

# **Valuation ruptures: breaking and remaking notions of ‘good ’in a US government agency**

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## **Abstract**

The flourishing literature of valuation studies has shown how values are enacted and temporarily settled through sociomaterial processes, highlighting the contestations and dissonances inherent in valuing. We extend this concern through a study of a sudden collapse and reconstruction of value – what counts as good – in a US government agency. Using ethnographic case study methods, we explore how the U.S. child support enforcement program’s performance measures breached a state agency’s operational framework and disrupted its understanding of good performance. Following the traces left behind by the measures, we demonstrate how actors and devices formed new networks of value, transforming the agency from one of the worst to one of the most outstanding performers in the nation. At the same time, new and unexpected notions of ‘good ’emerge. We transpose the notion of rupture from micro-sociological theory to show the collective efforts involved in making a sudden disruption and realignment of values.

Keywords: valuation, performativity, reactivity, disruption, micro-sociology, rupture, child support, performance measures

## Introduction

What might prompt the sudden *re-valuation* of an organization's understanding of 'good – 'be that good practice, good performance, or overarching, normative values? How is one good, or set of 'goods', displaced by another? How can organizational values, seemingly so constant, be suddenly ruptured beyond repair? We tackle these questions by means of an empirical case study of a US public agency responsible for collecting and administering child support payments from noncustodial parents. We examine how the agency (hereafter, LCSA) revalued and reconstructed its performance of 'good performance', following a 'rupture' provoked (Muniesa, 2014) by the US Child Support Enforcement Program's (CSEP) performance measures and incentive system. The provocations for this transformation arose exogenously from media attention and competitive positioning between states: publication of the state's rank (last, or worst) encouraged the agency to respond, reshaping its systems and practices to enable the new organisational vision of 'good performance 'to emerge.

It is well recognised that metrological practices transform organisations (Espeland & Sauder, 2007), but recent studies have begun to show how institutional actors may respond to these new disciplinary measures in unexpected or contradictory ways (Pollock, D'Adderio, Williams, & Leforestier, 2018). In our case, despite an enthusiastic, collective effort in 'making 'the rupture – adopting new performance measures and reorganising accordingly – new actors appear, new values develop, and new meanings for child support enforcement emerge. The rupture ripples through the organization and beyond: it becomes a moral project as well as an organizational one. Our contribution here is to show how the relational work of actors and artefacts brings about a dramaturgical re-presentation of normative aspects of the organisation – a notion of 'good 'that is not at all aligned with the original intention of the rupture. We show how this rupture has impacts beyond the organization, even on the life chances of the children the agency serves, invoking long standing sociological concerns of stratification and exclusion (Fourcade & Healy, 2013; Weber, 1978).

The flourishing literature of valuation studies has drawn attention to how values are enacted and stabilised through sociomaterial processes (Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013; Kornberger, Justesen, Madsen, & Mouritsen, 2015; Muniesa, 2011). Whether they concern the valuation of economic goods (Fourcade & Healy, 2013; Garcia-Parpet, 2007), symbolic goods (Fourcade, 2011, 2012; Reinecke, 2015), or intangible or unusual goods (Kelly & Burrows, 2011; Zhang, 2017), these analyses highlight the organization, framing, and

deployment of humans and nonhuman entities in the making of value. Such processes result in temporary and provisional settlements over 'what counts'. Yet they are fraught with tension, 'dissonance', and contest (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Stark, 2011) and scholars of valuation have increasingly considered contested processes such as 'assetization' (Birch & Muniesa, 2020), economisation, ranking and measurement. We develop these concerns through a focus on moments of dramatic *instability* in valuation. Transposing the notion of 'rupture' from the sociology of disruption (Vollmer, 2013) to the study of valuation we theorize valuation as a process spanning moments of rupture and repair, and open a conversation with understandings of disruption in the established micro-sociological literature (Tavory & Fine, 2020; Vollmer, 2013). We highlight the generative aspects of disruption, what Tavory & Fine (2020) label 'disruption for', as well as its more commonly recognized destructive consequences.

The paper is organised as follows. We first of all set out our theoretical framing, introducing the literature of valuation studies and the relevant literature on rankings and valuation. We introduce the case and offer a brief historical background on the CSEP and its performance-based incentive system, before discussing our study methodology. We then present the case. We show the moment of rupture: how LCSA's performance turned – almost overnight – from excellent to worst-in-class when media intervention brought federal measures and state rankings to the fore. We then introduce the experts and devices involved in the reconstruction of LCSA's ruptured 'good performance', showing how employees were themselves enrolled in constructing a 'cascade of inscriptions' (Latour, 1986, p. 17) – increasingly simplified and mobile representations of performance – that stabilized the new valuations. Finally we demonstrate how the reconstructive process persisted as new disruptions emerged, reshaping the agency's broader relationships with its clients and the community. In our discussion, we briefly theorise a notion of rupture, drawn from the sociology of disruption.

## **Values, numbers and organizations**

The sociological study of valuation (Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013; Kornberger et al., 2015; Muniesa, 2011) pursues a pragmatist approach that conceptualizes valuation as an ongoing social process. Taking issue with purely economic notions of value as revealed

preference (Samuelson, 1948) and classical sociological explanations (Parsons, 1968) the pragmatist approach highlights the multiplicity of values and their embeddedness in valuation practices. The programme has been underpinned by a determination to undo what Stark (2011) calls 'Parsons 'Pact', the disciplinary division of labour whereby value (price) is left to economics and values (norms) to sociology; for Stark, valuation comprises both value and values, to be understood in terms of the 'pricing, prizing and praising '(Stark, 2011) associated with particular orders of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Valuation is a process fraught with tension and contestation, played out through 'tests '(Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, p. 133) that result in provisional settlements. Valuation practices are, however, always overflowing and in need of remaking (Roscoe, 2015).

The pragmatist endeavour highlights the role of sociomaterial practices and technologies (Orlikowski, 2007) in evaluating, commensurating and classifying, so that the world might be 'ordered, hierarchized, and ultimately valued '(Kornberger et al., 2015, p. 9), and research has become increasingly interested in the political dimensions of such sociomaterial practices. Studies have documented the competing socio-technical valuation practices that underpin contemporary regimes of finance capitalization (Moor & Lury, 2011; Muniesa et al., 2017) and even bio- or techno-capitalization (Birch, 2020; Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014). As Fourcade (2011) notes, valuation processes are bound up with other kinds of social organization, implemented by specialized intermediaries and technologies: the production of worth is also a production of power differentials (Galis & Lee, 2014). For example, Homanen (2017, p. 361) shows how classificatory systems in Finnish maternity care, based on supposedly apolitical scientific evidence, enact the bourgeois gaze, while Dobeson (2020) explores how generous gifts in the Icelandic fish festival solidify the privatization of intangible wealth in the form of fishing rights. Valuation logics thus impose political and moral claims in contested domains (Roscoe, 2013): even prices have their own politics (Pallesen, 2016).

Our case concerns the breaking and re-making of notions of good – of 'worth – 'in an organization as it responds to the imposition of external performance metrics. These metrics are a particular form of valuation device, deployed under a mode of governance (Miller & Rose, 1990) often termed New Public Management (Hood, 1995) or performance measurement and management (Parker & Gould, 1999). Performance measures have performative effects: rankings encourage conformity with the underlying instrument (Espeland and Sauder, 2007) and have disciplinary effects on those ranked (Jeacle & Carter,

2011; Scott & Orlikowski, 2012). For this reason, research has tended to regard organizations as submissive in the face of overbearing disciplinary systems (Kwon & Easton, 2010). Recent scholarship has, however, offered more nuanced accounts of how organizations interact with rankings. For example, Pollock et al. (2018) show firms' agency in choosing between or subverting competing rankings, Kim & Velthuis (2021) show a complex set of reactions to online reviews, while Faulconbridge and Muzio (2021) theorize the relationship between the perceived legitimacy of measures and their performativity. Accounting scholarship has, therefore, begun to take an interest in the role of metrics and other such devices as mediating valuation practices (Millo, Power, Robson & Vollmer, 2020) and our study offers further evidence of the complex relationship between accounting for value and the values that are produced.

These converging literatures imply that values work is also generative, an insight crucial to our study. Actors may draw upon competing orders of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) that confront each other in 'tests', resulting in an often productive dissonance (Stark, 2011). Reinecke (2010) makes productive use of the notion of economies of worth approach to draw attention to the plurality of value regimes, and to highlight people's everyday sense of justice in the negotiation of the social order, while Hets and Mol's (2013) wry account of the 'good tomato' uses the notion of 'care' to theorize the performative characteristics of valuation, as participants work to 'perform' tomatoes as good according to varied and sometimes contradictory registers of value. Valuing is inseparable from decisions over what is to be valued, and what, indeed, is worth knowing (Dussauge, Helgesson, Lee, & Woolgar, 2015). The construction of everyday value is, therefore, a highly political endeavour invoking competing logics, epistemological practices, calculative work and practical care on the part of those caught up in valuation struggles.

In sum, it is well recognized that the settling of value, even temporarily, requires work. Valuing and making valuable – 'valorization' (Vatin, 2013) – takes place through sociomaterial processes, and valuation studies has been attuned to 'clashes and denunciations' (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006, p. 223) that develop. We contribute here by focusing on the collective efforts involved in instigating a sudden breach in valuation: a swift and total upheaval in the collective judgement of worth in an organization. Our case investigates such a process, theorising it as a moment of rupture and repair, for institutional valuations are – paraphrasing Carruthers and Kim (2011) – 'contested and provisional judgments whose complexity lies buried beneath a surface of numbers and quantification'. In

recognizing this, we can show not only how a moment of rupture is made and how it reorganises the institution, but also how its ripples come to reshape the norms of organizational work and ultimately the life chances of those whom the agency serves.

## **Methodology**

### *Background to the case*

In the US, child support payments from noncustodial parents are collected and administered by local offices under the auspices of individual states. State offices depend on the technological infrastructure developed through the years to facilitate the establishment and enforcement of child support orders: national registries, case management systems, and several databases containing employment and personal information. These information technologies enable states to track down noncustodial parents using key identifiers, such as social security or driving license numbers, and make them responsible for the financial wellbeing of their children.

Since its establishment in 1975, the US Child Support Enforcement Program (CSEP) has relied on a performance-based incentive system to encourage states to collect support payments (Solomon-Fears, 2016). The passing of the Child Support Performance and Incentive Act of 1998 introduced a more comprehensive performance management framework using five measures (see Figure 1) to evaluate state performances. These measures are directly related to child support services that states, often in partnership with local governments, provide. Combined with other factors, a state's level of performance in each of these measures determines the financial incentive payment it can earn for a given year. States may incur penalties if their data are unreliable or fail to meet the required performance levels for three of the five measures. In other words, the US child support payment apparatus operates within a national performance measurement and incentive system.

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Insert figure 1 here

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The state in question's (hereafter, CS) performance in these metrics is driven by a single office. This local child support agency (LCSA) is located in the southern part of the state and responsible for more than half of the state's total child support cases. Its performance outcomes were such that CS was for several years among the poorest performers in the nation, incurring financial penalties. In 2008, following the 'rupture', LCSA had a change in leadership and within a few years began to see improvements in four of the five federal performance indicators.

#### *Data collection and analysis*

Data collection took place between September 2015 and October 2016. The researcher visited LCSA in September 2015. Having previously worked for the organization, the first author was able to gain access to its day to day operations despite the closed nature of government agencies. She spent three and a half weeks tracing the circulation of the federal performance measures (hereafter, FPMs) at LCSA to identify who or what were involved in the making of the agency's good performance. Following these networks also led her to the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement in Washington D.C., a professional organization in the East Coast, and an annual training conference for both public and private child support professionals held in Utah, all of which provided additional perspective on LCSA's wider network.

The first author's previous connection with the agency put her in a privileged position as a researcher and the warm reception upon arrival was indicative of her existing relationship. Members of the management team, line staff, and other familiar faces welcomed her with greetings, hugs, and excitement for the visit. She was given a spacious office for her personal use throughout the duration of her stay, a telephone and an email account. She also received a security badge, giving her full access to almost all departments throughout the campus buildings. Her familiarity with the site, and the sector more broadly, enabled her to

navigate a complex federal program, both in terms of its technical apparatus, and through experiences and understandings that she shared with the research participants. At the same time, she maintained a critically reflexive approach (Hibbert, Sillince, Diefenbach, & Cunliffe, 2014) to the investigation by questioning her own assumptions and of those observed throughout the process; following a period of academic study away from the agency she had ‘perspective by incongruity’ that allowed her to see familiar routines as strange (Goodall, 2010). Her ‘insider’ role facilitated her identification and coordination of potential informants, and appreciation for the language used to tell their story of reconstruction. Conscious of her outsider-researcher role, she deliberately pursued their taken-for-granted logics and associations while holding off judgments about their claims. When participants present a familiar (or presumed logical) story, she took a step back, sought further elaboration on their accounts, and remained a detached observer of the shared experience. Thus, her follow-up questions encouraged interviewees to explain the reason for their decisions, activities, and perceived connections to unfolding events.

Her visit to LCSA generated semi-structured interviews and observations, which serve as the empirical material for this article. A total of 24 individual interviews were conducted, 16 of which involved the organization’s leadership. Interviews lasted between 32 and 91 minutes. Eight group interviews of 2 to 6 individuals were also conducted (see Tables 1 and 2). Through reflexive interviews (Denzin, 2001), she allowed participants to tell their story and explain the challenges they encountered and adjustments they made. While on site, she observed meetings, training and planning sessions, and demonstrations of software applications and business process mapping techniques. These were supplemented with more than 100 images collected at the various sites and a collection of physical and electronic artefacts: 21 reports, 16 performance-related statistics, 23 staff-related information, 45 electronic mail messages, 16 federal and state communications, 8 news articles and press releases, and several internal and publicly available documents.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised prior to coding using NVivo. The coding structure was gradually developed to capture processes, entities, and value statements. The researcher mapped out the connections and took note of the mechanisms and processes that made certain performances ‘good’; she examined the relationships that were forged to enact good performance and disclosed the disruptions that occurred.

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## **Breaking and remaking notions of 'good' in a US government agency**

### *1. From 'equilibrium' to a moment of rupture*

Our story begins with LCSA in a state of equilibrium. Until 2007, LCSA's performance measurements focused on the total funds collected from noncustodial parents. The bigger, the better: collections grew and staff regarded the agency as successful. They recalled how Mr Smith, then Assistant Director, would send official email announcements to all staff at the end of each fiscal year stating the total dollar amount collected. If they exceeded the previous year's collection, they 'would get emails saying, "good job, pat yourself in the back, you did an excellent job"' (Edelyn\_SupportStaff, FG3). Staff had some autonomy in pursuing the actions they expected would produce the highest collections. This meant focusing on setting child support obligations as high as possible to increase the possibility of collecting more. As Allison, one of the managers, noted, 'we were looking at just how much money we collected over the month, over the year. So, we would look at, "Oh, we collected \$100,000 last month; oh, we collected this; oh, we finally reached \$1m"'. Good performance was tied to collection levels and caseworkers' practices followed suit.

There came, eventually, a moment of rupture, a rude awakening to the 'reality' of performance under the FPMs. Supervisors recalled celebrating when collections reached a record level, and how within days LCSA had been shamed by the media as one of the poorest performing states in the nation:

Sarah: We had a record-breaking year and they brought lunch for the whole Unit. They closed the office and took us all at the Government Center and they did a big rah, rah session.

Donna: Big thank you...

Sarah: A big thank, and the whole thing, and they did lunch...

Donna: And then find out that...

Sarah: Then like a week later (laughter), oh by the way, just kidding, you're 54th!  
(Leadership, FG2)

Many employees had been simply unaware of these external – Federal – performance measures until they began to circulate in the media. In 2007 a local newspaper article mentioned a performance audit report, commissioned by the state legislators, putting the state at the 'bottom six of the 50 states' in all of the FPMs. The headline of a 2009 news report focused on the state's ranking ('last'; 'ranks at bottom') and shifted attention from the total amount collected to an alternative performance measure. Citing a Department of Health and Human Services 'report the article ranked collection according to the FPM framework, highlighting the 'percent of the potential support 'that the state collected. Moreover, it did so in a comparative fashion, concluding these measures placed 'the state just behind Guam's 48.5 percent and far below the 61.2 percent national average. '(Media Report 2009). Suddenly employees 'valuation of good performance collapsed. Focus group participants expressed their astonishment:

...we thought we were doing so well, and here we find out we were fifty... we're at the bottom of the barrel, you know. So, it was very disheartening. It was like starting a whole job all over again, you know...we never knew about it. (Nancy\_SupportStaff, FG1)

'we were all very shocked .... It was a rude awakening, 'cause we thought we were doing wonderful.... (Jenny\_SupportStaff, FG3)

Studies of the politics of valuation highlight how values can be imposed on powerless actors via bureaucratic and regulatory agencies (Galis & Lee, 2014; Homanen 2017), but this was not a government endeavour. It seems that the practice of ranking had emerged from within the child support community as a device to demonstrate the performance of some states relative to others, and that it was used by the more successful performers to advertise their status. Bill explains:

OCSE won't rank the states 'collect... But the states have come up with a formula where they collectively rank themselves and then spout that to the newspapers and things and then to each other... Everything is based on how the federal performance measures, how well you do in those things and including what the public cares

about... that... is the most important to the newspapers, to the TV stations ...  
(Bill\_Leadership)

Rankings are powerful organizing devices (Espeland & Sauder, 2007) and this was no exception. The public humiliation provoked by the media became a mechanism of disruption forcing LCSA to remake its 'good performance' through a radical transformation of their operations. Although the observation that rankings have performative consequences is 'perhaps a commonplace' (Muniesa, 2014, p.108), the *making* of the rupture and its unintended consequences are worthy of closer examination. So far we have witnessed only 'disruption to'. In the next section we consider disruption as a generative phenomenon, what Tavory and Fine (2020) term 'disruption for'.

## 2. *'Disruption for': the reconstruction and revaluation of a 'good'*

The process of introducing new frames of valuation to produce a new 'good' involved collective efforts across the organisation. The rupture was hard work; the unexpected encounter with the FPMs took employees by surprise and triggered a variety of behavioural adjustments. As Edelyn, one of the caseworkers, noted, 'that's when we found out, oh, we kinda sucked on this aspect.' A new division head, Ms Bridget Sanders, took office in the final quarter of 2008 and immediately embraced the federally mandated performance measures. Although new to the program, Sanders 'decided she was going to make a difference' (Jenny\_SupportStaff, FG3) and worked to foreground the FPMs, taking radical, even 'outrageous' steps:

...She took [the job] seriously. And when it came into the papers that [CS's] child support system was once again 54th in the nation, and that they can't seem to get anything right and other discouraging and disparaging phrases that were... she was quite incensed with this. It just really made her mad, and, rightly so. And so, she took very, very outrageous... you might say, steps to determine what can we do to get out of this rut. (Andy\_Leadership)

Participants alluded to key events through which the new measurement regime came to enrol support across the organization. First of all, Sanders embarked on a major search effort to fill the position of Operations Director to oversee the functions directly affecting the performance scores. The decision was made deliberately with performance improvement in

mind: 'Bridget then went out nationally and grabbed the individual who was making the news '(Andy\_Leadership). The new recruit, Mr Colby, came from a high performing state, bringing with him new organizational and metrological practices that had been successful in performing outcomes in line with the FPMs. Although the total collection measure of the past was not entirely replaced, its primacy was displaced by rhetorical devices and a new program of action centring on numbers, measures, and timeframes, collectively referred to as 'stats':

Mr Colby came from a good state where he did very well with his state... And they came in and they started raising the numbers and they started... we had stats. Before we didn't have stats, so you came in, you did work, and no stats and they didn't keep track of anything; how many cases you touched, how many cases went to court. And now everybody has stats. (Kati\_SupportStaff)

Colby's entrance into LCSA's space put the new performance measures at the nexus of all operations. His management by stats became an important disruptive mechanism in order to make the measures known and situate them in every functional unit of the organization, all the way down to the individual worker. Monthly performance charts, data reports, and dashboards dominated office spaces, conference rooms, and team meetings; these valuation devices signalled what matters, what counts, and what must be valued.

Experts were enlisted from within the organization with the task of making visible good organizational practice, defined as activities and processes that most effectively produced the mandated outcomes. Sanders assembled them into five Innovation Teams, each focusing on a single measure, and instructed them to use the measure as the evaluative principle to single out tasks that produced outputs that counted: valuation practices have an epistemological content, settling what is worth knowing (Dussauge et al., 2015). Certain practices stood out, others were modified or introduced, thus gradually giving rise to reformed organizational practices. Though directed, this was a grass-roots process within the organization; 'what counts 'became known through and by the same people who were expected to deliver these results according to these measures. Employees researched best practices and discovered, for example, that those who produced the highest collections made frequent phone calls. Telephone calls, they determined, are 'a proven collection tool worldwide '(Donna\_Leadership, FG2). Practices can only become visible as valuable *after* the introduction of measures that valorize such forms of performance. A list of cases

gradually turned into a 'cascade of inscriptions' (Latour, 1986:17) acting as witnesses to the good performance being deployed, making the desired good visible, measurable, and harder to challenge.

The provision of training also became an important component of LCSA's reconstruction of good performance. Another internal expert, the 'Management Analyst', developed and delivered a training program explaining the characteristics and behaviour of each measure in relation to LCSA's operational activities. She did not simply state or describe the measures; she also articulated the valued actions that would generate a good score. Employees learned to engage with the measures in a purposeful way: to be strategic in their case management approach and thereby effect change in the performance scores, to 'impact the numbers'. According to Sarah, one of the supervisors, learning about the FPMs 'definitely refocused this office 'to do the things that really mattered. As Donna further explained, it

'really made people aware of, I can spin my wheels doing this over here or I can have an effect on my number by working here. And I think a lot of people really kinda sat up and took notice of that' ...How do I personally as a case manager impact that number? What do I need to do everyday to impact that number?' (Donna\_Leadership, FG2)

This was a 'disruption for' (Tavory and Fine, 2020), a restructuring of the interaction order under the FPMs that enabled caseworkers to see what was impactful and what was wasteful, what 'spun the wheels'. It brought to their attention certain tasks, previously pushed aside, that could substantially improve their scores. For example, employees came to see that closing cases where possible would reduce their caseload and improve their performance rating. As employees' understanding of the new measurement framework deepened, their reconstruction of 'good' was slowly taking shape. With the FPMs as their point of reference, certain cases and tasks became visible, calling their attention to act on what the measures valued most. Strategizing became part of good performance; a strategy was defined by caseworkers' understanding and engagement with the measures.

### *3. New disruptions, new goods*

Reconfigured around performance measures, the daily work of collection agents changed to reflect the new systems: performance measures, backed by 'stats', experts, inscriptions and a competitive organizational culture. But value practices are perpetually unstable and overflowing: new measures roused new disruptive actors, notably delinquent payers and caseworkers developed strategies to deal with them, developing new values as they did so. Everyday casework became a place for unexpected values work.

Unemployment was among the many barriers to compliance with child support orders; others included incarceration, mental health, and family relationships. Such cases resisted LCSA's valued actions (eg phone calls to collect a payment) and presented obstacles to good performance. LCSA explored ways to address these barriers and 'over the years', as Bill, one of the members of the management team, said, 'we've created a way to deal with those cases'. The emergence of a new class of problematic cases has resulted in different kinds of good practice and a fundamental reconceptualization of the position of the agency within a broader network of community organizations. Rachel, another manager, described the kind of adjustment that took place.

So, when I first started, it was, 'you're not paying, you don't have a job, I'm taking your license, I'm throwing you in jail'. That's it, that's all. Noncustodial parent...would say, well, I'm not paying 'cause I can't see my children. And we would say, 'Family Court; that's not our issue. Sorry, you can't see your kids, but you still have to pay your child support. 'They don't have a job, 'sorry, your problem. You're going to jail. 'They don't have a license. 'You better take the bus. 'It was all about the hard core, banging him over the head. Now, what we do, we've implemented programs to assist, remove barriers from... for these noncustodial parents so they can ultimately get a job and pay their child support. (Rachel\_Leadership)

LCSA turned to the community and identified existing programs and resources that could address noncustodial parents' concerns. According to Rachel, the organization reached out to twenty community partners because 'what we were doing wasn't working'. Paula, a supervisor, justified the community partnerships in this way:

How do we improve and collect money and get these federal performance measures up when people don't have a job? What can we do to help? We are not in the 'I'm gonna get you a job' business, but we can certainly partner with the community and refer people to the partner and in turn, with that partner, hey, if you need our services,

refer them to us. And so, we actually started an Outreach Team and that team goes out and makes partnerships with different organizations in the valley; organizations that are gonna help us. They can help us, and we can help them. (Paula\_Leadership)

Rachel explained how they had to get to 'the ones who have the willingness to pay but don't have the means 'and 'help them get the means so they can pay'. But she also acknowledged that the more difficult cases are 'the guys that not only are not willing to, but they also don't have the means'. Such new classifications are performative and make possible new value regimes as new actors are enrolled into the organization's performance regime. For example, as LCSA attorneys engaged with the measures, they also adopted new strategies, and a new value unexpectedly emerged. Attorneys did not simply establish or enforce child support orders: they established and enforced *fair* orders. As Alex, one of the attorneys, explained,

Orders have to be published fair because if it's set fair, as compared to the top dollar amount possible, then you're more likely to have success in a particular case. You'll have a paying person. You'll have somebody who feels that he's been treated right... So, yes, I think [the measures are] there for a good purpose. (Alex\_SupportStaff, FG5)

The new performance measures made different individuals visible and structured opportunity for those who had previously been ignored. As new practices fused with the existing work norms of employees, they give rise to new concepts of worth within the organization – here, fairness – and because the measures lead to fairness, they become themselves worthwhile. Through this recursive logic, the measures, at first characterized as a rude awakening imposed through an external process of competitive positioning among states, are now understood to be a good thing in and of themselves. Our study highlighted only small scale disruptions of the new goods. For example, one caseworker 'inactivated ' a non-paying case's obligation amount to stop the system from reporting uncollected payments and another performed tasks unnecessarily in order to meet their goals and secure their flexible schedule. Individual acts of resistance, however, are unlikely to rupture the new organizational goods.

### **Discussion: how ruptures ripple**

This paper considers how a moment of rupture triggered by media's revelation of performance scores and state rankings quickly turns a child support agency's 'good 'into

'bad 'and back to 'good'. It explores the discontinuities and disruptions prompting a reevaluation and reconstruction of their 'good performance'. The child support program's FPMs have normative underpinnings including efficiency and the financial responsibility of parents. Their operability or the values they embody, however, are not guaranteed by their mere existence. Despite popular belief that adopting business concepts and strategies in government would improve the delivery of public services, the performative effects of these measures are, as Callon (2007) and Fourcade (2011) might argue, contingent upon the practical, technical, and epistemic conditions in which these measures settle.

We have shown the considerable work involved in making the rupture. We have followed the measures through the organization to show how they disrupt the status quo as a public shaming provoked the organization to adopt the FPM's model of efficiency and effectiveness. New organizational cultures, led by the competitive mindset of the 'winning ' administrators and justifications based on expertise and technical data (the 'stats') help to overhaul the organization. Through an iterative and dynamic disruptive process, experts, employees, technologies, devices, and other entities organized themselves to de-legitimize the old measure and create an infrastructure that generates good performance scores. The literature of valuation has distinguished between processes of valuing and making valuable, or 'valorizing '(Vatin, 2013); in our case these processes are recursive and overlapping, as employees identify effective practices, code them into organizational routines, and follow them so that the employees themselves might become valued 'good performers'. The resulting cascade of inscriptions stabilized a particular enactment of good performance within an organization, allowing a re-positioning in the ranking system. In this sense, at least, the institution is enthusiastically beholden to the disciplining mechanisms of the ranking (Pollock & D'Adderio, 2012). Moreover, the disciplinary process of ranking is open ended. Rankings offer commensuration (Espeland & Stevens, 1998) across disparate organizations and between states, and thus lead to iterative competitive revaluations. We might speculate that whichever state now finds itself ranked last will embark upon another program of organizational change, perhaps even poaching Mr Colby.

The study contributes to an ongoing preoccupation in the literature of valuation studies (Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013; Kornberger, Justesen, Madsen, & Mouritsen, 2015; Muniesa, 2011) with contest and dissonance. It focuses on the collective efforts involved in instigating a breach in valuation, a sudden and total upheaval in an organization's settled understanding of worth. We have theorised the work of breaching and mending values



through the notion of valuation rupture, drawn from micro-sociological accounts of disruption and disaster (Kilkki et al., 2018), which follow Goffman's (1983) understanding of social life in terms of interaction orders. Once broken, these orders must be hastily remade, and disruption acts as a foil encouraging social actors to forge stable social arrangements. Recent contributions have striven to systematise disruption into micro-sociological theory. Vollmer (2013) suggests an interaction order based on a 'punctuated equilibrium', where disruptions provoke sudden relational restructuring, actors hurriedly coordinating activities and expectations to make sense of and stabilise the new normal. Tavory and Fine (2020) suggest that disruption is a natural part of social life, with micro-sociology placing too much emphasis on interactional alignment and the production of a shared understanding of the world. They distinguish between a productive 'disruption for' and a destructive 'disruption to', and we have made use of this distinction in the organisation of our case material. Some disruptions transcend and reshape the social structures constituted through the interaction order. For Tavory and Fine, these are 'ruptures', where 'relational ruptures characterise a situation in which the interaction order may continue, but the affiliations among participants are substantially altered and affective connections damaged' (Tavory & Fine, 2020, p. 374).

At LCSA, organizational processes and routines are rapidly reworked by a community anxious to repair the rupture and stabilize values in what will come to be the new 'normal' operation. We move from employees understanding the agency as good, to worst, to good again. This is the 'punctuated equilibrium' proposed by Vollmer, who stresses actors' focus on status, social capital, group membership and reputation at the expense of norms, customs and morality (Vollmer, 2013, p. 204). But values work gives rise to unexpected developments. The emphasis on new forms of target meeting operation opens space for autonomy and even resistance in valuation. While Mr Colby seeks to let 'stats' dominate the organization, caseworkers find ways of incorporating new conceptions of worth into their routines. The reconstructive process around the rupture does invoke norms, customs and moralities. What counts as 'good', not only organisationally, but morally, is put to the test (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006): the dissonance between competing orders is explored and settled in the organisation. Eventually 'fairness' surfaces as the guiding principle, ironically due to the increases in measurable performance that stem from 'reasonable' and 'appropriate' orders. Fairness is negotiated beyond the agency through the enrolment of new actors in the shape of (formerly) non-paying parents and community organizations; it represents a trade-off between public goods such as efficiency and responsibility of parents, and the collection

agents' own evolving sense of the good. Fairness comes to shape the decisions of individual agents, in turn affecting the life chances of those whom the organization serves: the children of prison inmates, for example, now in receipt of small but meaningful contributions made possible by reasonable orders. New notions of the good underpin new relationships with community organisations with the intention, for example, of removing barriers to the employment of noncustodial parents. Our study therefore makes two claims of note for the sociology of disruption: in repairing the rupture interactions are generative of value, and those interactions are sociomaterial as well as dramaturgical.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we explore the moment of 'rupture' that displaces an organization's practices for enacting good performance. We document the effort required to re-formulate a new 'good'. We have shown how machinations within the organization overflow into the public domain, generating new partners, new services, and new logics of worth within and beyond the organization. Transposing the concept of rupture from the micro-sociology of disruption to the theoretical repertoire of valuation studies sets out an analytical framework for the study of disruption and discontinuity in valuation. It focuses attention on how the rupture is made: from the initial provocation, through the collective efforts involved in first of all rendering one set of arrangements invalid, to the establishing of sociomaterial arrangements that construct new organisational values. Empirical research can follow the traces of these values as they settle in new and unexpected directions, paying attention to the nuances of reactivity to external mechanisms of valuing, and to the agency of those valued, who in turn become responsible for making valuable – for 'valorization', in Vatin's (2013) phrase. We show how the rupture ripples and how this matters, for organizational practices and systems of valuation feed into the structures of the community and the life chances of those beyond the organization. In other words, we can add further context to the growing recognition that a pragmatist understanding of valuation may contribute to classical sociological concerns of stratification and exclusion (Fourcade & Healy, 2013; Weber, 1978). The performativity of the organization's measurement framework has given new meaning to the enforcement of child support.

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