A Saul Alinsky primer for the 21st century: The roles of cultural competence and cultural brokerage in fostering mobilization in support of change

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How can a proponent of change mobilize groups and organizations in support of a common project? Building on an extensive review of social movement theorizing and action, we argue that shared interests, network connections, the availability of resources, and the emergence of political, market and corporate opportunities (the standard topics discussed in extant literature) may be necessary, but are often insufficient for spurring mobilization. Conversely, cultural factors such as frames, identities, or practices are essential. Their presence can facilitate coordinated action even among unlikely allies, and their absence can prevent such action. Inspired by the work of Saul Alinsky (1909–1972), along with contemporary illustrations, we construct a two-step model of the role of culture in mobilizing for change. We bring attention to a change proponent’s cultural competence – skill in appreciating the different cultural meanings and values of those involved in a particular project of change – and cultural brokerage – skill in bridging and negotiating among actors with different cultural repertoires, to reach a temporary truce or covenant. We focus on two types of activities that define cultural brokerage, integration and redefinition, and apply them to the cultural factors of frames, identities, and/or practices. Our paper contributes to contemporary research on social movements, institutional theory, and cultural sociology.

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Introduction

Organizations and individuals who aim to introduce significant social change must often mobilize the support of multiple actors (e.g., individuals, groups, organizations) who contribute their time, money, and other resources to a particular vision of change (Bartilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006; Kellogg, 2011; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Mobilization is essential when social, economic, or cultural change is too complex or requires too many resources for any single actor, group or organization to handle (DiMaggio, 1988). For example, Weber, Heinze, and DeSoucey (2008) showed that only through collective projects could activists gather the economic, cultural, and socio-political resources necessary for the emergence of a new market for grass-fed meat (cf. Lounsbury, 2001; Kellogg, 2011). Yet the underlying problem of mobilization is Olson’s (1965) classic challenge: change may deliver a collective good, but few actors want to bear the costs of working to obtain it. In other words, how can a proponent of a project of change persuade others to contribute money, time, and other resources in support of a common goal?

Past work on antecedents of mobilization has emphasized aligning the rational interests of collective action participants or changes in exogenous political and social conditions (e.g., Fiss & Zajac, 2004; Rao & Dutta, 2012). Recently, however, a stream of research at the intersections of institutional theory, social movement theory, and cultural sociology has stressed the cultural strategies that actors use to facilitate mobilization. That is, change proponents foster mobilization through the skillful use of culture as a “toolkit” or “grab bag” (Kellogg, 2011, p. 483) of ideas, values, stories, frames, categories, rituals, and practices that actors can mix-and-match to construct “strategies of action” (Giorgi, Lockwood, & Glynn, 2015, p. 13; see also Fligstein, 2001 on social skill).

Consider, for example, that Jacques Delors’ creation of a new cultural frame – the Single Market Program – brought different European nations together by creating a new meaning for a union that would not cancel out important cultural differences and threaten national sovereignty (Fligstein & Mara-Drita, 1996). Similarly, it was a common identity as “Gospel women” that led Catholic nuns of different religious orders in the United States to join forces to oppose the threat posed by an Apostolic Visitation (Giorgi, Guider, & Bartunek, 2014). In both cases, change proponents leveraged cultural meanings to instill and promote joint action among multiple groups and organizations (Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Fligstein, 2001; Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000).

What remains unclear is how an actor can leverage culture to mobilize previously unconnected groups or organizations. At the theoretical level, past research has demonstrated the importance of culture in shaping mobilization among a variety of supporters (as the above examples suggest); or in contrast, how a lack of skillful cultural deployment may lead to failure of groups working together for a common good (Lichterman, 2005). It has suggested that differences in actors’ cultural repertoires – their portfolios of practices, identity, values, ideas, or worldviews (Clemens, 1997; Giorgi & Weber, 2015; Swidler 1986) – can be a significant barrier to working together on a change-related agenda (Braunstein, Fulton, & Wood, 2014; Swidler, 1986; Tavory & Swidler, 2004).

The challenge of overcoming cultural differences among individuals, groups, and organizations that would benefit from working together remains a central problem in understanding why groups mobilize, or fail to do so. This is particularly salient today, as actors with multiple (and often conflicting) agendas have been joining together in protests against events such as the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the U.S., against the Brexit decision in the UK, and many other similar events.

Successful activists have long employed the cultural skills needed for effective mobilization and serve as a guide for our theorizing. A prime example is the work of the community organizer Saul Alinsky (1909–

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1 Of course, we realize that not all, or perhaps even most, change is coordinated and intentionally enacted. The focus of this paper is on changes that actors purposefully pursue.

2 In the Catholic Church, an Apostolic Visitation is a Vatican-initiated visit to persons or places in order to maintain faith and discipline and correct abuses. For example, in 2011, an Apostolic Visitation of major Catholic institutions was initiated in Ireland in response to the extensive sex abuse scandal there.

3 e.g. nbnewws.com/storyline/inauguration-2017/women-s-march-washington-echoed-cities-around-world-n710156.

4 e.g. theguardian.com/politics/2017/jan/28/stop-brexit-campaign-biggest-uk-biggest-protest-march.

5 Community organizing and social movements are two closely related and overlapping methods of collective social action (cf. Sen, 2003). Engler and Engler (2014) assert that “Hang around social movements for a while and you will no doubt be exposed to the laws of Chicago-style community organizing”.

Cultural Antecedents

**Step 1**

- Cultural Competence
  - Appreciating the different cultural meanings and values of those involved

**Step 2**

- Cultural Brokerage
  - Bridging and negotiating among actors with different cultural repertoires

**Cultural Integration:**

- Combination of existing frames, identities, and practices

**Cultural Redefinition:**

- Creating or identifying a super-ordinate frame, identity, or practice that transcends existing repertoires

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**Structural Antecedents**

- Interests
- Networks
- Resources
- Political, market, corporate opportunities

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**Fig. 1.** The roles of cultural competence and cultural brokerage in mobilization for accomplishing a project of change.

1972), an icon of mobilization who, based upon years of experience of organizing in underprivileged, relatively powerless communities, especially in Chicago, called for a “revellie for radicals” (Alinsky, 1946) and identified “rules” (Alinsky, 1971) that would accomplish mobilization for significant social and economic change in the U.S. His books, which focus on strategies for organizing local communities for joint action, have been very influential, continuing through today.6 There is now considered to be an Alinsky diaspora in organizing (McAuley, 2015; Shaw, 2008), one that includes several large organizations such as the United Farm Workers, and “many hundreds of local, neighborhood-based organizations” (McAuley, 2015, p. 418).

In this paper, we rely on the classic sociological distinction between structure – thought of as “hard” or “material” factors – and culture, generally regarded as “soft” or “mental” factors (Sewell, 1992, p. 3), such as beliefs, attitudes, or styles of behavior to discuss what is necessary for mobilization. We first review commonly explored structural antecedents to mobilization — interests, social networks and resources, and political, market and corporate opportunities. We then focus on the critical yet underexplored role of culture in fostering mobilization. To shed light on these processes we summarize Alinsky’s work, especially as it graphically illustrates cultural competence and cultural brokerage. We subsequently flesh out the types of activities included in cultural brokerage, integration and redefinition. Finally, we explore how cultural brokerage affects three primary dimensions of culture that pertain to mobilization: framing, identity and practices. These dimensions comprise a conceptual model of the activities necessary to accomplish successful mobilization of multiple groups, activities at least as important now as they were when Alinsky was carrying out his work. Our model is sketched out in Fig. 1.

**Structural antecedents of mobilization**

Any significant social change requires the mobilization of resources and people (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988). The concerted mobilization of two or more actors in the pursuit of a common change project has accounted for the creation of new markets among change-oriented agents (Sine & Lee, 2009; Weber et al., 2008), and major industry changes involving the mobilization of both activists and industry professionals. For instance, Wolfson (2001) showed that the anti-tobacco crusade that resulted in significant regulatory changes evolved from the collaborative efforts of health care providers, medical professionals, and activists seeking to counter the negative effects of tobacco companies’ marketing campaigns in the late twentieth century.

If mobilization is such a powerful tool for change within and outside of organizations, it is critical for researchers to understand the factors that spur and enable it (Benford & Snow, 2000; DiMaggio, 1988). Below we identify and discuss four main structural antecedents to mobilization: interests, networks, resources, and opportunities (political, market, and corporate) (shown in Fig. 1).

**Interests**

Classic research on the “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968) has emphasized that even when a particular project is beneficial to multiple groups, actors often fail to coordinate and mobilize together because it is not in their interest to sacrifice their individual resources, time, and energy (Olson, 1965). For example, many benefit from healthy oceans or clean air, but it is challenging to coordinate the efforts of diverse actors to prevent self-interested action, such as over-fishing or polluting (Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013). Similarly, while workers might have a collective interest in forming a labor union and collectively negotiating higher wages, they also have individual

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6 See Dedman (2007) and Phillips (2017) for examples of how Alinsky has shaped contemporary political organizing.
interests to increase their personal wages by working overtime, which belonging to a union would impede (Oliver, 1993). Within this framework, mobilization can be stimulated through selective incentives that reward participants, punish free riders, and/or reduce the cost of collaboration (Heaney & Rojas, 2008).

Yet, social movement scholars argue that collective interests can sometimes be strong enough to fend off differing individual interests and lead groups and organizations to put aside even their ideological differences. That is, groups and organizations “participate in collective action when they feel that it is in their best interests to do so — when they feel that collective action is necessary for the achievement of their (own) goals” (Van Dyke, 2003, p. 230). Whittier (2014) vividly described how two ideological adversaries – progressive feminists and conservative Christians – were able to jointly mobilize in the 1980s because they both shared an interest in fighting pornography. Much research in this vein focuses on the “mobilizing structures” that movements use to align and incentivize others and/or make participation in a collective project less costly (Jenkins, 1983; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996).

Networks

Research from a network perspective shows that all action is embedded in a social fabric of opportunities to interact (Granovetter, 1992). Although groups often need to mobilize others to access resources that are necessary for their growth or even survival, it can be difficult to identify and select potential partners (Gulati & Gargiulo, 1999; Stinchcombe, 1990; Van de Ven, 1976). Thus, interaction and ultimately mobilization are more likely among actors who know each other well (Heimer, 1992).

Social networks can be particularly effective in fostering mobilization (Diani, 2007; Schussman & Soule, 2005), especially within communities (Rao & Dutta, 2012). For example, Forget (2011) conducted an historical analysis of the constitution and evolution of the Office of Economic Opportunity, founded in 1964. She identified two distinct groups within the office: the “radicals”, who shared the Peace Corps’ approach to social change and whose focus was on empowerment of poor people, and the “economists”, who came from the Office of the U.S. President and favored more traditional anti-poverty policies and coordination practices. She showed that the economists were, over time, more successful than the radicals in mobilizing support for their vision of anti-poverty advocacy because they leveraged their existing connections with external agencies. Nohria and Eccles (1992) also showed the importance of “who you know” by showing that interpersonal contacts within the Route 128 business community (at a time when it was trying to rival Silicon Valley) had significant implications for firms’ ability to act together. In literature on social movements, scholars have shown that social networks explain not only why some actors are recruited into activism and others are not (Diani, 2007; Schussman & Soule, 2005), but also why some escalate their involvement and take higher risks than others (McAdam, 1986).

Resources

Resources are also crucial for successful mobilization. In 2014, for example, Protect South Portland, a citizens-action coalition in Maine, accomplished an historic feat when it spurred the passing of a city council ordinance that stopped ExxonMobil from turning South Portland into a major export facility for Canadian tar sands oil (Magder, 2014; Society of the Sacred Heart, 2014). In an interview with one of the authors, Mary-Jane Ferrier (personal communication, April 25, 2015) a spokesperson for Protect South Portland, described several individuals, groups and agencies that had provided resources to Protect South Portland – such as the Natural Resources Council of Maine, a photographer from National Geographic, and a representative from Environment Maine, among others – and emphasized that these resources were essential to the effectiveness of Protect South Portland’s initiatives. More broadly, work in resource dependency theory in the management literature has shown that organizations join forces with actors that have complementary resources and similar interests (Aldrich, 1979; Benson, 1975; Yuchtman & Seashore, 1967) and form alliances with firms that possess ample, complementary resources and well-matched, aligned interests (Atuahene-Gima & Li, 2002; Eisenhardt & Schoonhoven, 1996).

Political, market, and corporate opportunities

Research on structural antecedents to mobilization focuses on triggering structural events, such as a political, market, or corporate opportunities that push forward one’s goals (McAdam, 1983; McAdam et al., 1996; Tilly, 1978). Political opportunities indicate the “consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure” (Tarrow, 1994, p.85). For example, the World Trade Organization Ministerial conference in Seattle in 1999 provided an opportunity for a large number of organizations to plan protests (Levi & Murphy, 2006). Additionally, the American Association for the Advance- ment of Science meeting held in Boston in 2017 provided an opportunity for representatives of several scientific disciplines to protest policies of the Trump administration that “many see as dangerous to the role of science in society” (Wessel, 2017). Opportunities that are exogenous to organizations may enhance prospects for mobilization by signaling the potential for change and spurring people to work together (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004).

Scholars have examined different aspects of the external environment that offer organizations “a chance to act together” (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999, p. 31), such as the relative openness/closure of the institutionalized political system (Clemens, 1997), new regulations (Sine, Haveman, & Tolbert, 2005), the strength of the state (Kriesi, 1996), the presence or absence of elite allies, and the state’s capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam, 1996). For
example, Rao and Giorgi (2006) examined how in the 1980s and 1990s corporations succeeded in transforming prisons into private enterprises despite widespread norms in the U.S. that detention, rehabilitation, and reintegration of the inmates were responsibilities of the state. They found that these firms’ connections with key state officials played significant roles in the initial acceptance of private prisons as a legitimate form for managing a growing population of offenders. Similarly, McAdam (1983) showed how changes in demography, repression, migration, and political economy contributed to the creation of political opportunities in the 1960s for the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement that spurred collective action among a variety of different actors. Finally, when public approval of the Iraq war stood at an unprecedented low in September 2005, leading grassroots antinuclear organizations in the United States collectively mobilized to seize the opportunity and sponsored a highly visible march in Washington (Heaney & Rojas, 2008).

In corporate and market contexts, opportunities for change are equally important. Social movement actors can apply pressure on firms and are more likely to do so when an industry or firm is particularly vulnerable. King (2008a) argues that particular corporate opportunity structures make some companies more susceptible to mobilized change efforts. For example, the United Steelworkers of America successfully targeted the Ravenswood Aluminum Company in West Virginia in the early 1990s by exploiting the nefarious reputation of the company’s primary shareholder, who was a major tax evader and fugitive from justice (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). In another example, multiple groups of gay activists engaged in collective action by endorsing the adoption of domestic partnership benefits in companies headed by sympathetic leaders (Raeburn, 2004). Activist groups against genetic engineering of food products formed coalitions to fight European producers following several high-profile food scares, including genetic engineering of food products, or the discovery of dioxin in animal feed (Schurman, 2004). McDonnell, King, and Soule (2015, p. 654) found that companies that adopt “social management devices”, such as corporate social responsibility board committees, initially as a defensive strategy in the face of public pressure to change, consequently become more receptive to mobilized change activists. Cross-national variation in political institutions and market arrangements may also affect how actors mobilize along a variety of dimensions, including the forms of collective action used and the intensity of pressure that change agents apply (Campbell, 2005; Kitschelt, 1986).

Still, these structural explanations for mobilization gloss over the inevitable difficulties of getting potential allies to overcome cultural differences that impede real engagement and joint action. Mounting empirical evidence suggests that structural explanations are not sufficient to explain the mobilization of collective action (Polletta, 1997). A crucial stream of research in the social movement and institutional theory literatures has brought attention to the importance of culture in fostering mobilization (DiMaggio, 1988; McAdam, 1996). Shared interests, social networks, complementary resources, and political opportunities create structural potential for collective action, but do not automatically spur mobilization. Whether that potential is realized ultimately depends on the “understandings of the actors involved” (McAdam, 1996, p. 339), since means to mobilize others cannot be divorced from existing webs of meanings, beliefs, and practices (Tavory & Swidler, 2009).

In other words, structural factors may be necessary, but are not sufficient for effective mobilization. Potential movement participants need to feel a sense of belonging and see themselves as a temporary “we” that allows them to pursue a common agenda (Forget, 2011; Kellogg, 2011). Through effective cultural strategies, proponents of change can redefine and reorganize interests and enable unimaginable coalitions to emerge (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Tarrow, 1994).

**Cultural antecedents to mobilization**

Actors carry with them particular cultural repertoires that shape their behaviors, thoughts, and expectations (Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Nelkin & Pollack, 1981). As a result, they may fail to perceive and seize political opportunities if they lack the necessary cultural resources (Cornwall, King, Legerski, Dahlin, & Schifman, 2007; Kurzman, 1996). Before individuals will agree to engage in joint action with others, such action must resonate with their own beliefs, ways of doing things, and view of the world. Thus, culture becomes a key ingredient in change proponents’ efforts to get others to devote their time, energy, and resources towards the achievement of a common agenda.

**Definition of culture**

Scholars invoke the term culture in a variety of ways, from stylized dimensions of national culture (Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2007) to practices and semiotic codes operating at a local level (Barley, 1983). In social psychology and organizational behavior culture is typically used to indicate a unified set of beliefs and assumptions (e.g., Gelfand, Leslie, & Keller, 2008; Gelfand, Leslie, Keller, & de Dreu, 2012; Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013). Schein (1990, p. 111), for example, defined organizational culture as “a pattern of basic assumptions, invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration . . . and, therefore is to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” This approach, however, isolates culture as merely an input to preferences and goals, as actors from a certain organizational culture are expected to interpret events and take action according to a similar set of values or a single cultural code that characterizes the whole group or organization.

In contrast, we draw on Swidler’s (1986, p. 273) definition of culture as a “tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.” Here culture is important not only because actors operate within “webs of significance” (Geertz, 1973) that imbue
their interpretations and constrain their behavior, but also because they can draw on repertoires of cultural elements – such as frames, symbolic boundaries, or narratives (Giorgi et al., 2015) – to construct their strategies of action, that is, persistent ways of ordering action (Swidler, 1986). From this perspective, culture gives actors the tools they need to make sense of and give sense to their environment (Swidler, 1986; Tavory & Swidler, 2009) as well as to create a certain style of action specific to their organization or group (Lichterman, 2006). Actors operating in multiple institutional conditions (Kraatz & Block, 2008) may mix and match elements from different cultural repertoires to creatively navigate and mold their environment.

Dimensions of culture: framing, identities, and practices

Research has shown that three main dimensions of culture (Giorgi et al., 2015) – framing, identities, and practices – are particularly relevant to the understanding of mobilization. Framing – the act of filtering or bracketing reality to guide attention – brings attention to a few stylized dimensions of reality (Goffman, 1974; Hallahan, 1999) and shapes others’ understandings and behaviors (Zerubavel, 1991), hence affecting mobilization. As an illustration, American car manufacturers gathered supporters not by discussing the slow decline of the industry, but by alarmingly denouncing the “death” of American cars to spur the creation of quality institutes and introducing awards that would restore a sense of pride in American manufacturing (Rao, 2008).

Identities – who we are and what we do as a collective (Navis & Glynn, 2010) – are also powerful tools for mobilization and change. It was the collective identity of “Gospel women” that spurred the mobilization of many groups of Catholic nuns in the U.S. These women turned negative emotions of fear and marginalization into feelings of empowerment and cohesion, which accounted for a substantial change in their strategy for jointly dealing with the external threat of a Vatican Visitations (Giorgi et al., 2014).

Finally, practices – “how we do things” (Giorgi et al., 2015, p. 30) in a group or an organization – play a significant role in fostering alignment among different groups or organizations. Research in social movements shows that frames are more likely to gain the support of government officials when they align with well-established democratic practices (McAdam & Su, 2002). For example, the “fat acceptance” movement imitated many of the gay movement practices (e.g., the practice of “coming out”) to spur mobilization in support of different body shapes and sizes under the umbrella of civil rights protection (Saguy & Ward, 2011).

These examples, among others, suggest that culture is key to spurring mobilization; if lacking a common cultural ground, actors may not recognize their common interests, may fail to see why change is necessary, may be incapable of talking about strategies for change, or may shirk from the pursuit of change because they feel it is outside their grasp (King, 2008b). However, despite the mounting evidence of the consequentiality of culture for social mobilization (e.g., Rao & Giorgi, 2006; Sine & Lee, 2009; Weber et al., 2008), scholars still lack a systematic framework for integrating the three dimensions of culture into a coherent theory of mobilization. To address this gap, after describing our approach to culture, we introduce the work of Saul Alinsky to provide a basis for proposing a two-step framework that involves, (1) cultural competence as the ability to understand the meanings and values associated with others’ repertoires, and (2) cultural brokerage as the process of bridging or negotiating among diverse repertoires, to achieve a temporary truce or covenant. We then show how such bridging occurs with respect to each of the three cultural dimensions that are key to extant research in social movements: frames, identities, or practices.

Cultural challenges in mobilization

Culture not only provides a toolkit for engaging others, but also creates potential barriers for social interactions. Since actors’ cultural repertoires vary in their framing (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2009; McAdam, 1982), identities (Greenwood, Sudaby, & Hinings, 2002; Weber et al., 2008), and/or practices (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010; Lichterman, 1995), pre-existing cultural barriers may exist between actors that impede them from reaching an agreement about what goals to pursue and what actions to take. For example, Forget (2011, p. 199) described how radicals and economists in the Office of Economic Opportunity had different traditions, intellectual premises, and worldviews that prevented their joint mobilization towards a common approach to waging a war on poverty, ultimately marginalizing the radicals and limiting the Office’s ability to create major social change.

Similarly, in their study of a very complex set of protests planned for the World Trade Organization Ministerial conference held in Seattle in 1999, Levi and Murphy (2006) observed that despite “immense effort by potential partners” (p. 651), the organizers struggled to find a common ground or a temporary agreement among the more than 200 different organizations involved, which were dissimilar in their degree of formality, decision-making structures, goals, tactics, strategies for protest, and ideological bases. Finding common ground among such a variety of groups requires more skill in the use of cultural tools than the organizers in these two illustrations were able to muster.

The skillful use of cultural tools

Current research in social movements and institutional theory emphasizes the importance of “social skill” as the ability to “induce cooperation in others” (Fligstein, 2001, p. 105).

Actors who overcome barriers to cooperation are recognized as “skillful” (Fligstein, 1997, 2001; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Rao & Giorgi, 2006), but the concept of social skill fails to identify, ex ante, which sorts of practices, abilities, or tools actors might use to induce cooperation. Thus, while Fligstein (2001) would likely acknowledge that social skill includes a cultural component, he does not...
address this directly. We illustrate such skill by presenting some brief vignettes from the work of Saul Alinsky. We use these to develop the constructs of cultural competence and cultural brokerage, both of which represent the types of social skills imagined by Fligstein.

Alinsky’s background and organizing campaigns

In an extensive magazine interview conducted three months before his death (“Saul Alinsky’s 1972 Interview with Playboy Magazine”, 2016Free Republic, 2016),7 Alinsky provided details of his upbringing and work that are pertinent to his cultural skill in organizing. Alinsky grew up in Chicago, “in the slum district of the slum, on the wrong side of the wrong side of the tracks, about as far down as you could go” (Part 2). Multiple ethnic groups lived in his neighborhood, each of which “was at each other’s throat” (Part 2). With the help of considerable financial aid, he attended and graduated from the University of Chicago.8 While in college he began to get involved in social issues, and after carrying out multiple jobs to survive financially after college, he became involved in community organizing with a local trade union. Alinsky’s first solo effort was organizing the Back of the Yards area in southwest Chicago, because “it was the nadir of all slums in America.”9 People were crushed and demoralized...And it was a cesspool of hate; [the different ethnic groups there] all hated each other” (part 6). Alinsky’s style of organizing involved, first, close observation of the community, which he achieved by listening to people’s grievances and learning about their practices and values. To gain support from the community he would tell people:

There’s something concrete you can do about [your dire living conditions]. But to accomplish anything you’ve got to have power, and you’ll only get it through organization. Now, power comes in two forms — money and people. You haven’t got any money, but you do have people, and here’s what you can do with them [. . .] (We used) everything at our disposal . . . boycotts of stores, strikes against the meat packers, rent strikes against the slumlords, picketing of exploitative businesses, sit-downs in City Hall and the offices of the corrupt local machine bosses . . . . At first the establishment dismissed us with a sneer, but pretty soon . . . they saw how unified we were and that we were capable of exerting potent economic and political pressure.

Finally the concessions began tricking in (part 6).

Note several important characteristics of this description. First, Alinsky was suggesting that the people in the Back of the Yards had shared interests in improving their living conditions. Second, he suggested ways they could work together. Third, he told them about the resources they had (each other). Finally, his work involved making opportunities available to them.

These interests, networks and resources had, implicitly at least, always been available, but the simple possibility of them had not mobilized action. The people in the Back of the Yards did not identify with each other — rather, initially at least, they hated each other. Alinsky’s cultural skill consisted in mobilizing joint action by framing the power they could have if they worked together. He did so by suggesting that they shared a common identity, and by creatively developing practices to accomplish their purpose.

It is important that this joint work involved the recognition and appreciation of differing ethnic groups’ cultural repertoires. Alinsky (1946) commented (p. 104):

The understanding of the standards, the codes, the attitudes, and the patterns of (different groups of) local people includes every part of their life, even their food habits. These welfare workers would get upset because our Italian families insisted on buying very good olive oil to cook with. Anybody ought to know that Italians have to have olive oil to cook with and it’s something which is much more important than budgets or stuff like that. The same thing happened with some of our Jewish families.

Alinsky (1946) also used culturally skillful means to obtain the support of the “haves” for the “have-nots”. He recounted the story of coopting, as a supporter for children’s welfare, a local businessman who aimed at leveraging his participation as a form of advertising for his business:

Throughout my conversation with Mr. David [. . .] his eyes kept wandering around the store. His whole manner was such as to let me know that in his opinion I was just another ‘do-gooder’ and as soon as I finished my song and dance he would give me a dollar or two and wish me well. I suddenly shifted from my talk on the children and began to point out most indirectly the implications of his joining our organization. And then it happened. His eyes lit up like a pair of neon lights [. . .] Then David turned to me and said, ‘I’ll be at that meeting tonight’ (p.120).

The example of Mr. David shows Alinsky’s cultural skill in recognizing how to create a sense of shared interests, even if his audience was initially uninterested. These are just a few of many examples of Alinsky’s work, but they serve well to illustrate how Alinsky fostered cooperation among conflictual groups. Of course, Alinsky was operating in times very different from today, and the scope of the work he described was more local than that of many contemporary social movements. Yet valuable lessons for today are evident in how Alinsky’s cultural skill overcame the cultural challenges of conflicting framing, identities and practices among those with whom he worked.

An example of lack of cultural skill

In contrast, consider the following example, adapted and abbreviated from Leondar-Wright (2014, p. 1–2). For its annual goal-setting meeting, an urban coalition of

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7 The interview is online and not paginated. However, it is divided into six parts, and we indicate the part of the interview from which we drew particular quotations.
8 Alinsky did not particularly value academic approaches to social issues. He said in his Playboy interview (part 3) that “The University of Chicago’s sociology department was an institution that invests $100,000 on a research program to discover the location of brothels that any taxi driver could tell them about for nothing. So I realized how far removed the self-styled social sciences are from the realities of everyday existence”.
9 In The Jungle (1906) Upton Sinclair described this area as characterized by pollution, squalor and poverty.
unions and their allies brought in Zoe, a college educated white woman from a middle-class background to facilitate their meeting. At the beginning of the meeting, Zoe made a long statement laden with abstract terms, such as proactive participation, goal setting, and benchmarks, and recommended a formalized process for the group discussion. The small groups, composed mostly of industrial and service workers, largely did not follow her recommendations, and instead discussed concrete points, which she later restated in more general and abstract terms (e.g. referring to a phone tree as an instance of “mobilization”). At the end of the meeting Zoe described the discussion as unclear, and the participants agreed that it had not helped them prioritize ways to build the organization.

The participants, who were largely working class and not college educated, did not feel an animosity towards Zoe or other college-educated professionals. Nor did they misunderstand each other. They were simply speaking in ways they were used to and reflected their cultural contexts. But since Zoe was oblivious to this, her work with the group was compromised.

Leondar-Wright (2014) used this example as an illustration of class as a missing ingredient in understanding dynamics when people of different classes join together in mobilizing to accomplish particular purposes. When people are not connecting with each other culturally, even if there is no conflict, they do not accomplish as much as they might otherwise. That is, they may share similar interests, similar networks, and even enjoy a political opportunity together, but the lack of understanding and appreciation of each others’ cultural repertoires strongly reduces the ability of the groups to mobilize together. Alinsky’s cultural genius was shown in his recognition of how to help actors believe they have shared interests, networks, resources, and opportunities, as well as his appreciation of the very concrete desires and needs of people from different groups, ethnicities and social classes.

The importance of cultural competence and brokerage

Drawing from Alinsky’s examples, contemporary illustrations and current literature, we propose a two-step model for accomplishing successful mobilization in support of a project of change (Fig. 1), which hinges on the deployment of cultural competence followed by cultural brokerage. Cultural competence refers to an actor’s ability to understand and appreciate the different cultural repertoires of the targets of mobilization (such as, for Alinsky, the varying values and practices of different ethnic groups and social classes). Such cultural competence, which amounts to a knowledge and familiarity of mobilization targets, needs to be coupled with cultural brokerage, which consists in the ability to bridge and negotiate among actors with different cultural repertoires to reach a temporary truce or “covenant” (Geertz, 1960, p. 231) necessary for the pursuit of a common goal. Alinsky clearly demonstrated cultural brokerage in his illustrations of ways of getting the multiple ethnic groups he was working with to mobilize together. Cultural brokerage does not require full alignment, agreement, or consistency among diverse groups of actors, but pragmatically aims at finding a “workable” or “good enough” agreement that can bridge their differences for a specific purpose. We will develop these arguments in more detail in the following pages.

Cultural competence: meanings and applications

While there has been comparatively little discussion of cultural competence from a social movement perspective, other literatures delineate a growing need for culturally competent people to work with those with different cultural backgrounds. We briefly touch on these literatures to show how their insights may apply with regard to mobilization.

Meanings of cultural competence vary somewhat, depending on who and what type of situation is involved (Foldy & Buckley, 2017). In one well-cited definition, Cross, Bazron, Dennis, and Isaacs (1989) define cultural competence as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (p. iv). Betancourt, Green, and Carrillo (2002) describe cultural competence with regard to health care as “the ability of systems to provide care to patients with diverse values, beliefs and behaviors, including tailoring delivery to meet patients’ social, cultural, and linguistic needs” (p. v). As these and multiple other definitions suggest, cultural competence focuses on how someone can be sensitive to others’ cultures and how individuals can learn to navigate in different cultural settings. It suggests that some people (such as Alinsky), perhaps because of their backgrounds growing up in very diverse settings, are more likely almost by definition to be more culturally competent than others.

Cultural competence plays a central role in a variety of settings. For example, it has been described as necessary for redressing inequalities in the U.S. healthcare system. Shaw and Armin (2011) described how calls for ‘culturally appropriate’ (p. 238) healthcare emerged in response to reports of ethnic disparities in health and the quality of care and how these have led to the development of federal regulations that require health care organizations to provide culturally appropriate services. As a result, many people have been trained to be cultural competence experts, and considerable work has gone into making physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals more proficient in this area (Paez, Allen, Carson, & Cooper, 2008; Perloff, Bond, Ray, Ray, & Siminoff, 2006). Kirmayer (2012) has discussed cultural competence in terms of mental health. Mental health service providers have become aware that “The clinical encounter is shaped by . . . differences in cultural knowledge and identity, language, religion and other aspects of cultural identity. Specific ethnocultural or racialized groups may suffer health disparities and social disadvantage as a result of the meanings and material consequences of their socially constructed identities” (p. 149). He argued that “the ways that human problems are understood and the particular forms of help that are available reflect the cultural
knowledge and practices of specific systems of medicine and healing” (p. 150). Molinsky (2013) noted that “Research on cultural intelligence or cultural competence . . . details individual characteristics critical for success in a foreign setting, without necessarily delving into processes of (cross-national) adaptation over time” (p. 684). Hester (2015) discussed the importance and difficulty of cultural competence for dealing with new waves of Mexican migrants to the U.S. at the time. She commented, for example, that these immigrants “adhere to multiple cultural traditions [ . . . ] they are a complex, diverse, multilingual and politically engaged transnational population” (p. 317).

Thus, cultural competence is being recognized as crucial in both conception and application. It requires sensitivity to divergent sets of actors, to their languages, to their knowledge of how to work in particular systems, to their needs, and to their ambitions. It is necessary for mobilizing change successfully, as Alinsky demonstrated, and a precursor for effectively brokering between multiple groups to achieve a common good.

Cultural brokerage: a framework

Cultural competence is a crucial first step, but it must be followed by cultural brokerage among the repertoires of differing sets of actors for successful mobilization. Lo (2010, p. 487) notes that “the notion of cultural brokerage has generally been defined as bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons from different cultures.” But she also specifies that it necessarily includes the ability to deal with “seemingly incongruent sets of schemas or orientations with which people organize their meanings and information . . . This mutual inclusion provides the foundational work that makes the sharing of meanings and information possible.” In other words, cultural brokerage not only involves recognizing differing groups, but also bridging and negotiating among different cultural repertoires. Saul Alinsky demonstrated brokerage in his unifying multiple ethnic groups in the back of the yards in their protests.

While the degree of agreement necessary for mobilization depends on the specific situation, we agree with Geertz (1960) that cultural brokerage consists in finding at least a workable “covenant” (p. 231) or truce between actors who would not immediately connect or understand one another. As with Lo (2010)’s approach, this type of brokerage emphasizes the “social meanings by which individuals understand and construct their world” (Pachucki & Breiger, 2010, p. 206) and that allow for “a full range of materials, resources, and ideas” (Pachucki & Breiger, 2010, p. 206) to flow across actors. On the basis of Alinsky’s work and other examples we have presented, we identify two main sets of activities that necessarily characterize the work of cultural brokers. These are integration and redefinition.

Cultural integration refers to the act of taking stock of and bringing together different cultural repertoires so they can coexist without one threatening the other. Rather than being oblivious to, ignoring, canceling out or glossing over differences in cultural repertoires, elements of these repertoires are recognized, respected and “added” to each other to give meaning to two or more actors’ joint work. Alinsky did this with the different ethnic groups in the back of the yards, and there are other more recent examples as well. When the Slow Food movement expanded its activities to the U.S. in the 2000s, the cultural repertoire of the movement was exclusively focused on food consumption. Yet Carlo Petrini, the movement’s founder, realized that Slow Food’s identity as a gourmand movement would not have mobilized people he admired, like Alice Waters, the renowned food activist and chef of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, CA. To effectively mobilize groups and organizations that he believed were essential to the growth of Slow Food – food and environmental activists – he brokered among these actors by “integration” of their frames; in his perspective, Slow Food was about gourmet food that was produced in an environmentally sound way, did not exploit workers’ rights, and consumed slowly and in a convivial setting. In other words, Slow Food pooled these groups’ different repertoires and enabled them to coexist under the broad label of good food.

At its root, integration consists of providing an outlet and a forum for a diverse set of actors whose different cultural repertoires are included and represented as part of a collective (Dorado & Vaz, 2003). This is not a straightforward task; as evident in the illustration from Leonard-Wright (2014), it may be very difficult even to articulate different sets of cultural meanings, let alone know how to link them together as Alinsky did.

Cultural redefinition refers to the even more challenging task of creating or identifying a super-ordinate frame, identity, or practice that transcends the existing repertoires of potential participants, with the goal of connecting diverse groups and organizations in a manner that appeals to each of them simultaneously (Carolan, 2008). Redefinition goes beyond recognizing and adding different repertoires. More creatively, it entails constructing a unified, new voice that leads to “unique narratives, interpretations, and discourses” (Montgomery, Dacin, & Dacin, 2012, p. 385).

For example, Braunstein et al. (2014, p. 705) described a faith-based civic group consisting of racially and socioeconomically diverse organizations in which cultural brokerage consisted of community prayer practices that overcame obstacles of racial and socioeconomic diversity. Such prayer services were formed by not only mixing and matching different groups’ cultural repertoires, but also by superseding each group’s specific experience and voice. Another example of redefinition is when social movement organizations combine stand-alone issues to create an entirely new cause. An instance of this type of redefinition is when activists from the conservation movement drew on frames from the civil rights movement to mobilize people around environmental justice (Jung, King, & Soule, 2014).

Framing, identity and practices in relation to cultural brokerage

To shed light on integration and redefinition as tools for cultural brokerage, we examine them in regard to the three
cultural dimensions (Giorgi et al., 2015) that play the most significant role in the literature on mobilization: framing (the selection of some aspect of perceived reality and making it salient), identity (the self-concept) and practices (the means through which actors achieve their goals), all of which are necessary to achieve mobilization for a particular desired change. Table 1 provides an overview of the framework and illustrations of each activity. Fig. 1, introduced above, illustrates the processes through which cultural brokerage helps actors accomplish common agendas for a common project of change.

Framing and cultural brokerage

By distinguishing what is in a frame from what is outside of it, framing selects some aspects of perceived reality and makes them more salient (Giorgi et al., 2015; Goffman, 1974; Hallahan, 1999). Social movement scholars have identified framing as central to rendering events or occurrences meaningful (Benford & Snow, 2000; Suchman, 1995). That is, actors cannot identify or seize opportunities or pursue interests unless they first have a frame that enables them to interpret those events or common goals as opportunities for action (Cornwall et al., 2007; Kurzman, 1996). Saul Alinsky’s illustration of his work with Mr. David illustrates this type of framing inasmuch as Alinsky’s portrayal of his goals resonated with Mr. David’s own beliefs about how to help children in his neighborhood. In contrast, the two intellectual communities of radicals and economists in the Office of Economic Opportunity failed to develop common frames around fighting poverty that would allow them to leverage their distinctive experiences and competences together to achieve significant social change (Forget, 2011).

Framing integration brings together and jointly represents the different actors’ interests, discourse, and concerns. Framing integration may be challenging, especially when there are multiple groups with diverse or conflicting agendas, as was the case with the Seattle protests (Levi & Murphy, 2006). However, cultural brokers seek to integrate even among groups with different ideologies. For example, Montgomery et al. (2012) noted that The Habitat for Humanity ReStore’s website deploys frames that appeal to potential corporate partners for donations in terms of the direct benefits to the donor, such as environmentally friendly disposal and tax write-offs. Frame integration does not aim at finding a common ideological base for all the actors involved, but more practically includes elements of all their cultural repertoires to create affinity between otherwise mismatched groups.

In addition to taking the perspectives of the target audience into account, successful cultural brokers develop frames that speak to different audiences and for different reasons. In framing redefinition, the cultural broker deploys a new frame that provides an outlet and forum for a variety of interests and values. For example, the Marine Stewardship Council (Montgomery et al., 2012) – an international non-profit that encourages sustainable fishing practices – was able to mobilize fisheries, suppliers, consumers, and retailers through the framing of “seafood sustainability standards.” This frame appealed to retailers because it crowed out low quality suppliers, and at the same time also appealed to fisheries and consumers that valued sustainable fishing practices. When implemented competently, framing redefinition can effectively bring together previously disconnected, or even adversarial groups. As noted, anti-pornography framing that focused on injury to women led to effective (if temporary) joint mobilization of two opposing groups, feminists and conservatives, during the 1980s (Whittier, 2014).

Identity and cultural brokerage

Another important dimension of cultural brokerage is redefining interests through the creation of a shared collective identity (cf. Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Bernstein (1997) forcefully argued that “a shared collective identity is necessary for mobilization of any social movement” (p. 535). He observed that, for some movements, such as the gay and lesbian movement, the goal of activism is to gain legitimacy for a stigmatized identity or to raise awareness about the differences within a given identity (e.g., “gay”.

Table 1

Cultural brokerage in fostering mobilization, with examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural dimensions</th>
<th>Framing activities</th>
<th>Redefinition examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Appreciating differing cultural repertoires</td>
<td>The framing of “anti-pornography” brought together feminists and conservatives although it meant different things to these two groups (Whittier, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>The identities of scientists and activists were pooled together to garner credibility and support for anti-BPA legislation (Lubitow, 2013)</td>
<td>A new coalition against domestic violence (MCADV) provided a new identity for various non-profits that overcame their fear of losing their particular identity and in-fighting (Arnold, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>Slow food documented and cataloged types of foods, gave local growers help, encouraged restaurants to include endangered products on menu (Rao &amp; Giorgi, 2006)</td>
<td>Development of new prayers that were not associated with any religious faith but represented the collective (Braunstein et al., 2014)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“woman”, or “black”). Klandermans (1984) suggested that an appeal to a common identity – ethnic or religious, for example – can provide incentives for solidarity that help people or groups become more engaged in action. The creation of a shared identity is essential to fostering mobilization because it addresses the question of why participants are taking action.

It is crucial for cultural brokers to help people or organizations understand their identity-based links and why they are likely to work well together in the future. Following Rivera’s (2012) concept of “cultural fit,” actors involved in joint mobilization efforts must not only be able to share interests at least temporarily, as was the case with the feminists and conservatives concerned about pornography (Whittier, 2014), but also be able to highlight similarities in background that create an affinity for working together. This might be the case, for example, with working class union members who share certain cultural traits based on their class identity (Leonard-Wright, 2014). More than just sharing common interests and goals, people form strong connections through their “liking” of one another, increasing the likelihood of seeing themselves as potential allies (e.g., Polletta, 1994).

In another example, Lubitow (2013) showed that the mobilization of scientists and social activists against the use of the chemical Bisphenol-A (BPA) was successful because the integration of both groups’ identities conferred credibility and legitimacy to their campaign. By focusing on children’s health issues and targeting state-level regulation rather than federal regulation, scientists and activists leveraged different aspects of their identities to provide significant scientific evidence, coupled with established campaigning tactics. Scientists who actively participated in the campaign defined themselves as more than just scientific researchers, but also as educators with an interest in environmental health issues, integrating a broader group of potential participants in their campaign.

The redefinition of cultural brokerage at the level of identity emerges when a change proponent crafts a collective sense of “we” with a superordinate identity that spans otherwise fragmented identities. Highly specific identity claims can splinter a group into narrower identity categories that preclude agreement, but the creation of a new common identity overcomes this fragmentation (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Wry, Lounsbury, & Glynn, 2011). Collective identity – defined as an actor’s “cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice or institution” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285) – facilitates breadth of mobilization (Bernstein, 2005; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). For example, when the Catholic nuns in the U.S. were subject to the Apostolic Visitation, one of their first reactions was to hire Canon lawyers and defend their actions and choices to the Vatican. But, after a series of meetings in which they developed a common identity as “Gospel women” that transcended the different practices and traditions of their religious orders, they felt empowered to fend off this threat using less confrontational methods (Giorgi et al., 2014).

In some cases, the creation of a superordinate identity helps social movement groups overcome the fear of losing their unique identity, while providing each group with a sense of belonging and connection to one another. In her analysis of the battered women’s movement in St. Louis, Arnold (2011) observed that the “local movement community . . . was fragmented, and its leaders were often at odds with each other” (p. 134). These organizations sometimes tried to undermine each other and engaged in acrimonious exchanges. It was the creation of a new organization, the Missouri Coalition against Domestic Violence (MCADV), founded with the goal of fostering cooperation, which spurred joint mobilization among the agencies. While a superordinate identity never fully resolved some of the conflicts among the different groups, it established a mechanism for dealing with problems and building trust, providing the agencies for battered women much more influence in the state. More specifically, Arnold (2011) suggested that “the key to the groups’ ability to work together” (p. 139) was a conscious organizing effort of a cultural broker, who was “able to focus attention [among potential but distrustful coalition members] on similarities in goals and benefits” (Levi & Murphy, 2006, p. 663).

In the case Arnold (2011) examined, the cultural broker was MCADV, which took several important initiatives. It sent staff members “skilled in conflict resolution” (p. 139) to run meetings and facilitate difficult conversations, provided them with pertinent political information, and set up task committees that engaged multiple agencies. It also helped the groups develop joint training for newcomers, which “required local activists to engage in serious discussion about subtle but important ideological issues, including the role of feminism in the movement, and arrive at some agreement around what causes wives beating, what the movement’s goals are, and what the strategic options are to achieve those goals” (p. 139).

Mary-Jane Ferrier, the spokesperson of Protect South Portland (personal communication, April 25, 2015), recalled how the shared identity that bonded together very different people was a desire to protect their neighborhood:

A lot of the people who were the volunteers . . . are . . . residents of South Portland. What’s in it for them is some sort of security about the investment in their homes, their children. This pipeline runs at the end of my block. It’s one block away from me. And all the great, big tanks surround my neighborhood, these great, big, enormous storage tanks . . . So we’re well aware of the risks of living with this thing there, even now. And if we were going to put much more risky stuff into that, then, you know, we want to protect our lives, and our property . . . So that was an agenda that everybody shared; no question about that.

She also described the redefinition that occurred within Protect South Portland:

We figured out that the only way to [get the city ordinance passed] was not through the risk to our lives or anything like that. It was about the air. It’s the only thing that the city had the right to legislate. Everything else is federal and, or interstate commerce. I got the Lung Association to come to speak . . . . And because we have the highest rate of asthma in the United States among children we got a nurse from the school department who deals with this.
Finally, another path toward building a redefinition of identity among different organizations may be to emphasize opposition to a common enemy. By focusing on “who they are not,” two actors may become radicalized in their identities and be more likely to see themselves as similar and compatible on various dimensions (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). This is an emotionally powerful tactic adopted by many social movement organizations (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000). Knowing whom they want to defeat gives people reasons to stay together and develop a shared identity. For example, Nancy Talanian, the cultural broker of the Bill of Rights, a movement that formed shortly after the passage of the U.S.’s Patriot Act in 2001, seized on the moment to bring together a broad coalition of over one million individuals who were scared by the Patriot Act’s potential for abuse (Vasi & Strang, 2009). Many of these activists viewed the Patriot Act as the Bush administration’s tool to violate basic civil and human rights. Although a number of these activists were previously working in isolation from one another, the threat of a new enemy created a sense of shared identity that spurred their alliance.

Practices and cultural brokerage

A final but equally important dimension for cultural brokerage in fostering mobilization is found within practices. Practices matter to joint mobilization because they refer to actors’ different tactics and strategies of action on how to reach a common goal (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Levy & Scully, 2007). In other words, even if two or more groups or organizations agree on a particular goal, they need to reach a certain “workable covenant” on practices for accomplishing it.

Class differences, access to powerful institutions, and life experiences shape the kinds of practices that actors use (Bourdieu, 1984; Friedland & Mohr, 2004). Bourdieu (1990), for example, introduced the term “habitus” to indicate the cultural practices that people learn in their social milieu and carry on for most of their lives. Such cultural practices are more than habits in that they become embodied and manifested in postures, accents, or ways of speaking; they are pertinent to groups and organizations as well as individuals.

Variation in actors’ practices can create inherent boundaries between groups and/or organizations because they define (and sometimes confine) the abilities of groups and organizations to interact and understand one another. Lack of familiarity with or rejection of certain cultural habits or practices may create sustained differences between groups that lead to further conflict and opposition. For instance, in his examination of minorities’ school performance, Ogbu (2004) found that African American adolescents opposed certain practices associated with academic success because they wanted to avoid “acting white.” This example demonstrates that even when groups share an ideological stance and aim at working together, differences in practices can prevent them from effective mobilization (Lichterman, 1995, 2005). Leonard-Wright (2014) offers the (frequent) example of people from different socioeconomic classes having trouble coordinating with each other because of multiple types of differences in speech patterns. In meetings, members of the professional middle class tend to use more words but talk less frequently than members of the working class and lower middle class. They also are more likely than lower and working class participants to talk about being angry. Working class members are less likely to use words to express their emotions, but to express their emotion with “tone of voice, body language, and loud volume” (p. 195).

Another obstacle to reaching agreement might present itself when a potential ally highly values some practices over others because it sees them as tightly coupled with its goals or agenda. For example, the Civil Rights movement fragmented and began to decline in the mid-1960s partly because movement newcomers disagreed with veteran activists’ strong attachment to nonviolent tactics (McAdam, 1999). Disagreement over the link between means and ends caused the Civil Rights movement to break into competing factions and ultimately to lose its centrality on the American political stage. One group’s strong attachment to a set of practices and another group’s aversion to those practices set the stage for the dissolution of a formerly robust alliance.

One way that cultural brokers may overcome these obstacles is through integration of different practice repertoires. An example is presented by the multiple groups that joined with Protect South Portland to stop Exxon-Mobil from turning South Portland into a major export facility for Canadian tar sands oil. Mary-Jane Ferrier (personal communication, April 25, 2015) described how each group provided its own resources, and together these were effective. The Natural Resources Council of Maine organized a march through the city about six months before Protect South Portland began its major work. A group of members from 350 Maine (part of 350.org) joined with the Natural Resources council in the march and also liaised with Protect South Portland in its efforts. In addition, 350 Maine recruited some of their members to be part of a long line across the bridge between Portland and South Portland and brought a photographer from National Geographic. As Ferrier noted, “it was a collaborative, but it was always our organization”. She noted that at one point Protect South Portland, which was carefully working with the city council to accomplish its aims, had to dismiss a well-known geologist because he insisted on treating the city council in an adversarial way.

The study of the Interfaith community by Braunstein et al. (2014, p. 9) provides another illustration of the integration of differing practice repertoires. Prayers were “offered by clergy representing different faith traditions and often delivered in different languages . . . Inviting multiple clergy to pray demonstrated the organization’s inclusivity and pulled diverse participants beyond their differences into a partially shared identity as members of this diverse faith community”. In addition, some clergy crafted their prayers by drawing on non-religious texts, such as poetry or literature, or “sources of wisdom”, creating a sense of cohesion within the organization even among those who did not feel partial to any religious faith.
Accomplishing mobilization for change

The successes or failures of the social movements we have explored have depended in large part on whether they experienced cultural competence and cultural brokerage. The economists and radicals in the original Office of Economic Opportunity (Forget, 2011) had very different framings that were never reconciled. The organizers of the Seattle protests (Levi & Murphy, 2006) encountered problems in part because the groups were splintered among themselves in their framing, identity and practices. The joint anti-pornography work of the feminists and conservatives (Whittier, 2014) enjoyed limited success only in the area in which cultural competency and cultural brokerage were both present. On the other hand, scientists and activists (Lubitow, 2013), members of Protect South Portland, and the battered women’s agencies in St. Louis (Arnold, 2011) all experienced cultural competency and prospered as a result of cultural brokerage.

Discussion

Significant cultural, economic, or social change is rare because institutions, by their very definition, are enduring structures that resist change (Rao & Giorgi, 2006). When change occurs, it is often the result of a mobilized and concerted effort of groups of actors who pursue a common goal. Despite an extensive literature that documents the limits of structural factors such as interests and opportunities in explaining the formation of mobilization, the role of culture in bringing groups and organizations together has been under-examined. In contrast, we have argued and presented evidence that successful mobilization hinges on cultural skill; that structural factors alone will not accomplish mobilization.

We set out to explore how a proponent of change can leverage culture to foster mobilization even among unlikely allies. An extensive literature shows that particular frames (Vasi & Strang, 2009), identities (Schrrock, Holden, & Reid, 2004), and practices (Lichterman, 1995) can persuade audiences to devote symbolic and material resources in support of a particular vision of change. What has been less clear, however, is how cultural skill in mobilization can affect the success of framing, identity and practices.

Inspired by the work of the highly successful community organizer Saul Alinsky, we developed a two-step model – cultural competence as a first step, followed by cultural brokerage – through which cultural barriers among actors can be overcome. Cultural competence refers to the work of appreciating the different cultural meanings and values of those involved in a particular project 7 of change, while cultural brokerage indicates the process of bridging and negotiating among actors with different cultural repertoires, to reach a temporary truce or covenant. In particular, we identified two types of activities that define cultural brokerage, integration and redefinition, and applied them to frames, identities, and/or practices to show the utility of our proposed model. Through cultural integration – the combination or integration of the participants’ varying frames, identities, and/or practices – or cultural redefinition – the creation of new overarching frames, identities, and/or practices – a culturally skilled proponent of change can successfully foster mobilization.

Our proposed model (Fig. 1) offers two main contributions to current understandings of the crucial role of culture in spurring mobilization in support of a project of change. First, it contributes to research in social movements by shedding light on processes through which cultural tools can lead to effective mobilization for change. Though its importance has generally been acknowledged in the extant literature, culture has largely been treated as a black box. Our model offers a theoretically useful and practical guide for using culture in mobilization. Contrary to current understandings of culture that tend to be relatively static, our model suggests that culture requires significant work both in understanding one’s audience and creatively finding a common ground — shared frames, identities, and/or practices that unify efforts towards the achievement of a common goal. Though we have given examples of either shared frames, identities or practices in our presentation, as we noted above, the skilled use of all of these cultural dimensions are necessary for mobilization. Finally, the examples we have presented from Saul Alinsky show that cultural competence and brokerage can lead even conflicting groups to productive covenants geared at change.

Second, our perspective on cultural brokerage has implications for understanding the micro-foundations of institutional change. Literature on the micro-foundations of institutional theory (Powell & Colyvas, 2008) and institutional work (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009) has emphasized how individuals, through routines, practices, and interactions, reproduce institutions. But, Powell and Colyvas (2008) also argued that scholars should turn their attention to the “everyday processes” that underlie institutional change as opposed to reproduction. Everyday practices are embodied in cultural competence and cultural brokerage or their lack thereof. On the basis of our analysis, we suggest that institutional change will likely be more successful when it builds on change proponents’ cultural competence and brokerage.

Next steps in theorizing, with implications for practice

We have discussed cultural competence and brokerage across a wide range of contemporary settings. To give a sense of their breadth, we summarize them in Table 2. Although that table has not been a focus of our discussion, in it, we indicate that multiple cultural dimensions are present in virtually every mobilization effort. Implicitly at least, and sometimes explicitly, we have treated cultural competence and, in particular, cultural brokerage, as involving the same types of skills and activities, with likely the same results, across these widely varying settings.

However, future research must include a more thorough examination of multiple contingencies for cultural competence and brokerage. The types of cultural competence and brokerage being exercised today extend far beyond the local settings with which Saul Alinsky worked, and as we have shown, the specific types of integration and
Table 2
Contemporary mobilizing illustrations, including contexts, cultural differences, cultural competence, brokerage attempts by means of integration and/or redefinition, and success of mobilization for social change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Types of cultural differences</th>
<th>Cultural competence shown?</th>
<th>Brokerage/integration</th>
<th>Brokerage/redefinition</th>
<th>Cultural dimensions</th>
<th>Success or failure?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leondar-Wright (2014)</td>
<td>Urban coalition of unions and their allies doing annual goal-setting</td>
<td>Industrial and service workers/college educated middle class woman</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forget (2011)</td>
<td>Office of economic opportunity fighting war on poverty</td>
<td>Radicals and economists</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levi and Murphy (2006)</td>
<td>Protests at the World Trade Association conference with multiple aims</td>
<td>More than 200 different types of organizations</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rao and Giorgi (2006)</td>
<td>Movement to foster the production and consumption of slow food</td>
<td>Differing gastronomical interests, ecological concerns in different countries</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Slow Food was about gourmet food produced in environmentally sound way, did not exploit workers' rights, and consumed slowly in a convivial setting Integration of both groups' identities to provide significant scientific evidence, coupled with established campaigning tactics</td>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lubitow (2013)</td>
<td>Scientists and social activists worked together to regulate the use of the chemical Bisphenol-A (BPA)</td>
<td>Differing identities of scientists and activists</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td>Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braunstein et al. (2014)</td>
<td>Faith-based civic group used interfaith prayer to bridge differences</td>
<td>Substantial racial and socioeconomic diversity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>New community prayers that represent the collective</td>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giorgi et al. (2015)</td>
<td>US Catholic religious orders subject to a Vatican visitation sought to respond in an integral way</td>
<td>Catholic religious orders with different practices and traditions</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Developed a common identity as “Gospel women” that transcended the different practices and traditions of their religious orders</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnold (2011)</td>
<td>Battered women's movement in St. Louis attempted to build an effective coalition</td>
<td>Leaders of different battered women's organizations tried to undermine each other</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>The creation of a new organization, MCADV, led to a common superordinate identity</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrier (2015)</td>
<td>Protect South Portland worked to prevent Exxon-Mobil from building an export facility</td>
<td>Multiple groups joined with Protect South Portland to stop Exxon-Mobil from building an export facility</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>The people of South Portland developed a shared identity based on common concerns</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery et al. (2012)</td>
<td>Marine Stewardship Council enhanced a demand for seafood sustainability standards</td>
<td>Fisheries, suppliers, consumers, and retailers</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Framing of seafood sustainability standards that appealed to all groups involved</td>
<td>Framing</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whittier (2014)</td>
<td>Feminists and conservatives worked together to fight pornography</td>
<td>Feminists and conservatives</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Anti-pornography framing that focused on injury to women and civil war</td>
<td>Framing</td>
<td>Temporary success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
redefinition used are more varied than those salient during his life. Consider the examples in Table 2. They deal with cultural differences across social classes, political ideologies, gastronomical interests, ecological concerns, religions, scientific and activist concerns, feminists and conservatives, consumers and retailers, to name just a few. They also reflect a wide variety of ambitious aims, including, among others, waging war on poverty, changing the World Trade Association, changing how food is produced and consumed, regulating a toxic chemical, getting the Vatican to cease an investigation, stopping the advancement of Exxon-Mobil, halting pornography, and developing new seafood sustainability standards.

These examples make evident that while we have presented a model of cultural competence and cultural brokerage that fits all these mobilization attempts generally, it will be necessary to develop much more nuanced understandings of specific factors affecting both cultural competence and skilled cultural brokerage. Adequately developing such nuanced understandings is beyond the scope of this paper; not enough work has been done to distinguish factors that affect particular applications of cultural competence and cultural brokerage. However, we will briefly suggest some of the characteristics that will likely have an impact on successful cultural brokerage. We will focus on two characteristics that seem potentially important: characteristics of settings in which cultural mobilization occurs and the types of cultural differences present among potential participants. We will also raise the issue of who may play brokerage roles.

Settings
The settings we have described include multiple differences. One difference is temporal; some of the mobilization attempts are for very short and well-delimited time periods (e.g. Levi & Murphy, 2006), and others for longer time periods, perhaps unlimited (e.g. Arnold, 2011). A second is geographical spread, such as across the world (Rao & Giorgi, 2006) or within a local neighborhood. Yet another is size; some mobilization efforts include huge numbers of groups (e.g. Levi & Murphy, 2006), while others include specific individuals (e.g. Lubitow, 2013). Some have very specific goals they are trying to accomplish over an extended period of time (Forget, 2011) and others rethink their aims regularly (e.g. Leondar-Wright, 2014). Further, there are differences in distribution of power among different actors, with some on the surface, at least, very powerful (Forget, 2011), and others not powerful at all.

These differences are all important, and are likely to affect the particulars of cultural competence and cultural brokerage. We add, however, that many of these differences are socially constructed, and that is one of the reasons that interests, networks, resources and opportunities, considered objectively, are not sufficient for successful social movement mobilization. For instance, one of Alinsky’s great achievements was convincing people in the Back of the Yards that they could have power even though by most objective criteria they did not. Thus, an important next step will be to explore actors’ perceptions of settings and their differences, and the implications of these for social mobilization.

Cultural differences
In our analyses we have explored multiple types of cultural differences. These include religious differences (Braunstein et al., 2014), class differences (Leondar-Wright, 2014), political differences (Levi & Murphy, 2006), intellectual interests (Lubitow, 2013), ideological differences (Forget, 2011; Whittier, 2014), and economic differences (Rao & Giorgi, 2006; Montgomery et al. 2012), among others. We have overlooked, however, other types of cultural differences, such as Hofstede’s analysis of national cultures. As a result, the types of brokerage we describe here – all based on western cultural norms – may not translate to collectivist cultures with very high power differences.

Also, there are groups with apparently similar cultural characteristics (e.g. Arnold, 2011) that are still in conflict with each other, perhaps because of their similarities and their desires to stand out as distinct from each other. Finally, it is likely that in many instances potential movement participants differ on many of these characteristics, not only one or two. Levi and Murphy (2006, p. 651) commented, for example, that “social movement organizations can be dissimilar on every conceivable dimension other than their distress with the status quo”. Thus, an important next step will be to explore perceptions of multiple types of cultural differences, the additive or multiplicative role of various cultural differences, and their impact on effective cultural competence and brokerage.

Who serves as a cultural broker?
Finally, although we have used Saul Alinsky as a model, the mobilization efforts depicted in this paper are not all led by identified cultural heroes. Many are led by “organizers” (e.g. Levi & Murphy, 2006; Lubitow, 2013), but some by specific people hoping to foster their own agenda (e.g. Rao & Giorgi, 2006), some by particular groups who consciously serve as brokers (Arnold, 2011; Montgomery et al., 2012), and some by multiple individuals with shared interests who are able to determine how to meld these interests despite all their other differences (Whittier, 2014). In other words, while we have been emphasizing the crucial roles of cultural competence and cultural brokerage, we have not been emphasizing who plays brokerage roles. Rather, as our discussion suggests, these roles may be played by many actors. Somewhere, however, there must be sufficient cultural competence and cultural brokerage that is accepted by potential participants to enable mobilization.

Thus, our paper opens up the general question about who can successfully demonstrate cultural competence and play brokerage roles, along with more specific questions about the types of settings in which individuals can play these roles effectively as well as the ranges of cultural differences social movement leaders are likely to encounter and must navigate. It is unlikely that the same individuals can play successful brokerage roles in all types of settings and with all types of cultural differences. But
how such settings, differences, and cultural broker roles match successfully has yet to be determined.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, our discussion, starting with the work of Saul Alinsky and ending with several contemporary mobilization efforts, has been both theoretical and grounded in practice settings. We have learned about our constructs from attempts to foster mobilization. Thus, implications from our work are directed towards practitioners as well scholars. In this spirit, we hope that our paper builds on Alinsky’s legacy by illustrating some practice guidelines that may inform social movements by increasing their proponents’ cultural skills.

References


