Building a Collective Moral Imaginary: Personalist Culture and Social Performance in Faith-Based Community Organizing

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This study draws on theories of personalist culture and social performance to explain why organizations in the field of faith-based community organizing are able to effectively engage people in collective action on multiple issues across social difference. Using two qualitative datasets, we document the construction and transformation of personal motivations in interactive social movement settings, and show the importance of this process for mobilizing action in pursuit of a multi-issue social justice agenda. Through cultural practices that construct moral meaning in interactive settings, activists learn to internalize a collective moral imaginary—a cultural schema that affirms the importance of individuals’ personal motivations, links these to those of other people, and situates them within a larger social structure. This expands individuals’ understandings of self and community, and thus frames multi-issue social justice activism organized across social difference as a morally compelling and effective means of pursuing personal interests and motivations.

Key words: social movements, political culture, community organizing, religion

Organizations attempting to combat inequality in the United States must contend with a range of cultural dilemmas brought about by the “great civic transition from membership to advocacy” (Skocpol, 2003:240) in post-1960s U.S. society. This transition has created a civic landscape dominated by advocacy groups, most with a clearly defined issue focus and a particular constituency. Scholars and activists have argued that this fragmentation of the public sphere is a significant obstacle to combating inequality, because it discourages broad-based organizing and narrows the scope of what can be achieved through collective action (Bothwell, 2003; Duggan, 2004; Roelofs, 2003; Smith, 2007). In the past, legislative reforms benefiting large portions of the U.S. population, such as the GI Bill and Social Security, were achieved with the support of membership organizations that united Americans across class, partisan, and religious lines and
generated civic engagement based on cultural narratives that linked individuals’ concerns and motivations to public affairs (McAdam and Kloos, 2014; Perrin, 2014; Skocpol, 2003). In contrast, today it is rare for multiple constituencies to be united within one civic organization, and few organizations work on multiple issues at one time.

One notable exception to the dominance of narrowly focused advocacy organizations is the field of faith-based community organizing (FBCO) (Braunstein et al, 2014; Stout, 2012; Swarts, 2008; Warren, 2001; Wood, 2002; Wood and Fulton, 2015). FBCO coalitions are networks of religious congregations and other institutions, such as labor unions and neighborhood associations, that identify and act upon issues that concern lower, working, and middle class communities. Coalitions vary in size and in racial and religious composition, but they are united by a shared cultural ambition: to link the various concerns and problems that people encounter in daily life within a broad moral framework that views growing socioeconomic inequality, structural racism, and elite control of the political system as a profound crisis with pernicious effects on the lives of all but the wealthy (Stout, 2012; Swarts, 2008; Wood and Fulton, 2015). Most FBCO coalitions mobilize multiracial constituencies and typically have simultaneous ongoing campaigns on issues as diverse as domestic violence, criminal justice reform, racial equity in education, combating voter suppression, and immigration, among many others. These issue campaigns are not pursued piecemeal, but as elements of an ambitious agenda for deep social reform that transcends any one issue area. In 2011, there were 189 FBCO coalitions active in the U.S., and the congregations associated with them represented nearly five million people (Wood and Fulton, 2015), though only a small fraction of this number were actually involved in activism.
As an exceptional venue of broad-based, multi-issue organizing, the FBCO field presents a cultural puzzle. FBCO coalitions strive to expand individuals’ understandings of how their daily lives are affected by systemic problems, and work to mobilize collective action that addresses issues at the structural level. But sociologists have long been doubtful about the degree to which Americans can recognize this type of framework as morally compelling in a culture heavily focused on material self-interest and emotional self-fulfillment. Mills (1959) lamented a widespread inability to recognize personal troubles as connected to public issues, and others have asserted that system-level narratives are widely subordinate to individual-focused views of public life (Bellah et al., 1985; Emerson and Smith, 2001; Skocpol, 1995; Williams, 1999; Wuthnow, 1991). Personalist culture, as this focus on self-interest and self-fulfillment has become known (Lichterman, 1995), places personal authenticity and autonomy at the center of moral considerations, and thus diverts attention and meaning away from public-facing, communitarian civic activity. In this cultural environment, how can organizations develop compelling frameworks for broad-based, multi-issue social justice activism?

This study builds on theories of personalist culture and social performance to explain why a large FBCO coalition that we call ELIJAH\(^1\) is able to recruit and mobilize religious persons of different faith, race, and class backgrounds in pursuit of a multi-issue social justice agenda. ELIJAH links personalist culture with public action by constructing a powerful moral framework that connects the concerns and motivations of diverse people, families, and communities to systemic and structural problems. We term this framework the *collective moral imaginary* because it frames the pursuit of individuals’ personal desires as dependent upon larger social and cultural forces, endows this connection with moral meaning, and emphasizes the

\(^1\) ELIJAH is a pseudonym, but not an acronym. The names of all persons in this study have been changed to protect participants’ confidentiality.
importance of collective action for achieving individuals’ goals. ELIJAH accomplishes this through a range of cultural practices that create meaning in interactive, face-to-face settings, thereby constructing an imperative for social movement activism that is framed in terms of living up to one’s authentic self.

**The Dilemma of Personalism**

Personalist culture has profoundly shaped civic activity in the U.S. since the Second World War (Bellah *et al*, 1985; Eliasoph, 2011; Lichterman, 1996; McAdam *et al*, 2005; Mills, 1959; Perrin, 2014; Putnam, 2000; Wuthnow, 1991). In personalism, social acts and propositions are evaluated by the degree to which they support the development of personal autonomy and authenticity, rather than by their implications for the shared public good (Bellah *et al*, 1985; Eliasoph, 2011; Giddens, 1991; Lichterman, 1995; Wuthnow, 1991). Bellah and colleagues (1985) explain that over the course of the twentieth century, personalist concern for self-fulfillment gave rise to forms of civic participation oriented primarily toward personal satisfaction, more about crafting a worthy and authentic self than situating the self within a larger social context (Giddens, 1991). Following Mills (1959), the Bellah team argues that this culture is damaging to democracy, because it encourages the notion that people can best address problems in their own lives by focusing on personal fulfillment, rather than engaging in cooperative reform projects. Numerous studies have shown that the issue-focused, homogeneous organizations that have come to dominate American civil society since the 1960s largely reflect the broader tendencies to focus on personal advancement and to interact primarily with people whose life situations and economic concerns are similar to one’s own (McAdam *et al*, 2005; Putnam, 2000; Sampson *et al*, 2005; Skocpol, 2003).
As a cultural logic that emphasizes personal fulfillment at the expense of engagement with larger publics, personalism seems to work against communitarian ethics like the collective moral imaginary (Bellah et al, 1985). However, Lichterman (1995) showed that personalism could be oriented toward more communitarian ends through a focus on individual political skills and civic empowerment. He explained that Green party activists constructed a culture of “personalized public commitment” that framed the pursuit of radical reform efforts as a way to cultivate personal satisfaction and empowerment. By emphasizing the development of individuals’ activist skills and political acumen, the Greens constructed a vision of radical reform that was “based in, rather than in tension with, practices of authenticity and autonomy” (1995:286, emphasis in original). This work shows that personalism is not antithetical to communitarian civic organizing, but functions as a deeper cultural lexicon that can support different kinds of civic projects (Alexander and Smith, 1993).

However, the literature on progressive religious movements is replete with studies where personalist culture inhibited, more than supported, public commitment. Hart (2001), studying a variety of leftist movement organizations, found that the influence of personalism in progressive interfaith groups restricted these organizations to one issue at a time, preventing them from developing more expansive, multi-issue programs for social reform. Similarly, Lichterman (2008) observed that different cultural attitudes and styles within an anti-racism clergy coalition made it difficult to bridge religious identities within the group. And Stout (2012) showed that “lifestyle liberalism,” a strongly personalist cultural tendency, impedes FBCO organizing among middle class whites. Lifestyle liberalism is characterized by the pursuit of a sophisticated subcultural identity marked by consumer choices, such as hybrid vehicle ownership and buying organic food, rather than participation in the more demanding work of organizing for an
inclusive democracy. The pursuit of this kind of identity is at odds with the diverse constituencies and the frank stories of hardship and loss often encountered in community organizing coalitions.

These studies highlight two ways in which further specification is needed to understand how personalized public commitment can develop in support of multi-issue organizing across social difference. First, Lichterman acknowledges (1995:290–93) that it is difficult to assess how a culture of personalized public commitment might develop in organizations that are more diverse than the Greens, since well-educated, politically astute activists like the Greens may be better equipped than others to orient personal motivations toward public goals. Our observations of similar dynamics in an organization that exhibits considerable racial, religious, and class diversity are notable because they demonstrate how personalism can resonate across social difference. Second, in Lichterman’s account, the Greens’ use of personalism as a cultural basis for public commitment was more circumstantial than intentional; the extent to which personalism can be used strategically to facilitate public commitment among actors who might otherwise remain oriented toward private affairs remains unclear. Our attention to ELIJAH’s intentional use of personalism to motivate activism against systemic injustice points to the ways that culture can be used strategically to facilitate social action (Alexander and Smith, 1993).

Progressive organizations’ struggles in connecting personalism with commitments to multi-issue organizing in diverse settings highlight the cultural challenge that movement organizations like ELIJAH face. In order for any public commitment to be effectively personalized, it must be learned and practiced culturally in ways that frame it as a logical extension of desirable personal identities (Giddens, 1991; Lichterman, 2008), and it must be articulated through cultural styles that appeal to the prevailing cultural ethos of self-expression,
fulfillment, and empowerment (Eliasoph, 2011). Existing literature provides examples of how personalism supports civic projects that can be easily understood as extensions of racial, ethnic, class, or political identities (Enriquez and Saguy, 2016; Hart, 2001; Lichterman, 1996, 2008), but FBCO groups’ priorities on organizational diversity and multi-issue agendas make it difficult to accomplish this among the range of constituencies they organize and the litany of issues they take up. By explaining ELIJAH’s use of face-to-face cultural practices to link personalist culture with the collective moral imaginary, we demonstrate the power of culture to create identities that have the potential to generate action across social difference.

**Cultural Practices and Social Performance**

Recent studies of U.S. social movement organizations have shown the potential of personalist concepts like individual agency and authenticity for motivating activism. One line of research shows that intentional identity work can frame social justice projects as means toward the realization of one’s authentic self (Han, 2014; Oyakawa 2015). Likewise, borrowing the “coming out” schema from LGBTQ discourse enables immigrants’ rights groups to depict the undocumented immigrant as an empowered person asserting her rights, rather than a recluse hiding in the shadows (Enriquez and Saguy, 2016). And multiple studies show that narrative storytelling helps individuals to recognize connections between their own personal biographies and larger structural issues (Braunstein, 2012; Ewick and Silbey, 2003; Polletta, 2006; Wuthnow, 1991). The cultural practices described in these accounts share an important element: they affirm personalist culture by locating moral agency within the experiences and pursuits of the individual, and thus frame civic activity as an extension of the self-as-project ethic.
We build upon this work by documenting how FBCO coalitions construct moral meanings that link personalist culture not only with discrete political issues and causes, but also with a deeper commitment to multi-issue social reform organized across social difference. The collective moral imaginary may be culturally unfamiliar, and perhaps even morally dubious, to many potential religious activists (Delehanty 2016). Its focus on structural and systemic conditions is a departure from the individualistic cultural analysis that most religious Americans are accustomed to (Beyerlein and Vaisey, 2013; Madsen, 2009; O’Brien, 2015). Considerable cultural work is therefore required for FBCO coalitions wishing to organize within religious congregations.

The emphasis on personal agency and authenticity that religious faith often involves (Edgell, 2012; Johnston, 2013; Madsen, 2009; Smilde, 2007; Smith, 2009) provides a cultural opportunity structure to do this. Existing studies of “cognitive liberation” (McAdam, 1999; Smith, 1996) and “injustice frames” (Gamson, 1992) have shown that attention to personal morality enables organizations to frame collective action in culturally appealing ways, but the social movements literature often overlooks the importance of performative acts like storytelling, conversation, and prayer for constructing moral meanings in group settings. We argue that ELIJAH’s cultural practices are effective because they contribute to a “fused social performance” (Alexander, 2004)—a cultural project that frames a position or goal as an extension of an audience’s existing moral presuppositions. In this case, the position being performed is the collective moral imaginary, and the audience consists of religious people, recruited through member churches, who might potentially become engaged in collective action. The centrality of the “moral self” (Johnston, 2013; Winchester, 2008) to many religious
Americans’ cultural dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984; Vaisey, 2009) provides an appealing and effective “footing” (Goffman, 1974) for ELIJAH’s goals.

Alexander argues that social performance is successful when it situates strategic objectives upon a metaphorical “scene” that invokes deeper cultural meanings. Since personalism comprises the foundation of many people’s moral analysis, especially within religious congregations (Becker, 1999; Edgell, 2012; Madsen, 2009; O’Brien, 2015), it serves as an effective scene for social performance. Below, we will show that ELIJAH’s cultural practices are effective in large part because they affirm personalist culture, constructing ELIJAH’s vision of multi-issue collective action across social difference as an extension of individuals’ motivations and identity projects. In short, we argue that performative practices center and prioritize the experiences and motivations of the individual, while at the same time asserting that these motivations are best pursued through collective action. This enables ELIJAH to effectively frame the collective moral imaginary as an affirmation and fulfillment of individuals’ authentic religious and moral identities.

We find that the focus on the individual moral self in the interactive, face-to-face dimensions of FBCO culture is a major reason why FBCO coalitions have been successful in framing social change projects as extensions of individuals’ personal goals—something that has otherwise been difficult for diverse, multi-issue organizations to achieve. In doing so, we show more precisely than previous studies why some cultural practices are effective for social movement recruitment and mobilization. For example, Braunstein, Fulton, and Wood (2014) show that bridging practices, such as interfaith prayers, help multiracial, politically oriented civic organizations to talk about race and class in group settings. Our work extends this insight by
documenting how practices like prayers and storytelling construct moral meaning around a vision of the self that supports and prioritizes action against systemic injustice (Giddens, 1991).

In the remainder of this study, we provide examples of how ELIJAH and its national network use performative cultural practices to affirm and extend personalist culture, and thereby give shape to a broad moral vision of how the self relates to social structure. We show that this process is a powerful motivation for activism because it harnesses individuals’ existing motivations, whether these reflect economic self-interest, a search for religious authenticity, or other identity projects, to make the collective moral imaginary a culturally appealing and morally compelling basis for collective action.

**Case Description: ELIJAH and the FBCO Field**

In the past twenty years, organizing in the FBCO field has influenced major local, state, and national policy developments in areas including heath care, criminal justice, voting rights, and education (Gecan, 2004; Kleidman, 2004; Orfield, 1997; Stout, 2012; Swarts, 2008; Wood and Fulton, 2015). Some FBCO coalitions have only a few affiliate member institutions, while others, including ELIJAH, have over 100. Most are religiously, racially, and socioeconomically diverse, and an increasing number are actively seeking to build organizational cultures that recognize racial diversity as a strength while also affirming, not trivializing, the challenges it can present (Braunstein *et al*, 2014; Wood and Fulton, 2015). Many, including ELIJAH, are aligned with a larger national or regional organizing network, such as People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO), the Gamaliel Foundation, National People’s Action, or the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), among others. These networks facilitate communication and strategic
coordination among local and regional coalitions, linking the local and state-level activities of regional coalitions into national organizing movements (Wood and Fulton, 2015).

ELIJAH is one of the largest FBCO coalitions in the U.S. While many FBCO coalitions are interfaith, ELIJAH is a Christian-only organization that includes over 100 member churches. Most of these are located within the metropolitan region of a large Midwestern city, with several affiliated churches located in smaller communities throughout the state. ELIJAH’s member congregations are approximately fifty per cent mainline Protestant, twenty-five per cent Catholic, and twenty-five per cent Black Protestant, with significant Latino representation among some of the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches.

ELIJAH’s current work is centered on racial justice. Its cultural practices seek to demonstrate that the political and economic problems that its diverse constituencies identify as major concerns, such as racial injustice in policing and sentencing, poor pay and benefits for low wage workers, predatory lending practices, immigrants’ rights issues, and a lack of affordable housing, are linked by the “invisible thread” of white supremacy. While ELIJAH has developed a racially diverse membership base in recent years, many of its top volunteer leaders are highly educated, middle to upper class whites, who, despite having little material stake in the organization’s core issue areas, engage in relatively high-demand forms of activism in pursuit of racial and economic justice. More notably, while issue-specific organizing around criminal justice and immigrants’ rights has been helpful for expanding the Black and Latino components of the membership, ELIJAH is not satisfied with single-issue activism among any of its constituencies. Instead, it strives to interest whites, Blacks, Latinos, and others alike in the full

2 Although all of ELIJAH’s affiliate churches are rooted in Christian faith traditions, significant bridging work is required to develop unity within the organization. For discussions of bridging among Christian communities in the FBCO field, see Braunstein et. al. (2014), Swarts (2011), and Warren (2001).
range of issues around which it organizes. In this regard, ELIJAH is an ideal case for studying how organizations can bring together diverse groups of Americans to act in pursuit of a social justice framework that cuts across multiple issue areas.

Data

We draw upon two qualitative datasets. Michelle Oyakawa conducted interviews with ELIJAH leaders and attended a weeklong training workshop in 2011. Jack Delehanty conducted participant-observation within ELIJAH from January 2015 through January 2017. Both authors have also obtained a considerable volume of archival materials in many forms, including flyers, meeting agendas, press releases, and email correspondence. The two researchers also have different perspectives on ELIJAH that add nuance to our analysis. Oyakawa was a staff organizer with ELIJAH from 2009-2010, and has an insider’s view of the organization. Her data collection focused primarily on how ELIJAH functions from the perspective of staff organizers and long-time influential leaders. Delehanty’s research involves being embedded in an ELIJAH congregation and experiencing ELIJAH’s leadership development process alongside other congregational leaders. He joined the core ELIJAH team within this congregation, and has gained perspective on the organization’s goals, priorities, and challenges through participant-observation. The two researchers thus have distinct, complementary perspectives. One of us approaches the analysis as an insider and former organizer, the other as a newer ELIJAH member learning its culture from the outside.

In 2011, Oyakawa conducted 32 semi-structured interviews with staff, clergy and lay leaders affiliated with ELIJAH. Interview participants were obtained through personal connections and referrals from key contacts. The interviews range from 45-90 minutes long.
Interviewees were asked about their involvement in ELIJAH and their experiences with ELIJAH’s leadership development processes. Most of the respondents were staff or influential leaders, and three-fourths of them had been involved in the organization for five years or more at the time they were interviewed. The weeklong training workshop she observed consisted of five days of training in organizing skills conducted by ELIJAH staff. “Weeklong,” as it is known within the organization, is held every summer, and comprises an intensive forum in which participants, typically enthusiastic activists recruited from member churches, go through the organization’s leadership development process. It represents an intentional effort to shape the identities and interests of individuals attending the training, and is a key site of socialization into ELIJAH’s culture.

Delehanty attended and participated in events organized by ELIJAH, its member congregations, and its national organizing network between January 2015 and January 2017. During this period, he attended an average of two events per week, including public rallies, meetings, and demonstrations; leadership meetings involving ELIJAH’s executives, staff organizers, and clergy and lay leaders; and issue-specific meetings, where ELIJAH staff organizers meet with clergy and lay leaders to plan strategies and actions within particular issue campaigns. He also participated in congregation-level events, where congregations’ local ELIJAH teams plan events and actions, discuss how to recruit members and build commitments to ELIJAH’s work within their churches, or hold outreach or listening sessions where congregants speak with local political officials or corporate leaders. In addition, he attended two national FBCO conventions organized by ELIJAH’s national network.

Our ability to draw upon these two datasets is advantageous in several ways. It allows us to show that the practices we identify are consistent in the organization over time and across
observers. Having data from two time periods bolsters confidence that the patterns we observe are not snapshots of particular moments, but strategies that have developed over time and characterize ELIJAH’s long-term trajectory. The interviews include influential ELIJAH leaders’ reflections on their experiences within ELIJAH as well as discussions of how ELIJAH’s cultural practices are intentionally crafted to situate individuals’ personal motivations within the collective moral imaginary. The participant-observation data allow us to analyze cultural practices in action and to gain understanding of how these play out in congregational contexts among activists who are not part of the organization’s top-tier leadership. Thus, our ability to incorporate both datasets and perspectives makes us confident that our analysis provides a valid account of ELIJAH’s cultural practices and how they contribute to the development of the collective moral imaginary.

Data Analysis

Our analysis proceeds in four parts. First, we present interview data in which experienced ELIJAH leaders describe the organization’s intentional development of a unique concept of self-interest, and discuss its importance to ELIJAH’s culture. We explain that this reconceptualized view of self-interest affirms personalist culture by linking individuals’ personal motivations to the collective moral imaginary, forming an authoritative footing (Goffman, 1974) for the organization’s other cultural work. Next, we explain how face-to-face conversations between established leaders and newer or potential activists identify the motivations that people bring into activism and use these to give shape to a broadened sense of community. Then, we analyze ELIJAH’s narrative practices to show how stories told in group settings link diverse persons’ motivations and interests into a larger frame of shared public interest. Finally, we provide an
example of how ELIJAH’s national organizing network uses this frame to call for collective action against the linked systems of marginalization that affect its diverse constituencies.

*Self-Interest and the Collective Moral Imaginary in ELIJAH*

ELIJAH’s activities are predicated upon the idea that social justice activism is not an altruistic act, but a way for people to advance their own interests, no matter their racial, class, or faith background. This framing allows ELIJAH to fuse personalist culture with ambitions for social reform, but the idea that helping one’s self is best achieved through collective action does not come easily to most members. Therefore, much of ELIJAH’s work involves teaching new and potential members about the expanded sense of self-interest that leaders have found to be powerful for motivating action.

ELIJAH defines self-interest as “self among others,” emphasizing how social context and community influence personal life chances and outcomes. In an interview, Alissa, a white woman in her 40s who is ELIJAH’s executive director, described this approach:

> We teach self-interest to be almost like vocation, almost like call or purpose. And it’s like, where in you do you have a yearning for a larger thing? What’s that about and how’s it connected to your story? And how’s your story connected to other people’s stories? Sometimes self-interest can be taught very narrowly. It’s like, I don’t have a job and I want a job. Or…those kids hanging out on the corner make me feel unsafe, my self-interest is to get them off the corner. It can be very narrow and frankly I think there’s some mis-teaching around it [by other community organizing coalitions]. The field of the human landscape is much larger than that. What motivates people is much larger than that. I mean people can be motivated by their faith, they can be motivated by values, they can be motivated by their identity… Like they’re not just motivated by direct one-to-one correlations between, this equals that.

Alissa’s discussion of different kinds of motivations, including faith, values, and identity, shows the importance of personalist culture for ELIJAH’s social reform goals. She argues that a
“narrow” conception of self-interest (e.g., “I don’t have a job and I want a job”) fails to capitalize on the potential of deeply motivating cultural factors like faith, values, and identities for helping people connect their own stories to those of others. Thus, the self-interest taught in ELIJAH is embedded in society and community, an applied worldview wherein an individual situates herself in a social context and articulates her goals for her own life and the wellbeing of her family and community. This affirms the personalist emphasis on identity and authenticity noted by cultural theory (Bellah et al, 1985; Giddens, 1991; Lichterman, 1996; Wuthnow, 1991), but links personalism to an imperative for working in community with others. Working for collective benefit is not fundamentally separate from fighting for one’s self, because each person’s story is “connected to other people’s stories.” Self-interest, when understood in this way, cannot be pursued in isolation, but requires cooperation and mutual commitment among individual actors. Ultimately, self-interest in the ELIJAH model can become equivalent to one’s purpose or “call” in the Christian sense—the end to which one’s life is directed.

Notably, ELIJAH arrived at this formulation of self-interest as the result of an intentional process of reflection about the organization’s long-term goals. In the mid-2000s, ELIJAH was experiencing a number of internal difficulties, especially interpersonal conflicts among staff over resources and priorities. They hired a consultant, Charles, to help them understand these issues and come up with solutions. In an interview, Charles said:

A lot of the tension grew out of a lack of clarity at the core of ELIJAH about who they were. Some people said they were the immigration group, some people said they were the housing group… There was a lot of focus on building power but no conversation about power for what? … They had a lot of turnover in leadership because leaders were tied to a specific campaign. And they weren’t getting tied into the larger organization because there was no connection. And there was no clarity about the connections or the way to articulate that. So there was that going on, the sort of siloing of the issues.

… [another problem ELIJAH had at the time was] this sort of narrow self-interest, individual self-interest and not seeing self-interest in a more expanded way, like why is
what’s happening to you of interest to me even though my life isn’t like yours. So [at the time they didn’t have] that interconnected piece that they now talk about.

… I introduced these concepts of three faces of power, worldview and so forth… and there was almost immediate recognition among [ELIJAH staff and leaders] that this was opening up something that they needed. We weren’t naming what was limiting them at this point—it was like, here’s where you could go. I remember, it was that first training where someone said, “Oh my God, our worldview is our methodology.” Which was true. I mean that was kind of the glue that was holding people together at the time. It wasn’t faith, it wasn’t a vision for the future, it was [community organizing] methodology.

Here, Charles tells the story of how and why ELIJAH developed its sophisticated concept of self-interest. Like the progressive organizations that Hart (2001) studied, ELIJAH was struggling to retain leaders across issue campaigns because it did not articulate a worldview that connected the issues motivating its different constituencies, and single issues did not connect individuals’ motivations to a broader collective vision. Charles helped ELIJAH leaders understand that the organization was missing a collective framework to tie their work together across issue areas.

Instead of building a multi-race, multi-faith commitment to deep cultural transformation, they were united by their adherence to specific issues and to community organizing methodology, which failed to provide a strong enough cultural basis to unite leaders across issue areas (Swarts, 2008; Wood, 2002).

The result of this process was the intentional development of the collective moral imaginary—a concept of self-interest reconfigured in the ways Charles described. One document that ELIJAH distributed in the mid-2000s outlines this as follows:

We see a world of economic and racial injustice. The real abundance of the world is only shared by a few. This injustice is upheld by a myth of scarcity. This myth of scarcity builds a world of fear. Because we are afraid, we act in isolation, as individuals. Our sense of community erodes and we become even more afraid and more isolated… We can see that the world does not have to be this way. This present reality can be transformed. We are called to play a role in that transformation. We envision a world of
economic and racial justice, a world where the abundance of this world is shared by all people, by all creation. We believe that this shared abundance is possible when we are acting as community rather than as isolated individuals. When we act as community, we begin to transform our fear into hope.

This description of the collective moral imaginary gives form to the cultural vision upon which ELIJAH’s multi-issue activism is based. A “myth of scarcity” in public discourse (Brueggemann, 2001) masks systemic inequality and makes people afraid of being economic losers. This fear isolates people, making them feel like they are struggling alone, rather than members of a sacred community. The key to effectively improving one’s own life is recognizing that social change is possible through collective action, which transforms fear into hope and isolation into community.

Embedded in the collective moral imaginary is the belief that coming together to “act as community” can eliminate individuals’ feelings of isolation and political powerlessness, and thus make personal fulfillment attainable through action that confronts large-scale societal ills.

ELIJAH’s cultural ambition is thus to be an agent of change that pushes society to move from a culture of scarcity, fear, and isolation, where people define their struggles as personal troubles alone, to a culture characterized by abundance, hope, and community, where people view their struggles as inextricably connected to others’ struggles and work together to solve social issues. ELIJAH’s vision of self-interest is therefore not a straightforward concern for one’s own economic wellbeing, nor is it an expressive identity project like the political activities of the “lifestyle liberals” that Stout (2012) discusses. Rather, ELIJAH’s collective moral imaginary fuses individuals’ diverse motivations and interests within a recognition of the interdependence of different political and economic issues. It connects deeply rooted cultural desires for personal authenticity and autonomy with an imperative to work together in community.
Previous work on FBCO coalitions argues that the language of self-interest is effective because it provides a cultural basis for connecting people with others who are different from them (Wood, 2002). This is also true in ELIJAH, but in this case, self-interest is important for another reason as well: it provides individuals with a way to expand their understandings of what is needed for them to achieve their aims and desires. By suggesting that to live well is to see through the myth of scarcity and the separation of people and communities from one another that it imposes, ELIJAH’s collective moral imaginary not only encourages meaningful interactions across social difference, but creates an activist identity that connects personal motivations with pursuit of the public good.

Yet situating individuals’ interests and commitments within the collective moral imaginary is a challenging process that demands considerable cultural work. As Alissa and Charles explain, the broad sense of self-interest that gives form to the collective moral imaginary must be taught using techniques that encourage individuals to connect their own motivations with larger ideas about justice and community. In the following sections, we show how ELIJAH accomplishes this by constructing meaning in face-to-face practices.

*One-to-ones*

The importance of personalist culture for constructing the collective moral imaginary is evident in ELIJAH’s use of a practice known in community organizing as one-to-ones. One-to-ones are two-person conversations in which one person asks the other about her or his personal history and reasons for being interested in social change. During one-to-ones, organizers and leaders are particularly interested in revealing any potential alignment between the individual’s current self-interest, which may be understood narrowly in the sense of short-term material
concerns, and the organization’s current or upcoming issue campaigns. Existing studies of community organizing discuss one-to-ones as a means of strengthening social networks: by engaging with one person at a time, community organizations enhance their strategic capacity by drawing more people into leadership development and collective action (Ganz 2000; Warren 2001). But one-to-ones also serve the crucial cultural function of encouraging individuals to identify and articulate the motivations that draw them into social justice work. These motivations, when understood through ELIJAH’s unique language of self-interest as described above, endow collective change projects with personalized moral meaning.

ELIJAH staff and volunteer leaders regularly do one-to-ones with each other and with potential new members. During weeklong, participants are encouraged to do as many one-to-ones as possible with organizers and other trainees, and during unstructured time and meals, participants are generally engaged in these conversations. For instance, when Oyakawa attended weeklong, she observed a Black pastor in deep conversation with a Franciscan nun, an Asian teenager asking an elderly white Lutheran about her life, and an East African immigrant recounting his childhood to a middle aged white Catholic. Such interactions are rare in everyday life, but their repeated practice over time in community organizing coalitions like ELIJAH provides a basis for mobilizing across difference on a variety of issues.

In one-to-ones, unlike in casual conversations, people are encouraged to take risks by asking difficult personal questions. This was emphasized during a one-to-one training workshop at weeklong in 2011. The trainer, a charismatic young Black woman named Ruby, demonstrated a practice one-to-one with Donald, a Black man in his sixties, in the front of the room. Ruby began the training by asking Donald about his work in union activism. The conversation turned to discussion of his childhood and how issues in his family had shaped his life. Then, Ruby
turned the conversation back to Donald’s union activism, asking him why he does the work that he does and how his current activism was connected to his family. During a debrief that followed the conversation, weeklong trainees pointed out that Ruby had asked Donald questions about painful personal issues. In response, Ruby said, “People are always telling you who they are. They drop hints, like Donald mentioned his divorce and his mom dying. They always say it in passing. And then when you start asking questions, you see it’s a big freaking deal.” She encouraged trainees to follow her example and ask questions about difficult issues. She argued that doing so provides a platform for understanding the motivation and self-interest a person brings into work with ELIJAH.

Social convention and habit often dictate that one should not look too closely at another’s personal pain. In contrast, ELIJAH leaders are trained to delve into others’ stories of pain, anger, and trauma, in addition to stories of agency and power. For example, at a training session in summer 2016, roughly fifty people of various racial and faith backgrounds were asked to pair up with people they did not already know, and instructed to repeatedly ask one another “what makes you angry?” Trainees were told to listen attentively, and then to continue asking “what makes you angry?” after each of their partner’s responses for a full ten minutes. Then, the roles switched, and the person who had been answering the question asked the same question of her partner for another ten minutes. These “mini one-to-ones” provided an opportunity for inexperienced ELIJAH members to practice discussing uncomfortable emotions like anger and pain before the meeting organizers moved on to explicit discussion of how predatory businesses in the payday lending industry cause feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation in poor communities. This process helped attendees to see how their own anger was connected to the emotional trauma experienced by people stuck in cycles of debt.
One-to-ones help people to identify and articulate their own reasons for being involved in activism, and to see how these motivations relate to those of people with different backgrounds and life experiences. After the mini one-to-ones, the ELIJAH staff organizer leading the training told the group,

We have these conversations partly to hear from other people, why they’re involved, why they’re here, but also to figure out our own deep motivations, whether that’s driven by our faith or by anything else. We need to go from being here because our pastor invited us to being able to stake out a Christian claim for confronting these injustices that are being done to people in our communities. And to do that we need to know our own stories, and be able to tell them.

The cultural process the organizer describes here aligns with Alexander’s discussion (2004) of social performance. It situates a desired action—working to confront payday lenders—within a larger cultural imperative: “a Christian claim” for fighting injustices more broadly. Yet, importantly, the organizer’s language shows that mere recognition of Christian precepts or beliefs about social justice are not sufficient. Potential activists must also know their own stories, and be able to tell them, if they are to become effective leaders in the payday lending campaign. This statement represents a recognition on the organizer’s part that personalist culture, as reflected in the attention to personal stories and motivations, is an essential link between religious belief and social justice action.

As we have shown, one-to-ones serve a variety of purposes in ELIJAH. First, painful experiences in life often spark emotions that can become motivations for activism, especially anger. Discussing these experiences, especially in such direct fashion as in the examples above, can help people understand and articulate their deep motivations for being involved in social justice work, and thereby identify common ground for working together. Second, talking about pain and anger helps to build emotionally intimate relationships that expand one’s understanding of who is a member of one’s community, and thus comprise a strong basis for collective action.
(Warren, 2001; Wood, 2002). This is especially important for a diverse organization that cannot rely on solidarity based on pre-existing racial or religious identity or on community organizing methodology.

A third function of one-to-ones is to help people feel emotionally connected across social difference, and thus to forge commitments to issues that have no immediate connections to their own lives. Hearing stories about others’ pain and sharing one’s own pain in one-to-ones provides ELIJAH leaders with powerful evidence that the daily struggles of individuals of different backgrounds have more in common with one another than is often believed. This practice reinforces the collective moral imaginary, which holds that personal struggles should not be faced in isolation, but addressed in community with others. This contributes to the potential for a broadened view of community that can spark and sustain mutual commitment and accountability among diverse constituencies by using personalism as a link between different kinds of struggles.

One-to-ones are essential to ELIJAH’s work. Along with other cultural practices, these conversations effectuate a transformation of self-interest from narrow to broad, and thus help to comprise the cultural basis for participation in a shared struggle that requires collective action in issue campaigns that are related only tangentially, if at all, to the issues that first motivated a person to become involved in ELIJAH. In the next section, we show how ELIJAH uses narrative practices to situate individuals’ motivations within a morally charged frame of mutual obligation among individuals and communities.

Narrative Practices and the Collective Moral Imaginary

In January 2015, ELIJAH held a “legislative launch.” This was a Saturday gathering where staff organizers, clergy, and lay leaders described the political work that ELIJAH planned
to undertake in the upcoming legislative session. The intent was to motivate leaders to organize their congregations to call legislators, lobby at the state capitol, participate in public rallies, and otherwise engage in ELIJAH’s work across different issue areas over the months to come. About 150 activists, including roughly eighty whites, forty Latinos, and thirty Blacks, were present. The event was bilingual: some speakers gave their remarks in Spanish, and an interpreter repeated these to the audience in English. When speakers used English, the interpreter translated their words into Spanish, with the translation conveyed to Spanish speakers through headsets.

Many ELIJAH events, from small meetings within congregations to larger gatherings like the legislative launch, use personal stories to demonstrate the links between different sets of interests and motivations. This was no exception. Through its organizing work, ELIJAH had identified four core legislative priorities for 2015: making driver’s licenses available to undocumented immigrants, restoring voting rights for formerly incarcerated people, increasing funding for mass transit in the region, and pushing for statewide mandatory paid sick time policies. Organizers had recruited lay leaders to tell personal stories about how each of these problems had affected them and their families (to save space, we omit the mass transit story here). Though focused on the storytellers’ individual experiences, each story linked descriptions of personal difficulty to the imperative to act in community.

The first storyteller was Ofelia, an undocumented Latina immigrant in her forties who has two children and has a car, but no driver’s license. Through the interpreter, she spoke of the difficulty she has getting around: she avoids using the car for everyday tasks such as taking her kids to school and doctor’s appointments, but there are occasions when she feels that she has no choice but to drive because she has no other way to transport her children. This brings a great deal of fear into her life. Her family is dysfunctional, she said, because she cannot provide
reliable transportation for her children, and each time she takes the risk of driving, her husband fears that she will be stopped by the police, arrested, and deported. This fear creates tension within their marriage, because the husband’s concern about Ofelia’s potential arrest and deportation makes him question her decision to drive even when she sees no other choice.

Ofelia’s use of the word “dysfunctional” is notable here. It indicates that for her, the lack of access to a driver’s license has effects that are not only political, but also deeply personal. To call one’s own family “dysfunctional” is to make the painful admission that one is unable to meet the basic obligations of family life. This transcends the political question of whether undocumented immigrants should have driver’s licenses and calls attention to the larger cultural question of what it means to have one’s family life disrupted by the state. Ofelia’s story blamed her family’s dysfunction not on her own personal failings, but on the state’s refusal to recognize undocumented people as capable drivers. She thus signified that her motivations for protesting the state’s policy on driver’s licenses lie in both her status as an economic and political subject of the state and her interest in supporting a loving, caring, family that can provide for its children. Her story implicitly invited others in the room to think of ways that their own families were experiencing dysfunction or pain due to political or economic circumstances, and extended the ramifications of her experience outward from the driver’s license issue toward the range of economic and political problems that disrupt family lives across different races, social classes, and faith traditions. It thus situated the campaign for driver’s licenses for immigrants within the collective moral imaginary.

The second speaker was Teandra, a Black woman with a bachelor’s degree in English from a prestigious local college. She held a good corporate job until recently, but after one of her close family members died and another was imprisoned, Teandra took to shopping, and then
shoplifting, to fill the void in her life. She was caught, charged with a felony, and sentenced to a short prison term and ten years of parole. She cannot vote until her parole is up. She spoke movingly about the symbolic ramifications of not being able to vote. The stigma of being a “political nobody” makes her feel like she cannot gain redemption. She regrets her past mistakes and wants to “do right by the world,” but she feels that her disenfranchisement makes this impossible. She told the audience that she has to remind herself every day that God has forgiven her, because it does not seem like society has forgiven her yet. She feels increased shame around elections because she has to tell her children why she cannot vote, and that makes her feel like a bad mother and an unsuitable role model.

Like Ofelia, Teandra felt that the denial of full citizenship brought her basic competence as a mother and family member into question. By revealing that being unable to vote makes her feel like a bad mother, she connected her interest in restoring the vote to formerly incarcerated people—a political issue campaign in which success would benefit primarily nonwhites—to a cultural interest in allowing families to flourish, a project with appeal across racial and religious lines. Teandra’s story endowed the political project of re-enfranchisement with a moral imperative to support families, central in the Christian traditions through which ELIJAH organizes.

The last speaker was Wayne, a white man speaking on behalf of a woman from his church who could not be present because she was at work, despite being sick. She received no paid time off and only three unpaid personal days per year, which she had used spending time with her dying father in the hospital. Since she had no more time off, she had to return to work immediately following his death. Later in the same year, her son took ill and also died. This time, she requested additional unpaid time off to spend her son’s last days with him, but upon her
return to work she was chastised by co-workers who were angry about having to cover for her. Wayne said that this was not a just or loving way for anybody to live and that God had a better way in mind for society.

Since Wayne was speaking on someone else’s behalf, it was difficult for him to relate intense personal pain and suffering to the audience in the same way that Ofelia and Raquel had. But his mention of the absent woman’s chastisement by co-workers invokes shame and guilt, and it elicited anger from the audience, who responded with cries of outrage (“that ain’t right” and “Lord have mercy”) that a person should be shamed or reprimanded for taking unpaid time off to care or grieve for a family member. This discussion of shame aligns with the talk about anger mentioned earlier; both examples point to the importance of affirming deep and painful personal emotions for connecting ELIJAH’s various political projects within one cultural framework.

In terms of social performance, these stories have a number of points in common with the one-to-ones described above. As in one-to-ones, each story involved relating a painful or embarrassing experience to a mostly unfamiliar audience. Further, each story connected personal pain and suffering caused by a particular policy issue to the cultural imperative of being able to provide for one’s family or to be recognized as a valuable human being. Together, the stories constituted a call to action against a social and political system that permits each of these injustices to exist. While none of the speakers explicitly mentioned links to the other three issues, the sequence of hearing one story after another created a compelling scene that connected the distinct storytelling performances, and thus situated the issues raised by each within one overarching moral framework that frames political action as the only logical means by which to overcome personal shame and suffering. Furthermore, these stories exemplified the politicized personal narratives that ELIJAH trains all members to develop (Oyakawa 2015).
The speeches delivered by ELIJAH leaders immediately following these stories cemented the collective moral imaginary by explicitly naming connections between the issues that Ofelia, Teandra, and Wayne had discussed. After Wayne’s story, Kevin, a white Protestant who owns a construction business and attends a suburban mainline Protestant church, said that the week before, a major national magazine had named ELIJAH’s state the best place to live in the U.S. Then Kevin asked, “does it sound like the quality of life is all that great for the people whose stories we just heard? How can we in [our state] allow these kinds of injustices to go on while others of us enjoy such a great quality of life? And how can the people in power, the people who judge how good life is, ignore the struggles of so many?”

Kevin’s message was followed by a brief speech from Alissa, the executive director. She rallied the group by asking them to applaud the storytellers, and then directed them to think about what society usually says about the issues the stories had addressed. She said “society is always telling us that we are in a zero-sum game against each other; that the narrative of our politics and culture is a zero-sum narrative. In schools, in communities, everywhere, we are told that there isn’t enough money for things, that we must choose.” She asked the audience to name places where they had heard this kind of talk—people mentioned the news, politicians, and their jobs. One person jokingly mentioned church budgets, eliciting laughs from others. Alissa continued,

this zero-sum narrative extends to issues of love and justice, too. The media and politicians tell us that if we have justice for Eric Garner or Tamir Rice, white communities will somehow lose some of their justice. That if we bring love to undocumented immigrants, somehow native-born Americans will lose some of their love. This is absurd! Absurd, absurd, absurd! [Alissa was shouting and beginning to cry by the fourth “absurd”]. And it’s not only absurd, but it’s deeply internalized and deeply racialized. When communities of color ask for love, whites don’t want to give it.
With these remarks, Alissa cemented the connection between the issues discussed in the preceding stories, and linked these issues to a cultural struggle of acting with others in pursuit of human dignity and justice.

The stories, along with Alissa’s and Kevin’s speeches that followed them, share a common feature: each links an individual’s deep motivations for addressing a particular political issue to a shared cultural struggle that involves supporting families’ ability to thrive by countering the myth of scarcity. By exposing activists to the pain, suffering, and embarrassment that individuals suffer as a result of political issues, ELIJAH links them within a shared struggle against systemic injustice, or what Alissa called the “zero-sum narrative” that pits communities against one another. Naming the damaging narrative that all of ELIJAH’s members are working against constituted a sort of boundary work (Lamont and Molnár, 2002), or “mapping” (Lichterman and Eliasoph, 2015), that positioned everyone in the room, no matter their race, class, or religion, as participants in a struggle against the broader culture that permits the myth of scarcity to persist.

Discussion of this myth of scarcity exemplifies ELIJAH’s overarching cultural framework, and demonstrates how social performance facilitates political organizing across social difference. ELIJAH’s work is not only about connecting people across racial, religious, and class lines, but also about exposing what the organization sees as pernicious cultural narratives that prevent individuals from advancing their real interests or pursuing their deepest motivations. These damaging narratives include the zero-sum narrative that Alissa described, along with a range of other cultural phenomena: fear of various types of others, stigma that often accompanies being poor or struggling to provide for one’s family, and the shame that some individuals feel when they are forced to ask others for help. Persistent affirmation of individuals’
motivations, painful experiences, and faith commitments, produced and reinforced through the social performance of one-to-ones and narrative practices, seeks to bring individuals to confront these myths by engaging in collective action against the systems that support them. Broad-based, multi-issue social justice activism becomes an intuitive and appealing strategy of action when ELIJAH creates a cultural link between individuals’ personal motivations and the idea that a collective good is worth fighting for.

Shared Struggle and Calls to Action

To show that the patterns we have identified within ELIJAH also appear in the broader national FBCO field, we close the analysis section with an example that demonstrates how ELIJAH’s national organizing network uses the same logic of social performance, fusing individuals’ motivations with larger moral imperatives, to bring persons to internalize the collective moral imaginary. The national network seeks to construct a nationwide, faith-based movement to confront racial and economic inequality and the political disempowerment of poor, working-class, middle-class, and racial minority groups. As one of the largest and oldest regional coalitions within the network, ELIJAH makes major contributions to its strategic planning, and the concept of self-interest that ELIJAH constructed in the mid-2000s has been adopted, with varying degrees of success, by many other member coalitions (Wood and Fulton, 2015). At a national convention in September 2015, organized to coincide with Pope Francis’s visit to the U.S., one of the national network’s executive leaders, Brandon, outlined how individuals’ distinct interests and motivations cohere into a national movement. Addressing a racially and religiously diverse gathering of over 300 FBCO activists, he highlighted the role of personalized commitments in FBCO activism:
We work here to steel ourselves together for this struggle that we are in. We want this time together to be a mountaintop experience … to not just click like on Facebook on something that Pope Francis says, but to actually go out and act like him. To step into action in the way that he is inspiring us to do. He is an inspiring figure, but he is just one man. We are millions. So that is our hope for this time, and what I want to ask everybody here is to really think and feel deeply, what does that mean for you, personally? How is God calling you into that as an individual in this room? What is he saying to you, and what is God saying to us collectively, to your organization? And to us together as a network? [emphasis added]

As in one-to-ones and the narratives from the legislative launch, Brandon here emphasizes the how individuals’ personal motivations, understood as Christian callings, are connected to the social change project that FBCO coalitions are engaged in. By saying that God is calling individuals into this work, he frames taking action toward the network’s national organizing goals as an extension of authentic Christian identity and commitment. With the transition from “we are millions” to “what does that mean for you, personally?” he connected an ambitious vision of collective action to the existing motivations of each person in the room. He continued,

When I think about the next forty days, I think about three things from Pope Francis’s own words that would make this moment, us stepping into it, very powerful. One is this idea of waking people up… When I look at all the best, most amazing pieces of organizing in the past couple years, and really in our history, it’s revealing the pain and suffering that’s already there. Whether it’s an immigrant community, the Dreamers, Black Lives Matter, or the Fight for 15, pain is already there, that people are not seeing. We’re so used to it, it’s invisible. We’re making it visible, and saying this is not God’s plan. So that’s one piece, how do we wake people up?

The second piece is, Pope Francis in Bolivia said very clearly that there is an invisible thread…joining all of our forms of exclusion, all the injustices that we face…these are not isolated. So when I think about how we can step into this moment, I think about how we can connect our struggles. Black, brown, white, API, Native people, beautiful people, connecting our struggles together.

And the third piece I think about…is we’re organizers. We think about power. And Pope Francis in Bolivia in July said very clearly, we can achieve a society that honors every human being with dignity. It’s totally achievable. It’s not a utopia, we can do it. The problem is that right now there is a system with different aims that is in place. And power is oftentimes hidden. So our job as organizers is to understand, what is this system with different aims that is operating in our communities? Perpetuating our suffering, the suffering of our people. And how do we begin to reveal that, make it seen, make it visible?
This discussion captures the components of the collective moral imaginary that we have explained in this paper, and demonstrates how it is articulated and practiced through social performance that links it with personalist cultural motivations. Brandon’s mention of “waking people up” to pain and suffering refers to revealing individuals’ true self-interest in the sense of ELIJAH’s applied worldview. He points out that the many issues that the national network is working on, including immigration problems, racial equity, and workers’ issues, each emerge out of the interests and motivations of activists engaged in those struggles, and come together through the sharing of stories and the discussion of mutual concerns. Brandon then invoked Pope Francis’s concept of the “invisible thread” to emphasize the connections between the various economic and political problems that motivate activism in various issue areas, and by hinting that real change cannot be achieved by those who “just click like on Facebook,” he called them into meaningful collective action. This language extends the pursuit of personal motivation and authentically living out one’s faith into participation in an ambitious movement for cultural transformation.

Conclusion

The U.S. is struggling with extreme political polarization, increasing racial tension, and unprecedented levels of income and wealth inequality. In this fractured public sphere, where individuals often see their own personal and family interests as opposed to those of others, and where civic commitment often takes on the character of an identity project, is it possible for people to work together for a shared common good? Under what conditions can Americans unite across deep cultural divides to take collective action on multi-issue agendas that combat inequality? This study has demonstrated how one FBCO coalition, ELIJAH, accomplishes these
goals by connecting a culture focused on personal motivations and authenticity with a framework of shared struggle against systemic injustice. Through this process, ELIJAH brings activists to internalize a collective moral imaginary that links diverse constituencies and issues in an overarching analysis and critique of the U.S. political system.

Building on earlier work in cultural sociology, our analysis demonstrates that the relationship between personalist culture and civic engagement is more complex and more flexible than often assumed. Conventional wisdom and existing scholarship point to personalism as a barrier that must be overcome before people will be able to internalize collective moral visions for social change (Bellah et al., 1985; Beyerlein and Vaisey, 2013; Perrin, 2014; Putnam, 2000). ELIJAH, however, bridges the dichotomy between personal and communitarian moral frameworks that pervades many dimensions of American public life. It accomplishes this by using one-to-ones and narrative storytelling to expand the moral self and connect desires for personal autonomy and authenticity with a recognition of the need for collective action.

These findings extend cultural theory in three key ways. First, recent work shows that culture that individuals have already learned and internalized throughout their lives is central to their ability to learn “new” culture in group settings (Bourdieu, 1984; Lichterman and Eliasoph, 2015; Lizardo and Strand, 2010; Vaisey, 2009; Vaisey and Lizardo, 2016; Winchester, 2008). The case of ELIJAH supports and extends this insight. By affirming and building upon individual motivations, ELIJAH brings its members to adopt collective moral frames that are constructed through discussion of their own previous experiences and interests. This shows the importance of learned cultural motivations as a basis for social and political action (Vaisey, 2009). But the case of ELIJAH shows that these motivations can be steered in unexpected directions through cultural work, and thus contributes to the growing literature on how political
participation and social movements are shaped by moral commitments and cultural meanings that are formed in group settings (Braunstein, 2012, 2015; Enriquez and Saguy, 2016; Lichterman, 2005, 2008; Wood, 1999).

Second, the importance of personalist culture to movement building in the FBCO field hints at an important link between cultural studies and framing processes in social movements (Benford and Snow, 2000; Goffman, 1974; Snow et al, 1986; Zald, 1996). Alexander’s theory of social performance (2004) highlights the importance of symbolic codes for effective framing of political ideas, but few studies have systematically examined how deep cultural meanings are constructed and deployed in face-to-face settings in social movement organizing. The importance of personalist culture for organizing in the FBCO field shows the degree to which deep cultural logics shape movement organizers’ ability to frame their goals as morally worthy. It is not enough to alert religious people to the many Christian beliefs, doctrines, and traditions that call for action against deep inequalities. Rather, religious movement organizations must also provide an appealing and intuitive cultural strategy for acting upon those connections. For ELIJAH and other FBCO coalitions, personalist culture, transformed through social performance, provides such a strategy.

Third, our analysis speaks to ongoing conversations related to the practical construction of empathy in civic groups and social movements (Dunn, 2004; Jasper, 2012; Kolb, 2014). This literature emphasizes the organizational and strategic processes that link conceptions of morality with individual cognition, moving beyond the typical social movement theory focus on frame alignment and resource mobilization to assess how moral identities evolve through the disruption of typical emotional patterns. ELIJAH’s cultural practices may spark a similar identity transformation among participants, inspiring action within the organization and possibly
expanding their definitions of community in other settings. The collective moral imaginary emphasizes concern for the welfare of others, but by intentionally discussing difficult emotions like pain, anger, and guilt, ELIJAH leaders also insist that true empathy can only be achieved through the recognition of one’s own vulnerability. Thus, ELIJAH’s culture not only attunes privileged activists to the struggles of marginalized communities, but also highlights emotional trauma in the backgrounds of privileged people that is often masked by wealth and status. One-to-ones and storytelling can reveal this trauma, and may thus help to construct a culture of universal empathy with the potential to mitigate the problems of race and class privilege and guilt that often plague progressive organizations (Leondar-Wright, 2014; Ward, 2008). Further research on race and class dynamics inside FBCO coalitions could shed more light on this.

Yet it is important to also note that the collective moral imaginary and the empathetic connections that it enables are not a panacea for the challenges of progressive organizing. Other scholars have noted that “belonging to an emotional subculture is not a passive achievement” (Kolb, 2014:1232), but requires intense cognitive and cultural work. There is a stark difference between the distant compassion that many privileged Americans feel for the struggles of the marginalized and the deeper empathy that ELIJAH strives to cultivate, and this empathy takes intensive work and cultural learning to develop. This presents a danger that well-intentioned but poorly trained activists may speak or act in ways that position them as “white saviors” or “do gooders,” rather than partners in struggle, and thus strip agency away from the communities that FBCO coalitions strive to empower. Compassion, in ELIJAH’s case, is not a sufficient motivation for involvement—activists must also be willing and able to engage in the difficult cultural work of constructing empathy in cooperation with others.
This points to a second difficulty. The introspection and self-cultivation required in the collective moral imaginary may prove significantly more challenging to learn for some constituencies than others. Given previous research documenting the association of the self-as-project ethic with particular class cultures (Eliasoph, 2011; Lareau, 2003; Leondar-Wright, 2014), a more systematic examination of how race, class, and religious backgrounds condition individuals’ ability and desire to express vulnerability is needed in order to fully understand the potential of ELIJAH’s model for broader mobilization both within and outside of the FBCO field. There may be potential FBCO constituencies for whom the kinds of cultural work we have described are unappealing or unintuitive, and future research should consider how such dynamics might hinder the participation of such constituencies in FBCO work. In addition, future work should also address more explicitly the connections between the collective moral imaginary and the Christian concept of the calling, which figures prominently in ELIJAH’s discourse, and explore the ways that secular organizations might develop similarly powerful emotional subcultures, or might struggle to do so.

These cautionary notes notwithstanding, the case of ELIJAH reveals several ways that movement organizations can combat the segmentation and fragmentation that has plagued social justice and progressive causes in American political culture. Social movements are typically recognized as issue-specific (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement, criminal justice reform movements, environmental movements, etc.), but ELIJAH views itself as engaged in a broad-based movement that advances American democracy by confronting a range of interconnected social problems that currently restrict individuals’ ability to pursue their real interests. ELIJAH leaders draw connections between these issues through cultural work, but such work is not typically valued by funders of progressive civic and social movement organizations. Instead,
organizations are typically funded based on whether or not they are able to win short-term issue campaigns (Smith, 2007). The cultural work needed to develop activist-leaders committed to multi-issue activism requires considerable time, energy, and material resources, and the fact that it is rarely funded directly is a barrier for organizations engaging in this work.
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