ORGANIZATIONAL REPRESSION OF STAKEHOLDER COLLECTIVE ACTION

Organizations face mounting pressure from stakeholders to change practices and policies, yet scholarly understanding of how organizations manage this pressure remains incomplete. While existing research has examined various organizational responses to stakeholder pressure—including acquiescence, neglect, collaboration, and resistance—they have been predominantly reactive and discrete, overlooking a more systematic approach organizations employ to neutralize stakeholder pressure before it emerges and end it even if it materializes. To address this gap, this paper introduces organizational repression as an integrated strategy aimed at preventing, controlling, or constraining stakeholder collective action from evolving. Drawing on the social movements and state-based repression literatures, we theorize how organizations can effectively undermine collective action by targeting its enabling conditions across three distinct phases: emergence, coalescence and formalization. We propose five key repressive tactics—manipulating threat perceptions, closing opportunity structures, restricting resources, selectively disincentivizing recruits, and fragmenting coalitions of members and allies—and explore how organizations implement each. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the social movements and nonmarket strategy literatures by theorizing organizational repression as a stakeholder management strategy and revealing how organizations can undermine stakeholder efforts to produce organizational and societal change.

Stakeholder pressure is a formidable force for organizational change, having pushed firms to adopt new practices and policies, ranging from shareholder value maximization to climate change mitigation to supplier codes of conduct (Bartley & Child, 2014; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). Recognizing its importance, research has studied a range of positive and negative organizational responses to stakeholder pressure (Oliver, 1991), including acquiescence (Luo, Zhang, & Marquis, 2016), neglect (Piazza & Perretti, 2020), collaboration (Odziemkowska, 2022), and resistance (Bonardi & Keim, 2005; Minefee & Bucheli, 2021; Waldron, Navis, & Fisher, 2013). However, these responses are largely reactive, discrete instantiations of managing stakeholder pressure, failing to consider how organizations instead can neutralize it via an integrated, and frequently proactive, *strategy of repression*.

Stakeholders—i.e., "*any* group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization's purpose" (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & De Colle, 2010: 54)—exert pressure on organizations by mobilizing via collective action, or the process through which "two or more stakeholders act in pursuit of a collective good" (Marwell & Oliver, 1993: 4). Stakeholder collective action (SCA) is critical as it provides stakeholders with the power necessary to push for organizational change that they are unlikely to achieve individually (King, 2008). But SCA is a cumbersome and costly process, replete with various challenges like the free rider problem (Olson, 1965). Therefore, stakeholders must achieve certain enabling conditions for SCA to progress from its nascent *emergence* phase, to gain traction in its *coalescence* phase, and sustain momentum in its *formalization* phase (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Staggenborg, 2016). We argue that organizations can exploit these challenges by targeting the enabling conditions at each phase of SCA through a strategy of repression that is designed to heighten the barriers to, and even end, SCA.

Drawing on the social movements literature (Earl, 2003), we define organizational repression as *an integrated strategy aimed at preventing, controlling, or constraining stakeholder collective action from evolving*. In this definition, we highlight that organizations can counter stakeholder pressure not just through isolated, purely reactive responses, but also proactively, by preempting, reducing, and eliminating stakeholders' efforts to engage in collective action and assert their demands in the first place. Thus, repression presents a flexible integrated stakeholder management strategy that organizations can use to undermine activism and dissent *before* stakeholder pressure emerges, *as* it emerges and coalesces, and *even after* it formalizes into a social movement. To do so effectively, organizations can deploy repressive tactics intentionally designed to target the enabling conditions that stakeholders must achieve in each phase of SCA—for SCA to progress to the next phase or to be maintained in the final phase—until the organization capitulates to their demands. By exploring the dynamic nature of organizational repression and SCA, we build a novel theory about how organizations repress as a means to strategically manage stakeholders.

Our theory contributes to the social movements and nonmarket strategy literatures by introducing the concept of *organizational repression* and demonstrating how it serves as a distinct, oftentimes proactive, and integrated strategy to prevent, control, or constrain SCA throughout the entirety of its evolution. Although prior scholarship on state-based repression acknowledges a possibility of repression by private entities (e.g., Earl, 2003, 2011), scholars have yet to explore organizational repression and its unique repertoire of repressive tactics. We address this gap in the literature by theorizing how organizations can effectively undermine the very conditions that enable SCA: perceiving a common threat and identifying open opportunity structures in the emergence phase; gaining resources and attracting recruits in the coalescence phase; and

maintaining members and allies in the formalization phase (Almeida, 2019; Christiansen, 2009). We posit that by linking their repressive tactics to these conditions—in other words, by undermining perceptions of a common threat and closing opportunity structures (i.e., using preventing tactics) in the emergence phase, restricting resources and selectively disincentivizing SCA recruits (i.e., using controlling tactics) in the coalescence phase, and fragmenting coalitions of SCA members and potential allies (i.e., using constraining tactics) in the formalization phase—organizations can effectively repress collective action.[1]

In building our theory of organizational repression, we posit that organizations often do not, and need not, wait for stakeholder pressure to emerge; instead, they can preempt SCA by intervening *before* it ever has the opportunity to emerge and end it even *after* it arises. Understanding how repression operates is crucial for research and practice in social movements and nonmarket strategy because it can have lasting impacts—negative or positive—for stakeholders, organizations, and society as a whole.[2] While we do not take a normative view on organizational repression, ultimately, our theory implies that repression can shape stakeholder dissent and impede stakeholder efforts to produce change.

REPRESSION AS A STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

With the help of SCA, stakeholders can exert significant pressure on organizations, compelling changes in their practices with direct effects on financial performance, access to resources, and even survival (Baron & Diermeier, 2007; den Hond & de Bakker, 2007; Henisz,

[1] Although the SCA conditions and corresponding tactics have commonalities (e.g., manipulating perception of common interests is a means of establishing value supremacy) with the competitive dynamics approach to modeling firm-activist interactions (e.g., Pacheco & Dean, 2015; Markman, Waldron, & Panagopoulos, 2016; Waldron et al., 2019), our approach is distinct as we model organizations and activists as competing over the awareness, motivation, and capabilities of stakeholders, not those of organizations. We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this important distinction.

[2] For example, it is possible that the repression of coal miners and anti-nuclear power activists could help mitigate climate change risks by allowing for an easier transition to non-carbon dioxide-producing sources of electricity. This example also highlights how organizational repression can target SCA of any ideological stripe.

Dorobantu, & Nartey, 2014). Because of these significant impacts, organizations have developed a range of positive and negative responses to manage stakeholder demands (Oliver, 1991). They include acquiescence (Luo, Zhang, & Marquis, 2016), collaboration (Odziemkowska, 2022), co-optation (McDonnell, 2016), greenwashing (Kim & Lyon, 2015), neglect (Piazza & Perretti, 2020), and active resistance through actions such as counter-narratives (Bonardi & Keim, 2005; Minefee & Bucheli, 2021) and counter-claims (Waldron, Navis, Aronson, York, & Pacheco, 2019), as well as omission of shareholder proposals (Hadani, Doh, & Schneider, 2018).

In contrast to these often standalone and primarily reactive responses, we argue that the stakeholder management literature has neglected a more integrated approach, designed to undermine SCA before it emerges and end it should it coalesce or formalize into a social movement: *repression*. Because collective action is how stakeholders build power to challenge the organizational status quo (King, 2008), repression seeks to *prevent, control, or constrain SCA.* Importantly, while organizations may lack the overt power of the state, they can still erode the foundations of SCA by deploying a set of adaptive repressive tactics that can *target* whole stakeholder groups or singularly powerful or important stakeholders that are pushing for, or are engaged in, SCA.

Repression, therefore, is not a one-off response, but rather an integrated stakeholder management *strategy*—"a pattern in a stream of decisions" (Mintzberg, 1978: 934)—designed to prevent or eliminate stakeholder pressure. That is, unlike the use of singular actions, such as greenwashing or co-optation, repression intentionally and strategically combines these and other, more illiberal tools to deter mobilization and sustain organizational control.[3] Moreover, organizations can deploy repression *reactively*, by neutralizing collective action as it gains

[3] We emphasize that organizational repression is independent of the ideological nature of SCA. Repression is, however, illiberal in the classical sense in that it is designed to limit stakeholder participation and speech.

momentum, or *proactively*, by intervening before stakeholders mobilize to shape how SCA unfolds or prevent it from arising altogether. Therefore, the tactics and underlying actions organizations deploy to undermine SCA throughout its evolution, whether more or less aggressive, reactive or proactive, constitute an organization's integrated strategy of repression.

For example, Amazon has employed a multifaceted repression strategy to undermine SCA at its warehouses (Gurley & Cox, 2020; Streitfeld, 2021). To preempt unionization, Amazon engaged in covert surveillance, using "heat maps" to identify employees that might be congregating, infiltrated private employee Facebook groups, and created a "Social Listening SOP" (Gurley & Cox, 2020). At facilities where union efforts still gained momentum, Amazon posted anti-union messages in bathroom stalls, held captive-audience town halls, and fired lead organizers (Ghaffary, 2022). Even though after regulatory scrutiny at one facility Amazon had to settle and post a notice stating, "WE WILL NOT engage in surveillance of you, restrain and coerce our employees, threaten you with the loss of your job, or interrogate you" about any union activity, Amazon still succeeded in repressing SCA as the union drive failed (Streitfeld, 2021).

The state-based repression and stakeholder management literatures shed light on the drivers and tradeoffs behind why and when organizations, like Amazon, choose to repress. First, organizations must become aware of the potential for, or the presence of, SCA (Wu & Liu, 2024): While they can become aware of *ongoing* SCA based on direct stakeholder demands, early organizational awareness of *potential* SCA can emerge by learning from both direct and indirect experiences (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016), as well as engaging in counterintelligence (Lubbers, 2012). Because activists often rely on a routine repertoire of contention—such as protests, petitions, or media campaigns—that transcends specific movements (Tilly, 1978), organizations that learn (directly or indirectly) from prior episodes of SCA can anticipate how the next contentious episode

will unfold and whether it could generate enough power to challenge the organization (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Yue, Rao, & Ingram, 2013). Further, counterintelligence efforts designed to identify and analyze potential threats can enhance organizational awareness by providing actionable insights about where, when, and by whom SCA may arise (Cunningham, 2007; Lubbers, 2012).

Second, once aware of SCA, the state-based repression literature suggests that, like states, organizations are most likely to attempt to repress SCA when they perceive it as weak enough to be contained, yet still a credible threat (Davenport, 2007; Earl, 2003; Waldron et al., 2013).[4] As SCA evolves, organizational perceptions of its strength shift accordingly, creating a dynamic calculus that shapes the likelihood of repression. The earlier that organizations can intervene in the evolution of SCA, the more likely their repressive efforts will effectively prevent and even end SCA, as stakeholders have yet to gain the power they need to effectively overcome the organization's repressive efforts. However, when SCA is left to emerge unimpeded, it can gain so much power that repression can become ineffective: at that point, repression can even backfire, producing amplified support for dissenting stakeholders (Smithey & Kurtz, 2018) and market backlash (Vasi & King, 2012). Hence, at that juncture, organizations may face a tradeoff between repressing SCA at all costs or finding a different way to manage stakeholder demands.

Third, in deciding whether to repress, in addition to assessing SCA weakness or strength, organizations are also likely to consider the degree to which a stakeholder issue resonates with and is prioritized by management (Bundy, Shropshire, & Buchholtz, 2013). Issue salience suggests two key cognitive structures—organizational identity and strategic frames—which respectively use different core logics: one logic is instrumental (i.e., rational, cost-benefit calculations) (Durand, Hawn, & Ioannou, 2019), and the other, expressive logic, is related to how the firm

[4] Consistent with the social movements literature, we use the concept of threat to delineate both organizational perception of the challenge that SCA poses and stakeholder perception of organizational impact on their interests.

defines and displays conceptions of the self (Bundy et al., 2013: 353). As leaders examine stakeholders' values on the focal issue, they assess whether they are congruent with those of their organization (Bundy, Vogel, & Zachary, 2018; Eesley & Lenox, 2006). When they differ, stakeholders and organizations can experience a values "misfit" so intense that it leaves little to no room for reconciling the organization's "modes, means, and ends" with those demanded by the stakeholders (Kluckhohn, 1951). In turn, this intractable values clash can result in intense, and even at times harmful, behavior between the organization and its stakeholders (Bundy et al., 2018)—including the use of repression as a stakeholder management strategy.[5]

Once an organization decides to repress, the next consideration quickly comes into view: *how* can it repress effectively? This question is the focus of our theory: in the next section, we propose that organizations effectively repress SCA by undermining its enabling conditions. We next consider how an organization does so in each phase of SCA evolution.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS EFFECTIVELY REPRESS

Mobilization and repression change over time in relation to one another, involving a push-and-pull between stakeholders and their target (McAdam et al., 2001; Tilly, 1978). As such, repression functions as the inverse of mobilization: as collective action seeks to provide stakeholders a more powerful means of interacting with an organization, repression seeks to diminish this ability—with an end goal of stakeholder inaction (Davenport, Johnston, & Mueller, 2005; McAdam et al., 2001). Therefore, to theorize how organizations can effectively repress SCA, we turn to the social movements literature that identifies three primary phases of SCA: emergence, coalescence, and formalization (Christiansen, 2009). In the *emergence phase*, collective dissent lies dormant and stakeholders remain isolated, in the *coalescence phase*,

[5] In fact, this clash in values may sometimes result in repression even when it is not in the financial interest of the organization. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this important point.

individual stakeholders converge into a visible group taking action, and in the *formalization phase* these efforts solidify into a formalized social movement with established structures (Almeida, 2019; Della Porta & Diani, 2006). But as we describe here, when effective social controls are in place, whether due to repression by the state or a non-state actor, any one of these phases can be forestalled and the sequential development of collective action aborted (Smelser & Smelser, 1963), forcing SCA into a final phase: *decline* (Christiansen, 2009).

In each phase of SCA evolution, stakeholders seek to achieve enabling conditions that allow them to move to the next phase and, eventually, build enough power to push the organization to capitulate to their demands (Boykoff, 2011; Almeida, 2019). Therefore, for parsimony in our theorizing, we delineate the boundaries between these phases as occurring when stakeholders achieve the enabling conditions for SCA at a given phase as well as assume that, once achieved, stakeholders maintain these enabling conditions in later phases. Although these phases are not strictly linear and "we make no pretense of dealing with absolutely delimited periods" (Hopper, 1950: 273), they capture dominant temporal aspects of collective action and its mirror image, repression. In turn, we posit that organizations can effectively repress SCA when contention arises between an organization and its stakeholders on an issue by undermining SCA's enabling conditions in a given phase. To understand how organizations repress effectively, we therefore break down SCA into its three dominant phases, identify the enabling conditions that underpin each phase, and theorize the repressive tactics that organizations can deploy to undermine these conditions in order to prevent, control, and constrain SCA from evolving.

Throughout our theorizing, we use the term *repressive tactic* to denote the set of actions organizations can use to undermine a specific enabling condition of SCA; in turn, *actions* captures concrete manifestations of organizational repression, such as co-opting movement leaders. The

actions organizations deploy to implement repressive tactics can range from less aggressive, such as greenwashing, to those that are more aggressive, such as deploying private security services (Smithey & Kurtz, 2018). Further, we group repressive tactics under the "preventing," "controlling," and "constraining" labels, which align with the emergence, coalescence, and formalization phases of SCA, respectively. Table 1 provides definitions of each repressive tactic, its corresponding phase, the enabling condition it is designed to undermine, and a non-exhaustive list of actions available to an organization to implement a given tactic. We next examine each phase in turn, beginning with the most vulnerable phase of collective action: emergence. Figure 1 summarizes our theory.

*****Insert Table 1 and Figure 1 about here******

SCA Emergence and Preventive Tactics

The emergence or "social ferment" phase denotes the period before collective action begins, when SCA is only a possibility (De La Porta & Diani, 2006; Almeida, 2019). At this phase, visible markers of mobilization, such as collective letter writing campaigns, walkouts, boycotts, or protests, are absent. "Potential movement participants" are still becoming aware of any grievance that may call for redress and even if they become aware, have at most expressed their discontent individually, such as in a "comment to friends and family" (Christiansen, 2009: 16). Given its nascent state, the barriers to SCA are most acute in this phase because stakeholders are "mobilizing from scratch" (Pearlman, 2021: 1786). As such, at the emergence phase, assessments of why and whether to mobilize occur at the individual level.

To understand why, despite the arduous task of mobilizing, SCA still emerges and is able to move to the coalescence phase, social movement scholars developed political process theory, which emphasizes the dual roles of "threat" and "opportunity" that push stakeholders out of a state

of non-mobilization (Almeida, 2019; Staggenborg, 2016). First, stakeholders need to recognize a *threat*, a grievance, or "troublesome matters or conditions, and the feelings associated with them—such as dissatisfaction, fear, indignation, and moral shock" (Snow, 2013: 1) that may be long-standing or more recent. From there, stakeholders need to establish "a sense of common interests" with others to propel them from individual grievances into collective action (Almeida, 2019: 65). Second, stakeholders need to identify an *opportunity* for mobilization, or that there is a possibility of having their grievance remedied. It arises when the opportunity structures in which they are embedded present favorable conditions to successfully make their claims (Meyer, 2004).

Given the dual roles of threat and opportunity for stakeholders to ever mobilize, these two key initial conditions in the emergence phase also provide organizations with an opening to prevent SCA from ever emerging. We posit that to effectively undermine both conditions, organizations have two corresponding *preventive tactics* at their disposal: 1) manipulating perceptions of a common threat and 2) closing opportunity structures. We explore each tactic in turn.

Manipulating Threat Perceptions. Manipulation, or "the purposeful and opportunistic attempt to co-opt, influence, or control" (Oliver, 1991: 157), of stakeholder threat perceptions can be an effective means of preventing SCA because, without a perceived common threat or grievance, stakeholders have no reason to mobilize. Organizations can manipulate the perception of a common threat by altering perceptions of a) the existence or impact of a potentially threatening issue and b) the appropriateness of the organization as the target of SCA. Accordingly, drawing on the social movements literature on framing and corporate social responsibility (CSR) research, as well as corresponding insights derived from real-world examples, we identify three actions by which organizations can manipulate stakeholder threat perceptions: 1) *concealing* harmful activities, 2) *framing* an issue proactively, and 3) *disguising* themselves as non-threatening.

First, organizations routinely *conceal* information that could provoke SCA by "strategically varying the types and amount of information they publicly disclose depending on how it reflects on them" (Marquis, Toffel, & Zhou, 2016: 484) or actively suppressing disclosure by third parties by making it difficult or illegal. For example, firms harming the environment may withhold data on emissions and toxic waste disposal (Kim & Lyon, 2015), while non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) can be used to silence employees. Some firms even lobby for legislative protections; for example, "Ag Gag" laws criminalize undercover investigations of factory farms, preventing the public from learning about unethical animal treatment (Landfried, 2012).

Second, organizations can seek to control narratives about any potential harmful activities that may later be exposed through their own *proactive issue framing*. In the emergence phase, stakeholders engage in diagnostic framing, or identifying "some event or aspect of social life as problematic and in need of attention" (Snow & Benford, 1992). Organizations can deflect the notion that there is any issue worth mobilizing around by diminishing any perceived urgency or shaping perceptions of the existence of the problem itself. For example, recognizing the risk of becoming a target for climate activism, ExxonMobil began actively sponsoring and disseminating research in the 1970s that downplayed climate change (MacKay & Munro, 2012).

Third, because in the emergence phase, stakeholders must not only recognize a threat but also "convincingly attribute blame to agents causing the problem" (Snow & Corrigall-Brown, 2005), organizations can invest in legitimacy-enhancing activities or *disguise*, portraying themselves as socially responsible, non-threatening actors. While CSR can serve genuine ethical purposes, organizations can also intentionally use it to manipulate perceptions of threat by making themselves appear less threatening despite engaging in activities that at least a segment of their stakeholders would perceive as harmful—thereby trying to have their CSR activities serve as

impression management measures against potential activist campaigns (McDonnell & King, 2013). In this way, CSR serves a performative purpose in misdirecting attention away from issues that stakeholders perceive as threatening, as opposed to substantively addressing that threat.

However, this action carries risks: "good companies" also make good targets because their reputations heighten the perceived hypocrisy and corresponding media attention when wrongdoing is exposed (McDonnell & King, 2013). Moreover, by failing to address the threat, SCA may still emerge because the core threat or grievance has merely been papered over. As one mining industry expert opined on CSR activities, some community members might accept development projects, while others may still question "why the company is giving them all these other things when in fact they see that the real issue is being fobbed off and not resolved" (Kemp & Bond, 2009: 19). Still, by concealing harmful activities, proactively framing the issue, and disguising themselves as nonthreatening, organizations can shape individual stakeholder's perceptions regarding not only whether a threat exists but also whether they are the appropriate target for activism. If successful, the organization will diminish any reason for the stakeholder to mobilize in the first place.

Closing Opportunity Structures. In the emergence phase, SCA arises not only due to shared grievances but also because opportunity structures are open to it, signaling to stakeholders that the timing is ripe for mobilization and they are more likely to have their demands heard and potentially met (McDonnell, King, & Soule, 2015). Prior research emphasizes two opportunity structures for SCA directly target organizations. First, the corporate opportunity structure (COS) refers to internal firm characteristics, such as sympathetic insiders or reputational vulnerabilities, that serve as cues that companies may respond positively to activist demands (Gupta & Briscoe, 2020; McDonnell et al., 2015). Second, the industry opportunity structure (IOS) involves macro-level aspects of an industry, including economic strength and culture, that signal whether

stakeholders may achieve their goals (King, 2008; Schurman, 2004). Beyond direct action, the broader political opportunity structure (POS), which refers to "political factors at the nation-state or regional level [that] influence[] mobilization" (Briscoe et al., 2014: 1788), shapes activist engagement in public politics aimed at influencing the government entities that regulate organizations (Hiatt, Grandy, & Lee, 2015). We posit that organizations can most effectively repress SCA at the emergence phase by fostering the perception that these opportunity structures are closed, effectively eliminating a precondition for mobilization and deterring stakeholders from mobilizing.

As shown in our earlier Amazon example, organizations can signal a closed COS in two primary ways. First, as emphasized in the state-based repression literature, a core way to demonstrate that an opportunity structure is closed to activism is the implicit threat of repression (Davenport et al., 2005; Earl, 2003). Past repression—including direct actions, such as excluding shareholder proposals or busting unions—creates a reputational signal that the firm is unreceptive to activism (Briscoe & Safford, 2008; McDonnell, 2016). Even if prior repression occurred after mobilization, the lasting perception of a closed COS can deter future activism. Second, organizations can foster an early perception of a closed COS through counterintelligence efforts. Extensive surveillance and monitoring signal to stakeholders that activism is not welcome and may result in retaliation, and even the mere presence of surveillance can induce demoralization, helplessness, and paranoia (Marx, 1974: 428).

Beyond the COS, organizations can close the IOS, working alongside other industry players to indicate that the entire industry is resistant to demands for change. By coordinating repression across an industry, firms can eliminate alternative targets (whether market competitors or parts of their supply/value chains) and demonstrate to lead activists that an entire sector is

uniformly resistant. For example, pipeline company Energy Transfer collaborated with other oil and gas firms to lobby for legislation that criminalized protests against all critical infrastructure projects (Yoder, 2018), effectively restricting avenues for dissent. In the technology sector, firms have similarly coordinated efforts to curb labor activism: major companies, including Google, Apple, and Intel, engaged in secret "no-poaching" agreements, ensuring that employees could not use job offers from competing firms as leverage for better working conditions (Levine, 2015). This collusion not only suppressed worker mobility but also signaled to tech employees that the whole industry was unwilling to entertain collective demands.

Finally, the POS can "spur activists to take action by signaling possibilities for a movement's influence" (King, 2008: 396), as constituencies are given more routine and meaningful avenues for access to political participation to redress grievances (McAdam, 1999; Tilly, 1978). Although this concept arose to describe variation in activism against the state, those same factors that render the POS open may also influence activism against a different target: the organization. Activists pursue change not only by directly targeting organizations but also by leveraging the state to exert regulatory and economic influence (Hiatt et al., 2015). When the POS appears open for stakeholder influence, stakeholders are more likely to organize through institutional channels to press for change (Werner, 2012). Organizations can counteract this by capturing and co-opting political institutions, ensuring that activists perceive these channels as unreceptive.

Organizations can capture the POS in several ways. First, they can shape the legislative and regulatory environments in favor of their interests and create a captive audience of legislators and regulators through corporate political activity (CPA), including campaign donations, lobbying, and board appointments (Hillman, Keim, & Schuler, 2004). As organizations increasingly engage

with (and help elect) politicians beneficial to their interests, stakeholders can perceive that attempting to engage in public politics is futile (Werner, 2012). Beyond legislative and regulatory capture, organizations can also co-opt law enforcement through revolving-door relationships, including hiring ex-government officials, military personnel, and police (German, Levinson-Waldman, & Mueller-Hsia, 2022). These relationships with law enforcement can blur the line between private security and public policing (Starr, Fernandez, Amster, Wood, & Caro, 2008) and reinforce the perception that SCA will be met with state-backed repression from law enforcement.

To summarize, at the emergence phase of SCA, organizations target and undermine its two enabling conditions by manipulating stakeholder perceptions of threat and closing opportunity structures. Further, the two tactics work in tandem: while manipulating perceptions of threat addresses *why* stakeholders might mobilize, closing opportunity structures addresses *whether* they believe mobilization will even be worth the effort. Moreover, if organizations are successful in manipulating perceptions of threat and thus protecting their reputations, they can ensure retained access to both the politicians and industry partners they need to close the POS and IOS (McDonnell & Werner, 2016). These two preventing tactics are the most effective in this phase because they specifically target the enabling conditions for SCA to emerge, thereby preventing SCA from ever occurring, as opposed to restricting or unwinding it once it has progressed. Thus, we posit:

Proposition 1: The preventive tactics of manipulating threat perceptions and closing opportunity structures are most effective for repressing SCA in its emergence phase.

SCA Coalescence and Controlling Tactics

When organizations fail at or do not engage in preventive repression and stakeholders identify a common threat and open opportunities for mobilization, then SCA can move to the next phase: coalescence. The coalescence phase marks a critical shift from individualized grievance to nascent mobilization (Christiansen, 2009). Though not yet a formalized social movement (Bishara,

2021; Finkel, 2015), the coalescence phase involves the transition from an *individualized* to a *collective* understanding of grievance and desire for redress (Almeida, 2019; Christiansen, 2009). Leaders emerge who "lead people to question and challenge their current mode of living" (Hopper, 1950: 272), while media coverage increases the visibility of discontent (Christiansen, 2009). Stakeholders reach out across existing and emergent networks to articulate shared grievances, generate options for redress, and coordinate around potential tactics. Through these actions taken by a variety of stakeholders, "the movement becomes more than just random upset individuals; at this point they are now organized and strategic in their outlook" (Christiansen, 2009).

To establish this collective support and organize stakeholders in the coalescence phase, the social movements literature highlights two enabling conditions. First, the collective nature of actions in this phase requires that aggrieved stakeholders *attract recruits* to their cause (Boykoff, 2011; Almeida, 2019). Movement recruits are those new to the SCA, as well as the potential participants who, once recruited, form the lifeblood of collective action. Second, to coordinate, organize, and support nascent collective action, stakeholders need to *gain resources* that do not exist in the emergence phase (Staggenborg, 2016) and that allow them "to transform… sentiments into action and influence" (King, 2008: 27). As a result, to most effectively repress SCA at the coalescence phase, we posit that organizations can target these two enabling conditions with two *controlling tactics*: *selectively disincentivizing recruits* and *restricting resources*. We introduce and discuss each in turn.

Selectively Disincentivizing Recruits. Attracting recruits is crucial for SCA in the coalescence phase as successful collective action requires the power that comes from a *group* of individual stakeholders asserting their demands (Christiansen, 2009). Not only do recruits provide legitimacy and power to SCA, but they also contribute the emotional charge that can help SCA

coalesce (Almeida, 2019). But attracting recruits poses challenges: for individuals to be willing to act collectively, they need to perceive that the benefits of collective action outweigh the costs (Christiansen, 2009). To control and thus, impede stakeholders' ability to attract new recruits to their cause, organizations can selectively disincentivize potential recruits by increasing the costs and decreasing the benefits of mobilization. They can do so either by explicitly increasing the costs of SCA through more harmful actions (the "stick" approach) or by offering alternative benefits (the "carrot" approach) to stakeholders to abstain from SCA.

With the "stick" approach, for potential internal recruits reliant on the organization for financial stability, selective disincentivizing can include demotions, threats of employment termination, or site closures. When employees at Google formed a walkout to contest harassment against women and related misconduct, one walkout organizer alleges Google retaliated by demoting her and recommending she take medical leave—a clear sign to her and potential recruits of high costs of SCA (O'Brien, 2020). For external stakeholders less dependent on the organization, it can threaten to revoke investment in their local business, terminate employment for a family member or friend, or sue individuals who speak out. While the selectively disincentivizing tactic can target a specific recruit, an organization's goal during this phase is also to make broader recruitment effort difficult by signaling to potential recruits that mobilization can come at a substantial cost and hence, that they should reconsider joining the SCA.

In addition, organizations can take the "carrot" approach to deter mobilization by providing specific stakeholders with targeted benefits. For instance, in the lead-up to unionization efforts, firms have offered individual employees managerial roles, minimal wage increases, and new benefits such as healthcare resources, so long as they abandoned unionization efforts (Van Buren & Greenwood, 2008). When Delta Airlines employees were seeking to unionize, the company

offered 5% pay increase—but only to non-union employees (Koenig, 2024). Ultimately, not only can these efforts at selectively disincentivizing lay the foundation for organizations to stop some recruits from joining the nascent SCA (Oliver, 1991), but they can also undermine future efforts to attract recruits to the cause, effectively controlling SCA coalescence.

Restricting Resources. Beyond selectively disincentivizing individual recruits, organizations can hinder stakeholder capacity for SCA coalescence by restricting resources. Stakeholders draw on a range of resources for mobilization, including human, material, social-organizational, cultural, and moral resources (Cress & Snow, 1996; Edwards, McCarthy, & Mataic, 2018). While recruits expand an organization's ranks, human capital resources provide the labor, leadership, experience, and skills—in other words, the capabilities—that SCA needs to progress (Edwards et al., 2018). Organizations can control human capital by, for example, creating schedules that prevent skilled organizational employees from attending SCA meetings, or identifying and firing SCA organizers in order to rob it of leadership.

In addition to human capital, organizations can control material and socio-cultural resources through legal and structural interventions. While material resources include financial and physical capital, socio-organizational resources include infrastructures, social ties, and networks (Edwards et al., 2018). Organizations can hinder material resources by cutting off modest financial or in-kind support often provided through informal channels. They can also proactively hinder external stakeholders' ability to shift from an informal collective to a formal non-profit by lobbying to tighten regulations on tax-exempt status, making it harder for stakeholders to secure funding and legitimacy (McDonnell & Werner, 2016). To control internal stakeholders, organizations can weaken labor protections by supporting right-to-work laws that make it harder for unions to gain formal recognition (Ellwood & Fine, 1987). Finally, organizations can also limit

socio-organizational resources by, for example, joining mailing lists and controlling the dissemination of information, denying meeting spaces, and revoking IT access or collaborative tools. After conflict around its treatment of female employees, for instance, Google petitioned the National Labor Relations Board to withdraw a rule that allowed workers to organize with their work email without the risk of company retaliation (O'Brien, 2020).

Finally, organizations can seek to restrict moral and cultural resources that underpin the notions of solidarity, identity, values, and legitimacy of SCA (Edwards et al., 2018). They can retract such resources from coalescing SCA through public acts of disavowal, through furtive messages to sympathetic parties, or through simple atrophy (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). By doing so, organizations can ensure that even as SCA coalesces, they restrict stakeholders from gaining resources that support effective organizing.

To summarize, by selectively disincentivizing recruits and restricting resources, organizations can undermine the two enabling conditions at the coalescence phase. Not only do each of these controlling tactics target crucial enabling conditions in this phase, but they also work together to stop SCA coalescence: while selectively disincentivizing recruits cuts off the lifeblood of the movement by stopping stakeholders from joining, restricting resources ensures that even when recruits do join, they lack the resources necessary to advance collective action. Moreover, while preventive tactics in the prior phase may still help in this new phase, because they target different conditions, they are not as effective as the controlling tactics that target the specific enabling conditions in this phase (i.e., resources and recruits). Based on the above, we posit:

Proposition 2: The controlling tactics of selectively disincentivizing recruits and restricting resources are most effective for repressing SCA in its coalescence phase.

SCA Formalization and Constraining Tactics

If organizations either fail in their repressive efforts at the coalescence phase or chose not to repress, and stakeholders attract recruits and gain resources, then SCA can move to the next phase: formalization. Characterized by higher levels of organization and coalition-based strategies (Christiansen, 2009), this phase gathers stakeholders into more formal groups of *members* to sustain mobilization and seeks out additional *allies* to broaden public support for their position (Almeida, 2019; Boykoff, 2011).

At the formalization phase, coalesced collective action becomes a coordinated social movement engaged in conflict with clearly identified opponents and strategic orientation towards a specific goal (Christiansen, 2009: 15; Bishara, 2021). Stakeholders now "share a distinct collective identity" (De la Porta & Diani, 2006: 20). In contrast to the prior phase, aggrieved stakeholders not only establish their own, more formal organizations with *members*, but they also form *coalitions* with *allies* including existing social movement organizations (SMOs) and others to increase their reach (Almeida, 2019). In this phase, while stakeholders continue seeking resources and recruits, they will have achieved a critical mass in the coalescence phase (Marwell & Oliver, 1993) that they aim to maintain via a structured social movement in the formalization phase. Unlike new recruits in the prior phase, SCA members at the formalization stage are more entrenched and committed to the movement, as participation itself becomes a reward (Gordon, 2025). Moreover, stakeholders at this phase seek to enhance their power through broader coalitions (Almeida, 2019), with the continued goal of forcing the target organization to capitulate.

To sustain momentum and continue to pressure the organization, stakeholders now face the critical challenge of maintaining participants or *members*: without them, SCA loses the collective capacity or power needed over the long-term to pursue their demands (Almeida, 2019). Moreover, establishing *allies* is crucial as the movement seeks to strengthen and broaden its recognition

among the general public, a critical enabling condition for the movement to have its demands met (Boykoff, 2011). At the formalization phase, success entails the continued capacity to engage in SCA, whether as a means of consistently pressuring an organization to change or monitoring the compliance of an organization that has acquiesced to its demands.

As in prior phases, organizations can still manage SCA with repression; indeed, "...the very popularization of unrest and discontent serves to intensify [] resistance to the spread of the movement" (Hopper, 1950: 273). Repression, however, is not a given: should organizations perceive that SCA has become too powerful to be repressed, they are unlikely to risk their valuable resources and reputations by repressing it because, with SCA's increased strength, the risk of possible failure and reputational damage increases. But if organizations still attempt to repress at the formalization phase for other reasons (such as a values clash), because SCA success in this phase depends on *maintaining members* and *establishing allies*, we argue that the most effective *constraining* tactic is *fragmenting coalitions* of these two sets of actors (McAdam et al., 2001).

Fragmenting coalitions of members and allies. Fragmenting, a repressive tactic introduced in the social movements literature on state-based repression, is designed to weaken group solidarity and constrain SCA by exploiting "conflict that emerges within or between social movement groups that formerly shared (or potentially share) common beliefs, interests, tactics, and/or goals…leading to schism" (Boykoff, 2011: 276). While much of the literature focuses on internal group dynamics that lead to division, external actors—particularly targeted organizations—can deliberately fuel these divisions (Boykoff, 2011). Fragmentation is particularly effective because it prevents "scale shift," or the significant expansion of social movement activity to a wide variety of groups (McAdam et al., 2001).

To understand how organizations can fragment coalitions of SCA members and allies in the formalization phase, we draw on the state-based repression and social movements literatures to identify a thorough but non-exhaustive list of fragmenting actions that create/exploit conflict within and/or between stakeholders and stakeholder groups (Boykoff, 2011; Smithey & Kurtz, 2018; Herman & Chomsky, 2021; Davenport, 2014; McDonnell, 2016). Specifically, we follow this literature's insights by focusing on the following actions: *sowing distrust* among members and allies, *stigmatizing* select stakeholders or groups, *co-opting* stakeholder groups that organizations perceive as more manageable, and *coercing* stakeholders and potential allies to end their engagement in SCA. Because these actions are the same whether organizations are attempting to fragment coalitions of members *or* allies, we discuss each action across the two targets jointly.

Sowing distrust. Maintaining participants and solidarity with allies depends on trust (Davenport, 2014). Without it, SCA members and allies will hesitate to build the strong relationships necessary for sustaining SCA over the long run (Weipert-Fenner, Rossi, Sika, & Wolff, 2024). Organizations can exploit this vulnerability by intentionally sowing distrust among members and across allies to the point of movement or coalition schism. Internally, organizations can sow distrust amongst unionizing employees by painting some of them as untrustworthy outsiders. For example, in the early 1900s organizations exploited the presence of the Communist Party within the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to seed the claim that the CIO was serving its own ideological ends versus the needs of labor, create a division between CIO and the American Federation of Labor, and thus, weaken both unions (Balser, 1997). In addition, repressive actions such as surveillance, particularly through infiltration of the focal movement, can create paranoia, making members wary of continued collaboration and suspect of the intentions of potential allies (Lubbers, 2012). For example, anti-corporate activists reported feeling paralyzed

under surveillance, with one organizer noting "the heat you're going to get.... we are going to be watched, hammered down" (Starr et al., 2008: 260). By fostering distrust, organizations undermine the cohesion among members and allies necessary for SCA to formalize and sustain momentum.

Stigmatizing. To further fragment SCA, organizations can intentionally stigmatize both select individual movement members and groups within a movement alliance (Smithey & Kurtz, 2018), as stigma does not simply exist; rather, outside entities can engage in processes to generate it (Zavyalova, 2025). Stigma marks someone as deviant or undesirable, shaping how others perceive and engage with them, including whether they are worthy of support. Once stigmatized, the consequences can be severe, ranging from "suicide to economic and social isolation" (Zhang, Wang, Toubiana, & Greenwood, 2021: 188). To repress opposition and isolate and deter threatening dissidents, organizations can exploit moral and associational sources of stigma.

Moral stigma refers to "blemishes" of character "based on engagement in activities perceived as immoral" and is linked to ostracization and social sanctions (Zhang et al., 2021: 199). Such consequences can prompt members to deny group ties, withdraw, or denounce the movement—fracturing solidarity (Boykoff, 2011). Organizations can intentionally cultivate moral stigma by framing the actions and intentions of movement participants as deviant or dangerous. For instance, resource extraction companies have labelled environmental activists as "ecoterrorists", thereby stigmatizing them as radicals that threaten public safety (Smith, 2008). And with the help of the media, organizations can spread narratives that activists engage in immoral conduct that violates social norms (Oliver, 1991).

Moral stigma is especially powerful because it extends to entire groups through associational stigma, which arises from mere proximity, association, or contact with stigmatized individuals (Zhang et al., 2021). As Goffman (1963: 30) explains, those associated with

stigmatized actors "share some of the discredit" and can suffer severe consequences: employees, for example, lost job opportunities for working alongside blacklisted colleagues (Pontikes, Negro, & Rao, 2010). By creating stigma through association, organizations can deter potential allies and bystanders from joining or remaining in a formal movement. Associational stigma can also fuel the "radical flank effect" in which organizations "create, maintain, and enforce boundaries between so-called undesirables and desirables" (Boykoff, 2011: 273). The result is that "activists engaged in moderate tactics fear that radical tactics would create a backlash against the movement's activities and goals," and ultimately separate themselves (Grandy & Hiatt, 2024: 838).

By stigmatizing certain stakeholders, organizations can socially isolate, and thereby fragment coalitions of, members and allies involved in SCA, constraining its progress. "Once stigmatized, a social movement faces stunted opportunities to effectively give voice to its central issues or goals" (Boykoff, 2011: 275). The fear of stigma leads participants to withdraw, coalition partners to distance themselves, and potential recruits to avoid involvement altogether. Ultimately, "[o]utward political expression of beliefs can be sacrificed on the altar of social acceptance" (Boykoff, 2011: 275-76), weakening solidarity necessary for sustained mobilization.

Manufacturing consent. In seeking to quell opposition, organizations also use more subtle forms of repression designed to manufacture consent among key stakeholders or to manipulate public opinion through propaganda designed to ensure acceptance of an elite's position (Herman & Chomsky, 2021; Lippmann, 1922). By securing the support—or at least the passive acquiescence—of segments of the stakeholder population affected by their actions, organizations can not only diminish active resistance, but also fragment SCA because allies, persuaded to align themselves with the organization, may even begin to actively denounce and countermobilize against dissidents (Odziemkowska, 2022).

A primary means through which organizations can manufacture consent is through CSR initiatives that strategically align stakeholder interests and those of their allies with corporate success (Brock & Dunlap, 2018). This approach mirrors counterinsurgency tactics, which emphasize "competition with the insurgent for the right and ability to win the hearts, minds, and acquiescence of the population" (Kilcullen, 2010: 29). For example, organizations can choose CSR initiatives that foster dependency on the corporation, discouraging dissent by making opposition to corporate interests seem counterproductive for stakeholders and communities. In Germany, Energy giant RWE embedded itself in the region through activities like local sponsorships and infrastructure upgrades, allowing it to split the community into factions of those for and those against the company's project, with proponents even mobilizing against dissidents (Brock & Dunlap, 2018).

Finally, organizations can also push for acceptance of their position through broad counter-framing initiatives often waged through media outlets (Herman & Chomsky, 2021; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). To undermine stakeholders' efforts at prognostic framing—or offering a proposed solution to their problem (Staggenborg, 2016)—organizations can counter with their own solutions (that would be more beneficial to them) or frame activists' proposed policies as unworkable, harmful, or self-defeating. For example, during the #FightforFifteen movement, fast food industry lobbyists funded messaging that a higher minimum wage was a job killer and would devastate small business owners (Almeida, 2019; Rolf, 2016). This counter-framing not only reduced the policy's appeal but also undercut the ongoing SCA by suggesting that participation in the campaign in favor of the wage increase by SCA members and allies was economically irresponsible and morally questionable (Rolf, 2016).

Relatedly, organizations can manufacture consent through astroturfing, the practice of creating seemingly independent advocacy groups that are actually funded and controlled by the organization to serve its interests (Walker & Le, 2023). For instance, soda companies created front groups such as Americans Against Food Taxes to oppose local soda tax initiatives, allowing them to mask corporate interests as authentic stakeholder concerns and widely promote their own pro-corporate narrative (Walker & Le, 2023). In doing so, organizations also further fragment SCA coalitions by constructing artificial divisions.

Co-optation. Working in tandem with manufacturing consent, organizations can also fragment and neutralize SCA through direct and indirect co-optation (Oliver, 1991) by absorbing potential threats into the organizations' decision-making structures where they can be more easily constrained (McDonnell, 2016). Direct co-optation involves forming overt alliances with threatening stakeholder groups or their allies (Odziemkowska, 2022), often through corporate sponsorship of activist initiatives, which allows firms to shape advocacy agendas, divert activist attention from their own practices, and project a socially responsible image (Yaziji & Doh, 2009). Indirect co-optation, on the other hand, operates through social networks (Odziemkowska & McDonnell, 2024), as firms build ties with non-threatening activist entities to discourage more contentious members from targeting them and to fracture potential alliances (McDonnell, 2016). This networked influence helps isolate dissenters and generate goodwill among interconnected groups, making it harder for stakeholders to both maintain members and gain allies. As a result, through co-optation, firms can constrain SCA after it has coalesced.

Coercion. As SCA gains momentum and power through formalization, to stop dedicated SCA members and deter any potential allies, organizations can escalate repression through coercion. Coercion involves demonstrating power—through intimidation, threat, or use of physical

force—to deter individuals from acting in ways they otherwise would (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Coercion raises the costs of SCA to members and their allies by "discouraging or inhibiting action through explicit or tacit threat" (Boykoff, 2011: 279) of psychological, physical, and economic consequences. Organizations can coerce members and allies both directly and indirectly.

Direct coercion of internal stakeholders involves threats to fire unionizing employees and intimidation. For example, Chipotle workers attested that a manager threatened to fire employees if they sought to unionize—"even implying they might face physical violence" (Russ, 2019). Direct coercion of external stakeholders involves filing strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), which aim to silence stakeholder dissent among SCA members and to deter potential allies from joining the movement (Pring & Canan, 1996). Recently, Energy Transfer filed several (alleged) SLAPP lawsuits against individual stakeholders and non-profits involved in the Standing Rock protests—eventually winning over $600 million from Greenpeace—and placing existential financial pressure on movement members and allies, and signaling legal risk to others should they join (Eckes & Paiement, 2025).

Organizations can also coerce indirectly by leveraging private third parties, including paramilitaries and private security firms. They provide a pathway for organizations to intimidate stakeholders through outside entities, with private security firms even able to perform quasi-law enforcement duties (Grunwald, Rappaport, & Berg, 2024). While these entities can exert physical, even deadly, force, they also routinely rely on intimidation tactics, such as visible weaponry, verbal harassment, and constant surveillance (Shearing & Stenning, 1985). For example, the above-mentioned pipeline company Energy Transfer hired private security companies (PSCs) to undermine SCA against its Dakota Access Pipeline. Labelling their strategy a "counterinsurgency approach" to "identify and break down the activist network" (Brown, 2020), one PSC overtly

surveilled and followed specific members of the movement, while another pepper sprayed and deployed attack dogs against some SCA members (Brown & Sadasivam, 2023).

In addition, organizations can leverage public law enforcement or military bodies to coercively constrain SCA by providing them with financial funding and material goods, supplying information, and presenting stakeholders as threatening criminals (German et al., 2022; Starr et al., 2008). For example, in Nigeria, Shell was accused "of seeking and assisting the intervention of the [Nigerian] security forces when confronted with demonstrations by the [Ogoni] communities" who protested oil extraction on their land—an intervention which even led to activists' deaths (Boele, Fabig, & Wheeler, 2001). By forming partnerships with such entities, organizations can exploit the state's coercive power and perceived legitimacy to surveil, arrest, and use force against stakeholders (Stoughton, 2017)—all of which serves to constrain members and allies from supporting SCA. And while some coercive actions used to fragment coalitions of members and allies may mirror some actions used to selectively disincentivize recruits, the former are amongst the most aggressive actions that organizations can use, deployed at a time when organizations use the full force of power available to them to constrain SCA's burgeoning strength at the formalization phase.

Accordingly, based on the above, we posit:

Proposition 3: The constraining tactic of fragmenting coalitions of members and allies is most effective for repressing SCA in its formalization phase.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on insights from the social movements literature (Earl, 2003, 2011), we introduce repression as a distinct, often proactive, and integrated strategy that organizations can use to prevent, control, or constrain SCA from evolving. Unlike prior research that explores organizational responses to stakeholder pressure as discrete, mainly reactive, and often

accommodating actions (Oliver, 1991), we take a dynamic approach to understand how organizations can use an integrated set of proactive and reactive, more and less aggressive actions to eliminate SCA at every phase of its evolution—from emergence to coalescence to formalization. To show how organizations can effectively repress, we theorize a repertoire of preventive, controlling, and constraining tactics designed to undermine SCA's enabling conditions in each phase. At the emergence phase, organizations that effectively manipulate perceptions of threat and close opportunity structures can prevent SCA from ever emerging. At the coalescence phase, organizations can effectively repress by restricting resources and selectively disincentivizing recruits. Finally, at the formalization phase, repressing organizations can effectively quell dissent by fragmenting coalitions of SCA members and allies.

To enhance conceptual clarity and parsimony, our theory relies on several building blocks. First, consistent with the social movements literature (Christiansen, 2009), we delineate three distinct phases of SCA evolution—emergence, coalescence, and formalization. Although discrete phases sacrifice descriptive detail regarding fluidity of the SCA process, they allow us to specify the conditions enabling SCA to progress to the next phase and, correspondingly, the repressive tactics organizations can deploy to effectively prevent, control, and constrain SCA from evolving. Second, even though organizations may lay preliminary groundwork (in an earlier phase) for a repressive tactic they deploy later, we link each tactic to the phase in which it is most effective in undermining the specific enabling condition. Third, our theory centers on how organizations can effectively repress SCA on a given issue as it progresses through its lifecycle (i.e., phases). While prior repression on other issues may influence future mobilization—for instance, by shaping stakeholders' perceptions of opportunity structures—we acknowledge that we do not explicitly

theorize the long-term or across-issue effects of repression, particularly the possibility of backlash against organizations. We discuss this and additional limitations further below.

Finally, while presenting the overarching repressive tactics, we identify specific actions that organizations can take to implement them. Importantly, these actions represent a non-exhaustive list of examples and are not necessarily exclusive to a single tactic. Rather, multiple tactics may benefit from the same action, depending on the phase of SCA and the specific enabling condition(s) targeted. For instance, filing a SLAPP against stakeholders might support the restricting resources tactic (by imposing financial costs on the targeted group), even if it is most effective in fragmenting coalitions of members and allies (by intimidating members into silence and signaling potential negative consequences to allies). This flexibility highlights a defining characteristic of organizational repression as an integrated strategy: multiple tactics can simultaneously employ the same actions—and therefore target multiple enabling conditions—to prevent, control, and constrain SCA as it evolves. Ultimately, through our theorizing, we introduce organizational repression as a fundamental yet understudied organizational strategy, with significant implications for the social movements and nonmarket strategy literatures.

Social Movements. Our theory advances social movements research by reframing repression as an *organizational* strategy rather than solely a *state* function, extending insights traditionally grounded in political science and sociology (e.g., Davenport, 2007; Earl, 2003) into the domain of organizations. Whereas classic social movement research has centered on how states repress dissent (Tilly, 1978; Davenport, et al., 2005), we theorize how organizations—lacking formal sovereignty but possessing significant power—can deploy similarly adaptive and assertive tactics to demobilize SCA. By showing that firms can actively deploy an evolving repertoire of repressive tactics, our work positions organizations not as passive targets of stakeholder pressure

but as strategic actors capable of shaping (and targeting) the very conditions under which SCA emerges. In doing so, we challenge an unspoken assumption that collective action against organizations can emerge and unfold without repressive interference by targeted organizations.

Our work further contributes to the social movements literature by using a temporal lens to explore the dominant phases of SCA, including its inception. Scholarship at the intersection of social movements and organizations routinely emphasizes the period after collective action has emerged and even coalesced into a full social movement (e.g., King, 2008; Vasi & King, 2012; Eesley & Lenox, 2016). However, by focusing on what occurs only after SCA has materialized, it overlooks the critical nascent period before stakeholders ever mobilize collectively, resulting in a survival bias toward successful social movements (McAdam & Boudet, 2012), as well as a gap in our understanding of how firms can strategically seek to prevent SCA.

By theorizing how organizations seek to stop SCA from unfolding, we also shed light on the role of opportunity structures in shaping mobilization. Management literature has examined corporate and industry opportunity structures as independent drivers of activism (Gupta and Briscoe, 2020; King, 2008; McDonnell et al., 2015; Schurman, 2004) but has largely overlooked how the broader political opportunity structure interacts with these factors. We argue that the POS is not just an exogenous force that facilitates or hinders activism; instead, it is also an endogenous terrain that organizations seek to control. In other words, organizations can repress SCA not only by shaping the perception of COS and IOS openness, but also by capturing the political landscape, limiting activists' ability to leverage public institutions in their struggle. By lobbying for restrictive laws, fostering relationships with policymakers, and aligning themselves with law enforcement, organizations can ensure that the POS remains closed to stakeholders. This insight challenges the traditional separation of private and public politics (Hiatt et al., 2015; McDonnell et al., 2015;

Werner, 2012), showing that organizations can actively shape how stakeholders engage in both in their pursuit to maintain control over the institutional environment.

Furthermore, our work provides insights into why social movements fail, a topic of increasing importance to the literature (King, 2008; McDonnell et al., 2015). Prior research has primarily focused on movement outcomes, particularly whether they succeed in achieving their goals and what happens to organizations when they do (Bartley & Child, 2011; McDonnell et al., 2015). We propose that organizations can actively and intentionally undermine those outcomes by systematically targeting the enabling conditions for SCA to emerge and survive. By actively undermining collective action, repression weakens stakeholders' and their allies' ability to shape public discourse and alter industry and organizational norms—ultimately reducing their capacity to drive change both within organizations and across society.

Relatedly, because repression can stifle collective action, our theory also contributes to broader debates about how organizations resist institutional change (Oliver, 1991). Prior research emphasizes the role of SCA in challenging organizational practices and reshaping industry norms (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). However, we highlight that firms need not—and often do not—take stakeholder pressure as a given; instead, they can actively work to preempt and neutralize it before it gains traction. When organizations effectively repress SCA, stakeholders no longer have the power to generate the broader institutional pressure necessary for change, allowing firms to not only resist immediate demands, but also prevent the broader development of institutional change.

Nonmarket Strategy. In addition to contributing to the social movements literature, this paper expands our understanding of nonmarket strategy, or a firm's concerted pattern of actions to improve performance by shaping its political or social context (Baron, 1995; Dorobantu, Kaul, & Zelner, 2017; Hillman, Keim, & Schuler, 2004; Holburn, Maxwell, & Bonardi, 2024). We

introduce repression as a stakeholder management strategy that firms can use to shape their nonmarket environment as they seek control over the social context in which they are embedded. While this literature has often considered two critical aspects of nonmarket strategy—CPA and CSR—as separate efforts (Mellahi, Frynas, Sun, & Siegel, 2016), our theory shows how and why organizations can intentionally integrate CPA and CSR to quell dissent and to limit their nonmarket competition.

Moreover, while traditional nonmarket strategy research has focused on CPA within the legislative and regulatory domains, such as lobbying and campaign contributions (Dorobantu et al., 2017), we highlight that organizations can also seek to co-opt the enforcement function of the executive branch to repress activism. By utilizing private security firms and seeking deep influence over public law enforcement, firms can exert control that extends beyond conventional political channels. These actions challenge the fundamental assumption that the state holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force (Weber, 2019) and reveal the increasingly blurred boundaries between corporate and state power (even beyond the context of state-owned enterprises).

This paper also deepens our understanding of CSR by illustrating how firms can strategically use it as a tool for repression, challenging the traditional presentation of CSR as a purely prosocial activity, even when performative. Prior work has emphasized CSR's role in deflecting stakeholder criticism and mitigating reputational damage (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012), but we show that CSR can also function as a tool for repression, beginning in the emergence phase when firms use CSR to manipulate perceptions of threat by promoting narratives of corporate benevolence and ethical responsibility (Brock & Dunlap, 2018). Organizations can also use CSR to fragment coalitions of members and allies, including by selectively partnering with activist groups they perceive as more manageable (Yaziji & Doh, 2009), thereby shaping discourse around

contested issues and creating broader divisions within SCA (McDonnell, 2016). Ultimately, when CSR initiatives are used to repress, they can influence stakeholders to submit when they would otherwise mobilize and even cause enduring divisions within entire communities (Brock & Dunlap, 2018; Staggenborg, 2016).

In the same vein, our research contributes to a deeper understanding of the *dark side* of stakeholder management, an area of the literature that remains underdeveloped (Harrison & Wicks, 2021: 1168; Kujala, Sachs, Leinonen, Heikkinen, & Laude, 2022). Traditional stakeholder management scholarship emphasizes the need for organizations to generate value for, and in coordination with, their stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2010). By contrast, repression is often not just passive neglect or accidental harm; instead, it presents an active, strategic pathway to stakeholder control that can disproportionality harm some stakeholders (Harrison & Wicks, 2021). And, counter to the notion that "treating stakeholders well… contributes to firm performance" (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2014: 107) , some organizations may aggressively repress—and ultimately harm some stakeholders—as their chosen strategy to enhance performance. That said, the welfare implications and overall normative nature of repression is highly contextual, as repression of some stakeholders and their allies may be beneficial to other stakeholders or society at large.

Limitations and Future Research. Our theory outlines how organizations can effectively repress SCA as it evolves, yet a key determinant in their selection among repressive tactics and, more specifically, the repressive actions to implement those tactics, is their capacity to repress (Wernerfelt, 1984). Without the necessary resources—such as lobbying capabilities to influence the POS or financial power to co-opt stakeholders—firms may either opt not to repress or adjust their approach to fit their constraints. This suggests an important avenue for future research:

exploring how organizational resources and capabilities shape the choices surrounding and the effectiveness of repression. For example, do firms with high levels of political influence rely more on state capture, while those with extensive surveillance infrastructure emphasize intelligence gathering and monitoring? Answering these questions will enhance our understanding of how repression unfolds across different organizational and industry contexts.

We further encourage researchers to empirically explore the prevalence and determinants of repression. Because repressive actions are often covert, and thus underreported, qualitative research provides a fruitful avenue to explore organizational repression. Ethnographic studies, in-depth interviews, and archival research could also illuminate the experiences of stakeholders facing repression and deepen our understanding of why some stakeholders are more susceptible to repression versus others. In turn, case studies of firms employing different repressive tactics could yield comparative insights, while quantitative research, leveraging data such as whistleblower reports, SLAPP filings, and leaked corporate documents, can complement qualitative research efforts by systematically identifying patterns of repression across industries, countries, and time.

While our theory highlights the most effective repressive tactics in the short term (during a single episode of SCA), we encourage future research to empirically test our theory and investigate when and why repression causes backlash, especially over the medium to long term or across different issues. Scholars of state repression have found that repression can have a chilling effect on mobilization, but it can also fuel backlash, further galvanizing future activism (Davenport et al., 2005). Similarly, in the organizational context, repression could successfully demobilize one SCA (on a single issue) and even prevent future others, but it could also trigger spillover effects that produce additional, intensified stakeholder pressure, reputational crises, or regulatory scrutiny on other issues.

Relatedly, to fully understand repression, we urge scholars to assess the institutional environment in which the repressing organization and stakeholders are embedded. Institutional environments likely shape not only repression outcomes, but also how organizations engage in repression. While we posit that repressive tactics highlighted in our theory operate across different contexts, specific choices may depend on legal frameworks, media scrutiny, and civil society strength (Marquis et al., 2016). For instance, in authoritarian or weak democratic regimes, organizations may have greater latitude to deploy a more aggressive approach to selectively disincentivize or fragment stakeholders because of lax legal standards, instability, and limited oversight of corporate conduct. Institutional context can also shape how stakeholders perceive and respond to repressive tactics, influencing how organizational repression strategy unfolds.

Beyond the effects on organizations, we also encourage scholars to investigate both the immediate effects of repression on the repressed stakeholders—such as job losses, blacklisting, or legal consequences for activists—as well as its long-term effects on their ability to engage in SCA in the future. Further, if repression systematically discourages SCA, what are the broader consequences for labor movements, environmental advocacy, and civil rights? For stakeholders, repression can result in a range of harms, including breaking down trust and solidarity within their communities and even physical injury. While repression could be used for normatively "good" ends, it nevertheless raises serious ethical, legal, and democratic concerns.

Relatedly, given the potential consequences organizational repression poses for society, we encourage both positive and normative (ethics) scholars to explore its impact on democracy and societal inequality. Repression not only restricts who gets to participate in shaping organizational conduct and norms, but it could also compromise democratic principles by curbing public debate, silencing dissent, and chilling participation in the public sphere. Repression can also contribute to

rising economic and political inequality: for example, the curtailment of unions and workers' rights has been shown to contribute to a widening socioeconomic gap (Cobb, 2016). Future studies may explore whether and how repression can further entrench inequality by restricting workers' collective bargaining power. Likewise, if firms repress SCA through campaign finance or regulatory capture, such actions raise critical questions about how firms are shaping policing outcomes and the broader political landscape.

CONCLUSION

We introduce repression as a distinct, integrated strategy that organizations can use to prevent, control, and constrain SCA from evolving. Unlike prior research that explores organizational responses to stakeholder pressure as discrete, often reactive, and largely accommodating actions, we show that organizations can both proactively and reactively repress SCA with more and less aggressive actions. We posit that effective repressive tactics are inherently tied to SCA as they are designed to undermine its enabling conditions in each phase of its evolution. Ultimately, we hope that our theory, along with its practical and normative implications, inspires future research and discussion of organizational repression in policy and practice.

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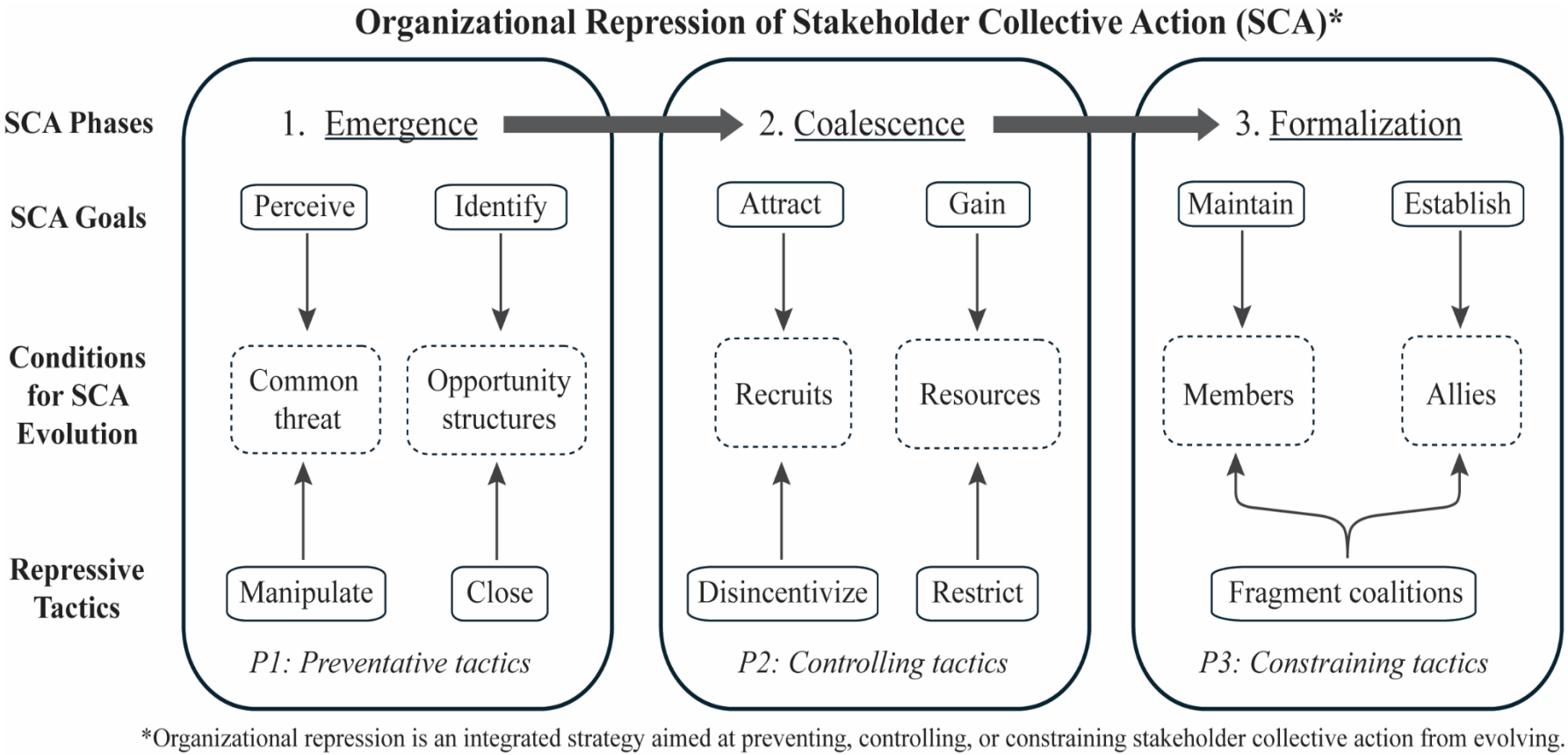
TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF REPRESSIVE TACTICS

Repressive Tactic	Definition	SCA Phase	Enabling Condition Targeted	Examples of repressive actions
Manipulating threat perceptions	Altering perceptions of a) the existence or impact of the issue and b) the appropriateness of the organization as SCA target	Emergence	Perceiving a shared threat or grievance	Withholding data on emissions and toxic waste disposal, greenwashing, performative CSR activities
Closing opportunity structures	Fostering the perception that the corporate, industry, and political opportunity structures lack receptivity to stakeholder demands	Emergence	Identifying open opportunities for mobilization	Surveilling stakeholders, lobbying for legislation criminalizing protests against critical infrastructure projects, revolving-door employment relationships with government officials
Selectively disincentivizing recruits	Increasing the costs and decreasing the benefits of mobilization for specific stakeholders and stakeholder groups	Coalescence	Attracting recruits	Layoffs, blacklisting, increasing pay for only non-union employees
Restricting resources	Undermining stakeholder ability to gain and maintain resources	Coalescence	Gaining resources	Lobbying to tighten regulations on non-profit tax-exempt status, cutting off in-kind support, public repudiation
Fragmenting coalitions of members and allies	Creating and exploiting conflict within and/or between SCA members and potential allies	Formalization	Maintaining participants and establishing allies	Co-optation, fostering stigma, targeted support of perceived moderate groups, astroturfing

FIGURE ONE. MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL REPRESSION



*Organizational repression is an integrated strategy aimed at preventing, controlling, or constraining stakeholder collective action from evolving.