting with, or confronted by, a dialectic mode.
The institutional accomplishments arose from an initial focus on outcomes, that is, tangible results from the Food Lab’s activities. We initially coded these as cognitive, normative, or regulatory changes, but then focused on the most visible and tangible outcomes in the regulatory domain. From there, we identified the broader, higher-level changes in the salient “social relationships” (Murray et al., 2010, p. 3) and “beliefs of the social system” (Westley & Antadze, 2010, p. 2) that instantiated the more direct, tangible outcomes. The result was four institutional accomplishments, each of which was associated with specific, illustrative outcomes. Together, the practices and accomplishments make up our model of dialogical agency for social innovation, which we describe below.

Findings

We identified five practices, through which the Food Lab effected four institutional accomplishments, as illustrated in Figure 1. In the following, we describe each of the practices and how they feed into each other, and we then describe the institutional accomplishments.

*Practices observed in the Food Lab*

Four of the practices are connected in a cyclical interaction, commencing with Enrolling and moving to Hosting, Surfacing, and then Regenerating. We see the practice of Regenerating building on the previous practices and giving rise to the four institutional accomplishments, though it may also feed into renewed Enrolling efforts. A fifth practice, which we call Reflexivity, is an ongoing questioning of what is done, and why, in each of the other practices, and so we situate it in the middle of the cycle in Figure 1. We describe each of the practices below, giving attention to how they underpin the institutional accomplishments.
Enrolling. The practice of Enrolling focused on recruiting and priming people for participation in the Food Lab. Much attention was given to identifying the “right” people. Following guidance from the literature, the objective was to “get the ‘system’ into the room” (M2). In this context, this was motivated by a diagnosis of food insecurity as a problem that involved the entire food system and was not primarily or even only due to insufficient food production (M2, IS2). Therefore, role-players from across different food value chains – “from farm to fork” – needed to be involved. A further premise was that the Food Lab needed to improve interactions between business, government, and civil society.

Once important organizations had been identified, further parameters for selection focused at the individual level, attending to influence, knowledge, and diversity. Especially in the early phases of the Food Lab, the Enrolling process sought to identify individuals who had some level of influence within their organizations, so that they could bring strategic knowledge into discussions at the Food Lab and – at least potentially – integrate insights and motivation from the Food Lab back into the strategies and practices of their organizations (IS2).

Most participants became involved in the Food Lab as an interviewee in a dedicated process of “dialogue interviews” (IS1, IS2). These were one-on-one discussions between potential new participants and one or more members of the convening or facilitation team. One objective of these interviews was to gain insights about the food system from different people’s vantage points, but the interviews also focused on people’s life histories and the kinds of motivations and values they emphasized. They also played a priming role both in content and process. Interviewers would describe and discuss the rationale for and characteristics of dialogue in the Food Lab, and they sought to implement the interviews in a corresponding manner.
A cross-cutting emphasis was to ensure diversity among the participants. Enhancing racial and gender diversity was particularly salient in the South African context, given the Apartheid history. The emphasis on diversity became more prominent during latter phases of the Food Lab, partly due to its emerging focus on smallholder farmers and the corresponding desire to have farmers themselves not just represented but also involved (A3).

More generally, there emerged an explicit focus to involve perspectives that would challenge assumptions – both on the food system and on the role of the Food Lab itself. An example of this was the launch, in 2015, of the Food Lab’s report on scenarios for the South African food system. The Food Lab invited as a keynote speaker a prominent academic and activist with the national Food Sovereignty Movement, who provided a powerful challenge to many participants’ views on the food system and indeed to the Food Lab. She argued that food insecurity was essentially caused by the rapaciousness of corporations and, by engaging these corporations in dialogue, the Food Lab was complicit (M4). The only way to advance food security and, more to the point, food sovereignty, was to fight “for an alternative eco-socialist path” (A4).

We coded such events, in which the Food Lab came across explicit critique or resistance to its emphasis and premises on dialogue as “dialectic encounters.” For the purpose of this article, our interest is, first, in how such dialectic challenges were not just chance events. As illustrated by the above example, they were at times purposefully produced to challenge or disrupt assumptions. Second, we are interested in how members of the Food Lab responded to such dialectic encounters – this will be described below under Regenerating.

Hosting. After Enrolling, the Food Lab’s work focused on Hosting – the intentional creation of conducive “spaces” for participants to interact with each other in
dialogue, rather than debate, and for them to share experiences of diverse facets of the food system, beyond those parts that they were exposed to in their normal roles. These objectives were most explicitly addressed in the “Learning Journeys:” two- to three-day field trips, in which participants visited different sites and people within the food system. For instance, in one such journey, participants visited a large commercial farming operation owned by one of the largest companies, by production, on the continent, and then different smallholder farmers in the same area, followed by a visit to a retailer’s distribution center. Organizers of these journeys spent much time in preparing them, curating not just the sites to be visited, but also people that would discuss their contexts and experiences of the food system with Food Lab participants.

An important objective was to give participants a visceral sense of people’s very diverse lifeworlds and circumstances in the food system. Thus, for instance, participants were struck by the contrasts between smallholder farmers’ lived experiences, on the one hand, and the scale and sophistication of a large, commercial farm or a retailer’s distribution centre. A key premise of the Hosting work was that it should provide formal or organized opportunities for participants to reflect upon and discuss these experiences with each other, but that there would also be vital opportunities for informal interactions.

Indeed, participants often highlighted these informal moments as being pivotal in their experience of the Food Lab’s work. For instance, one participant noted,

*The brutal contrast between [the commercial farm] and the neighbouring smallholders, that really hit home. When we discussed this on the bus that afternoon – that’s when we realized that there’s both a need and an opportunity for us to do something in support of the emerging farmers (A3).*

On a subsequent Learning Journey, also focused on smallholder farmers, a crucial breakthrough again occurred during an informal interaction. After a long day driving through the countryside and meeting diverse actors in fresh produce supply chains, three supply chain managers of the country’s largest retailers were sitting at the bar of the hotel.
It was in this discussion that agreement was reached that it was both important and possible for the retailers to develop an adapted version of supplier standards, which would maintain food safety while responding to the specific challenges of smallholder farmers (as we will describe below) (A3).

**Surfacing.** While Hosting focused on the creation of a conducive context for participants’ shared experiences and dialogue, Surfacing consisted of more specific activities meant to bring participants’ “whole selves” into discussion, and also to raise potentially awkward or challenging ideas or perspectives. Much of this relied on routine practices into which Food Lab participants were socialized. For instance, group meetings routinely commenced with a “check-in” process, in which participants were encouraged to share information not just about their current working lives, but about possibly relevant personal matters, as well. This was meant to enable participants to develop relationships beyond the intellectual and instrumental objectives of the Food Lab, and it was also believed that it enabled deeper and more fulsome discussion.

Building on the conceptual underpinnings of “Theory U,” explicit attention was given to eliciting not just cognitive insights from participants, but also to bring into discussion their emotional and volitional experiences. During the “check-ins” and in a range of other dedicated moments in meetings, workshops, and Learning Journeys, participants would be encouraged to reflect on their emotions and motivations. A recurring question was, “What do you have energy for?” and participants’ responses were then brought into group discussion to identify areas for further attention by the Food Lab or groups within it.

One of the more difficult aspects of Surfacing became prominent with the Food Lab’s latter-day shifts towards emphasizing diversity in its composition and discussions. This had two dimensions we highlight here. First, proactive efforts went into bringing
perspectives into conversation that involved an implicit or explicit critique of the Food Lab’s premises on the value of multi-stakeholder dialogue. The implications for Enrolling were mentioned above, but additional work on this was done in Surfacing – for instance, dedicated workshop discussions were focused on different perspectives on change in the food system, based on Holt Giménez & Shattuck’s (2011) characterization of “neo-liberal, reformist, progressive, and radical” regimes. This enabled participants to better understand their own perspectives on social change, how they relate to those of others, and how similarities or differences might enable or constrain communication across such perspectives.

An even more difficult aspect of Surfacing was to bring contentious issue of race into discussion. One of the facilitators described a poignant incident like this:

Scanning the room, it became apparent that almost all the people speaking from the center table were white men and that those sitting with folded arms and blank faces were mostly women, several of whom were black. Despite the fact that we were about to close and that we would not meet again in this way again for three months – or perhaps because of these factors – I named what I was seeing, saying: ‘We’re at an important point in our work together and I notice that it’s mostly white men who are speaking. This mirrors an old pattern in South Africa, and in agriculture’ (A11).

She describes contrasting responses from white male participants. One celebrated this “surprise” and used it to engage more directly with a black female participant, who subsequently played a leading role both in the Food Lab and in the Food Sovereignty Campaign. Another reacted more defensively and started disengaging from the Food Lab. She concludes, “Rupturing entrenched patterns does not come with a popularity prize, and a stomach for disequilibrium seems to be a prerequisite for this approach” (A11).

Regenerating. Building on each of the preceding practices, Regenerating shifted and recombined existing cognitive, emotional, and volitional resources into novel forms and combinations to enable action and the resulting institutional accomplishments. Regenerating thus occurred for each of the dimensions that were addressed in the Surfacing work, that is, cognitive, emotional, and volitional.
We label the Regenerating work focused on cognitive resources – assumptions, arguments, and metaphors – as reframing. Reframing constituted a purposefully dialogical response to arguments that were often made in a dialectic manner, both from participants within the Food Lab, as well as from outside critics. An example of this was the above mentioned “dialectic encounter,” in which an invited keynote speaker criticized the Food Lab for engaging the private sector. As noted by a participant,

*So at the launch event... there was a brewing disagreement, and there was a very provocative address by [the keynote speaker]; it was accusatory; there was the potential for us to all go back into our various camps and corners... [But then a Food Lab participant] spoke about the importance of the being able to argue, the freedom to argue; and how the Food Lab as a platform and how the scenarios as a tool for generating – whether you want to call it stories, new knowledges; how invaluable it was that we were able to argue across our boundaries* (149).

A specific instantiation of responding to this dialectic encounter was to reframe metaphor.

The keynote speaker used a metaphor borrowed from Berthold Brecht: “The food system is a house that’s burning. It’s no use to try to fix it. It must burn down so that we can rebuild it” (M4). One of the participants responded, “Perhaps the food system is more like a burning ship. We cannot let it sink because then the poor will suffer most of all. So, we need to rebuild the ship while keeping it afloat” (M4). Even though the keynote address was “accusatory” (I49), the reframing work was not to counter the perspective as irrelevant or misguided, but to make use of its ideas for new ways of thinking about the food system.

Regenerating work focused on emotions is what we call reconnecting, because it reconnects individuals with themselves, others, and nature through empathy. For instance, in one of the Food Lab’s early workshops, one of the participants took out a saxophone and played a stirring jazz tune. As participants swayed to the music, this experience connected them to themselves and others in the room, thereby deepening relationships, and it also created a common image for their interactions in the Food Lab – the music was introduced as a form of syncopation and thus symbolic of the dialogue process – and for
people’s commitment to working together for positive change (M2). Another example involved a senior government official addressing a more recent multi-stakeholder meeting convened by the Food Lab. Her expression of frustration and disillusionment when visiting her home village and witnessing widespread hunger was accompanied by visible emotion. It set the tone for the day’s discussions and forced all participants to confront their own relationship with the hardships faced by poor people in the face of seemingly intractable problems in the food system (M8).

We refer to Regenerating work focused on participants’ volition as Reorienting. As noted, Surfacing practices around the question, “What do you have energy for?” brought to the fore individuals’ and groups’ sense of direction and willingness to commit time and energy to particular themes or activities. Reorienting involved proactively engaging these volitional resources to make individual and collective commitments on specific opportunities for working together. Sometimes these commitments were combined with the cognitive and emotional resources developed in Reframing and Reconnecting efforts to make intentional changes to the institutional field – this is indicated by the arrow “A” in Figure 1 pointing to the resulting institutional accomplishments, as will be discussed in more detail below. At other times, the Reorienting work fed into a further cycle of dialogue practices, commencing with a dedicated Enrolling process. This is indicated by the arrow “B” in Figure 1.

An example of this Reorienting feeding back into Food Lab activities is linked to the above-mentioned interactions in the bus during one of the early Learning Journeys between a commercial farm and smallholder farmers (A3). These experiences and discussions led to a cognitive Reframing that identified both the need and opportunity for addressing smallholder farmers’ needs through improved communication and collaboration between different stakeholders. Simultaneously, the Reconnecting involved
participants engaging with this issue also emotionally, triggered by the contrasts in the food system and the travails faced by the poorest actors in it. The Reorienting then combined these shifts by means of an intentional practice involving individuals coming together in a designated group to give this issue dedicated attention over a sufficient period. The significance of this commitment needs to be seen in the context of participants’ time constraints, given their busy “day-jobs,” as well as the many people – both within and outside the Food Lab – who initially downplayed the role of smallholder farmers in ensuring food security. This collective commitment thus fed into a further iteration of the dialogue practices commencing with Enrolling, eventually resulting in institutional accomplishments that facilitated tangible institutional changes in support of smallholder farmers.

Reflexivity. While the above practices were observed feeding into each other in an iterative, cyclical manner, Reflexivity involved the ongoing questioning of values, objectives, methods, and outcomes in each of the other practices. Hence, for instance, in the Enrolling practices, Food Lab participants continuously asked each other, “Do we have the right people in the room?” Emphasis was put on the possibility that powerful actors might be “tilting the stage,” with the result that they were indeed co-opting the dialogue process for their advantage, as argued by the keynote speaker criticizing the lab (M4). Similar concerns were prevalent in discussions before, during, and after specific meetings, workshops, or Learning Journeys. Reflection and discussion on whether the Food Lab was contributing to a more just and sustainable food system were thus a routine component of the Lab’s activities. In addition, external perspectives and appraisals were sought to stimulate such reflexiveness. This included, for instance, the involvement of student groups, who were encouraged and supported in focusing their group projects on the Food Lab, as well as the commissioning of a study to highlight lessons from the first
few years of the Lab. Results from these informal and formal discussions were occasionally integrated into shifts in approach. For instance, the above-mentioned shift in emphasis from inviting participants with influence to seeking greater diversity was a direct consequence of this reflexive work.

Institutional accomplishments

By “accomplishments,” we mean salient shifts in the patterned postures and interactions of stakeholders, with valence for the institutional field. We describe each of the four observed accomplishments below together with examples of associated, tangible institutional outcomes. The accomplishments are thus “higher level” institutional effects attributable to the dialogue practices described above, while the outcomes are more specific, tangible instantiations that represent or result from the accomplishments.

**Increased boundary permeability.** We observed as an outcome of Food Lab practices an increase in interactions across diverse boundaries separating sectors, roles, power relations, and so on. In other words, actors communicated more frequently and fatefuly with other actors in the food system, with whom they previously had much less interaction. For example, previously, policy makers in the government department responsible for agriculture had remarkable little interactions with smallholder farmers, despite support for such farmers being a stated priority in government policy. An explicit objective of the Food Lab was to bring these actors into contact in a conducive setting, so numerous formal and informal interactions between policy-makers and smallholder farmers occurred during Food Lab workshops and Learning Journeys. These interactions were significant in their own right, and they resulted in tangible effects on government policy. More important from the point of view of institutional accomplishment is that these interactions and the resulting changes in policy institutionalized more frequent and fruitful interactions between these actors beyond the confines of the Food Lab.
This is exemplified in changes made to the government’s extension policy, which explicitly included a more proactive approach to involving smallholder farmers in the design and implementation of policy. The responsible government official explained:

*Yes, there are many service providers who are giving extension advice to farmers. It is a very fragmented situation. There is a need for coordination. Our work in the Food Lab has influenced our approach. We are now creating forums at different levels, local to national, in which we try to bring these various providers together to agree on priorities and shared issues… working with the farmers (M4).*

*Increased relational depth.* While boundary permeability is about the scope and quantity of interactions, relational depth is about the quality of relationships between actors in the field. Interviewees argued that Food Lab practices increased relational depth – actors’ relationships became characterized by a more multifaceted array of dimensions, beyond an instrumental focus on actors’ work roles, and beyond hitherto confrontational modes of interaction. Actors highlighted a more intrinsic value that they attributed to these new relationships and how this helped achieve tangible benefits. That is, paradoxically, a relative decrease in emphasis on instrumental relations seemed to have instrumental benefits.

For instance, a Food Lab participant working for a human rights NGO emphasised how repeated interactions in the context of Food Lab activities enabled her to develop more interactive relationships with actors, with whom she previously had no or mostly confrontational relationships:

*Often as civil society we don’t have much access to business and industry… it’s opened up the relationship to be part of this persistent process in the scenario planning… we have a conversation and it doesn’t have to be confrontational; we don’t have to agree; but you can kind of hash these things out… Especially in the food situation, it’s easy for somebody coming from civil society to think of companies in the food system as behemoths, who are not at all interested in the kind of things that I am interested in, in ensuring that people have enough food to eat… it was very helpful for me meeting the people involved, and hearing their concerns… These are legitimate concerns and you can hash them out with a human in a way that you can’t with a press release that comes from a retailer or something (I46).*
This shift in the quality of relationships had tangible implications at a subsequent point, when a potentially tense stand-off emerged as activists picketed outside government officials’ offices. A Food Lab participant later quoted the government official as follows:

_They could acknowledge me and we could go outside and talk about what government is doing. Although they were not happy, it was easy for them to come to me to explain what was happening. They were not necessarily angry with me, they were able to listen to me, because we were both at the scenario planning (A13)._ 

The activist, meanwhile, similarly highlighted the relational resources that enabled them to communicate despite the potentially confrontational situation:

_We have respect for each other. The difference is this: If I don’t know you, I don’t give you the time to explain yourself. Ordinarily, we would just be making statements. This was a good example of benefiting from having spent quite a bit of time with people from different perspectives and roles (A13)._ 

A tangible outcome of these interactions was the inclusion of analyses and recommendations from the Food Lab’s – as well as the activists’ – work into the policy making process and its substantive outcome (M9).

_Increased value reflexivity._ We find that Food Lab practices assisted participants to talk about and act upon values. The significance of this is that most discussions on food security were previously characterized by a high degree of implicit certainty surrounding underpinning values. For instance, in our interviews with actors who self-identified with the “radical” regime identified by Holt Giménez & Shattuck (2011), there was a profound commitment to “grassroots” development and opposition to anything associated with corporate action. As indicated in the interview quote from a human rights activist above, Food Lab practices provided an opportunity for such underpinning values to be reconsidered. This is not to say that this particular activist became less critical of corporate abuse or exploitation, but the underlying, previously implicit value commitments were surfaced and subject to reflexivity. A similar movement was visible among some private sector participants, who initially held a clear value commitment to the primacy of the market – as noted by one interviewee: “The best solution for high [food] prices is high
prices... the market will sort this out” (I7). Such clear-cut prescriptions became rarer over time among Food Lab participants, including senior business managers (M8, M10).

We suggest it is this value reflexivity that underpins some of the tangible institutional outcomes of the Food Lab. When the supply chain managers of some of the country’s main retailers agreed that evening at the bar to work together to develop more helpful supplier standards for smallholder farmers, this was premised on Regenerating practices that allowed increased value reflexivity. As noted by one of the participants,

I knew we were making progress when there were three of the retail guys standing at the bar in the evening after a long day speaking to small farmers, saying, ‘we see we have to change!’ This is what gave rise to the agreement to develop the entry-level LocalGAP standards [for smallholder farmers] (A3).

Raising the valence of smallholder farmers encouraged these managers to take on the challenge of adapting an international, unwieldy standards system, maintain a diligent approach to “pesticides, microbial counts, and ethics” (A3), and pre-empt concerns surrounding collusion, all the while making things tangibly easier for smallholder farmers.

*Increased categorical differentiation.* A direct consequence of Regenerating work – especially Reframing – was increased categorical differentiation, through which broad, institutionally salient categories were disaggregated and made more contextually relevant, giving special attention to the views and interests of people implicated in these categories. A prominent example of this accomplishment is the differentiation of the category “smallholder farmer.” Previously, both the government and the major retailers conceived of and interacted with smallholder farmers as a relatively coherent, monolithic group. This had important implications for the government’s extension policy, as well as to retailers’ supply chain management practices. For instance, in one of the Learning Journeys, participants were astonished to witness the challenging, sophisticated conditions that one of the participating retail company’s distribution centres uniformly imposed on suppliers: for example, suppliers needed to deliver the produce within a ten-minute window – an
expectation that clearly threatened to overwhelm small suppliers who relied on sharing an old pick-up truck to deliver their goods (A3).

Through the Food Lab practices, this monolithic approach to the category of smallholder farmer was over time challenged and replaced with a much more nuanced understanding. The first participants who highlighted the need for this cognitive shift were researchers who had been studying smallholder farmers for many years. However, the rationale and importance of this reframing became more evident to other participants only through their experience of the food system in the Learning Journeys. As described by one interviewee,

*On one of the learning journeys, we saw all these differences; then, on the bus, [when an academic participant] outlined the profile of different kinds of smallholder farmers, this opened the eyes of everyone, and we realized we need to be more specific about which farmers can be linked to commercial agriculture, and that other farmers require different kinds of support (M4).*

In sum, our analysis results in a process model of dialogic agency in social innovation, in which five practices give rise to four institutional accomplishments – this is illustrated in Figure 1.

----- Figure 1 here ----- 

**Discussion and conclusion**

We contribute to both the institutional work literature and the social innovation literature in several ways. First, we respond to calls in the institutional theory literature to explore dialogue as an important aspect of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), but we challenge the idea that dialogue is simply a specific type of discourse and argue that it is in fact a fundamental mode of institutional agency, one that is both analytically and practically distinct from dialectic agency. Dialogue may be a particularly generative mode of agency for institutional work intended to address grand social-environmental challenges like food security. These challenges are played out in dauntingly complex institutional fields and meta-fields where institutional inertia is high, cognitive
sunk costs are considerable (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991), and agency is profoundly embedded (Seo & Creed, 2002).

In this vein, Dorado (2005) distinguishes different kinds of opportunity contexts in institutional fields. The food system exemplifies opportunity hazy fields that are “highly unpredictable” due to many diverse institutional referents of various strengths. Consequently, interest-based institutional entrepreneurship aimed at addressing “complex social problems” in these fields may be ineffective. Dorado proposes that “convening” might be the most effective type of change approach in hazy fields. Institutional convening involves actors who “identify complex problems (e.g., pollution) and create collaborative arrangements to jumpstart processes leading to the development of solutions to ameliorate those problems” (401-402). Dorado notes that to date convening has not been adequately studied or theorized in the context of hazy institutional fields. We would argue that grand challenges typically play out across multiple hazy institutional fields, and that dialogic agency will potentially underpin the most generative convening strategies in those contexts.

Given the importance of dialogic agency in addressing grand challenges, we make a further contribution to institutional theory by describing and illustrating five cornerstone dialogic practices that have not been elaborated in the institutional work literature (see Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009, 2011 for reviews): enrolling, hosting, surfacing, regenerating, and reflexivity (as practice). And we suggest that these practices contribute to four institutional accomplishments: increasing the boundary permeability, relational depth, value reflexivity, and categorical differentiation of the institutional field. This contribution responds to Nilsson’s (2015) call for more research into positive institutional phenomena and inquiry as institutional agency. We do not propose these practices as exhaustive of dialogic institutional work. Future research is
needed to identify additional practices and to map out potential field-level variables that might enable or constrain dialogic agency.

We also contribute to the social innovation literature. While that literature is rife with empirical descriptions of dialogic agency in practice, those practices are in general under-theorized. Linking social innovation explicitly to institutional theory opens the doorway to the future development of theories of social innovation proper. While social innovation is increasingly framed institutionally (e.g., Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Howaldt et al., 2014; Westley & Antadze, 2010), it is rarely operationalized as such in the empirical literature. Future studies of social innovation can expand its theoretical base by framing social innovation praxis as various forms of institutional work and by teasing out the specific institutional accomplishments that work provokes, as we have modeled here.

More specifically, distinguishing between dialogic and dialectic agency may help social innovation theorists and practitioners unpack a number of puzzles associated with trying to use dialogic practice to change a dialectic world. We believe that dialogic agency is underdeveloped in the institutional work literature not because researchers have missed it but because it has not been the dominant approach to social change historically. We do not doubt that dialectic, interest-based contest is by far the dominant change modality. Social innovation as an emergent phenomenon augurs a potential shift toward a different modality (prefigured, to be sure, in older traditions like participatory action research). But such a shift cannot be abstracted from the dialectical dynamics of the global regimes social innovation is intended to disrupt. Our preliminary exploration of how dialectic and dialogic agency interact with each other and of what sorts of identity commitments are conducive (or not) to engaging in dialogue points the way toward deeper investigation into the relationship between dialectic and dialogic modes of agency. Such an investigation
may help social innovation scholarship and practice more fully engage with older dialectical traditions of social change and critical theory.

Finally, this research hints at the idea that dialectic agency and dialogic agency may have starkly different impacts on the overall social innovation capacity of an institutional field. As far as we know, social innovation capacity – whether at the organization level or at the field level – has not been fully theorized as a construct in the literature (Seelos & Mair, 2012). Nevertheless, various social innovation scholars do point to the development of generalized, collective capacities for institutional reflexivity, disruption, and creative agency as an underlying goal of the social innovation “movement” (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Unger, 2013). Heiskala (2007) positions something like this capacity at the heart of social innovation, emphasizing “the importance of social innovations that create reflexive social structures which have the capacity for collective learning. Reflexive social structures have the capacity of continuously renewing themselves through social innovations” (74).

If institutions, however, are sustained by the generalized routine, role, and class categories that structure them and by the taken-for-granted values that undergird them, then social innovation depends upon field-level capacities for cross-boundary engagement, role transcendence, values-based inquiry, and the inclusion of experiential, non-generalized knowledge. These are precisely the institutional accomplishments we found to be sparked by dialogic agency in the Food Lab. We would offer a provisional hypothesis, then, that dialogic agency heightens the social innovation capacity of a given institutional field while dialectic agency constrains that capacity. Dialectic agency can clearly provoke specific social innovations, but in doing so it may rigidify institutional structure (even new structures) in such a way that subsequent social innovation becomes more difficult.

References


Lawrence, T. B., Suddaby, R., & Leca, B. (2009). Introduction: Theorizing and studying institutional work. In T. B. Lawrence, R. Suddaby, & B. Leca (Eds.), *Institutional


Zietsma, C., & McKnight, B. 2009. Building the iron cage: Institutional creation work in the context of competing proto-institutions. In T. B. Lawrence, R. Suddaby, & B.
### Table 1: Summary of comparison between dialectic and dialogic agency

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<td>Social Category</td>
<td>Whole Person</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Categorical</td>
<td>Analogic</td>
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<td><strong>Interaction Dynamic</strong></td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Inquiry</td>
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### Table 2: Overview of data sources used for more detailed analysis

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<td>Interview with Head of Strategy, Pick’n’Pay</td>
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<td>Cock, J: ‘The political economy of food in South Africa,’ Amanda</td>
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<td>December 2014</td>
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<td>Gonzalez: ‘Poor left out of new plan to end hunger – activists’</td>
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<td>Various</td>
<td>5 March 2015</td>
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<td>Satgar: ‘Break the food chain to build our humanity,’ Mail&amp;Guardian</td>
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<td>Busiso / South African Human Rights Commission: Commentary on Food Lab</td>
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<td>Stevenson: ‘Ending hunger in South Africa: We have to do better,’ Daily Maverick</td>
<td>Article</td>
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<td>8 October 2015</td>
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<td>Magner, C: ‘Moving in and out of our boxes as we stay in conflict and relationship,’ Reos Newsletter</td>
<td>Article</td>
<td>Facilitator / Consultant</td>
<td>9 October 2015</td>
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<td>Synthesis Report: Learning from the task of convening the Food Futures Exercise</td>
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<td>30 October 2015</td>
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<td>Cock, J: ‘How the environmental justice movement is gaining momentum in South Africa,’ The Conversation</td>
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<td>Freeth and Goldberg: ‘Seeing the South African Food System through the Lens of Power’</td>
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Figure 1: Process model of dialogue practices and institutional accomplishments

**Practices**

- **Enrolling**
  - Recruiting people to represent the food system, giving attention to influence, diversity, and knowledge
  - Priming participants into ways of engaging in the Lab
  - Proactive efforts at disrupting assumptions or dominant frames

- **Hosting**
  - Curating and facilitating “spaces” for formal and informal interactions, and for shared experiences of diverse facets of the food system

- **Regenerating**
  - Reframing cognitive assumptions, arguments, and metaphors
  - Reconnecting emotionally to self, others, and nature
  - Reorienting volitional commitments

- **Reflexivity**
  - Continuous questioning of values, objectives, methods, and outcomes

- **Surfacing**
  - “Inscape” life and work as part of routine practices, such as “check-ins” and “dialogue interviews”
  - Attending to cognitive, emotional, and volitional dimensions of experience
  - Challenging participants on dominant frames or issues of race

**Institutional accomplishments**

- **Increased boundary permeability**
  - More interactions across boundaries separating sectors, roles, power relations, etc
  - Example of resulting institutional outcome: smallholder farmers gain access and communicate directly to government policy-makers, with effect on design and implementation of the government’s extension policy

- **Increased relational depth**
  - Personal relationships and interactions characterized by multiple dimensions beyond role identities, and by less instrumental and more intrinsic value
  - Example of resulting institutional outcome: NGO activist re-evaluates her approach to powerful actors in business and the state, with the effect that she provides support to policy-makers for new food security policy and revised extension policy

- **Increased value reflexivity**
  - Stakeholder interactions characterized by greater willingness and ability to integrate values related to social justice and sustainability into discussions and actions
  - Example of resulting institutional outcome: Supply chain managers of retail companies agree on creating a revised set of supplier standards for smallholder farmers

- **Increased categorical differentiation**
  - Key categories are revised to ensure improved nuance and contextual relevance, premised on “local” perspectives
  - Example of resulting institutional outcome: The formerly monolithic category of “smallholder farmer” is differentiated into more specific categories and the government’s extension service is revised to account for differences between them