SEMIOTIC SHIFTS

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ABSTRACT A central question in sociology is how culture shapes action. I advance scholarship on this question by theorizing how strategies of action evolve in the face of semiotic shifts, which occur when the personal significance of one's beliefs and/or behaviors are redefined, typically through participation in new environments. Empirically, I examine the semiotic shifts that two groups of college students experience while attending elite, American universities: deeply religious students and underrepresented minorities. I draw on 99 interviews and four years of ethnographic observations to analyze 79 students' belief journeys in college. I argue that people adopt three strategies to navigate personal beliefs in pluralistic contexts: burrowing, distancing, and bridging. I find that the adoption of these strategies is shaped by how people carry their beliefs. My findings have implications for theorizing on culture, educational inequities, religion, and organizations.

KEYWORDS culture, semiotics, higher education, religion, organizations

Ann Swidler (1986) ushered in a new era for cultural sociology, arguing for a theoretical approach that centers on the strategies that people build out of their cultural toolkits and repertoires. Considering divergent strategies of action has enabled us to understand, for example, why minority youth engage differently in educational contexts (Carter 2005), why people decide not to use condoms despite health risks (Tavory and Swidler 2009), and why violence persists in urban neighborhoods (Kirk and Papachristos 2011). But cultural scholars have long disagreed about how personal and public culture intersect to shape peoples' strategies and outcomes (Lizardo 2017; Pugh 2013; Vaisey 2009).[1]

I advance this debate by examining when and how people's beliefs and strategies of action evolve as they adapt to new cultural-institutional contexts. We do not know why some people's beliefs are transformed when they enter environments where they encounter new ideologies and practices, while others double down on prior belief commitments. Swidler (1986) suggests that culture accounts for continuities in settled lives and change in unsettled lives. But the concept of unsettled lives has proven difficult to measure and examine empirically. I propose an alternative concept, *semiotic shifts,* for when the personal significance of one's beliefs and behaviors are redefined, usually through participation in a new environment. I then ask: *what do people do when they enter contexts that offer new ecologies of meanings for their core beliefs? How do they solve the problems that arise with such situations?*

While institutional theory and cognitive culturalism have advanced cultural theorizing in many ways, neither provides us with the theoretical tools to fully answer these questions. Institutional theory focuses on macro-cultural logics or individuals engaged in institutional work.

[1] I follow Lizardo (2017:89) who argues that culture is manifest in personal (within persons) and public (extra-personal) forms. Both forms of culture have the potential to influence individuals' actions and behaviors, but they do so in different ways.

A central question remains unanswered: "how can we account for local activity, agency, and change without reverting to the kind of individual actors that neo-institutionalism was designed to critique?" (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021:3). Likewise, cognitive culturalists have developed sophisticated techniques for measuring aspects of personal culture, from attitudes to schemas (Boutyline and Soter 2021; Brońić and Miles 2021; Kiley and Vaisey 2020; Boutyline and Vaisey 2017). But our ability to explain why and how beliefs and strategies of action *change*, over time and across contexts, remains limited. These processes are critical to understand as societies become more pluralistic and polarized (Mason 2018).

Advancing theory on these questions requires a methodological approach that prioritizes in-depth accounts of belief journeys as well as participant observation in local settings where people are navigating complex semiotic spaces together (Fine 2021; Tavory 2016). I examine one such setting: prestigious, American residential universities. Elite universities are an ideal environment to examine semiotic shifts. Students leave their families and hometowns to attend residential universities, adapting to near-total institutions that often diverge from the cultural contexts they grew up in. Such schools are culturally dense, pluralistic organizations that maintain a diverse array of subcultures, enabling their members to adopt a wide range of relational strategies. They institutionalize processes of self-fashioning and ideological exploration, making them fertile settings to examine belief continuity and change (Frank and Meyer 2020; Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2009).

Prestigious universities do not bring about semiotic shifts in the lives of all their members. I focus on students who may be especially likely to experience semiotic shifts: deeply religious students and underrepresented minorities. In both cases, which often overlap, students are likely to experience college as a new semiotic space that diverges from their home communities in terms

of social, cultural, and moral norms (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Jack 2019). Drawing on 99 interviews and four years of ethnographic fieldwork in two universities, I analyze the belief journeys of 79 people in college.

I develop three modal strategies of action that people adopt to navigate pluralistic environments: *burrowing* (doubling down on prior beliefs and surrounding oneself with a community that shares those beliefs)*, distancing* (doubting prior beliefs and distancing from communities associated with those beliefs)*,* and *bridging* (holding prior beliefs while exploring new ones and participating in multiple moral communities). I find that the adoption of these strategies varies according to how people carry their core beliefs. Entering college with highly declarative, zealous beliefs leads people to burrow, while less declarative beliefs lead people to distance – even (and sometimes especially) if beliefs are zealously held. Nonzealous, highly declarative beliefs make bridging possible. In the findings, I demonstrate how modes of carrying beliefs influence strategies of action through epistemic encounters.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I develop the concept of semiotic shifts. In new environments, aspects of personal culture that one previously took for granted become visible, and new skills and assumptions must be learned. I argue that understanding how people navigate new semiotic spaces can help us advance a core question in cultural sociology: how personal culture shapes action. To develop the links between personal culture and action, I offer a typology of four modal ways that people carry their core beliefs, considering variation in terms of *declarativeness* (conscious accessibility of belief tenets [Lizardo 2017]) and *zeal* (affective attachment to belief identities). I then outline my empirical setting and case, the qualitative data that I draw upon, and my analytic approach. The findings that follow (1) demonstrate the typology of belief forms through student profiles, (2) reveal how belief forms spark different kinds of epistemic encounters

(the micro-level interactions that trigger semiotic shifts) and (3) outline how epistemic encounters guide strategies of action and trajectories of belief change. I conclude by considering the broader implications that emerge from these findings for cultural sociology, as well as the sociology of education, religion, and organizations.

TOWARD A THEORY OF SEMIOTIC SHIFTS

A longstanding debate in sociology is how culture shapes action.[2] Swidler (1986:277) defines strategies of action as "a general way of organizing action...that might allow one to reach several different life goals." People draw on culture like a toolkit to craft such strategies: "culture influences action through the shape and organization of [prefabricated] links, not by determining the ends to which they are put." Vaisey (2009) challenges this argument, drawing on cognitive psychology and practice theory (Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1984) to suggest that toolkit theory gave people too much deliberative power. The core metaphor we need, he argues, is that of a rider on an elephant (Haidt 2001; 2005), which offers us a dual-process model of culture in action. The rider represents the discursive, conscious level of talk and deliberation, and the elephant represents the deeper, subconscious level of schemas and intuition (see also Boutyline and Soter 2021; DiMaggio 1997; Lizardo 2017; Martin 2010). The rider can only do so much to guide the elephant (Scott and Lyman 1968).

Although cognitive culturalists have moved cultural sociology forward in significant ways, key questions remain unanswered. Pugh (2013) argues that the role of social context gets lost in the individualism of cognitively oriented models. Institutional scholars have sought to address this issue by revealing how people's actions are structured by their institutional environments, but they

[2] For helpful overviews of the contours of this debate that have informed my argument, see Lizardo and Strand (2010), Pugh (2013), and Vaisey (2009). Here, I offer only a brief summary as background for the present argument.

have not fully specified the interactive processes that connect people, organizations, and institutions (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021).

Overall, toolkit, cognitive, and institutionalist theories are each limited in their capacity to explain how and why people *change* strategies of action or reconsider their core beliefs. Continuing with Vaisey's metaphor, the question could be framed: under what conditions does the elephant change directions, or shift strategies? One answer to this question is: *when the environment changes.* Both elephant and rider are going to adopt a different strategy to cross a river than when moving through a desert. Their strategies would have to change drastically if they ended up in a zoo.

To deepen our understanding of how culture and action are linked, we must examine how people draw upon personal culture amid transitions to new environments. One of the main ways that people encounter new meanings and practices is through their participation in organizations. Inhabited institutionalist scholars have documented how people interact with myths and meanings presented by the organizations they are embedded in (Hallett 2010; Hallett and Ventresca 2006). I bring this work into dialogue with scholarship on how action is shaped by the culture people carry with them through the various settings of their lives (Miles 2014; Swidler 2001). Linking these two literatures enables us to better understand how personal culture influences strategies of action.

A *semiotic shift* occurs when the personal significance of one's beliefs and/or behaviors are redefined, typically through participation in a new environment. Tavory and Swidler (2009) put forth the idea of semiotic spaces, where a set of dominant semiotic axes create a shared social code that constitutes possible meanings, independent of what any individual wants to signify (see also Sewell [1992] and Silverman [1983]). They outline three main semiotic axes that constitute the space in which people understand condom use in rural Malawi: sensuality, trust and love, and

risk. Of course, the semiotic space for condom use would be different in New York City than it is in rural Malawi, just as it would be different at Yale versus Liberty University. When people move from one environment to another, there is an increased likelihood that they may experience semiotic shifts, wherein formerly taken-for-granted beliefs or behaviors become visible and must be reckoned with. Some people remain in consistent cultural contexts for the duration of their lives, but the dynamism of modernity and globalization create conditions where many now experience diverse semiotic spaces throughout life.

People experience the contours of a new semiotic space through encounters (Goffman 1961a) – interactions with other individuals, sub-groups within organizations, and institutional myths (in the form of rituals, narratives, rules, etc. [Meyer and Rowan 1977].) All three kinds of interactions can cue people to the possibility that their beliefs or behaviors *mean* something different in their new environment. Such encounters may lead a person to (re)examine their own beliefs and behaviors, triggering a semiotic shift.

An example can help make this more concrete. Imagine a student who grew up in a conservative, Christian community in the South, then attends an Ivy League university. Their college would present them with a new semiotic space. Identifying as Christian might go from being common sense to being unusual, or possibly even suspicious among progressive, secular peers. Casual hookups might go from being taboo to celebrated (as an expression of sexual freedom) in institutional rituals. In these examples, beliefs and behaviors are shifting positions on a set of common axes. But our imagined student may also find that the dominant axes are *themselves* different. Religion may have served as a dominant axis in their home environment (e.g., is this belief or behavior aligned with or opposed to Christian faith?), but college might present new axes (for example, is this belief or behavior aligned with or opposed to authentic self-

expression?) The evaluator (in this case, Christianity) becomes the evaluated, and new evaluators are introduced. What does our imagined student do in this situation?

Such shifts in environment open new possibilities for belief and strategy change, but they do not predetermine pathways of change. We can envision contradictory effects that a new semiotic space may have. Some people might double down on long-held beliefs, becoming increasingly committed to their beliefs in the face of opposition and burrowing into subcultures where others share their beliefs and practices (*burrowing)*. Others might embrace new beliefs offered by their context, foregoing former beliefs and distancing from communities associated with those beliefs (*distancing)*. Still others might seek ways to reconcile divergent beliefs and to participate in oppositional epistemic communities (*bridging).* Why do people adopt these different approaches? To answer this question, I argue that we consider variation in how people carry their core beliefs.

LINKING CULTURAL FORMS AND STRATEGIES OF ACTION

Culture's influence on action depends on the form it takes. Swidler (1986) suggests that culture exists on a continuum from ideology to tradition to common sense. When culture takes the form of ideology, it influences action directly; when culture takes the form of commonsense, it influences action indirectly. Lizardo (2017) argues that one limitation of this framework, and others like it, is that they do not distinguish between personal and public culture, or the fact that, within persons, culture exists in consciously accessible (declarative) and embodied (nondeclarative) modes. Building on these theories, I develop the idea that one central aspect of personal culture, *core beliefs*, can be empirically assessed along two dimensions of variation: declarativeness and zeal.

Beliefs are a crucial component of personal culture, but one that has proved difficult to study (Martin 2002). Belief systems are "a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence" (Converse 2006:3). Practically speaking, most people organize their beliefs around anchoring religious and political identities (e.g., as Christians, Muslims, conservatives, progressives, etc.) (Baldassarri and Goldberg 2014; Boutyline and Vaisey 2017). The two often combine to form particular moral orientations (such as conservative Catholics, secular progressives, or liberal Protestants). But for many, the two are not fully intertwined and one may take precedence over the other.

How do people hold these anchoring belief identities? First, beliefs vary in the extent to which they are declarative. Lizardo (2017:89) defines declarative culture as that which is "phenomenologically transparent and elicited as linguistic reports." Put simply, people not only know their belief systems - they *know* they know them, and they can articulate them. Such knowledge should not be taken for granted: a sophisticated understanding of how a conservative ought to vote on specific foreign policy issues or the theological complexities surrounding communion are by no means obvious - or even important - to most people who consider themselves conservative or Christian. Converse (2006), for example, found that only about 3% of people rely on abstract conceptual dimensions to evaluate wide-ranging political objects. When beliefs are less declarative, they are not inherently less known, because a person could still have high nondeclarative knowledge of their beliefs. A Catholic who knows none of the theological debates surrounding transubstantiation may know at an embodied level, how to receive communion - and the emotional posture that communion requires.[3]

[3] In other words, cultural knowledge may be redundantly represented in both declarative and nondeclarative forms (Lizardo 2017). In my analysis, I focus on variation in declarative knowledge, but do not systematically analyze variation in nondeclarative knowledge (e.g., beliefs as embodied habit [Strand and Lizardo 2015]).

Second, I argue that beliefs exist on a continuum from zealous (ardent devotion to one's belief identity) to non-zealous (a cooler attachment to one's belief identity). Like the first dimension, we should not think of those who are more zealous as more attached to their belief identities, but as having an attachment that is more passionate. Some people with less zealous beliefs will be ambivalent or apathetic toward their belief identities, but it is possible to have a deep, yet cool, attachment. In short, I am suggesting that we need to account for variation in the emotional valence of people's relations to their belief identities (as progressives or conservatives, Christians or atheists, etc.) (Hochschild 2018).

Taken together, these two dimensions offer four ideal-typical modes of carrying core beliefs (see Figure 1). *Ideologues* have beliefs that are highly zealous and declarative. *Agnostics* have beliefs that low on zeal and declarativeness. *Followers* have highly zealous, less declarative beliefs. *Contenders* have less zealous, highly declarative beliefs. In the findings, I will show what each of these four types look like in practice.

Insert Figure 1 here.

Summary. Existing cultural theories leave unanswered the questions of how and why people's beliefs and strategies of action change. I have suggested that one kind of situation that is likely to bring about belief and strategy change - when people enter new semiotic spaces. An environmental change can trigger semiotic shifts in two ways: by changing what beliefs are socially (in)convenient to hold and by introducing people to new moral frameworks, practices, and potentially even new semiotic axes.

How might people navigate new semiotic spaces? I have offered three potential strategies of action: burrowing, distancing, and bridging. Why do people adopt these different strategies? I suggest that we consider two dimensions of variation in how people carry their core beliefs –

declarativeness and zeal. Declarativeness may enable the maintenance of rare beliefs (e.g., act as a bulwark against distancing) but does not shed light on why some with declarative beliefs burrow, and others bridge. Zeal could also be protective against belief change. On the other hand, those who are zealous may place high value on being aligned with their local community so they may struggle to adapt to a social context where their beliefs set them apart from others. In the findings that follow, I demonstrate how the experience of being semiotically shifted is influenced by how people carry their beliefs, using the case of students' religious and political belief journeys in college.

CASE AND METHODS

Empirically, I analyze 79 cases of students' belief journeys in college. These cases come from 99 interviews with college students, alumni, and staff and four years of ethnographic fieldwork with two collegiate identity-based groups, a Christian student group ("Christian Fellowship" or CF) at Stanford University, and a nonprofit that supports marginalized and underrepresented students ("Lewis Center" or LC) at a prestigious public university.[4] I provide a summary of data collected in Table 1. In this section, I outline why elite universities are a strong setting to examine semiotic shifts, discuss the two ethnographic sites, and summarize the data that I collected and my analytic approach.

Insert Table 1 here.

Elite universities as setting

[4] In line with recent arguments about the importance of naming ethnographic sites for transparency (Murphy, Jerolmack, and Smith 2021), I have chosen to name the main university where I conducted this study – Stanford. I use pseudonyms for student groups and their members to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Because "Lewis Center" is a supplementary ethnographic site, a more unique organization, and serves highly marginalized student populations, I do not name Lewis Center's university (to further protect the confidentiality of the organization's members.)

There are multiple theoretical advantages to using elite universities as a setting for this analysis. Elite universities have resources that enable them to generate dense, complex semiotic landscapes. They tend to be near-total institutions that frame many aspects of their members' lives (Goffman 1961b). Further, universities are not culturally neutral entities. They are beacons of globalized, scientized, cosmopolitan modern culture – often seen as the "temples" of secular modernity (Frank and Meyer 2020; Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2009). They institutionalize values of openness and diversity, and frame identity and belief exploration as normatively good and part of what the college experience entails (Jepperson and Meyer 2021). Many of their students see college as a time to develop their beliefs and, more broadly, their sense of self (Mullen 2011). Nearly every student that I interviewed, regardless of their demographic characteristics and entering beliefs, told me that they changed significantly in college. Some suggested that a key purpose of college was to develop their *own* beliefs, apart from their families and home communities.

At the same time, prestigious research universities are not culturally monolithic: they contain a vast array of groups with diverse beliefs and practices.[5] Such schools strive to attain diverse undergraduate student bodies in terms of ethnicity, nationality, and social class, which means that they are likely to admit members with significant ideological diversity as well. As others have shown, residential universities have robust subcultures that support the formation of wide-ranging political and religious commitments (Binder and Wood 2013). Because members live in close proximity for multiple years, most people will come in contact with others who do not share their beliefs, creating opportunities for epistemic encounters that trigger semiotic shifts.

[5] The universities that I drew interviewees from in this study each have over 400 student organizations, highlighting the density of subcultures available for students to join (Fischer 1975).

Finally, such universities select students who have developed worldviews and are able to converse about abstract moral and social issues through their admissions processes, which rely on essays and personal statements (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Horwitz et al. 2022; Stevens 2009). Ivy plus universities produce a disproportionate percentage of the country's politicians, journalists, and academics – the nation's ideologues, both on the Left and the Right. Given these unusual organizational features, most students can find communities that closely match their beliefs, whether they are looking for effective altruists or conservative Catholics. But most students will also encounter individuals and groups with very different beliefs and practices than their own. These organizational dynamics make prestigious, residential universities an ideal context to examine semiotic shifts.

Sample, data collection, and analysis

Of course, not all students will be semiotically shifted by the cultural contexts of elite universities – privileged students are primed for these kinds of environments through their familial and educational experiences (Khan 2021). Two groups who are likely to experience semiotic shifts at elite universities are deeply religious students, especially those from conservative religious traditions (Uecker and Pearce 2017), and students from underrepresented backgrounds in terms of class and race (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Jack 2019). These two categories can and do overlap. The students who are underrepresented and have rare beliefs may be among the most likely to experience college as a new and unsettling semiotic space.

I focus primarily on demographically and politically diverse students from Protestant backgrounds (including Evangelical, Black, and Mainline Protestant), though I also interviewed students from Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and nonreligious backgrounds. There are multiple reasons why Protestant students are a good case for my analysis. First, American culture has deep

Protestant roots, and being Christian was common in the pre-college contexts of many of my respondents. This differentiates Christian students from students who are religious minorities in the US and who come from home environments where their religious beliefs already set them apart from their broader community.[6] Second, because Evangelical Protestantism (the largest group of Protestants in my sample) prioritizes active personal faith over inherited religious affiliation, it is difficult to be "nominally" evangelical. This makes holistic deconversion more possible and plausible than in faith traditions where secularism is more common (such as Reformed Judaism). Third, most American universities have robust evangelical Christian subcultures on campus which makes burrowing and strengthening one's religious beliefs possible and plausible (Magdola 2007). Finally, American Christianity, and Evangelicalism in particular, is a fraught, complex religious movement, rife with internal tensions and a general crisis of authority (Worthen 2013). This crisis was especially salient during my data collection (2019-2023), given political divides within the American Evangelical movement over Donald Trump.[7]

Ethnographically, I spent two years doing in-depth participant observation with "Christian Fellowship" (CF), an evangelical Christian student group that I chose because of its political, racial, and socioeconomic diversity.[8] I conducted 55 interviews with 41 CF participants about their beliefs, identities, processes of finding community, and overall college journeys. Through two years of ethnographic research with CF (and following students for two years after I concluded

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[6] Of course, some people grow up in religious enclaves where their beliefs are common sense, though likely still see Christianity as the dominant religion in America and are unlikely to expect that most people will share their religious beliefs in college.

[7] Examining a broader time scale, Hout and Fischer (2002; 2014) have demonstrated that a growing percentage of Americans have moved away from Christianity and have no religious affiliation, and they argue that politics plays a central role in this shift.

[8] CF (and LC, below) are pseudonyms. A significant proportion of CF's members are Black, Latino/a, Native American, or Pacific Islander and many are first generation and/or low-income students. Politically, CF was fairly evenly split between conservatives, progressives, and moderate students, unlike many other religious groups which are predominately progressive or conservative. I provide details on the demographics of my interview sample in Table 2.

fieldwork), I met students who became Christian in college, those who deconstructed or moved away from faith, and many whose political beliefs, religious practices, or theological tenets shifted in college.[9] For some, I saw these changes unfold in real time through the ongoing relationships that fieldwork enabled.

This initial sample provided rich data on how a community of deeply religious students grappled with beliefs and changed over time, but it had two weaknesses. First, it missed many of the students at risk for taking different strategies (e.g., those holistically distancing from religion in college). Second, I could not address the extent to which my findings apply to those with different starting beliefs. To address these limitations, I drew upon fieldwork and interviews that I was conducting for a broader ethnographic project with "Lewis Center" (LC), an organization that serves working-class, Black and Latinx students attending a prestigious, public university, and I conducted supplementary interviews with additional students and alumni not involved in either group.

Though Lewis Center is generally progressive, its primary aim is to provide institutional support, leadership training, and a communal base for underrepresented students. It thus served as a site to observe how religious and political beliefs were grappled with in a setting that was not explicitly centered on shared beliefs. I conducted a two-year ethnographic study of Lewis Center, which included of participant observations in some of their core programs as well as their general study space. For example, I observed a semester-long course, led by LC's director, that brings together diverse students from across the university to explore race, class, and gender inequalities

[9] For example, some students that I met joined CF their junior or senior year after distancing from faith during the first half of college (like Temi, who I will introduce below). Others that I interviewed visited CF but then disengaged, or deconstructed faith after college (like Kaia, who I will introduce below).

through students' lived experiences. I interviewed many participants in this course as well as many of LC's core members, who participated in other programs and worked in LC's study space.

In addition, I conducted one-time interviews with a broader set of college students and alumni with diverse beliefs (including Stanford undergraduates who were not involved with Christian Fellowship and students and alumni who attended other universities).[10] I provide a summary of the demographics and political/religious backgrounds for all interviewees in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here.

For each person that I interviewed, I sought to understand what their core religious and political commitments were when they entered college (as well as their families' beliefs and common beliefs in their pre-college environments), how they carried these beliefs throughout college, whether their beliefs changed, what relational strategies they adopted during college, and whether these strategies evolved over time. For 61 students, I draw on longitudinal data (either longitudinal interviews, ethnographic observations, or both). For the 18 students where I do not have longitudinal data, I sought to reconstruct pathways of change and continuity by asking interviewees to provide narrative accounts of their college journeys, trajectories of belief change, and communal involvement during each year of college.[11]

Ethnographic observations of day-to-day group life in Christian Fellowship and Lewis Center were also essential for my analysis. Both groups acted as "burrowing spaces" for some, and as "bridging spaces" for others. Though I was not able to interview students prior to college,

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[10] Many of these supplementary interviews stemmed from my work in residential education at Stanford, through which I interacted with a broad array of undergraduates. Though I did not conduct fieldwork in this setting, I interviewed some students that I knew over a long period of time through this role, which allowed me to engage in theoretical sampling (Small 2009). I interviewed students who attended other universities through snowball and convenience sampling.

[11] Because these accounts are retrospective, they are influenced by interviewees' subjectivity at the time that I interviewed them and thus serve as supplementary data for my analyses.

ethnographic observations and follow-up interviews enabled me to follow students over time. For example, I followed a group of eight first-year students involved with CF over the course of college through ethnographic observations, then conducted follow up interviews with them two years later. In addition, I re-interviewed those who were juniors and seniors during my fieldwork after they graduated to understand how their beliefs and strategies further evolved as they adapted to life after college. [12]

My analytic approach was abductive in nature, a process of double fitting data and theory with a focus on the pragmatic challenges that people face in their day-to-day lives (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). I initially sought to understand why students from similar religious backgrounds had different religious trajectories in college. Through coding and categorizing interviews and fieldnotes, I identified the three ways that people relate to beliefs and belief groups in college (burrowing, distancing, and bridging). I then sought to understand why people adopted these different strategies. Modes of carrying beliefs arose as an important factor for understanding strategy adoption.

To operationalize declarativeness and zeal, I asked people questions about their religious and political background, current beliefs, and whether their religious or political beliefs had changed at all in college. My goal was to understand how they currently carried their beliefs as well as the environments they were embedded in prior to college. I also observed how the members of Christian Fellowship and Lewis Center lived out their beliefs and engaged with others' beliefs in day-to-day group life. To categorize strategies of action, I asked interviewees to narrate the story of their college journey, including sources of community during each year of college and any key moments of personal change. Most people adopted one overarching approach during college,

[12] I provide context on the data that I collected for each person that I interviewed in **Appendix A.**

though a subset of people switched strategies. When possible, I corroborated these accounts with my observations of students' participation in the two groups that I studied.[13] In sum, interviews provided insights on the declarativeness and zealousness of students' beliefs and their stories of belief evolution over time, and ethnographic observations enabled me to observe how beliefs were discussed and practiced in day-to-day college life, to see how people changed over time, and to develop rapport over many months which was essential for collecting rich interview data.

The findings that emerge from my analysis are organized into three main sections. In the first section, I provide thick descriptions for each mode of carrying beliefs. Second, I show how modes of carrying beliefs spark particular kinds of epistemic encounters, the micro-level interactions that trigger broader semiotic shifts. Finally, I outline how trajectories of epistemic encounters shape the adoption of strategies of action. I summarize the model that emerges from my findings in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 here.

BELIEF FORMS IN PRACTICE

Ideologues

Ideologues are eager theologians: they are both knowledgeable (high declarativeness) and passionate (high zeal) about their core beliefs. For example, James,[14] a warm-spirited, first-generation college student from Southern California, entered college as a conservative Christian. He wore suits to class, worship events, and even Christian Fellowship's super bowl party, where

[13] For example, burrowers in CF and LC tended to be core members and attend most events, whereas bridgers tended to be less frequent participants and more likely to bring outsiders into each group. Some distancers dropped off and stopped participating, while others began participating in both groups later in college after initially distancing.

[14] Every interviewee has been given a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. In some cases, I change small details to further protect students' confidentiality, such as changing their hometown to a similar / nearby location.

he arrived with a textbook on logic in tow. When he was asked "Why the suits?" in a member "spotlight" interview for CF, he explained:

> I started getting into classic menswear as kind of a way to embody the ideal of a gentleman. And then, as I started getting deeper into my faith, I started wearing it instead to show respect for my neighbor and practice self-control.

I interviewed James during his first year of college and asked about his most important identities as a person.[15] James replied:

> Sure, so first and foremost, I think the most important thing that I base my identity on is being an adopted child of God. So being a soldier of Christ in the church militant, being redeemed. I don't really see myself through other identities…I guess maybe a man would be second, taking on functional roles that God has called men to do, such as fatherhood and stewardship.

James not only identifies his Christian faith as his most important identity - he also brings in abstract theological concepts, such as being "adopted", "redeemed," and a "soldier of Christ," to characterize this identity (an indicator of declarativeness).[16] In CF, James exuded quiet passion for his faith. In one conversation, when I mentioned my appreciation for Karl Marx's work, his eyes widened, and he launched into an explanation of Marx's militant atheism. His concern for my spiritual welfare in this situation demonstrates his ideological orientation.

James grew up in a Christian family, but not one where highly declarative beliefs were common:

> I'd always been a Christian, my parents are Christian, our whole family is. But I didn't start to take my faith *seriously* until junior year of high school…Philosophy was the beginning of my search to engage my intellect with God and dedicate that part of myself to him. Philosophy led me to theology.

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[15] I first asked interviewees to tell me about "their most important identities" to get a sense of where their belief commitments fall in their overall sense of self. While some students that I met through CF, like James, began with Christian faith as their most important identity, others did not, which indicates that students understood this as a general question, and that group membership alone does not explain their centering of faith in their responses.

[16] Each of these terms is connected to specific passages in the New Testament, highlighting James's familiarity with these passages and a "tight" understanding of Christian faith.

> My mom works at the Lancôme counter, selling perfume at Nordstrom, and my dad has been a UPS deliverer for 33 years. So, not an intellectually heavy background. I think that was something where I felt called by the Spirit rather than encouraged by family members.

James' learned about theology on his own, prior to college, which is important for understanding his approach to faith *in* college (a process I will discuss below).

Although James' beliefs revolved around religion, other students entered college as political ideologues. Harper is a queer, first-generation college student from Arkansas that I met through working with residential life. With a bob, big glasses, and hipster-chic attire, she exuded a self-assuredness that set her apart from many others that I interviewed. Harper was passionate about her progressive, secular beliefs. In dorm discussions, she was not afraid to challenge her peers when they said something she found ignorant or bigoted.

When I invited Harper to do an interview, I learned that, to my surprise, she grew up in a conservative Christian family. She told me:

> I grew up Baptist. And I was very religious when I was little, until probably sometime in middle school. I just was like, "oh my god, this [religion] is sexist and homophobic. So, it is against me as a person." And some of the statements were weird - it came off to me as cultish, and just problematic in general. So, when I was more aware of the world and able to develop my own thoughts, I was like, "okay, this isn't something I really agree with," and I saw a lot of toxic behavior around it, so I was like, "*okay, I'm not Christian anymore*." But I didn't tell any of my family and I still acted like I was because it's very important to a lot of people in my family.

As she moved away from the Christian conservative beliefs of her family and community, she developed a deep interest in progressive politics:

> I've always been really interested in politics. I remember spending much of my summers and all my time on the news. I'm always consuming news. I have Twitter, I follow a couple of my close friends, but I mute them half the time, and I follow almost all the Congress people. I have like 400 something; I'm trying to follow all of them.

Harper developed declarative beliefs as she diverged from what was common sense in her family and home community. She had to articulate, first to herself and eventually to others, why

she did not want to be Christian – and what she wanted to be instead. She began to follow political ideologues, which sparked an ardent commitment to progressivism. Both James and Harper, as well as other ideologues that I interviewed, could pinpoint the moments that they developed their own beliefs (e.g., moments where beliefs became more declarative). The process of personal belief formation, especially when combined with the cost of holding different beliefs from one's family or community, often sparked ardent devotion (zeal).[17]

Agnostics

At the opposite end of both continuums from ideologues, agnostics have less declarative, nonzealous beliefs. For example, Iris, a soft-spoken, Asian American woman that I met through a class offered by Lewis Center, explained her belief background as follows:

> Growing up, my family pretty much raised me and my brothers as Catholics, and we went to church. Around high school, when I started to get busy, we kind of stopped going to church. I don't think we stopped believing in the religion…But coming to college and becoming more independent has made me gain some distance from religion.
>
> For political beliefs, to be super honest, coming into college - I don't think I really *had* any. The culture at my high school was very much just getting good grades and focusing on your path to college. So, I pretty much had no political beliefs coming in.

Education was the arena of ardent devotion in Iris's family, not religion or politics. When I met Iris through a seminar at Lewis Center, she described herself as someone "figuring out" her beliefs. Unlike peers, who used class discussions as a platform to share their moral convictions, Iris mostly listened, taking in other's perspectives, and expressing a desire to know more. She joked with me that she was a political "blank slate" before college.

Likewise, I got to know Ratna, an Indian American woman from an upper-class family, through my work in residential education. I often ran into Ratna studying early on Saturday

[17] This finding – that costliness and sacrifice sparks ardent devotion – aligns with recent work on how longer fasting strengthens religiosity (Aksoy and Gambetta 2022).

mornings before anyone else was awake. She wanted to become a doctor and knew how to build the resume she needed for medical school. But when it came to core beliefs, she was less sure:

> I am Hindu, and my family is Hindu. But it just hasn't trickled down to me or my sister really…When someone asks me, I always do a double take because I'm like, *I don't know.* I've never given it a lot of thought. I have always defaulted my whole life to just saying that I'm Hindu, but clearly, I need to reevaluate once I start my own family and decide how to raise them. And if I don't feel that deep connection, it just feels a little bit fake, you know? To claim a religious identity when, intrinsically, I'm not motivated to follow it.

This quote demonstrates that Ratna held her religious beliefs agnostically. She told me that she had "never given [Hinduism] a lot of thought" (low declarativeness) and does not "feel that deep connection" (low zeal).

Followers

I turn now to the off-diagonal forms of holding beliefs. A follower orientation is one of high zeal combined with less declarative knowledge. For example, Aria, a Black woman from Virginia who attended an Ivy League school for college, told me: "I grew up in a very religious home. My father is a preacher in a Black Pentecostal church. I was really sheltered. I didn't experience a lot outside the home before college." She explained:

> I hadn't really perceived myself as very religious until college, because in the South, being Christian is common. I was accustomed to being surrounded by Christians and not really having to defend my viewpoints.

A comparison is helpful here: Harper *had* to defend her viewpoints because they were rare. Aria's religious beliefs – though deeply held - rarely required articulation prior to college, because they were common sense. As a preacher's kid, it was taken for granted that Aria would exercise utmost devotion to the faith of the family. In reflecting that she hadn't perceived herself as very religious *until college,* Aria implies that she was very religious (high zeal) but was not consciously aware of this (low declarativeness).

Similarly, a follower orientation to political beliefs involves high devotion but less declarative knowledge. Jude, a first-generation college student, had more developed political convictions than many in her home community, but when she began college, she realized how much more there was to learn. When I interviewed her during her first semester, she explained:

> In the context of my family, I think I'm probably the most politically aware of the people that I'm at home with. But on campus, I feel like I'm *definitely* not. Like, I know I'm ignorant to a lot of different things, which I feel like is also okay as long as I know that I'm ignorant, and I'm trying to be less ignorant. (Interviewer: is something coming to mind?) Yeah, one of the [summer reading] books was about San Francisco and the gentrification crisis. I knew of it, but that book really dove into it and really opened my eyes to like, "Oh, yeah, these are big problems that I didn't really know before."

Jude was deeply committed to progressivism, but when she arrived on campus, she came to see herself as "ignorant to a lot of things." As these two examples demonstrate, a follower orientation combines high devotion to belief identities, but limited declarative knowledge. As in Aria's case, I found that this orientation took shape in environments where one's beliefs are widely shared.

Contenders

Contenders are the opposite of followers: they have abstract, declarative knowledge of their beliefs but a cool attachment rather than ardent devotion. For example, Addi, a Black, Muslim man who grew up in New York City, became deeply interested in politics in high school. "As a result of dating someone who was very political, I got introduced to politics, and that's when I started forming my political beliefs. She was a liberal; I decided to be conservative." He continued:

> I spent a lot of the time in high school learning political philosophy and rhetoric, how to speak to people, how to have arguments. I always wanted to learn about politics…I would talk to people who are liberal. I wanted to engage in conversation. And oftentimes, I would engage in conversations with five people at a time, all opposing me. I was just sort of a contrarian.

Addi knew his political convictions and spent time learning political philosophy and rhetoric. He told me that he was consistently a contrarian in both liberal *and* conservative spaces. I observed

how his "cool" attachment to his political beliefs made debating an enjoyable challenge rather than a stressful experience when he participated in a political discussion panel that CF hosted.

I also met students with a contender orientation to their religious beliefs. Corina, an extroverted, Filipina, progressive Christian from Los Angeles, told me:

> The way that I have lived Christianity and have thought about it is just a little different than mainstream evangelicals, in terms of my justice orientation, or thinking about minorities. Or I read different literature than a lot of [Christians]. So, part of it was me filling in the shoes of the expectation to ask, "how can we think about this differently?" Which I was really happy to do, it was something that I enjoyed doing. I think that in any scenario, I'd be comfortable being the naysayer, or just coming in from a different angle.

Likewise, Foundin, a working-class, Christian student who grew up in a small town in the Midwest, recounted:

> I grew up not liking [institutionalized] religion. My mom was intent on teaching us the Bible and making sure we had a personal relationship with Jesus. But the church was always viewed as this corrupt institution. I thought that Christianity was more solo than community endeavor. In high school, I was like, "I want to major in philosophy, do religious studies and psychology and learn about the human condition." My youth pastor said, "You can't do that, man. You're not going to be a believer anymore." I did it anyway, or started doing it.

Whereas followers are passionate about their belief identities, even if they cannot always articulate the specific tenets of their beliefs, contenders are skilled at articulating abstract ideas but less ardent in their devotion to their belief identities. Rather than developing black-and-white orientations, contenders question and push boundaries (as Foundin's resistance to his youth pastor shows).

EPISTEMIC ENCOUNTERS

A semiotic shift is a phenomenological, subjective experience that occurs when beliefs or behaviors are resignified, often as a result of participating in a new environment. At the micro-level, semiotic shifts are triggered through interactions. In organizational environments, people may experience a variety of encounters with new beliefs and behaviors – from surprising

conversations to unnerving experiences with institutional rituals. Epistemic encounters are those interactions that take on epistemic significance by triggering the (re)examination of a belief or behavior that had formerly been taken for granted.[18] In this section, I discuss how modes of carrying beliefs spark different kinds of epistemic encounters.

An ideological orientation sparks reifying encounters

People with an ideological orientation often experience encounters with alternative beliefs and behaviors as *reifying*: these interactions foster defensiveness and increase opposition to alternative beliefs and behaviors. For example, Victor, a low-income, Hispanic man and a leader of a Republican club on campus, explained how he became more conservative in college:

> I was the president of one of the MEChA[19] chapters at my high school to promote cultural awareness about my community. We [conservatives] laugh about that now. Because, when I came here, I was suddenly excluded from those places [cultural centers]. I wanted to help, I cared about these issues. But I sent emails and people didn't respond to me. I would go up to people, and there was sidestepping – *they don't want to work with me.* Because they feel antagonized about the fact that there are low-income Hispanics conservatives like me.

I did not observe Victor's interactions with the members of cultural centers firsthand. But what is notable is how Victor interprets these interactions: he believes that his peers did not want to work with him *because* he was conservative. He invited me to visit one of his club's meetings, where I observed how they collectively discussed their encounters with progressive peers, reinforcing the idea that others are biased against conservatives in ways that are unjust.[20]

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[18] Because of these inherently subjective and interpretive dimensions, interviews are important to understand what people consider to be epistemic encounters and how they experience them, but ethnographic observations are important for observing how people negotiate or collectively interpret epistemic encounters. As Howie Becker (1953) observed, subjective experiences are rendered meaningful through social interactions.

[19] MEChA stands for "Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán" and is an organization that seeks to promote Chicano unity and empowerment through political action.

[20] For a more in-depth analysis of this reifying process as it relates to conservative college students, see Binder and Wood (2013) and Binder and Kidder (2022).

Students also had reifying encounters related to their religious beliefs. Seth (an ideologue) grew up in the Middle East, where his parents were missionaries. When he got his acceptance to Stanford, he was surprised. "I was like, 'okay, hold up. I want to pray about this. I don't want to go to Stanford because it's a big-name school. I want to really make sure that that's where God wants to take me.'" Though he grew up in an environment where Christian beliefs were rare, Stanford was unexpectedly unsettling. He explained:

> I don't think I realized how sheltered I was in [home country] - from just raw Californian culture. So, new student orientation - that was *definitely* kind of a shock. And I realized very quickly that my faith is going to be a sink or swim deal. And it was clear to me that I wanted to swim - and I wanted to learn to *swim well.*

By framing faith as a "sink or swim matter," Seth demonstrates his view that there are no viable alternatives to his current faith. This dichotomy highlights his zealous, all-or-nothing orientation to his beliefs. I asked him what was most striking about orientation. He quickly replied, "Beyond Sex Ed." He explained:

> **Seth:** It's kind of infamous. It's basically just sex ed all over again, for college students. And yeah, quite evil.
> **Interviewer:** Evil? In the sense of?
> **Seth:** Both cruel to put college students through it (sex ed) again and just evil in the sense of…not of God. Not biblical. Yeah.

Seth encountered progressive sexual ethics through new student orientation (an institutional ritual). The fact that this event was required may have played into Seth's sense that faith would be a "sink or swim" matter. Hearing stories of students' sexual journeys was jarring for Seth and others, who were frustrated that abstinence was not offered as a viable approach to sexual ethics in college. Another CF member, Mara, told me, "There was *one* person on the panel who had practiced abstinence and their conclusion was 'Yeah, it's not worth it.'" With ideologues, reification arose from their perception that their beliefs were not adequately represented alongside others. This led

them to deepen their commitment to holding rare beliefs and become wary of alternative beliefs, thus seeking spaces where they could burrow.

An agnostic orientation sparks demanding encounters

People with an agnostic orientation to their beliefs often had *demanding* encounters: they felt pushed to choose sides and decide what groups they were loyal to. For example, Nelson, a Christian raised in an upper-middle class family in New York City, recounted how he felt pushed out of a Christian group during his first year of college. One of the women in the group accused him of "being a player" and told others (in his words) "He's sleazy and fucks around." Nelson did not see much conflict between joining a Christian fellowship and joining a fraternity. But in both groups, his alternative commitments caused tension. Many Christian students I interviewed described college as a place where their faith thrived, but Nelson described college as a "very secular place" where a lot of Christians are "seeing the hammer."

> You have this reputation of Christians that sort of persists throughout the entirety of the student body. That Christians are people who hate LGBTQ people, or evangelical Christians are conservative, which is relatively true. So ultimately, I feel like conversations on that front have decreased on my end.

Nelson's experiences led him to believe that he was "falling short" of the commitments he should have been making to his faith. Meanwhile, his fraternity included people who "say things that are just very, very objectifying to women…When part of that student body says that, and you consider *yourself* to be friends with a lot of that part of the student body…It's difficult." Nelson's efforts to compartmentalize spheres of life were challenged by the semiotic landscape of his campus. Spaces where he felt comfortable in separately had become closer (and more oppositional) on campus, making it difficult to participate in both. When I asked Nelson how he would compare his faith now (junior year) to when he began college, he immediately replied: "It has *definitely* decreased."

Demanding encounters occurred with political beliefs as well. Iris told me how her interactions pushed her to form her beliefs: "being in college, where there are a lot of things going on - it's forced me to do more research." She went on, "Eisha is the first Black friend that I have, and my other housemate is Pacific Islander. Becoming friends with them has made me more aware [of racial injustices] – especially in the context of *their* relationships with the university." Eisha and Iris co-participated in a class offered by Lewis Center which sought to deepen students' understandings of race, class, and gender through the lived experiences of participants. When Iris heard Eisha talk about her experiences of hatred from Asian men in their computer science classes, she was stunned. "Hearing what happened to you, Eisha," she said, "that just fucking sucks." A year later, she recounted the significance of that discussion: "I had *no idea* what Eisha was experiencing, even though we are best friends and had taken all these classes together." Overall, these encounters led Iris to become progressive and to distance from Catholicism. She began to evaluate Catholic beliefs in terms of whether they aligned with her progressive convictions. Demanding encounters often push people with agnostic orientations to distance from prior beliefs, either by revealing their ambivalence (as in Nelson's case) or by fostering new belief commitments (as in Iris's case).

A follower orientation sparks disorienting encounters

Followers experienced disorienting encounters, as zealously held beliefs come into question. Earlier, I introduced Aria, a "pastor's kid" who attended an Ivy League university. In reflecting on her first year, she told me:

> College was a huge mind explosion, in terms of all the belief systems that people had. I was encountering a lot of people from different belief systems and realizing that I was *very* religious to a lot of other people…I found that some of my viewpoints were quite bigoted, at least as perceived by other people, specifically on the topics of sexual identity and being celibate until marriage, which was really important to my parents - for me to do that. And important to me, inherently, because I was very close to my parents growing up.

As a result of these encounters, Aria began to question her experiences growing up. She explained: “As a teenager, I didn't really look at my parents as being overprotective or annoying, or overbearing with religion or God.” In college, this changed: “My whole perspective shifted, and I got mad. I became irate with the fact that I had not had as many experiences as my friends. I felt like I had missed out.” Broader questions arose about the context she grew up in when she realized how sheltered she had been. Overall, she described college as a “culture shock.”

Both Seth (an ideologue) and Aria (a follower) use the language of “sheltered” and “culture shock” to describe their transitions to college (in other words, both were semiotically shifted). But their responses to, and interpretations of, culture shock are different. Seth loses trust in his *new* environment and becomes defensive, seeing it a place that wants to “sink” his faith. Aria begins to question her *old* environment and realizes her uncertainty about her own beliefs on issues like sexuality. Ideologues entered college having actively chosen their beliefs. But those with less declarative beliefs often felt as if they had not consciously considered their beliefs - or possible alternatives - prior to college.

Temi also experienced disorientating encounters during her first year of college. Temi grew up in Zambia. Her parents were pastors, and the local church was a central institution in her home community. Learning about the history of colonialism in a first-year seminar was eye-opening:

> A lot of my [religious] doubts had to do with my intersectional identities. Understanding big issues, like why racism exists, why God allowed that. Why colonialism happened, because colonialism was the avenue through which Christianity came to many parts of the African continent, and to Zambia in particular. So, it was like, *why am I embracing this colonial religion when colonialism was used as a tool of oppression for my ancestors?*

Temi found herself in a semiotic double-bind. Embracing Christian faith meant embracing a tool that had been used to oppress her ancestors. But rejecting Christian faith meant distancing from her family and home community. She began to question her faith more holistically:

> So, I had a lot of questions. And where I grew up, at least in my home church, there wasn't really room for navigating those questions without people then judging you, or looking down on you, saying, “why are you even asking these questions?” So, I assumed that, because I had those doubts, that made me not a real Christian.

She described the first half of college as a time of “disintegration” because she was “exposed, for the first time, to a lot of people who didn’t believe the same thing that I believed.” In her home community, where most people were Christian, her beliefs were common sense. But in college, Temi became actively engaged in exploring difficult questions:

> I started to be really curious about what Africa would look like if it hadn't been colonized. And I was navigating my own identity coming to this institution. It was like, I *do* want to hold on to who I am. But I wonder, what is this definition of who I am? *That came before the missionaries came?*

Some secular students experienced disorientation through encounters with *religious* peers in college. For example, Ann became Christian in college. The first friend she made was Mara, a fellow linguistics major, who invited Ann to visit CF. There, Ann had encounters that led her to question her agnosticism. She told me:

> At some point, I was like, “okay, so God actually *does* want to connect with me.” Before then, I always assumed that wasn't the case. And that I just had to try harder. And then maybe God will notice. By the end of freshman year, I still don't know if I could say there was something that happened that was evidence for God, but that year, I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is what the presence of God feels like." And then, it just grew from there.

Ann was disoriented by experiencing “the presence of God.” She put herself in a position where religious experience was a possibility by visiting CF, just as Temi and Aria put themselves in positions where doubt was a possibility by engaging in conversations about sexuality and colonialism. It is unlikely that people will experience encounters as disorientating without being open to such experiences - but openness alone does not engender disorientation. Less declarative beliefs are also important: the realization that even if they knew *what* they believed, they did not

always know *why* they believed it. When beliefs are held zealously, the discovery of unanswered questions can be particularly disorienting.

A contender orientation sparks reconciliatory encounters

For contenders, interactions across belief differences pushed them to engage in reconciliation, exploring ways to marry contradictory experiences or hold paradoxical beliefs. Corina (the Filipina contender I introduced earlier) experienced encounters – in both religious and non-religious settings - as reconciliation-provoking. She joined Hope (a Christian student group), because:

> They didn't shy away from talking about LGBTQ issues, race issues, identity issues. And that's something that I wasn't able to talk about growing up, and I always was like, "I want to know what Christian people think about these things."

Corina joined a group that talked about issues that she "wasn't able to talk about growing up," rather than seeking a group as similar to her former community as possible. But she had unexpectedly difficult relationships in Hope, as co-members failed to support her in the wake of traumatic experiences. Rather than move away from Christian community (e.g., distancing), she joined CF, though she was wary of CF's conservative reputation. She told me, "CF has the reputation of a ring by spring mentality.[21] And I was like, 'you know there are other things people can care about besides marriage. Like race, for example.'" Corina knew that she would be one of the most progressive members of CF, but she joined anyways, and experienced the communal support that had been lacking in Hope. Simultaneously, she joined the Native American cultural center, a space where people challenged her beliefs from a different direction. She reflected:

> I wanted to be immersed in a group where I would feel uncomfortable, so that it would give me room to grow and to see the world how they saw it. I learned a lot from the Native American cultural center on why a lot of Native groups are opposed to Christianity. Not just on a high level, like, 'Oh, yeah, colonization,' but on a very nuanced level. I was able

[21] This is a common term within Christian subcultures, especially in the South or at religious colleges, where many students see finding a spouse as a core goal of college and hope to get engaged by the spring of their senior year.

> to learn a lot of nuances of what they believe, what their culture believes, and *how Western Christianity doesn't meld to that, but the Bible still does.*

Corina realizes that "Western Christianity" does not meld with her friends' beliefs, but the Bible still does (a reconciliatory encounter). Participating in CF and the Native American cultural center simultaneously pushed Corina to develop more complex, nuanced beliefs (e.g., bridging).

Non-religious students also described reconciliatory encounters. Karl, a queer, agnostically Buddhist student told me: "My first year of college, I was curious about different religions. So, I went to Catholic mass a couple times and some Christian fellowships on campus." I asked whether he had any salient experiences exploring religious groups. He replied:

> Hearing the perspectives of queer Christians. One group had a small group focused on queer identity. Hearing how they think about how Christianity relates to queer identity was pretty interesting to me, I was diving into a perspective that I hadn't heard before. Because, in high school, the only Christianity that I was familiar with was [LGBTQ] intolerant.

He explained how these experiences convinced him that, rather than view people as "red flags," based on their belief groups (as he once did), it was important to be in relationship with those who have alternative, and even oppositional, beliefs. His curiosity about different religions emerged from his contender orientation, but it was through the process of exploring different religious groups that he had reconciliatory encounters that pushed him to bridge.

HOW BELIEF JOURNEYS UNFOLD OVER TIME

My data suggests three overarching ways that people navigate personal beliefs in pluralistic semiotic landscapes: burrowing, distancing, and bridging. Generally, reifying encounters lead ideologues to burrow, demanding and disorienting encounters lead agnostics and followers to distance, and reconciliatory encounters lead contenders to bridge. In this section, I further demonstrate how belief journeys unfold. I highlight both expected and unexpected cases of burrowing, distancing, and bridging. This reveals that, through epistemic encounters, "lane

change" becomes possible as some adopt strategies that we would not expect if we only considered how they initially carried their beliefs.

Burrowing

Burrowing occurs when a person becomes increasingly committed to their beliefs and embeds themselves in a community where others share these beliefs. For Seth (the ideologue who saw faith as a sink or swim matter), burrowing quickly emerged as the clear path to take. During his first week on campus, Seth saw CF tabling and struck up a conversation with Greg (the campus minister). "I asked him all sorts of theological questions - what they believe about the Bible. About the Holy Spirit. Hot topics, like women in ministry or LGBTQ issues. I did not agree with him on everything, but he answered very biblically, in my opinion." Seth sought a group that was aligned with his own theological convictions.

Greg recounted a meeting he had with Seth halfway through his first quarter on campus. Seth was discouraged that he was sharing his beliefs with people and "had not seen anyone come to faith." Greg laughed and explained to Seth that ministry might look different in college. Seth shifted his approach. He told me, "My ministry became much more discipleship geared - raising up already-believers and making them stronger believers, teaching them spiritual habits and disciplines." Reifying encounters intensified his sense that his community should consist of people with shared beliefs. By his senior year, Seth told me that his closest friends "are all people in CF."

But some followers and agnostics also burrowed, despite their intentions to bridge. These individuals had disorienting or demanding encounters that pushed them *into* burrowing spaces, where they came to interpret external encounters as reifying. Alejandro, for example, did not intend to burrow into a faith-based community in college. Like Nelson (agnostic orientation), he told me that he was "looking for Christian community, but not really, really looking for it." During his first

semester, Alejandro came to small group, but almost always left early to meet his dorm friends. “Sorry to leave early again,” he interrupted sheepishly while glancing at his phone, “but I gotta get to this basketball game” (Field note 10-18-19). Once a quarter, CF does an outreach event called “Pancakes and Prayer” where they serve free pancakes to partiers and anyone traversing campus late at night. When I observed this event, Alejandro walked by the table with his dorm friends. He greeted his peers, but did not acknowledge his membership in CF. From the vantage point of flipping pancakes, I sensed that this collision of social worlds was potentially awkward for him.

In spring of his first year, the coronavirus pandemic hit, and students were sent home to continue college remotely. This marked a turning point for Alejandro. His dorm community fizzled out, but CF continued to meet via Zoom. He realized that the dorm “was not a lasting community.” He began reading the Bible with his small group leader:

> Diego invited me to read the New Testament with him. And there's a lot of stuff in there that really caught my eye in terms of, you have to at least *try* to kind of resist temptations. So, there's been a change between me now and me a year ago. At the beginning of college, it was like, "Oh, I'll meet all my friends in my dorm," you know, like, “Christians have a lot of leeway. There's not a lot of specific prohibitions in Christianity.” And now it's like, “Actually, no, it's the other way. I need to be showing example to these friends of the way that I live to show my inward commitment to God.”

Even as CF became a central source of community during the pandemic, he planned to reunite with dorm friends when campus reopened. He told me, “It will probably be dorm friends that I pod together with. That was always my plan, even back when things were normal. I was already organizing a housing group with those friends.”

When the return to campus proved slower than expected, he decided to live with Christian friends his sophomore year. He was surprised to be nominated as a potential student leader for CF:

> I was really honored that someone had nominated me to be an officer that year, which was very unexpected for me. I think that changed my thinking, like, "wow, I should approach this with more seriousness, and I should be more than just a kind of passive member."

Over two years of fieldwork, I watched Alejandro shift from being a peripheral member to a core member. I did a follow-up interview with him his senior year, and learned that his college experience had come to *center* on CF. He notified me that he and Rea (another CF member) would be getting married in two weeks.[22] He was serving as the student president of CF. He mentioned theological debates he was having with a Muslim friend: "Even today, I was texting him about, you know, archaeological evidence for the New Testament." In short, his belief orientation had changed from agnostic to ideologue.

Both the pandemic and the return to campus brought encounters that fostered this shift. He explained:

> When I came in [to college], I was kind of unformed. I was generally more conservative because of my upbringing. But I was more open. Especially in 2020, I was more open to donating to certain [progressive] funds or listening to the pleas of Kaia [a progressive member of CF] or something. And then, over that year, doing my own delve into politics, I felt kind of cheated by buying into that stuff. Also, COVID, the way the university handled it, polarized me. I was habitually dealing with feelings of frustration and anger, all junior year, because, as an RA, I was heavily restricted in what I could do. And I was tasked with enforcing policies that I really disagreed with.

Alejandro's work as a Resident Assistant reified his growing sense that campus culture was opposed to Christian faith. He told me that his work in the dorm was his "time in Nineveh."[23] What shifted Alejandro from agnostic to ideologue (and from distancing to burrowing), were new epistemic encounters during the pandemic, whereby he became increasingly committed to conservative, Christian beliefs and increasingly opposed to other views.

Alejandro's story is not unique: I observed many students who burrowed into singular groups, despite their intent to bridge across groups in college. For example, Jessica, a first-

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[22] This was an unexpected development. In a prior interview, he said (regarding dating), "I don't have anyone in mind. I'm not really looking that hard. It's not a huge priority, but I'm open to it."

[23] Nineveh, in the Old Testament, was a non-Jewish city that Jonah, an Israelite prophet, was called by God to go to and encourage the people to follow God. Alejandro is suggesting that he was "called" to the dorm as a "secular space" where he was supposed to point people to God.

generation, low-income Latina student who burrowed into Lewis Center, told a younger student, "[University] is like a…*disappointing boyfriend*. I thought it would be the best place ever -- the most progressive place ever – and it is *not.*" Overhearing this conversation, her friends burst out in laughter and expressed their agreement. In contrast, Jessica continued, "Lewis Center is a communal space that is *truly* progressive." These kinds of exchanges, where opposition to dominant culture on campus was collectively narrated, were common in both CF and LC. Each group engaged in what Reed (2015) calls *resignification*, where meanings are put forth and stories are told to reinterpret the symbolic order of the broader environment. Through resignification, encounters associated with one group were rendered surprisingly positive, as encounters with the broader context were collectively interpreted as negative.

Overall, my findings suggest that there are two pathways to burrowing. Ideologues often adopt a burrowing approach immediately, as they have initial epistemic encounters that reify their beliefs and sense of opposition to campus. But some followers and agnostics also burrowed. Imbalanced encounters led to increased engagement in some groups and increased distance from others. Through participating in "burrowing" spaces (where ideologues had made their home), encounters with those outside the community were collectively interpreted as reifying, leading some followers and agnostics to become ideologues.

Distancing

Distancing takes place when a person makes a fundamental shift away from their former beliefs and belief groups. Disorienting encounters lead to distancing by triggering doubts and revealing questions that had formerly been taken for granted. Aria (the pastor's kid who attended an Ivy League school) explained how she began dating a non-Christian man her sophomore year, which caused a "huge rift" with her family and home community.

> I pretty much barred myself from the church. I shut them out and didn't want to talk to them. And as a result, I equated that with my faith because that was just how I compartmentalized everything. And I decided to just stop praying, stop going to church. And another thing too - Trump was elected when I was a sophomore, and I noticed a lot of white Christians were supporters. I just started getting really frustrated with Christianity as a whole. So, in addition to my own personal life, then seeing politically, how things were playing out in the church and things I had just been very blind to previously, I got really mad, and I just decided - you know what, *I'm not going to do this anymore.* Maybe this Christianity stuff is just really stupid.

Likewise, Temi told me, "I distanced myself from Christian community, that was my process of navigation." When I met Temi her sophomore year, she was not involved in religious life. The Center for African Studies was her primary source of community.

A few contenders distanced when reckoning encounters led them to explore new beliefs that proved more compelling. One such person is Addi, the conservative Muslim I introduced earlier. He told me that his "inclination toward religion began" when he dated a Christian in college:

> I just woke up one day, I was like, "What are my priorities?" I put religion at the top and I was like, "*Okay, I'm gonna solve this first*." And that's when I began to study Islam much more. I started reading the Quran. And I finished it, and I started studying the Hadith, which are the sayings and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. I started watching Muslim theologians talk about the religion. I prayed pretty much every day on time.

Addi wanted to understand the critiques people had regarding Islam: "So, that's when I began watching a lot of debates on religion." He recounted one key epistemic encounter:

> One day, I was watching this Muslim scholar. And he said something which I thought was morally wrong with regards to Islam. And that's when I decided to not be Muslim. But even after that, I still considered Islam to be a religion that I was going to be a part of, if I found a way to rectify my issues with it.

Addi talked to many different people – the pastor of CF, the Catholic priest on campus, his Arabic professor (who was Muslim), imams in the local masjid, and his peers, some of whom were deeply committed Christians. Eventually, he decided to become Christian. This was a relationally costly decision. He said: "On my way to my baptism, I recognized that in becoming Christian,

there were a lot of things that I would be forsaking - my mom's tradition, being Muslim, things like that." Addi's religious change also had implications for his political engagement.

> Politics took on a less significant role in my life. Yeah, it diminished quite dramatically. To the point where, I stopped going to College Republicans junior year. I stopped really participating in anything…That took on less of a role in my life simply because I have other things that I need to prioritize.
>
> Seeing the pettiness of politics [on campus] alienated me from it. Sort of caused me to fall into the arms of religion and theology - which now I care about much more.

In short, Addi not only distanced from his former religious beliefs - he also distanced from conservatism as his main belief anchor.

Through Lewis Center, I also met students who distanced from prior beliefs and communities, especially as they developed more progressive (and more ideological) beliefs. For example, Natalie, a Latina woman, recounted an eye-opening brunch with her family:

> I went to brunch with my family. And I was like, "oh my gosh, I feel so different from you guys. Because the things I want to talk about, you guys would have *no idea* what I'm talking about." That was the first time I've experienced that. I have read about it - you know, people from different backgrounds become less like their family. But I really *felt* it. I'm like, "oh my god, I just want to talk about Bourdieu right now and you won't even know what I mean." I love that you can talk about that at Lewis Center and people aren't like, "What the hell are you talking about?" It's just natural conversation.

Unlike burrowing, which some people intentionally choose as a way to maintain beliefs in a new context, few people plan to distance from their beliefs or former belief groups in college. Distancing occurs when the gamut of a person's epistemic encounters tips the scales against former beliefs and belief groups. Disorientation leads to disenchantment as beliefs unexpectedly "stop working" in a new context. Some, like Addi, move from one belief group to another, but others struggle to find new communities. Kaia, for example, was involved in CF during her first two years of college, then distanced from the group later in college. When I did a follow-up interview with her post-college, she was questioning her Christian beliefs all together.

> Before, I was involved with CF - worship and church and everything. Now, I feel like a blank slate, almost in that I am taking everything away, and just building things slowly, one by one. My family is Christian, from my grandparent's generation. So that legacy was what drove me to continue my faith in Jesus. But recently, I've just been thinking, *I have so many unanswered questions*. I just want to take things slow. I want to just break it all down and build back up from the foundation.

When I asked her what community looked like post-college, she replied: "Community?" and paused to think. "I don't know…I think most of the time, I am by myself." She elaborated: "My community is very transient…the struggle that comes with community and deep friendships, I'm kind of over it, at this point. I keep a barrier up."

Bridging

Some people bridged instead of burrowing or distancing – exploring new beliefs without foregoing old ones and participating in multiple belief groups in college. Bridging is the approach that most students planned to adopt in college (even ideologues, who wanted to share their beliefs with others), yet only a subset of students actually did bridge over time, most of whom entered college with a contender orientation.

Like Corina, Flavia entered college with a contender orientation and consistently bridged throughout college. She was involved in CF as well as Jewish life, played a varsity sport, wrote for the contrarian campus newspaper, and planned to pursue a humanities PhD post-graduation. Greg (CF's campus minister) told me that Flavia was a "phenomenal inviter" and single-handedly brought in more than half of CF's new visitors. When I observed Pancakes and Prayer (the outreach event that Alejandro found awkward), Flavia brought two non-religious friends from her sports team with her – not to eat pancakes, but to help her make them for others.

Flavia grew up in an upper-class, conservative, Episcopalian family on the East Coast. She described her religious background as focused on "tradition" rather than "faith." Her family was more zealous about politics than religion: they stopped attending their church when it became "too

left-wing." Flavia formed highly declarative beliefs prior to college through attending a secular, progressive boarding school. CF was one of multiple groups she joined in college where she did not easily fit in.

> I realized very quickly when I arrived at CF that it was not actually the kind of Christian that I was...but I thought that it would be good for my growth. Because there are a lot of kinds of Christianity besides what I was raised with, and it's important for me to push myself. I thought it would be challenging, which it is.

Flavia bridged throughout college, viewing challenging encounters as good for her growth. When I interviewed her after graduating, she reflected, "I had never felt like I fit in with a group until after college. I didn't really fit in with CF either - I came from this very WASP-y, stiff upper lip, background. And CF is just really, really not that."

A few students who did not enter with contender orientations still managed to adopt a bridging strategy in college. Kat (follower orientation) is one such person. She told me, "Christianity is important to me because it played a big role in my life and was very woven into my family relationships." Like Temi and Aria, she discussed how college brought disorienting questions to the fore:

> Faith was a big part of my family - I genuinely believed it. But going into college, I started to have a lot of questions. I think it's generally a time when you start to try to really make your faith your own thing. And so, for most of college, I was grappling with faith. You know, there's devout people who grew up in devout Muslim families - *how do I know that Christianity is different?* I didn't want to be religious, just because it's familiar - if this is not really *it,* then I don't want to just believe it.

But these questions drove Kat deeper into Christian community, rather than away from it. She visited "almost every Christian fellowship" during her first two years of college, though her closest friends were secular. She struggled to find a Christian group where she fit in, because in most groups, "people weren't in a wrestling period - they knew they were Christian and just wanted Christian friends" (e.g., burrowing). She felt that she needed "material to chew on" to figure out

her beliefs. She joined CF her junior year because it provided this material, though she did not connect immediately with co-members: “It was not like ‘I love all these people, we are going to be best friends.’” In CF’s small groups, I noticed that Kat regularly raised doubts and questions to hear others’ thoughts on them.

Kat became increasingly involved with CF, but maintained her friendships with nonreligious peers, rather than moving away from these friendships. She attributed her belief exploration to her (secular) best friend:

> The wrestling thing – that part of me was kind of dead until college. I almost feel like I became *sentient* in college. Like I never had any deep conversations with anyone before, not because I couldn't, but I just didn't engage in deep conversations. My closest friend at [university], who I met my freshman year, I think she triggered it… Now that questioning part of me feels really like a part of who I am.

Bridging was not easy. Kat was put off by her Christian peers who had different beliefs on gender equality:

> There is a lot that I hear from Christians about how we should do X, Y, or Z [regarding gender]. I'm like, “I understand where you're coming from. But practically, this is how it plays out. So, we need to change things upstream because these are these downstream effects, and it's harmful in these ways.” And it left me feeling very frustrated and angry with a lot of Christians.
>
> But that was difficult because, parallel to this, *my faith is growing*. And the Bible tells you to love one another. And there's these people who are really strong Christians, but when it comes to some of these gender things, they say things that I feel are harmful downstream. And so, it left me really frustrated because I want to be like “oh, they're just wrong. They're just these bad Christians.” But you can't say that. At the same time, what they're suggesting works for a small group of people but is harmful in these ways.

Because her faith was growing, she chose not to distance from Christian peers. But simultaneously, her relationships with non-Christian friends enabled her to see how ostracizing Christians’ beliefs could be. Her best friend visited CF and was “livid” with the views she encountered, which was surprising to Kat: “I was confused, because I felt very much at home, and comfortable with the jokes and the political ideas.” She went on:

> Then, for the first time, I *understood.* And I was frustrated that I didn't realize this before. It reemphasized in my mind the importance of staying in touch with the world and being really good friends with people who weren't Christian, because I realized how I had been completely blind to some of these things.

When I interviewed her post-college, she was continuing to bridge: her rootedness in Christian faith grew through her church, just as her commitment to being in relationship with ideologically diverse friends continued. We discussed issues she was wrestling with, from abortion to dating, where she felt that her Christian and progressive beliefs pulled her in opposite directions.

Bridging, wherein people belong to multiple epistemic communities and develop complex, "alternative" beliefs, emerges from reconciliatory encounters. Contenders are especially likely to have such encounters. Their confidence in their knowledge of their beliefs combined with a cool attachment (low zeal) makes them unafraid of diverging from their belief group to explore new ideas and practices. Though many moved away from bridging in college as they realized that burrowing or distancing were easier paths, some, like Kat, had reconciliation-provoking encounters that led them to bridge.

DISCUSSION

The core problem that I have sought to address in this article is this: existing cultural theories do not fully account for when and why some people's beliefs and practices evolve when they change contexts, whereas others' double down on prior commitments. The practical relevance of this theoretical puzzle is clear. We are in a time marked by significant ideological polarization, where few common moral foundations are widely taken for granted (Giddens 1991; Gorski 2019; Mason 2018). A deeper understanding of how people sustain anchoring beliefs in pluralistic environments, as well as when and how people's beliefs change, is essential for navigating the social and civic challenges we face.

I offer three main contributions. First, I put forth the concept of *semiotic shifts*: the process by which the personal significance of one's beliefs and/or behaviors are redefined, usually through participation in a new environment. Second, I offer a novel typology of how people carry their core beliefs. Finally, I develop three modal strategies of action for how people navigate personal beliefs in pluralistic contexts and demonstrate how strategy adoption is linked to modes of carrying beliefs. (See Figure 2 above for a summary of this model.) These contributions emerged from my empirical study of two groups of college students: a group of Christian students at an elite, private university, and a group of working class, Black and Latinx students at a prestigious, public university. Through these two studies and additional supplementary interviews, I analyzed 79 students' belief journeys in college, enabling me to build the theory that I put forth here.

Semiotic shifts as a conceptual tool for sociology. My concept of "semiotic shifts" offers increased precision over the compelling but fuzzy concept of unsettled lives (Swidler 1986), by zeroing in on the situations where people learn how to traverse new semiotic landscapes. I examine semiotic shifts sparked by a cultural-institutional transition – how people navigate elite college contexts. Although my case study of semiotic shifts at elite colleges is not necessarily generalizable, given that few people attend highly selective universities, it generates insights testable in the myriad other kinds of transitions that people face throughout the course of their lives. Significant life experiences such as marriage and divorce, becoming a parent, or losing loved ones could potentially trigger semiotic shifts by creating situations where former beliefs and practices stop working as equipment for living (Burke 1973). Likewise, professional transitions or, perhaps more profoundly, loss of employment are important settings to examine semiotic shifts (Damaske 2021; Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010).

In centering on an institutional transition, my aim is to deepen existing dialogues between cultural and organizational theorists by highlighting the central role that organizations play in shaping beliefs as well as strategies of action. The cognitivist turn in cultural sociology has helped us understand large-scale trends in beliefs and attitudes, but we have lost sight of the interactions, relationships, and organizational environments where personal culture is activated, and strategies of action are lived out. Such settings provide a contextual anchoring without which our theories of the links between culture and action remain incomplete.

The concept of semiotic shifts also advances existing dialogues on personal culture. Lizardo (2017) discusses how culture becomes non-declarative. A quintessential example of this is how skills – like driving or boxing – go from requiring conscious effort to becoming embodied habits (Wacquant 2004). When a person experiences a semiotic shift, personal culture often becomes declarative - it moves from the hiddenness of commonsense into the light of contestability.

Sociologists are rightfully concerned with the methodological issue of how to access and measure nondeclarative culture, given that it is not linguistically accessible (Boutyline and Soter 2021; Vaisey 2009). But we should also be concerned with the pragmatic issue of how taken-for-granted beliefs or practices become visible, and what people do when this happens. How does inequality go from being taken-for-granted to being questioned or seen as immoral (Desmond 2023)? How do racialized organizations begin to break down racialized structures and practices that are currently invisible to organizational members (Ray 2019)? The process of rendering "hidden" beliefs, practices, and axes of difference visible is essential for advancing structural change at the micro, meso, and potentially even macro levels.

Theorizing how people carry core beliefs. Second, I have developed a general framework for how people carry their core beliefs – as ideologues, agnostics, followers, and contenders. This framework extends existing scholarship on how beliefs are organized. Previous work in this domain focuses on attitude networks, a fundamentally declarative form of personal culture (for example, see Baldassarri and Goldberg [2014] and Boutyline and Vaisey [2017]). I argue that we should also consider variation in *zeal* (people's affective attachment to belief identities) to more fully understand how people carry their beliefs and how beliefs shape action. In addition, my findings reveal that people vary in terms of whether their religion, political orientation, a combination thereof, or some other moral framework operates as an anchoring belief identity. Addi, for example, shifted from seeing conservatism as his primary belief anchor to seeing religion as his primary belief anchor. Likewise, Iris shifted from being an (apolitical) Catholic to (a nominally Catholic) progressive. While Baldassari and Goldberg (2014) note that religion is shapes the way people understand politics, the reverse can also be true. To better understand how people organize their beliefs, it is important to understand how they combine religious and political beliefs, if one takes precedence over the other, and why.

A potential avenue for future research in this area is to develop the links between the structural properties of beliefs at the individual and group levels. Martin (2002) argues that belief groups vary in terms of *tightness* (constraint among belief elements) and *consensus* (constraint among belief group members). How individuals carry their beliefs is likely to be influenced by the belief groups they belong to (or once did). But individuals may also change the structural features of their belief groups. Whether the cognitive authorities of a given belief group, for example, are ideologues or contenders is likely to shape how much internal dissent their group will tolerate.

This raises a broader point. It is beyond the scope of this article to explain why people become ideologues, agnostics, followers, or contenders to begin with, though my analysis suggests that where people fall depends on the context where their beliefs are formed (or reformed). People who are immersed in environments where their beliefs are commonsense face less pressure to develop declarative beliefs. In pluralistic contexts, by contrast, people are asked to give an account for their religiosity or irreligiosity, to articulate their views about gender or race, and to claim their political orientation - or lack thereof. Pluralistic environments, in short, are likely to foster declarativeness, but it is unclear what kinds of environments foster zeal, an important avenue for future work.

Why people adopt different strategies. Finally, I offer an answer for why beliefs change in different directions as people adapt to a new cultural environment. My analysis suggests that a central factor that guides whether people burrow, distance, or bridge is how they carry their beliefs. Those with declarative, zealous beliefs (ideologues) are most likely to burrow, those with nondeclarative beliefs (agnostics and followers) are most likely to distance, and those with declarative, nonzealous beliefs (contenders) are most likely to bridge.

That said, how people carry beliefs does not fully determine the strategies they adopt. Epistemic encounters are the sites where "lane change" becomes possible, the moments that not only trigger semiotic shifts, but also guide the direction of such shifts. Encounters that are disorienting, demanding, or reconciliatory constitute micro-level interactions where metanarratives are questioned and reconstructed (Reed 2015). In semiotically dense landscapes, like elite universities, many groups are engaged in melodramatic performances to offer ideological frameworks and cultural repertoires. By revealing how people traverse such landscapes and

experience diverse epistemic encounters, my findings deepen our understanding of how and why beliefs are transformed through participation in organizational spaces.

Implications for the sociology of education, religion, and organizations

Sociologists have examined the myriad challenges that underrepresented groups face in navigating educational institutions, especially elite ones (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Carter 2006; Jack 2019). But existing work has not fully considered the intersection of rare beliefs and marginalized identities. My analysis suggests that underrepresented students may be among the most likely to distance from their former religious beliefs in college (and among the least likely to adopt a bridging strategy). Both trends can foster inequality: the former by making educational attainment morally costly, and the latter by limiting the accrual of social capital that comes from participating in multiple groups.

Understanding this dynamic will require further exploration, but my analysis suggests two possible explanations. First, deeply religious underrepresented minorities often felt as if they must choose between two kinds of groups: religious communities where their demographic identities were downplayed, or other identity-based groups (e.g., cultural centers, ethnic themed dorms, etc.) where they felt they had to downplay their religious beliefs (especially if they came from conservative religious traditions). Second, students from working-class backgrounds often grew up in families, home environments, and schools where discussing beliefs in an abstract, ideological fashion was not common (e.g., less declarative contexts). Some therefore felt ill-equipped to answer difficult questions, leading them to doubt former beliefs. Others developed ideological beliefs in ways that created distance between them and their families (like Natalie, who realized she could not discuss Bourdieu during family brunch).

Higher education institutions tend to promote, and even promise, bridging*:* that students will gain new ideas, skills, and networks without losing their former identities, commitments, and social ties. But in my study, those who distanced (and many who burrowed) typically came from less privileged backgrounds and had multiple minority identities. Scholars of education ought to be attuned to the possibilities of distancing and burrowing, both in terms of how students relate to their demographic identities *and* their core beliefs. Sociologists often fail to consider how moral convictions intersect with other identities in ways that drive educational and economic outcomes (Horwitz et al. 2022; Morton 2019). Religion plays a central role in the lives of many underrepresented students. Considering religious identity as an additional layer of intersectionality is critical for understanding students' experiences and addressing inequalities within higher education.

My findings also have implications for the sociology of religion. Semiotic shifts can help explain the divergent intuitions on whether secular contexts help or hinder religious belief and practice (Berger 2011; Hill 2009; Tavory 2016). Both, I argue, are possible depending on the extent to which institutional environments offer a new semiotic landscape and the extent to which people can and do engage with religious sub-communities. It is well established that the kinds of community individuals embed themselves in – or distance themselves from – matter for religious commitments. But I suggest that an underlying mechanism for *why* community matters is that participation in groups changes the lived experience of semiotic landscapes.

Groups matter for religious trajectories in at least two ways. First, they can shift the universe of discourse. Temi’s reckoning around religion’s role in colonization fundamentally shifted how she understood Christianity, a faith that was woven into the culture of her home community. Second, encountering new kinds of religious (or nonreligious) people can trigger

semiotic shifts. If one believes that evangelicals are bigoted, conservative, and simple-minded but meets evangelicals in college who are politically nuanced, kind, and intellectually rigorous, that could shift a person's perceptions of Evangelicalism more broadly. Even if people do not change their beliefs entirely, new environments frequently demand that formerly taken-for-granted beliefs must be defended and articulated.

I have argued that debates in cultural sociology can be fruitfully advanced by attending to the ways that organizational contexts bring about semiotic shifts, but the reverse is also true: organizational scholars tend to be insufficiently attuned to the micro-level, cultural processes that constitute day-to-day organizational life. Semiotic shifts can be expected in any culturally complex and organizationally heterogeneous society where people are crossing boundaries. I briefly consider what my findings offer to work on inhabited institutions and organizational identification.

Part of the goal of inhabited institutionalism is to shift scholars' gaze "away from individuals and toward social interactions" (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021:3, see also Hallett and Ventresca 2006). But my findings suggest that a gaze toward interactions may be enhanced, rather than diluted, by attending closely to the interlocutors themselves. People are shaped by the interactions they participate in (and forego). One's identities, beliefs, and, ultimately, sense of self are constituted through ongoing dialogues with one's significant others (Taylor 1992). These significant others may be individuals, but they may also be groups or organizations. Personal culture guides people in deciding what interactions to participate in, what semiotic axes to dance with. To fully understand how interactions shape both individual and institutional change, organizational scholars should closely consider the interactants involved, and the personal culture they carry (both consciously and unconsciously).

A fundamental question for management scholars is how people come to identify with their organizations. My findings offer fresh insights on this process. First, I underscore the importance of subgroup participation as an underexamined mode of identification. Current work typically focuses on identification with overall organizations, but many people identify with subgroups instead. In some cases, these subgroups challenge the broader organization and create countercultures (as both CF and LC did). Organizational scholars thus ought to consider when subgroup affiliations are a *mode* of identification and when these attachments *cut against* organizational identification. For example, how does union affiliation or engagement in internal social movement groups influence broader trajectories of identification?

My findings are also relevant for work on sensemaking and sensebreaking, which are central ways that organizations foster identity construction (Ashforth and Schinoff 2016). The kinds of epistemic encounters that I outline (reifying, demanding, disorienting, and reconciliatory) may be a useful typology for understanding different modes of sensebreaking. Likewise, the three strategies that I develop (burrowing, distancing, and bridging) could inform analyses of pathways of sensemaking. Ultimately, my argument regarding how personal culture shapes strategies of action is useful for understanding why people's identification pathways vary.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. I built this theory through a study of two groups of college students. By focusing on student groups, I observed more burrowers and bridgers than distancers. That said, Lewis Center was a site where I met people distancing from former *religious* beliefs (like Iris). And in CF, I observed people distancing from former *political* beliefs, as well as a few who distanced from religion for part of college (like Temi). I conducted supplementary interviews to address this limitation, but ultimately, I prioritized relational, observational depth over interviewee breadth in building this theory. Future work is needed to

explore the process of semiotic shifts with more ideologically diverse samples and in other institutional settings.

Second, though I did collect longitudinal data on students' journeys in college, I did not interview or interact with participants *prior* to college. It is difficult, therefore, to fully determine what students' stances towards their religious or political beliefs were before they began college. I sought to address this limitation in three ways. I expanded the temporal window in the other direction, interviewing some of the initial interviewees post-college to observe that institutional transition. In addition, I drew on multiple sources of information to categorize how people carried their beliefs into college – not just their perceptions of their families and former contexts, but also their religious denominations, the kind of high school they attended, and where they grew up. Finally, I met a subset of participants during their first month of college and followed them over time (like Alejandro). Still, a critical avenue for future work is to examine how people carry their beliefs before and after organizational transitions.

Overall, this paper extends existing scholarship on how culture shapes action by revealing how and why people adopt different strategies to navigate new institutional contexts. In the face of semiotic shifts, one's own personal culture is laid bare and drawn upon to decide what interactions to pursue and which to forego. I expect that the links between ideologues and burrowing, followers/agnostics and distancing, and contenders and bridging may apply in many settings. Understanding these links has the potential to help us address a significant challenge we face in modern times: how can people foster moral anchors that act as equipment for living within societies that contain a wide plurality of beliefs.

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FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1: Four Modes of Carrying Core Beliefs

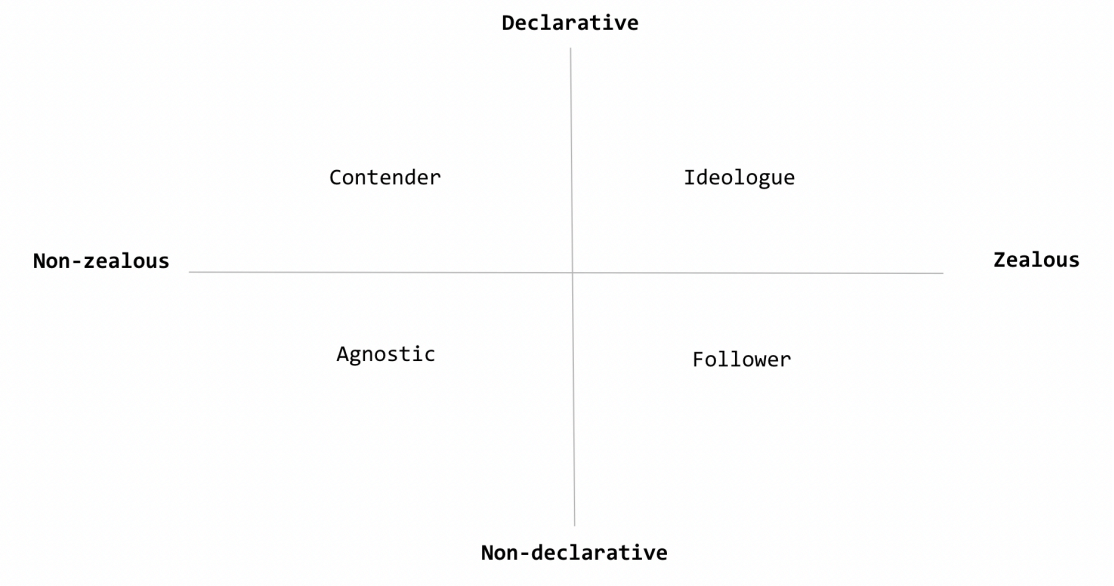

Figure 2: The Process of Semiotic Shifts

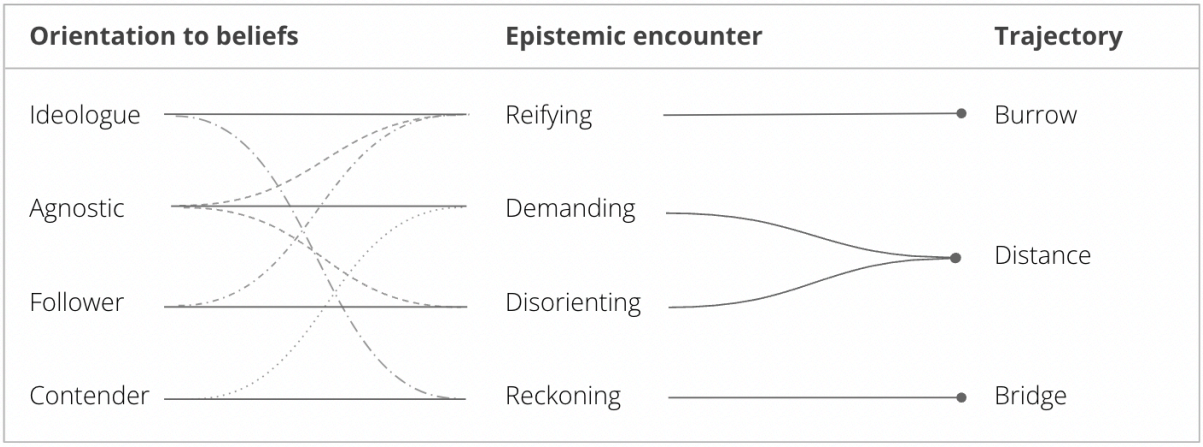

Table 1: Overview of data collected

Type of case	
Single interview	18
Single interview plus fieldwork relationship	34
Longitudinal interviews plus fieldwork relationship*	15
Fieldwork relationship only (no formal interview)	12
Supplementary interviews with group leaders / staff	15
Cases with ethnographic context (e.g., fieldwork relationships)	
Christian Fellowship	41
Lewis Center	20

**The total number of interviews (n=99) includes 32 interviews from these students, who were interviewed twice or three times.*

Table 2: Demographic categories for interviewees (n=67, excluding supplementary interviews)

Gender		
Man	29	43%
Woman	37	55%
Non-binary	1	1%
Entering college religious beliefs		
Evangelical Protestant	30	45%
Black Protestant	5	7%
Mainline Protestant	6	9%
Catholic	5	7%
Muslim	2	3%
Hindu	1	1%
Buddhist	1	1%
Mainline Protestant / Jewish	1	1%
Nonreligious	16	24%
Entering college political beliefs		
Conservative	16	24%
Moderate	20	30%
Liberal	27	40%
NA / unsure	3	4%
Unknown	1	1%
Race/ethnicity		
Asian American / Pacific Islander	21	31%
Black	13	19%
Hispanic / Latino	6	9%
White	21	31%
Mixed race / Native American / Other	6	9%
International student		
Yes	5	7%
No	62	93%
Identify as FLI (first-generation and/or low income)		
Yes	26	39%
No	41	61%
University		
Stanford	46	69%
Other	21	31%

Appendix A: Demographic information and data collected for interviewees (n=67)

Name	Entering college religious beliefs	Entering college political beliefs	Race / ethnicity	Social class	Gender	Total interviews	Observational data (CF or LC)	University
Nelson	Evangelical Protestant	Conservative	Asian American	Upper-middle	M	2	x	Stanford
Karl	Buddhist	Liberal	Asian American	Upper	M	1		Stanford
Christy	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	Asian American	Middle	W	1	x	Stanford
Nathan	Black Protestant	Liberal	Black	Upper-middle	M	1	x	Stanford
Anne	Nonreligious	Moderate	Asian American	Upper-middle	W	2	x	Stanford
Theo	Evangelical Protestant	Conservative	Asian American	Upper-middle	M	1	x	Stanford
Diego	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	Latinx	Lower	M	2	x	Stanford
Victor	Evangelical Protestant	Conservative	Latinx	Lower	M	1		Stanford
Flavia	Mainline Protestant and Jewish	Conservative	White	Upper	W	3	x	Stanford
Nigel	Evangelical Protestant	Liberal	White	Upper-middle	M	1	x	Stanford
Jude	Evangelical Protestant	Liberal	Mixed race	Lower	W	1		Stanford
Wambua	Black Protestant	Moderate	Black	Lower	M	1	x	Stanford
Delilah	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	Asian American	Upper-middle	W	1	x	Stanford
David	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	Asian American	Upper-middle	M	1	x	Stanford
Audrey	Evangelical Protestant	Conservative	White	Middle	W	1	x	Stanford
Mara	Evangelical Protestant	Conservative	White	Middle	W	2	x	Stanford
Harper	Nonreligious	Liberal	White	Lower	W	1		Stanford
Seth	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	Mixed race	Middle	M	1	x	Stanford
Mila	Evangelical Protestant	Conservative	Asian American	Upper-middle	W	1		Stanford
Brad	Mainline Protestant	Moderate	White	Upper	M	3	x	Stanford
Kenna	Mainline Protestant	Conservative	White	Upper-middle	W	1	x	Stanford
Julien	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	Asian American	Upper	M	1	x	Stanford
Naila	Catholic	Liberal	Mixed race	Lower	W	1		Stanford
Ratna	Hindu	Liberal	Asian American	Upper	W	1		Stanford
Isaac	Black Protestant	Conservative	Black	Lower	M	1	x	Stanford
Finny	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	White	Middle	M	2	x	Stanford
Hope	Mainline Protestant	Liberal	Mixed race	Upper-middle	W	1	x	Stanford
Dina	Evangelical Protestant	Conservative	White	Upper-middle	W	1	x	Stanford
Samuel	Mainline Protestant	Conservative	Mixed race	Upper	M	1	x	Stanford
Ezra	Evangelical Protestant	Conservative	White	Upper-middle	M	1		Other
Kian	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	Asian American	Upper-middle	M	1		Other
Aiden	Mainline Protestant	Liberal	Asian American	Upper-middle	M	1	x	Stanford
Kat	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	Asian American	Lower	W	2	x	Stanford
Aria	Black Protestant	Moderate	Black	Middle	W	1		Other
Ray	Catholic	Conservative	White	Middle	M	1		Other
Mira	Catholic	Liberal	Asian American	Middle	W	1		Other
Tim	Nonreligious	Liberal	Asian American	Lower	NB	1		Other
Corina	Evangelical Protestant	Liberal	Asian American	Middle	W	2	x	Stanford
Chris	Mainline Protestant	Moderate	White	Upper-middle	M	1	x	Stanford
Alejandro	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	Latinx	Upper	M	2	x	Stanford
Addi	Muslim	Conservative	Black	Lower	M	1	x	Stanford
Ted	Nonreligious	Liberal	White	Upper	M	1		Stanford
Lola	Evangelical Protestant	Liberal	Latinx	Lower	W	2	x	Stanford

Foundin	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	White	Lower	M	2	x	Stanford
Kaia	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	Asian American	Upper-middle	W	2		Stanford
Maddie	Evangelical Protestant	Liberal	Mixed race	Lower	W	1	x	Stanford
Faith	Evangelical Protestant	Moderate	White	Lower	W	1		Stanford
Kaylee	Nonreligious	Moderate	White	Lower	W	1	x	Stanford
Tara	Evangelical Protestant	Conservative	Black	Upper	W	1	x	Stanford
Temi	Black Protestant	Moderate	Black	Lower	W	2	x	Stanford
James	Evangelical Protestant	Conservative	White	Lower	M	2	x	Stanford
Laila	Evangelical Protestant	Liberal	Asian American	Lower	W	1	x	Stanford
Sarah	Evangelical Protestant	Unknown	White	unknown	W	1		Other
Lucy	Nonreligious	Liberal	Asian American	unknown	W	1		Other
Nadira	Muslim	Moderate	Asian American	Upper-middle	W	1	x	Other
Deonte	Nonreligious	Moderate	Black	Lower	M	1	x	Other
Brooklyn	Nonreligious	Liberal	Black	Upper-middle	W	1	x	Other
Yelena	Nonreligious	Liberal	Black	Lower	W	1	x	Other
Joan	Evangelical Protestant	Liberal	White	Lower	W	1	x	Other
Damon	Nonreligious	Liberal	Black	Lower	M	1	x	Other
Nala	Nonreligious	Liberal	Latinx	Lower	W	1	x	Other
Santiago	Nonreligious	Liberal	Latinx	Lower	M	1	x	Other
Iris	Catholic	Unsure	Asian American	Upper-middle	W	1	x	Other
Norah	Nonreligious	Liberal	White	Upper-middle	W	1		Other
Eden	Catholic	Liberal	White	Lower	W	1		Other
Talia	Nonreligious	Liberal	Black	Lower	W	1	x	Other
Jess	Nonreligious	Liberal	Latinx	Lower	W	1	x	Other
Baldwin	Nonreligious	Liberal	Black	Middle	M	1	x	Other