

# Changing informal institutions via mimesis: Gender equality in marriage proposals

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## Abstract

Marriage equality has exposed how the institution of marriage is changing, but less attention has been given to how informal institutions around heterosexual marriage rituals are affected by a growing demand for gender equality. By applying institutional theory and feminist institutionalism to the context of women proposing to their male partners, this paper observes how shifts in gender norms change heteronormative institutions. Drawing from interviews with women who proposed to men and a virtual ethnography, we describe how reverse proposals can set precedence for emulation of practices or mimetic isomorphism. We therefore contribute to institutional theory in threefold ways. First, we describe how mimetic isomorphism introduces new standards and norms into a highly traditional institution. Second, we show how this integration of new standards and norms serves this patriarchal institution to remain relevant and appear progressive. Finally, we contend that this tension of joining a patriarchal institution but doing so in a subversive manner represents a double bind for women who are encouraged by society to formalize their heteronormative relationships through marriage and yet chastised for initiating this themselves.

Vera Hoelscher, Ratna Khanijou and Daniela Pirani are part of the broader MANagement Ring Project, which explores what happens to the heteronormative institution of matrimony when women propose to men.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The heteronormative proposal script of a man proposing to a woman with a lavish engagement ring is an institution that is enshrined within Western wedding traditions since the advent of high-profile aristocratic proposals and De Beers' three-month-rule of the 1930s (Howard, 2008; Ogletree, 2010). Through marketing and media, the practice of marriage proposals has stiffened into a nonlegal yet prescriptive script based on male initiative, diamond rings, and chivalric performances (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). While the recent marriage equality laws of some countries have gifted us with an increasing academic treatment of queer weddings (Parkins, 2020), the effect of marriage and gender equality on heterosexual wedding rituals is yet to be discussed in an academic context.

Proposals exemplify how increasing discourses of gender equality affect gendered institutions. With reverse proposals, we identify when women ask their male partners to marry them, reversing the gendered norm that initiates wedding rituals. Our research probes the cognitive aspects of the new institutional theory (Mackay et al., 2010) in that our data describes how women who propose to men may set precedence for mimetic isomorphism, or precedence for emulation of practice, within their communities, or even a wider Internet public through their narratives of proposals. We explore how talking about, participating in, and finally staging reverse proposal scripts can be employed to legitimize this practice. Inversely, we also thematize how the mimetic isomorphism exerted by contemporary society, within which women are both proactively encouraged to get married yet discouraged from proposing themselves, stifles proposal equality. We acknowledge how the institution of marriage, and therefore also the proposal script, sees itself at a crossroads in the face of declining marriage rates, decreasing reliance by women on the institution, and a broadening of its definition to include genders and sexualities previously shunned from it. By looking at how women narrate their experiences, we gather cultural references, shared imageries, and material props that recompose proposals as an institution. We understand self-narratives as a point of departure to access an alternative "symbolic order" (Irigaray, 1985a) that reverses this hegemonic script. This paper does not understand femininity as a biological imperative but as the performance of an alternative imagery (Irigaray, 1985a).

By probing our sample of 21 in-depth interviews with women who proposed to men, we thus contribute to institutional theory and feminist institutionalism in threefold ways. Firstly, we describe how women proposing to men and celebrating these reverse proposals introduces new standards and norms into the highly traditional institution of matrimony, therefore triggering mimetic isomorphism. Secondly, we argue that these new standards and norms serve for this patriarchal institution to remain alive and relevant. Thirdly, we propose that at the heart of this lies an unresolvable double bind for women. While women are strongly encouraged to submit to heteronormative marriage, they are simultaneously castigated for taking the initiative to propose this next step in a relationship themselves. After all, reverse engagements occur in the face of a contemporary society that is still guided by tropes held deeply within a collective imagery of what constitutes acceptable and legitimate gendered conduct. This project understands formal and informal institutions as gendered (Mackay et al., 2010), and thus it focuses on the changes brought in by gender equality. We endeavor to address the following research questions: Firstly, how do women who propose to men navigate expectations and gender norms? Secondly, how do women who propose to men disrupt the informal institution of marriage proposals?

## 2 | INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND NEW INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

According to Scott and Meyer (1994, p. 13), institutions are "symbolic and behavioral systems containing representational, constitutional, and normative rules, together with regulatory mechanisms that define a common meaning

system and give rise to distinctive actors and action routines". There are distinct types of institutions that together determine norms that are widely accepted, practiced, and even form the expected standard of conduct, versus those that challenge the established system (Scott & Meyer, 1994). Crucially, although institutional theory is based on symbolic systems such as "rules, norms, and cultural-cognitive beliefs", the concept relies on material resources and their accompanying behaviors to thrive (Scott, 2013, p. 15).

Institutional theory provides a theoretical framework to understand how norms are enforced in society, suggesting threefold mechanisms at play: regulative, normative, and cognitive. Regulative mechanisms pertain to coercive isomorphism, or the power held by legislation. Law-making institutions can almost inescapably dictate the norms of social conduct. Normative isomorphism enshrines the hold institutions have over individuals by setting a standard of social obligation to which they are expected to adhere. Finally, the cognitive aspect of institutional theory describes how the prevalence of a practice influences individuals to accept it as the expected conduct. This is referred to as mimetic isomorphism and relates to the emulation of practices to fit in with a larger mass of society (Scott, 2013). Sociological institutionalists (SI) are particularly versed in observing how institutions work by defining what is appropriate, reflecting a shared understanding of the way the world works and framing meanings that guide human behavior (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Mackay et al., 2010).

Because of our interest in narratives, we integrate this framework by looking into new institutional theory, suitable "to better capture multiple dynamics of continuity and change through concepts like informal institutions, critical junctures, path dependency, feedback mechanisms, and institutional conversion, layering, drift, and erosion" (Mackay et al., 2010, p. 584). New institutional theory is an umbrella term that bridges different disciplines and streams (Galea et al., 2015; Mackay et al., 2010), sharing two commonalities: the interest in informal institutions and the resilience of institutions (Mackay et al., 2010). Unlike formal institutions, which are definite and designed, informal institutions take the form of practices and narratives (Galea & Chappell, 2021).

The relation between formal and informal institutional rules is the relation between rules in form and rules in use (Mackay et al., 2010). Informal institutions are relevant to change in organizations as they can replace or undermine existing formal institutions that do not work anymore (Galea et al., 2015). This relation is relevant because informal rules help to activate change. Change occurs of the old informal and the new formal couple, or if the old informal acts as a site of contestation of the rule in form (Leach & Lowndes, 2007 in Mackay et al., 2010, p. 576). Institutional change, then, occurs through an internal process of interpretation, imitation, and adaptation (Mackay et al., 2010). The second commonality is the understanding that "institutions are defined by the fact that they are resilient over time and produce stable and recurring patterns of behavior, which are then reinforced and amended by people as they go about their lives and work" (Galea et al., 2015, p. 376). Because of their embeddedness in patterns of behavior, informal institutions are particularly tenacious and resilient, as observed in relation to gender inequality (Galea & Chappell, 2021). Chappell and Waylen (2013) further stress that the gendered nature of institutions can be so engrained that it even escapes the attention of actors within them. This specifically also pertains to informal institutions, which prop up gendered rules through highlighting conduct that does not conform to stereotypical gender roles. They state that these are "notoriously difficult to unravel and research" (Chappell & Waylen, 2013, p. 600) due to how unaware people may be of their biased assumptions.

The deeply steeped tradition of institutional theory has mostly found application in organizational and entrepreneurship studies (Ross-Smith & Kornberger, 2004). Yet, there are texts that utilize institutional theory as a lens for consumers, carving new avenues within antiquated institutions. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), for instance, introduce a look at frustrated consumer collectives within the institution of the fashion industry in their study on fashionistas. One of the key tenants their participants utilize to influence the institution and its provision of fashion for their consumer segment is by collectivizing their plight.

### 3 | A GENDERED TURN: FEMINIST INSTITUTIONALISM AND LUCE IRIGARAY

There is a further growing body of literature that utilizes institutional theory to highlight the limits that discussions on gender typically encounter within professional organizations and industries (Galea et al., 2020; Martin & Collinson, 2002; Ross-Smith & Kornberger, 2004; Vijay et al., 2021). Utilizing institutional theory as a theoretical lens, Wicks's (2002) text on male-dominated work environments within the underground coal mining industry of Nova Scotia, Canada, serves to illustrate another organizational context within which institutional theory aids our understanding of acceptable behaviors and the lack of cognitive isomorphism to diverge from these. When the accepted norm is of a patriarchal nature, this crucially contributes to identity formation within individual male miners who will subsequently often find it inconceivable to question the status quo (Wicks, 2002). Further elaborating on the institutional aspects of gender, Styhre (2014) looks at institutional work toward gender equality within the Swedish Church and the rise in acceptability of female ministers—all the while still being subjected to gendered expectations and sexism. Styhre stresses that institutional theorists should not assume that institutions and their regulations are in place a priori but that these are socially constructed and constituted.

New Institutional Theory has also been criticized for overlooking how both formal and informal rules reinforce gendered power relations (Krook & Mackay, 2011). Born out of this critique, Feminist Institutionalism aims to overcome gender blindness in the study of institutions: "Gender, [...] is also a feature of institutions and social structures, and a part of the symbolic realm of meaning-making, within which individual actors are nested" (Mackay et al., 2010, p. 581). Hence, Feminist Institutionalism unveils how formal and informal rules are gendered while they also produce gendered effects (Galea & Chappell, 2021). For example, Feminist Institutionalism has been applied to understand how masculine privilege works through institutions to maintain gender inequality (Galea & Chappell, 2021). Mackay et al. (2010) contend that changes in gender norms are potential changes in institutions.

To understand how changes in gender norms affect institutions, we turn to the work of Luce Irigaray. In particular, we use Irigaray's notions of sexual difference and of mimesis to look at how gendered narratives can produce different institutions. The notion of sexual difference postulates that the whole world reflects the male ego (Whitford, 1991) and that the subject at the center of this symbolic order is inherently male (Oseen, 1997). In the social and symbolic order we inhabit, women are conceptualized only in relation to men, reducing the feminine to what men are not, or do not want to be (Irigaray, 1985a; Oseen, 1997). Irigaray (1985b) clarifies that the female subject emerges through narratives, produced individually and reproduced in imageries.

The creation of a new symbolic order uses different strategies, among which mimesis, a reflexive strategy "to use a sexual stereotype", and goes beyond it (Kozel, 1996, p. 125). Mimesis is the deliberate assumption of femininity through repetition of an imagery women have not built, a repetition that makes visible how femininity is a masquerade (Irigaray, 1985b). The strategy of mimesis asks a woman "to resubmit herself [...] to 'ideas' about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but also to make 'visible' an effect of playful repetition that was supposed to remain invisible" (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 76). While mimesis as a masquerade is what women do in order to participate in men's desire, a masquerade is also the convincing performative production of female sexuality. By making visible the performative work of femininity, mimesis is both playful and parodic. With mimesis, women can erode stereotypes from within by consciously stepping into them (Kozel, 1996) and enhance their sense of agency (Fotaki et al., 2014).

Within this manuscript, we indeed argue that women use proposals as a form of mimesis, through which they reenact the proposal while changing its gendered imagery. Yet, we also recognize the resulting double bind for women who find themselves strengthening the patriarchal institution of marriage all the while doing so through acts that still appear progressive and subversive to contemporary society.

### 4 | METHODOLOGY

Our research philosophy follows an inductive approach according to Bryman and Bell (2007) that explores everyday interactions as hermeneutic meaning systems (Thompson, 1997). Once obtained ethical clearance, we adopted a

two-step process, including interviews and ethnography. We first conducted a virtual ethnography according to Hine (2000) within the virtual sphere of the wedding industry by observing comments on leading wedding blogs (such as *Practical Wedding*, *Wedding Wire*), feminist blogs (*Manrepeller*, *Jezebel*), and Reddit threads thematizing reverse proposals. We furthermore trawled comments on reverse proposal-related sites on social media platforms such as Instagram and Reddit, alongside those on newspaper articles covering engagement rings for men. As the final part of this first step, we performed a content analysis according to Jansz and Martis (2007) of proposal scenarios within the seminal Instagram handle @HowTheyAsked.

During the second step of our data collection process, we conducted in-depth conversational interviews according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) with 21 women who had proposed marriage to their male partners. Interviews were conducted digitally and lasted around 40–60 min each. Our interview guide included questions probing their views on proposals and marriage generally, alongside their proposal stories and the reactions of their partners, families, friends, and the wider public to these. Interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed to facilitate the analysis process. All participants were given a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity. Consent was gathered in written form prior to the interviews.

The women were identified online via relevant Instagram hashtags such as #sheaskedhesaidyes and recruited via direct message. This ensured that participants not only interacted with their partners, families, and friends but were also part of a wider Internet public in their proposal displays. Within this combination of sampling methods and practicing purposive sampling (Shaw & Riach, 2011), we aimed to yield a spread of socio-economic status, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The result of this can be seen in the participant table below indicating that our sample is nonetheless mostly white and of a high education level. Furthermore, only one of our research participants identified as queer during her interview. We reflect on this throughout this manuscript (Figure 1).

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic analysis in order to triangulate our data that came in the form of interview transcripts, screenshots, and text snippets with the literature on new institutional theory. In this, we chose an iterative process that first distilled codes and then collected these together into wider themes that told the stories of women who proposed to men imbedded in their wider institutional meanings. Regular reflexivity exercises as practiced by Rome and Lambert (2020) were integral to this in order to reflect on our positionalities as three feminists of different cultures and sexual orientations who are all heavily targeted by the wedding industry due to our age and gender. NVivo 11 was used as an organizational tool.

## 5 | ANALYSIS

A core tenant of institutional theory is its hold over what constitutes acceptable conduct within societies versus what lies outside of these bounds (Scott & Meyer, 1994). As we established, proposal scripts are heavily gendered and enshrine that it is a man asking a woman to formalize their heterosexual union by entering into the institution of matrimony. The proposal script represents a significant outpost of this institution and has therewith become an institution in and of itself. As our content analysis of celebratory proposal posts on the Instagram handle @HowTheyAsked (which only changed its name from @HowHeAsked in 2018 to signal LGBTQI+ inclusivity) demonstrates, only four in over 1800 posts depict women proposing to men.

Utilizing the lens of new institutional theory, our analysis elaborates on three themes that illustrate how reverse proposals challenge institutional norms. First, we discuss the backlash women face for breaking from tradition. Second, we consider reverse mimetic actions and how these create new mimetic isomorphism in the place of broken traditions. Third, we explore the formation of digital solidarity networks that give rise to sisterly peer-to-peer support systems at scale.

Name	Location	Age	Occupation	Nationality	Education level
Laura	Lancaster, Pennsylvania	38	Attorney	American	Bachelor degree
Hannah	Menorca, Spain	36	Social Entrepreneur	American	Bachelor degree
Sarah	Sarasota, Florida	20s	Barrista	American	Bachelor degree
Clara	Vancouver, Canada	27	Sustainability consultant	Canadian	Bachelor degree
Magda	Amsterdam, The Netherlands	28	Graphic designer	Dutch	Bachelor degree
Mona	Germany	32	Lecturer	Italian	PhD
Linda	Liverpool, UK	50s	Nursing Associate	British	Social Care Diploma
Catherina	Geneva, Switzerland	37	Media Consultant	Italian	Masters degree
Seraphina	New York, USA	40s	Entrepreneur	French	Bachelor degree
Juliet	Norway	30s	Polar scientist	British	PhD
Cassandra	The Netherlands	30s	Stay at home mum	Dutch	Bachelor degree
Mary	UK	33	Housewife	British	Diploma
Tania	Florida	37	Artist	Brazilian	Bachelor degree
Josephine	Finland	40	Student	Finnish	Bachelor degree
Marissa	Germany	25	Marketing manager	German	Bachelor degree
Lexi	Germany	34	Lecturer	German	PhD candiate
Rosa	Pennsylvania	37	Stay at home mum	American	Associates degree
Bernice	Nevada/California	29	High school counsellor	American	PhD
Margot	The Netherlands	28	PhD candidate	Ecuadorian	PhD candidate
Lucinda	Canada, Farringdon	40	PhD candidate	Canadian	PhD candidate

FIGURE 1 Participant table

## 5.1 | The backlash for breaking tradition

The gendered engagement script and the bearing it has on women who propose to men can be seen within the data from our virtual ethnography and research participants' narrations of their lived experiences. A few of these tell of people close to them actively attempting to discourage them from breaking the gendered norms or expressing severe disappointment post-proposal. This further pertained to a wider Internet public of spectators voicing their dismay at women breaking out of the institutional mould. Women who propose operate within a highly heteronormative, patriarchal institution, and do not necessarily advocate for reforming or deconstructing the institution of marriage, which many feminists argue is profoundly connected to gender inequality (Nutti, 2016). Yet, accounts such as those experienced by our research participant Juliet, demonstrate the bravery it takes to bend the rules, even in the informal context of joyously proposing to her boyfriend.

Juliet had decided she was ready for the next step and capable of taking control: "I said out loud to a colleague I can do it, I don't have to wait for him. I'm a progressive feminist, why am I waiting for a man to do something that I can do by myself?". Upon this questioning of her values and gender ideals, she decided to call her mother for support:

I called my mother immediately, and she continually surprises me by how conservative she can be for somebody who used to be a punk, so she, her first reaction was why can't you wait for him? And I said why should I, why should I have to? She was like but I want you to have that moment.

The reaction of Juliet's mother represents a common attitude toward women breaking the proposal script. Comments such as "wait for him" and "I want you to have that [fairytale] moment" reveal prevailing sentiments from family and friends, which serve not only to patronize their sense of empowerment but purport a sense of vulnerability. Embracing such performances may seem individualized and limited in scope for any real change in these women's emancipation from patriarchy (Gill, 2016). Yet within the norms expected by families and friends, it can still be an accepted momentous step.

This is corroborated by Bernice's proposal story, which begins with her telling us that she and her fiancé are "kind of like black sheep of our families from birth" and that their response to this was to create their own family with two dogs that led them to cultivate "our own way of doing things in our own lives". The rejection she experienced from her family is something that is laced throughout her narration. She met her now fiancé, a fireman, through an online dating spree. After years of living together, she wanted to progress in their relationship. Thinking back on how she decided to be the one to propose, she recalls conversations with women in her family and female friends who tried to discourage her: "I've never really received a positive reaction or feedback to wanting to break gender norms and traditions". She found these reactions so emotionally disappointing that she stopped broaching the subject with them altogether. When she nonetheless spontaneously proposed to her boyfriend at a local low-key pizzeria, he joyously accepted. Yet, many of her family and friends were not as excited and suggested that she had done so only for him to be covered by her healthcare rather than what they deemed to be romantic or legitimate reasons: "I was getting the impression that people felt that we weren't maybe really in love, or getting married for the right reasons". Negative comments from close family and friends made the couple become very selective in choosing who to share their story with.

In spite of these negative comments, Bethany performs as the bride who received the blessing of her relatives by wearing the traditional marital jewelry she inherited from both sides of her family. While these rings are not her usual style, with one of them having "a massive diamond in the middle and three rows of diamonds all around, like it's just this crazy thing", she diligently wears them to all family functions, mimicking the role of a traditional bride despite wanting to break gendered norms. Bethany's proposal story demonstrates how a conservative family can project wishes and aspirations onto a nonconventional couple. Traditional marital jewelry further helps complete this outwardly traditional and heterosexual picture. Although Bethany is hurt by these reactions, she also navigates different coping mechanisms, ranging from creating her own independent family to adopting traditional family displays to appease them.

The backlash women and their partners face shows how their initiative is understood only in relation to what their male partners did/did not do, reinforcing the centrality of the masculine (Irigaray, 1985a). @Proposetoo, a female-owned engagement jewelry business and Instagram handle dedicated to the celebration of reverse proposals, recently exemplified this with their post on the engagement of Jodi Turner-Smith to Joshua Jackson (Figure 2).

This high-profile reverse proposal demonstrates the intense backlash that women (particularly those of color as the post's author highlights) may experience for publicly celebrating their nonconformance to gender norms. The comments section of this post further illustrates how Jodi Turner-Smith's courage, and the consequent repercussions she suffers, serve as a warning example for women to stay within gender norms.



FIGURE 2 Instagram post by @proposetoo

A further example from our virtual ethnography demonstrates how the very suggestion of a woman proposing to a man can be highly triggering to members of the Internet public. Reddit user P's response to a thread on reverse proposals indicates that he views them as the downfall of US-American culture:

LMFAO this is pathetic. A bunch of lost women poisoned by cultural Marxism ranting about the patriarchy and begging their loser boyfriends to get married because said married loser boyfriends didn't want to. All of these losers will end up divorced and miserable. Yay Weimerica!

P's comment reflects hegemonic attitudes about female proposals, often considered as shameful acts of desperation that steal responsibility away from the role of a man (Robnett & Leaper, 2013). This is corroborated by user 71alright's backlash to a thread on women proposing to men:

If he hasn't proposed, it's probably because he doesn't want to or isn't ready to marry.

The right to propose is part of a symbolic order tailored around men's initiative (Irigaray, 1985a). As shown by this quote, corrupting this order has both personal and political implications. Further, as Ostrom (1986) asserts, institutions are interrelated and therefore affect one another. This became evident when our participant Lexi butted up against traditionalist takes on the formal institution of married family names. Following on from their progressive engagement, the newlyweds decided to carry forward her family name instead of his post-wedding. This was to the great dismay of her new husband's grandfather:

After the wedding, we didn't have contact with him anymore because he was so angry, he was so disappointed, because he just found out at the day of the wedding that my husband will take my last name, and that was such a huge shock for him.

This is a striking example of how individuals who break the rules are "held accountable" by other actors within an institution (Ostrom 1986, p. 6). Women who propose or do not change their married name are thus othered as "lost", subjecting themselves and those who commit to them to severe social scrutiny. We note that the women within our sample who dared to transgress this established norm were able to do so out of a position of privilege, allowing them to challenge the status quo without risking their own status. Yet, reflecting on the negative reactions to reverse proposal scripts and related institutions within our data, it is evident that whether close family, friends, or the wider Internet public, operate on the assumption that it is indeed the right and proper thing for women to submit to heterosexual marriage but not to question the patriarchy that upholds it through initiating so themselves.

## 5.2 | Mimetic acts that challenge the norm

Applying the notion of mimesis (Irigaray, 1985b), our data show how women engaged in different kind of mimetic acts, reinstating traditional tropes as well as transforming such tropes into parody. Asking his parents for permission, for example, was a popular narrative amongst our participants. As to be expected from previously presented data, this did not always happen on excited ears. Our participant Rosa told us of her in-law to be's retracted reaction to her asking for their son's hand in marriage:

His parents, were like it's very, it's something that a man should do, like, you're gonna make him feel less of a man, if that makes sense. [...] They wanted us to be engaged, just not with me doing it.

While her partner's traditional parents were keen for their son to get engaged and married soon and were happy with his choice of partner, they had envisioned his road to marriage being embarked on in the socially expected manner. Yet, Rosa reappropriated the gendered script by engaging both parents in the permission seeking, creating new meanings of the ritual for herself and for his parents. Similarly, our participants, Sarah and Cassandra, decided to ask their fiancé-to-be's parents for permission before dropping to one knee and popping the question. Mimesis offers a parodic rendition of the original act (Kozel, 1996), exposing that it is not the engagement, but who initiates it, that legitimizes the couple.

Rosa's, Sarah's, and Cassandra's accounts of mimesis speak to empowerment and a re-doing of traditional gendered scripts, but also the privilege that they hold in being able to flip the script. Sarah even previously thought

that women proposing was not legitimate or maybe even “*pathetic*”. In debating existing assumptions of traditional gender roles with her partner, they rethought this preconception. Rather than only replicating the traditional masculine script, she rewrote and reembodyed the script to create new meanings for herself and others.

Through repetition, mimesis reveals a parodic side (Irigaray, 1985b). Our participants explored and incorporated stylistic elements into their proposals, revealing how tropes such as gifting a diamond ring could be replaced with less scripted gifts. Alternative “*engagement things*” were particularly relevant to mimes. Margot, for instance, decided to bake a “marry me” pizza to show her care and thoughtfulness in the proposal:

I baked him a pizza where I wrote “marry me”, because his favourite food is pizza, so I thought it would be very romantic to make him a proposal pizza, [...], I bought a ring, we do rock climbing together so I bought him a ring that is silicone, like a climbing ring [...] he's an active guy, he wouldn't want a diamond ring.

Instead of getting a diamond ring or proposing in a public space, Margot decided to use symbolic aspects of their intimate lives. In doing so, she challenged the norms and expectations imposed upon proposers (Schweingruber et al., 2008). As Margot later revealed, “*that [a diamond ring and making a show of the proposal] is not for me. I will do it my way*”. Several other women stressed the stylistic nature of their proposals in their accounts and how this drew on new engagement scripts. Magda, for instance, decided to incorporate the couple's dog in what is known as a “pup-posal” (an emergent *terminus technicus* of the engagement industry) by customizing a name tag:

I ordered a nametag with “will you marry me?” [...] I was on the Internet making those tags [for my dog] and thought that's a cute way to propose to someone with a puppy and a name tag.

Conversations around an “*engagement thing*” rather than an engagement ring also featured in our virtual ethnography. As a response to Kerr's (2015) Jezebel article, the user toslotchperchancetodream writes: “*I love the idea of an Engagement Thing*”. User Caroline's response to an article on A Practical Wedding evidences her ruminations around what an appropriate “*engagement thing*” might be:

I'm trying to come up with ideas, I was thinking maybe a really nice fedora, because he loves hats, especially fedoras. Or a gun, because he really wants one, but I don't know enough to pick one out, and don't know if giving a gun is a little like giving a knife.

Our participants did not simply present a mimesis of heteronormative rites, but in fact rewrote the script. Many of their stories are transformative in nature and celebrate the creation of these new scripts. They were what Irigaray (1985b) would call *re-imagining* a new way through which women could propose. Such ideas could enable creative ways through which women can represent and relate to one another, rather than trying to match up to men's symbolic realms (Fotaki et al., 2014; Oseen, 1997). Our participant Rosa, for instance, referenced the pop culture icon Monica from the TV show *Friends* as an inspiration:

I had just watched the episode of Friends where Monica had proposed to Chandler, and not like with ring or anything, she had done that, and that was the first time I had ever... in my whole life everybody has always said I am a lot like Monica, so I had always, like, really leaned into her, so when I saw that episode, it just clicked in my head, like, maybe that's a good idea?

With this statement, Rosa is elevating Monica's proposal to Chandler as giving her further agency to flip the script in a perceived absence of other role models. Herewith, Rosa gives rise to a nascent new script of “the Monica” who feels empowered to break the heteronormative mould. The women used pop-cultural references such as “the pup-posal” or “the Monica” as creative points of departure for how myths can be reconfigured and reshaped. By

identifying these overlooked elements of popular culture as inspiring narratives, women erect alternative symbolic myths, which they can identify and connect with (Oseen, 1997). In performing the mimesis to parodying the traditional material tropes, these women were recreating new shared meanings and imaginations of the hegemonic proposal script.

### 5.3 | The formation of digital solidarity networks

As illustrated above, women who propose draw on role models who have previously proposed to their male partners, fictional, and sometimes real. Within our virtual ethnography, the peer-to-peer sharing of experiences was a recurrent theme. Our analysis reveals that non-male proposals nourish solidarity over individualism. Women who propose draw inspiration from their social networks to define what a new feminist proposal script may look like, which results in a collective sharing of their journeys. For example, drawing on inspiration from each other was one of the main talking points in the comment section of Kerr's (2015) Jezebel article titled "When Women Propose, This is How It's Done". Lizzie's reply to the article illustrates how thankful she was to be able to read positive accounts of women popping the question:

I've been thinking about proposing to my boyfriend of 4 years, and I was so so nervous about it - all the other articles and posts I could find were putting it into a negative light and I was starting to think I was crazy for even thinking of doing it! This post has shown me that it's not weird or 'wrong' - it all depends on the couple and I know my bf will love it :) Thank-you so much for giving me the confidence to do this!

Contrary to accepted proposal traditions, these women define their new scripts in relation to others. The sharing of inspiration, ideas, experiences, and backlash within the digital community encouraged confidence and bravery. Social media acted as the tools to reshape beliefs and attitudes around reverse proposals to challenge this hegemonic, patriarchal tradition. Within this digital community, feminist virtues of care, understanding, inclusivity, and connection were being reproduced. This sentiment was shared by user CM:

I want to propose so badly, but I don't know if partner would be secretly upset. During our 3 year relationship I have really embraced my feminist roots and have well and truly pulled him along for the ride. [...] Should I leave this one thing to him? All of these bad ass and brave women breaking the norm has really inspired me though!

The above accounts demonstrate that drawing inspiration from other women's lived experiences gives rise to peer-to-peer solidarity networks that challenged the informal heteronormative institution of proposals. Akin to feminist movements such as the Women's March and global women's strike (Littler & Rottenberg, 2021), these digital solidarity networks that we observe are shaping new lines of practice that are not egoistic, aggressive, or dominating. While we did not observe the rise of a collective identity (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) and are aware of the privileged nature of our sample, our data spoke of horizontal support. It enabled creating a safe space within which women could share stories, ideas, and experiences to inspire and learn from each other. With the aid of social media, the support network that these women created was far reaching (Pirani et al., 2021).

This chimes with how members within one's social circle also play an important role as a support network. Our participant Laura, for instance, sought reassurance from her girlfriends ahead of popping the question: "I talked to some of my girlfriends about it, do you think that's weird, is that cool, should I just do it anyway?". Asking friends was also important for Cassandra, although she did not find the courage to propose the first time around:

I had advice from our mutual best friend, I've known her since I was 3, so 27 years now. She helped me setting up the first meeting, the first try to the proposal before I chickened out.

In building a community, these women illuminated the values of care, connection, and empathy. Although such forms of solidarity may be viewed as a postfeminist agenda and what Chatzidakis et al. (2015, p. 5) highlight as a “rebranding [of] feminism” and mostly accessible to privileged women, we argue that it allows for an understanding of a different type of new informal institutionalism that focuses on empathy and support rather than domination and tradition. Especially in relation to wedding rituals, where the hegemonic discussions tend to revolve around material aspects (Otnes & Pleck, 2003), we see that reverse proposal networks focused more on ideals and values of the relationship. These digital solidarity networks that we observed were therefore producing narratives, behaviors, and symbolic ways for women to propose, by other women.

## 6 | DISCUSSION: NEW DEPARTURES OR SAME OLD, SAME OLD

This paper assesses whether institutions can change along with changes in gender equality. In doing so, we highlight the importance of mimetic isomorphism, the cognitive aspect of institutional theory usually employed to enshrine the emulation of practices (Scott, 2013), within feminist institutionalism. More, we argue that mimetic isomorphism can be reframed as distributed power. By distributed power, we refer to a power that is not concentrated in cultural tropes but instead claimed by actors engendering new socially accepted norms. Our conceptualization of distributed power builds on the work of Lowndes (2014, pp. 685–6), who states that institutions “distribute power, differentially constraining and enabling actors in ways that ‘stick’ over time” and further recognizes that institutions “do not have an objective existence beyond their effects upon actors’ behavior”. Distributed power is thus aware of the gendered nature of institutions and simultaneously highlights how change can develop through collective agency. We showed how change in gendered institutions is not dependent on new norms institutionalized by individual projects but on actors who *share* power through mutual validation and through the circulation of alternative standards. The redistribution and sharing of power has the potential to reshape cognitive isomorphism by allowing for new role models of mimetic displays to emerge. We argue that the coercive power upheld by a standardized practice can be turned on its head when a subgroup establishes new informal rites that inspire others to imitate. In analyzing how women generate and use mimetic isomorphism to flip the proposal script, we thereby contribute to institutional theory and feminist institutionalism in threefold ways.

First, we argue that individuals can change informal institutions by foregoing the prevalent norms and conventions that these institutions imply. Rather than accepting the status quo and following established rites, we show that individuals within a highly patriarchal institution can act on the gendered scripts to introduce new norms and standards into the institution, creating mimetic isomorphism. This inspires others to emulate and create new practices and may thus constitute a new critical mass of individuals in their own right. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) have theorized the coalescence of collective identity as part of the institutional work required to seek inclusion into the market. We extend this attention to the collective beyond a market-driven perspective, as we frame mimetic isomorphism as distributed power that acknowledges the capacity of actors within informal institutions to step into new directions and carve out a trend for others to follow.

This partially contradicts the observation that the presence alone of a critical mass of subjects challenging gendering norms does not imply a shift toward gender equality (Caven et al., 2021). Yet, we acknowledge that it is not that easy for most individuals living within a patriarchal society. We acknowledge that our sample includes mostly white, mostly heterosexual, mostly highly educated women, and the effect this has on agency and creating new mimetic isomorphisms. Within an institution that rests on the foundation of legally and economically privileging heterosexual couples, the act of flipping a proposal script may not seem so subversive. After all, it is through entering into matrimony via the means of an engagement script that privilege can be reproduced and compounded during a couple’s lifetime—especially for the male part that historically disproportionately benefits from female care and reproductive work (Arruzza et al., 2019). The intense backlash that some of the women who (plan to) propose to their male partners receive also speaks of the dangers they encounter when breaking the traditional script and therewith challenging patriarchal hegemony over the value and direction of heterosexual relationships.

Second, we demonstrate that at the heart of distributed power is the integration of new standards that can be deployed to redefine the institution. We observed how women employ mimetic isomorphism not only to mimic traditional gendered norms but were producing and reproducing a new symbolic order for themselves. For instance, using parody and material tropes such as *engagement things* to create a new shared cultural imagery to share among themselves and others in which they are not absent (Oseen, 1997). Inspired by Irigaray (1985a), we show that these women were going beyond mimicry to recreate what is considered appropriate conduct within the institution of proposals. Chappell's work on the "gendered 'logic of appropriateness'" (2006, p. 223) highlights that the default conduct within institutions assumes a traditionally male stance and thus typically rejects divergence from this norm. Yet, these women forged a new gendered logic of appropriateness that upends previous assumptions about what is apt or not.

The emerging discourses around what may constitute new mimetic isomorphisms thus both widen the institution of marriage to become inclusive of a greater variety of proposal scripts and, at the same time, strengthen its hegemonic claim as the culturally dominant form and "gold standard" of living in a relationship that is socially, legally, and financially privileged. We observed this intricate interplay: On the one hand, the institution of marriage is fighting for its survival and relevance in a contemporary society that is increasingly characterized by new feminisms along with calls for diversity and inclusion that have deeply permeated popular culture (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). On the other hand, this apparent flexing of values serves to remain attractive and appear progressive to demographics who might otherwise eschew this traditional milestone altogether.

In observing this contradiction, we contend that there are two double binds for women. First, although women are expected to want and strive toward heteronormative marriage, a seed that is often planted in early childhood, they are nonetheless chastised for apparently wanting it so badly as to dare to initiate this marriage themselves. This double bind echoes McBride's (2021) thesis on the constant double bind of the inescapable logic of neoliberalism and feminism within it. She argues that you are "damned if you do, and damned if you don't" and therewith gets to the heart of the matter of what living as a woman in, well, all societies amounts to. This double bind also correlates with the work of Bradshaw and Brown (2018), who offer an alternative psychoanalytical reading utilizing Laing and Esterson's (1964) *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. According to them, Laing and Esterson (1964) suggest that inhabiting multiple personalities enables women to function within the double standards placed on them by familial and societal expectations. They give examples of this in their ruminations about the double bind women find themselves in, in the face of families who anticipate their female offspring to form heterosexual relationships and yet reprimand them for subsequently entering into a sexual relationship (Laing & Esterson, 1964). As they posit, bouts of what may be pathologized as "madness" may ensue that reflect on the impossibility of fulfilling the standards a patriarchal society has for women.

The second double bind that we observed speaks of the contradictions of being rebellious in the times of capitalism. In *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* (1997), Eva Illouz discusses how romantic love, which is historically situated in rebelliousness and considered extremely private, simultaneously reproduces and is reproduced by the capitalist marketplace in a fashion that makes consumption inescapable. On one hand, reversing the proposal script is a rebellious act that subverts patriarchal role models, as a search for an alternative symbolic regime (Irigaray, 1985a) that speaks of gender equality and sometimes feminism. On the other hand, most of these proposal scripts end in heteronormative and capitalist marriages, described by the materialistic scenario of the white wedding (Arend, 2016; Otnes & Pleck, 2003) therewith subscribe to the institution that they subverted. Moreover, women are dependent on their partners' acceptance to initiate their rebellious acts, thereby circumscribing to the patriarchal ideologies that remain.

To conclude, we observe how informal institutions enable mimetic isomorphism toward both welcoming and fighting societal change: On the one hand, mimetic isomorphism is enacted by its members and thus characterized by distributed power; on the other hand, it is still guided by tropes held deeply within the collective imagery of society, such as what constitutes acceptable gendered conduct and legitimate proposal scripts. With this paper, we call for new research into the gendered aspects of informal institutions and how these may be broken down and questioned

by their members. Most importantly, we welcome research into other contexts that further probes and questions the double bind that the female gender is still viciously subjected to.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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