

**When the rational isn't so rational anymore:
The institution of marriage in tension**

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What could be more mundane and normal than someone getting a license at a government office? If someone wants to get married, he/she has to have a license, just like if she wants to hunt or drive. It is only a technical document but it nonetheless recognises and legitimates by proxy a right to do something. With your license in hand (or inscribed in a database), you are now entitled and more rightful than those who don't have one, according to the institutionalized authorities.

Lammers and Barbour (2006) define institutions as “constellations (i.e., relatively fixed arrangements) of formalized rational beliefs manifested in individuals’ organizing behaviours” (p.356). But what happens when what used to be rational isn't so rational anymore? The institutionalization of same-sex marriage in the United States provides us with an interesting case to see how the different definitions of “what is rational” can create tensions within a particular institution. In this paper, we mobilize a ventriloquial approach grounded in Cooren's (2010) work to show how different formalized/rational beliefs and actions can be incarnated by figures (i.e. the law, religion, God, gender, society, etc.) that appear to be in contradiction with one in other (Koschmann & Laster, 2011).

We argue that a ventriloquial perspective can indeed reveal how the coexistence of different “ established practices based on formalized beliefs - in short, institutions - offer powerful guides, even constraints for organizing” (Lammers & Barbour, 2006, p.371). In the scene analysed, we see how the actors give meaning to their actions by focusing on two different worldviews about marriage and on what should be considered as “ rational ”. On one side, the lady offers an interpretation aligned with what used to be the law, an alignment that hampers the delivering of the license and thus acts as a recalcitrant agent (Kuhn & Burk, 2014). On the other side, the same-sex couple affiliate themselves with the recently introduced law foregrounding a new rational/formalized belief apparently not yet disseminated among representatives of the institution. This crossover creates a tension where a clash of values occurs publicly. We thus

argue that such unfolding tensions have the potential of constraining organizational actions but also have the possibility to create space for changes within institutions.

References

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