

Working with ideas: Collective bricolage, political tests and the emergence of policy paradigms

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Abstract

Literatures on institutional, ideational and policy change have made great strides in dynamically conceptualizing agency within structure. What continues to be insufficiently understood, however, is how actors actually work with ideas, that is, how broad policy ideas become concrete and implementable. One concept that has gained some traction in understanding actors' application of ideas is bricolage, understood as the stabilization or changing of institutions through a creative recombination of existing ideational and institutional resources. We theorize bricolage as a process of working with ideas by testing their cognitive, normative and strategic capacity. In contrast to much of the existing literature, we theorize this ideational policy entrepreneurship as collective agency. This gives greater analytical weight to how different bricoleurs work together—simultaneously and across time—to develop the ideas that come to shape policy. The empirical relevance of the theoretical argument is corroborated with an analysis of the work of bricoleurs in the paradigm shift of German pension policy.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Rich literatures on institutional, ideational and policy change have over the past decades made great strides in dynamically conceptualizing agency within structure (Emmenegger, 2021; Fioretos et al., 2016). Despite these advances, this paper identifies two interrelated conceptual shortcomings and proposes solutions. First, we see a tendency to conceive of agency driving political change and continuity in either overly individualistic or overly collective terms. On one end of the spectrum, dominant perspectives like policy paradigms (Hall, 1993) and the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, 1998) view political change as ideas shifting in collective and punctuated ways. On the other end, other strands of policy research have tended to think of change as driven by individual, politically shrewd actors (see Capano & Galanti, 2018). The middle ground between these visions of agency, we argue, offers important conceptual maneuvering room to get at a more realistic understanding of political change and continuity.

We take the literature on bricolage as our starting point. The “bricoleur” has been introduced as an alternative type of ideational entrepreneur that breaks with many of the conceptual rigidities that plagued dominant ideational frameworks (Carstensen, 2011). In highlighting that political actors often pragmatically and creatively borrow and recombine available ideas and institutional elements rather than adhere to a hegemonic paradigm, bricolage scholarship has developed a more sentient vision of agency (Hannah, 2020). Moreover, as a gradualist approach, it provides an important corrective to the static understanding of ideas characteristic of the first generation of ideational scholarship that relied on punctuated equilibria to explain change (Clift, 2018). However, in emphasizing the creative and innovative qualities of bricolage, the literature has tended to conceive of the bricoleur in overly individualistic terms. Only limited effort has gone into accounting for how bricolage works as a collective endeavor with most energy so far spent on theorizing the rarer instances of individual entrepreneurs successfully promoting their ideas. This is representative of a more general tendency of policy research to individualize agency roles in policy entrepreneurship, where policy success is attributed to one heroic individual (Capano & Galanti, 2018; Meijerink & Huitema, 2010; Petridou, 2014).

We propose as a solution that greater analytical weight is given to how policy entrepreneurship emerges from different bricoleurs working together to develop the ideas that come to shape policy areas. Actors do not necessarily have to be placed together in space and time to work as a collective (Duymedjian & Rüling, 2010; Orlikowski, 2002). A group of actors (whether individual or organizational) who share a repertoire of discursive practices made up of ideational and institutional resources applied in earlier policymaking efforts engage in bricolage by reapplying these under new circumstances. Building on recent interventions that bring prominence to practices (Jabko & Schmidt, 2022), we conceptualize bricolage as a process of *working with ideas*.

This begs the question of what such working with ideas actually means and gives rise to the second shortcoming in the literature that we seek to address: the insufficient understanding of how concrete ideas that end up in policy come about. The critique of equilibrium style frameworks as lacking endogenous explanations of ideational origins and recurring to overly deterministic learning processes, is well-rehearsed at this point (see e.g. Liebermann, 2002; Carstensen, 2011; Röper, 2018; Wilder & Howlett, 2014). More rarely recognized, current conceptualizations of bricolage also have little to say about how actors develop “useful” policy ideas. This too touches on the collective nature of bricolage, because it suggests that how we apply a tool depends crucially on how other actors have applied it before. To be sure, extant scholarship recognizes the importance of the history of ideas within a polity for which ideas

gain impact (Campbell, 2004; Schmidt, 2010). Nevertheless, these conceptualizations of the historical background for ideational battles tend to leave limited room for agency (Boswell & Hampshire, 2017).

To overcome this tendency, we propose a conceptual handle useful for understanding how bricoleurs work with ideas, and how ideas become tools for collective bricolage. We use the concept of *political tests* to theorize the emergence of a repertoire of practices useful for collective bricolage. Political actors perform three principal tests to determine the usefulness of a particular set of ideas in dealing with policy problems relative to cognitive, normative and strategic standards (cf. Carstensen & Röper, 2022). Most scholarship focuses on cases where policy ideas pass these tests and end up being successfully institutionalized, but naturally a more common occurrence is that a policy idea is explored and found wanting in one or more of the three tests. Our framework shows how despite such failure, tests still affect the development of ideas. Understanding such processes sheds new light on how actors concretely work with ideas, in what might be considered the plumbing of overarching processes such as shifts in dominant paradigms or advocacy coalitions.

We illustrate the empirical relevance of these propositions with an analysis of the origins of German pension ideas and the processes through which three key bricoleurs placed in three different time periods worked on ideas about pension privatization. Drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including in-depth expert interviews, the study reconstructs the ideational influences of central actors and probes into their “working with ideas.” The analysis underscores the empirical relevance of the proposed re-conceptualization of bricolage by showing how bricoleurs worked collectively in developing and testing ideas to make them politically palatable.

2 | CONCEPTUALIZING COLLECTIVE BRICOLAGE

2.1 | Bricolage and ideational agency

Couched in the context of ideational policy research, bricolage provides a specific vision of ideas and how political actors work with ideas. First, ideas are relationally structured. Although the bricolage approach builds on a common understanding of ideas as “historically constructed beliefs and perceptions of both individual and collective actors” (Beland, 2019, p. 4), it dispenses with the previously dominant conceptualization that the meaning of ideas derives from an essential core (see Carstensen, 2011). Rather, the meaning of ideas is constituted by the different ideational elements they are made up of and the other ideas that they are related to. In this view, actors create meaning by drawing together ideational elements and connecting these with other ideas.

To make this notion more analytically workable, we may follow Campbell (1998) in thinking of these elements as taking different shapes as programs, paradigms, public sentiments and frames. Programs are concrete policy prescriptions that outline a course of action for decision makers. Frames serve to promote and legitimize programs. In the background “policy paradigms” (Hall, 1993), “belief systems” (Lehmbruch, 2001) or “programmatic beliefs” (Berman, 1998) function as often-unarticulated assumptions that circumscribe the range of potential programs actors consider and find articulation as the dominant discourse. Public sentiments or “public philosophies” (Campbell, 1998) are normative background ideas in the form of national identities and public opinion setting the perimeters of the legitimate.

Understood from the perspective of bricolage, the question guiding actors is how these kinds of resources may be recombined and refashioned to become relevant to the problem at hand (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p. 18). There are no essential a priori limits to which or how elements may be joined to make up an idea. What matters is that it is possible to convince relevant coalitional actors, stakeholders and indeed voters about their “natural” and “necessary” connection (Carstensen, 2015).

Second, the specific meaning of ideas is established through their use. That is, the way connections between ideational elements emerge is through actors' application of them in making sense in a policy field. Doing so effectively requires deep knowledge about the policy area as well as familiarity with the ideational and institutional tools—with their potential connections and their previous use—to understand how they may be combined effectively in cognitive, normative and strategic terms. As with Levi-Strauss' bricoleur, where the meaning of tools continually emerges from the use to which they are put, ideas gain their meaning from the other ideas that they have historically been connected with. An important part of the learning process of bricolage, then, is to explore possible connections and interdependencies between ideas and ideational elements.

Here we follow recent work stressing the importance of practice for understanding how ideas are applied in policymaking (Jabko, 2019; Jabko & Schmidt, 2022; Jabko & Sheingate, 2018; Sheingate, 2010). From a practice perspective, ideas are not applied as priori knowledge to a specific decision or action (Orlikowski, 2002, p. 251). Instead, over time actors build up “repertoires of discursive practices” based on tacit knowledge originating in previous experiences with applications of ideas within a specific policy area or polity and recognized as pertinent by a circle of actors who perform it in a variety of ways (Jabko & Schmidt, 2022, pp. 867–868). These discursive practices are much less pure in ideational terms than normally argued in ideational scholarship as they may contain elements that originate in different paradigms or philosophies but are practiced together (Jabko, 2019). In this view, intersubjective processes of contestation and framing revolve around the question of how ideas are to be practiced rather than conflicts between irreconcilable paradigms (Jabko & Schmidt, 2022). From the perspective of bricolage, we may thus think of the repertoire of discursive practices as the tools that bricoleurs have experience working with, and that may be wielded in innovative ways in addressing policy problems.

Third, ideas and institutions tend to change in gradual ways rather than through the large ruptures hypothesized in early ideational and institutionalist scholarship. As actors seek to adjust ideas and institutions that are part of their repertoire, they are bound to change these selfsame ideas and institutions. Rather than stable institutional and ideational setups, actors thus work within what Jabko and Sheingate (2018) call “dynamic orders,” where actors “frantically strive to preserve the status quo” and “typically re-engineer order in complex ways” (p. 313). Actors produce ideational change either by changing the relative weight of the elements in an idea, injecting a new element in the idea but otherwise keep intact the setup of elements or perhaps connecting an idea to another existing idea that it was previously unconnected to. In either case, the result is a potential for significant but usually gradual ideational and institutional change that over time, however, can amount to a paradigm shift (Carstensen & Matthijs, 2018).

2.2 | Building repertoires of practice through tests

To reap the analytical benefits of using bricolage to theorize agency in ideational research, it is necessary to deepen our understanding of its collective dimensions. To be sure, despite the vision of “the bricoleur” as a solitary figure, it was always clear that Levi-Strauss (1966) considered bricolage as more than a trait or talent of specific individuals. Collective bricolage takes place when a group of actors (whether individual or organizational) apply a shared repertoire of practices made up of ideational and institutional resources used in earlier policymaking efforts and reapplied under new circumstances. This involves a shift in focus from the actions of individual policy entrepreneurs to agency as entrepreneurship where individuals interact and promote policy innovation through embedded collective patterns of action (Capano & Galanti, 2018). Applying this vision of agency as bricolage, however, raises an important question: If the bricoleur's use of resources is based on familiarity with these elements in concrete settings, how is such familiarity shared in a collective of actors? That is, how do actors come to share a collective set of resources?

To get at the defining features of collective bricolage, it is useful to distinguish between actors sharing ideas and sharing practices. Simply put, sharing ideas is much less demanding. Given their abstract nature, ideas are relatively easy to learn about. Actors may do so in multiple ways, including by reading scientific or popular works, through education, the news, etc. Precisely because of their ambiguity and interpretive openness, ideas can become fashionable and diffuse across the globe (Gilardi, 2012) or come to work as “coalition magnets” bringing together distinct groups around an appealing idea (Béland & Cox, 2016). In contrast, collectively applying ideas in policymaking—making them work as shared policy practices—is a different and much more demanding process. First, turning ideas into practices requires agreement about what the idea means in the specific setting that it is applied within. This internal meaning-making is vital for cooperation, and it requires that the members develop a shared interpretive framework (Bechky, 2003). Moreover, the collective entrepreneur—be it a political party, interest organization, advocacy coalition, etc.—will have to contextualize ideas in local settings, translating their meaning into existing complex meaning structures (Carstensen & Röper, 2019). This applies not just in geographical terms. Given increasing specialization of policymaking in complex societies, practices must also be worked out and adjusted to local dominant practices of specific policy areas. This requires political work of building viable compromises, which is likely to further dilute the purity of ideas (Hannah, 2020) but helps solidify collective understandings of what an idea means under local circumstances.

If collective bricolage takes place as groups share a repertoire of practices in policymaking, how do actors build such a repertoire? Here we want to propose a conceptual handle useful for understanding how bricoleurs work with ideas, and how ideas become tools for collective bricolage, namely *political tests*. We build on the notion of a test as first developed by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) and later adopted into ideational research by Carstensen and Hansen (2019) to understand gradual ideational change. In this context, we use the concept of test to theorize the emergence of a repertoire of practices useful for collective bricolage. We understand tests to take place in situations where there is uncertainty about “what is,” thus preventing actors from simply relying on what is taken-for-granted or appropriate. These situations not only occur in times of crises. More mundanely, they arise as ideas and institutions are applied in efforts to establish everyday practices. To be sure, such bricolage processes involve learning, but they differ from standard understandings of policy learning as “a deliberate attempt to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in response to past experience and new

information” (Hall, 1993, p. 278). A key difference is between the linearity of standard understandings of learning, where successful learning involves a progressive strengthening of the capacity to address a policy problem, and the openness of the bricolage process, where ideas are applied to establish their meaning in the context of an existing repertoire of practice, and not because they are the optimal solution to a problem.

Test situations give rise to political struggle because their resolution comes to structure the interpretation and handling of policy problems. To reach a compromise that may temporarily resolve uncertainty and satisfy actor preferences, political actors perform three principal tests to determine the usefulness of a particular set of ideas in dealing with policy problems relative to cognitive, normative and strategic standards (see also Carstensen & Röper, 2022).

Cognitive tests are performed to determine the capacity of an idea to credibly address the problems that is the source of uncertainty (Schmidt, 2008), which includes coming to agreement about what the problem is and how it can plausibly be solved (Béland, 2009).

Normative tests serve to determine whether the proposed combination of ideational elements speaks to dominant values in the coalition that is promoting it, the norms and public philosophies that structure interaction within the policy area as well as society at large (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). Here the test may show that a particular combination of ideas is not embedded enough in the setup of the broader moral political economy (Hansen, 2019).

Strategic tests aim at ascertaining which constellations of ideas may bring together a winning coalition of actors. Here tests may often be performed first in closed rooms between actors trying to agree to cooperate and later on tried out in a more public setting where the level of support from elite stakeholders and their constituents may be gauged (Carstensen & Röper, 2019).

The work of bricoleurs thus consists in applying these three tests to policy ideas and institutions to determine their potential usefulness as part of a repertoire of practices. Scholarship on bricolage tends to focus on the cases where policy ideas pass these tests and end up being successfully institutionalized, but naturally a more common occurrence is that a policy idea is explored but does not convincingly pass the three tests. Investigating their potential meanings and other elements they may be joined with, however, adds valuable resources to the ideational stock that bricoleurs can apply in the future—how they have been used earlier makes up a key resource in how they may be applied later.

Although tests enrich the stock of ideational resources by seeking out potential connections, it is important to note that tests may also limit potential connections. As certain connections are made more and more often and by an increasing number of actors this naturalizes a certain combination of ideas. This means that although a controversial assemblage of ideas may not pass all three tests, over time actors get used to seeing the connections made, helping to buttress their political acceptability. As the ideational alternatives that can convincingly be connected narrow down, we see the emergence of a collective repertoire of practices.

Notably, this provides an alternative perspective on how paradigms shift and emerge. In this view, the ideas that make up a paradigm do not originate solely in academic theory (e.g., economics), are kept together through their incommensurability from other theories, and change through revolutions brought on by an increasing number of anomalies, as Hall (1993) famously argued. Instead, paradigms, as repertoires of ideational practice, emerge gradually from actors' collective efforts to tease out potential connections between ideas based on tests of their capacity to answer to cognitive, normative and strategic concerns.

3 | RESEARCH STRATEGY

To provide an example of how collective bricolage works, we turn to the case of German pension politics. By combining a broad historical perspective on the career of ideas of pension privatization (that had long been non-dominant, minority policy ideas) with the in-depth analysis of key policy entrepreneurs, we aim to illustrate our two main theoretical propositions: Testing and reworking policy ideas are key resources for a paradigm shift and tends to occur as a collective effort over time. The analysis proceeds in four steps.

First, we give an overview of the prevalent German pension paradigms since the 1950s. This provides the baseline for the ideational material bricoleurs had at their disposal when conceiving new policy proposals.

Second, we focus on pioneering policy entrepreneurs within the CDU throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Not only was it the leading government party for most of this period, but due its centrist position—between a social democratic SPD that vehemently opposed pension privatization until the late 1990s and an economically liberal FDP that had preferred pension privatization since the 1950s—the conservative CDU was the central battleground for pragmatic pension reform ideas (Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993). Based on case knowledge and secondary literature, we inductively identified three CDU policymakers who conceived key liberal pension policy innovations. In order to elucidate how these actors worked with existing ideational and institutional resources, and how over time a politically effective repertoire of discursive practices emerged from this process, we reconstruct the ideational influences and motivations of these key actors based on secondary literature, documentary research and expert interviews. During the semi-structured interviews with the actors in question, we asked them about the sources they consulted, the people who left an impression on them and the political context when they developed their respective policy proposals. Taken together, this allows tracing how these bricoleurs performed cognitive, normative and strategic tests that helped build a repertoire of discursive practices.

Third, we complement this perspective on individual policy entrepreneurs with a consideration of the role organizations play in facilitating collective bricolage. In particular, we focus on how party conventions held by the CDU provided testing grounds for new pension policy ideas.

Fourth, we discuss the limitations of this approach and its implications for alternative explanations of policy change.

4 | CASE: THREE BRICOLEURS AND A PARADIGM SHIFT IN GERMAN PENSION POLITICS

4.1 | German postwar pension paradigms

The 1957 pension reform provided the foundation for the German one-pillar pension paradigm and the “Bismarckian” postwar welfare state more broadly. The public pension scheme was financed through a pay-as-you-go system (PAYG), where the current generation of workers finances the current generation of pensioners. The intellectual underbody for this financing mechanism was based on the Mackenroth theorem, which states that social expenditure ought to be serviced with current national income (Mackenroth, 1952). The public pension pillar alone promised status maintenance (*Lebensstandardsicherung*), meaning that the working population

could maintain their living standard throughout their retirement years (Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993, pp. 93–115). Under the impression of the perceived failure of pension schemes that relied on capital stocks throughout recent history of wars and inflation, this dominant PAYG public pension pillar ensured that prefunded schemes in the private and occupational pension pillars played but a limited role (Bernier, 2009).

The reform was by no means uncontested. Economics minister Erhard (CDU) and other conservative ordoliberalists opposed chancellor Adenauer's (CDU) reform to an extent that caused the media at the time to refer to a “pension war” (Bundestag, 2017). The entire camp of organized business also opposed the PAYG approach (Hockerts, 1980, pp. 377–394).

These actors proposed alternative solutions that aimed at more prefunded pensions and less involvement of the state, broadly subscribing to the three-pillar-paradigm where old age provision ought to stem from the public, occupational and private pension pillars (Carstensen & Röper, 2019, p. 1340). From a bricolage perspective, these ordoliberal pension proposals constitute a “path not taken” (Schneiberg, 2007), that is, a set of ideas and interpretations that were tested by actors but failed to make it into policy.

As the aftereffects of the economic downturn on employment and larger societal changes intertwined in putting pressure on the German pension system beginning in the 1970s, a debate about the long-term “demographic problem” of public PAYG pensions emerged in the 1980s (Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993, pp. 115, 364ff.). The increasingly shared diagnosis of demography-related funding problems gave way to a variety of systemic pension reform initiatives (Buttler & Jäger, 1988, p. 386; Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993, p. 168ff.). It became obvious that (ordo)liberal pension ideas had never dissipated, but in fact lingered as minority discourses in certain pockets of the polity (Carstensen & Röper, 2019). Prominent actors in the 1950s had already conceived much of the ideational “substantive raw material” (Lieberman, 2002, p. 697) underlying pension privatization arguments that were now revived.

A period of “muddling through” marked by “searching movements, reorientations, and redefinitions” (Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993, p. 162) between 1974 and 1985, was followed by more far-reaching retrenchment reforms that were aimed to remain true to the one-pillar paradigm (Hinrichs, 2005). The partial pension privatization reform in 2001 marked a paradigm shift (Lamping & Rüb, 2004). Breaking with the traditional social insurance paradigm, the state was no longer the sole guarantor of the achieved living standard in old age, with private capital markets filling the void (Carstensen & Röper, 2019; Röper, 2021). In the 15 years or so preceding the reform, various bricoleurs developed and advocated multi-pillarization policy ideas that were rejected on different grounds. We now turn to three of the most important bricoleurs.

4.2 | German pension policy bricoleurs during the 1980s and 1990s

4.2.1 | Kurt Biedenkopf

The first and widely considered to be the most important among these bricoleurs was prominent CDU politician Kurt Biedenkopf. Biedenkopf and his partner Meinhard Miegel proposed a basic, tax-funded universal state pension combined with private capital formation and individual prefunded state pensions that were reflective of individual contributions rather than embedded in a more collectivistic system (Biedenkopf, 1985; Miegel, 1981; Miegel & Wahl, 1985). Biedenkopf is widely credited as the key policy entrepreneur to have paved the way for three-pillar pension ideas in Germany (Bönker, 2005, p. 356).

The 1955 *Rothenfelser Denkschrift* crucially inspired Biedenkopf (CDU, 1997, p. 21; [Interview Biedenkopf](#)). This report was commissioned by chancellor Adenauer and contained policy suggestions that emphasized individual responsibility (Hockerts, 1980, pp. 279–299). Biedenkopf recalls:

This alternative proposal built on the principle of subsidiarity. That means the idea was that old age security ought to be built from the bottom up, not by the state. (...) That report already pointed out that one needs to follow this path instead of beginning with the organization.

(Interview Biedenkopf).

This “ordoliberal principle of subsidiarity” (Miegel & Wahl, 1985, p. 58) that Erhard unsuccessfully sought to defend in 1956/1957 was at the core of Biedenkopf’s idea formation.

Reactivating and recombining familiar domestic ideas, Biedenkopf acted as a bricoleur. Even though his ideas were eventually rejected as too radical, his prominent position within the CDU meant that his proposals had to be regularly discussed, for example, at party conventions but also in public discourse more generally. Due to this salience, his ideas became crucial reference points and his tests of the ideas provided important lessons for bricoleurs who followed in his footsteps. That is, notwithstanding their intellectual coherence, these ideas needed further normative and strategic work to be politically viable. As such, he was more of a revolutionary among bricoleurs, highlighting that bricoleurs are by no means fundamentally conservative actors, but “may actively seek opportunities to shift the status quo, despite potential political risks, and have long-held and well-defined goals in doing so” (Hannah, 2020, p. 489). In terms of the three tests that we bring to bear on the work of bricoleurs, Biedenkopf’s iconoclastic work successfully developed an answer to population aging that many found cognitively convincing. Yet in speaking too one-sidedly to fellow liberal ideologues it ultimately failed in normative and strategic terms. This insight was crucial for later efforts of bricoleurs in crafting ideas with wider public appeal.

4.2.2 | Christian Schwarz-schilling

Invigorated by the “demography debate,” the academic discussion on prefunded old age provision became more vibrant. During the mid-1980s a flurry of academic publications rooted in ordoliberal thought criticized PAYG pensions (for an overview, see Wiesner, 1988, p. 256ff.). These voices praising prefunded pensions meant a revival of “long familiar economically liberal thinking” (Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993, p. 370). However vivid, this discussion was largely confined to academic circles (Buttler & Jäger, 1988, p. 386; Wiesner, 1988, p. 255) up until 1987, when Telecommunications Minister Christian Schwarz-Schilling deployed this cognitive testing in more politically adjusted discourse. Basing his arguments on extant economic scholarship, his proposal envisaged the introduction of a capital stock in the public pension pillar and an adjustment of contribution rates so that child rearing would reduce one’s pension burden. He first published his ideas in a booklet (Schwarz-Schilling, 1987), which were then further developed by a commission under his chairmanship.

Though intellectually persuaded by Biedenkopf’s ideas, and liberally drawing on this repertoire of discursive practices, Schwarz-Schilling deemed them political non-starters: “There will be no new pension system on a green field and it will not command majority backing. The

pension revolution (...) won't happen" (Schwarz-Schilling, 1987, p. 10). Instead, Schwarz-Schilling explicitly framed his proposal as close as possible to the goals of the 1957 reform, which involved at least paying lip service to *Lebensstandardsicherung* through the first pillar (see also Körber, 1988, p. 272; Schwarz-Schilling, 1987, p. 5; Schwarz-Schilling, 1988, p. 17) and emphasizing that Germany has always had a three-pillar system (Schwarz-Schilling, 1988, p. 25). As argued by Boswell and Hampshire (2017), this kind of strategic work—downplaying differences between a policy idea and the existing public philosophy—can be an effective political strategy. In this context it offered important normative insights about how the cognitive strength of the idea could be harnessed more effectively through a strengthened normative scaffolding. At the same time, Schwarz-Schilling took aim at the “foolish dogma by Mackenroth” underlying PAYG financing (Schwarz-Schilling, 1987, p. 33), demanded a “redefinition” of the relative weight of the three pension pillars (Schwarz-Schilling, 1988, p. 5; see also Schwarz-Schilling, 1987, pp. 13–16) and displayed a steadfast belief in capital markets (Schwarz-Schilling, 1987, p. 34). In recombining ideas of capital formation and family policies (in terms of linking pension contribution rates to the number children raised), Schwarz-Schilling was the first to bundle up longstanding economic-liberal and conservative-catholic lines of critique vis-à-vis the prevailing pension system (Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993, pp. 362–389). Schwarz-Schilling provided “the sluice (...) through which these (liberal) arguments (about prefunded pensions) found their way into political decision-making processes (diffusion)” (Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993, p. 374).

As Telecommunications Minister, Schwarz-Schilling had previously not dealt with the issue of old age provision. His impetus to engage with pension politics only came about in the mid-1980s when his daughters asked him about the “pension crisis” at the kitchen table (interview Schwarz-Schilling). He immersed himself in the literature and found works by the German financial economist Reiner Dinkel (1981, 1984) to be “particularly insightful” (Schwarz-Schilling, 1987, p. 46) in terms of their family-political perspective, as well as Schreiber (1955) and Nell-Breuning's critique of a purely PAYG system in terms of generational equity (interview Schwarz-Schilling; Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993, p. 384; Schwarz-Schilling, 1988, pp. 51–52). In sum, earlier cognitive work aimed at strengthening arguments for the problem-solving capacity of a capital market approach to pension policy was aided by tests showing the normative viability of combining conservative and economic-liberal values.

It is remarkable how close Schwarz-Schilling's thinking was to Biedenkopf's in cognitive terms, but how different their policy proposals were. Schwarz-Schilling drew conclusions from Biedenkopf's failure to implement his ideas. “I mean, I was a politician, not a scientist. What is viable and what is not?” is how he characterizes his own thinking at the time (interview Schwarz-Schilling). Earlier strategic tests had shown the usefulness of not proposing revolutionary changes. Instead, Schwarz-Schilling made sure to link his proposal back to the principles of the 1957 reform, even if his ideas in some ways contradicted those. In a deliberate attempt to gain wider backing for his ideas, this bricoleur placed professed support for the status quo centrally in the discursive repertoire using a more subversive framing, while adding a family policy element to appeal to conservative values that might appeal to a wider range of actors than the more economic arguments proposed by Biedenkopf (interview Schwarz-Schilling).

Just like Biedenkopf, Schwarz-Schilling's proposal had no immediate legislative impact. But the idea of a capital stock in the public pension pillar was picked up by several CDU politicians in the mid-1990s and Nullmeier and Rüb (1993, p. 383) even go as far as submitting that it was

only Schwarz-Schilling's initiative that caused the first "sustained shock of the pension consensus."

4.2.3 | Andreas Storm

In the context of the "pension crisis" brought about by German reunification, one of the CDU policymakers to revive the idea of a capital stock in the first pension pillar was Andreas Storm. Presented at the 1996 CDU party convention, the so-called "Storm-Plan" became the blueprint for the government's reform efforts. Besides a capital stock, the plan contained the so-called "demographic component," an adjustment of the pension formula.

Storm's proposal of a capital stock in the first pension pillar did not go as far as Schwarz-Schilling's, for it was designed with stronger collective elements with no involvement of private sector actors such as insurers. Schwarz-Schilling was supportive of Storm's proposals, both in public and in private phone calls at the time ([interview Schwarz-Schilling](#); [interview Storm a](#); [b](#)). Even more so than Schwarz-Schilling, Storm thought to develop and frame his ideas in ways commensurate with the status quo. For example, instead of the commonly used framing of "generational equity" to make the case for prefunded pensions, he stuck to the traditional "generational solidarity" framing. His explicit goal was to not merely convince economically liberal but also more traditional social policymakers: "I've always pursued an evolutionary approach, that is from within the system and derived historically. That was the only way to start a conversation with social politicians in the first place. That is, based on the premise: how can one strengthen the system from within instead of breaking with the system" ([interview Storm a](#)). Or, in the parlance of this paper, Storm used an existing repertoire of discursive practices based on previous normative and strategic tests to set up his evolutionary approach to policy making.

In the end, only the "demographic component" element of Storm's proposal became law. The capital stock in the first pillar was "scratched last minute" ([interview Storm a](#)). His strategic thinking that a capital stock that was collectivistically designed might appease both economic liberals (who favored prefunded pensions) and more traditional policymakers (who favored collectivistic solutions) turned out to be wrong. The former preferred more private sector-oriented solutions for the second and third pillar and the latter were still skeptical concerning any prefunded elements, especially in the first pillar. "As such my proposal was the ideal compromise, but in a situation where the willingness to compromise was not particularly pronounced" (*ibid.*).

In sum, Storm clearly went beyond the previous two bricoleurs by seeking to appeal to people across the aisle. He tested his ideas in ways that were much closer to the status quo to aim for a broader coalition. Going forward the lesson was clear: If you wanted to insert prefunded elements into the German pension system, it could not be in the public pillar, but in the occupational and private pillars (*ibid.*). And that is what the 2001 Pension Reform Act eventually implemented by introducing voluntary, tax-subsidized schemes for occupational and private pensions. By the time the policy process for this law began, many alternative conceptions of partial pension privatization had already been discarded; not exclusively but crucially due to the collective testing by the three bricoleurs portrayed above. It must not surprise that the eventual reform passed by SPD and Greens was in many ways closer to the emerging consensus within the CDU than what the SPD labor minister Riester had originally sought to implement (Oelschläger, 2009).

4.3 | Party conventions as testing grounds

Upon focusing on how individual bricoleurs learned from their predecessors' tests, we now turn to the importance of organizations in fostering such processes. In the case at hand, it is the workings of a political party. As already mentioned, the CDU was the central battleground for pragmatic multipillarization pension reform ideas (Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993, p. 353). The party was essentially split into two camps: "social politicians" as agents of continuity led by labor minister Norbert Blüm on the one hand and "financial" and "economic politicians" on the other (Berner, 2009). Andreas Storm recalls that within the party "90% of the social politicians were in favor of the Blüm model and 90% of the financial politicians and economic politicians were against it." Agents of change, including the three bricoleurs portrayed above, proposed a wide range of different policy ideas, whereas continuity agents defending the status quo constituted a cohesive front (Hegelich, 2006, p. 234). Facing this "concrete wall" built by defenders of the status quo, multipillarization bricoleurs introduced their policy ideas (Carstensen & Röper, 2019, p. 1341). One crucial venue for such challenges were party conventions.

Schwarz-Schilling presented his proposal at a party convention in 1988. After the CDU's federal board had voted against the proposal beforehand, it was already clear to him that it would not pass at the convention (*interview Schwarz-Schilling*). But he still advocated his ideas and they were put up for a vote. The arguments advanced in opposition to Schwarz-Schilling's proposal were remarkably similar among defenders of the old system (Nullmeier & Rüb, 1993, p. 388). Supporters of Biedenkopf's ideas (that were not voted on that day) overwhelmingly voted in favor of Schwarz-Schilling instead of the still victorious continuity agent Blüm (*interview Schwarz-Schilling*). Whereas Schwarz-Schilling's ideas failed to gain a majority, the convention constituted a crucial testing ground for this particular variety of multi-pillarization ideas in terms of their political potential and the arguments fielded against them.

Biedenkopf's prominent position within the CDU ensured that his proposals had to be regularly discussed, including at party conventions throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Bönker, 2005, p. 356). His ideas entailed a pension revolution that was widely regarded as unrealistic. But due to his standing within the party, these radical multi-pillarization ideas were continuously part of the conversation and thus tested in various party forums. Over the years Biedenkopf's ideas became a second school of thought—next to the traditional one-pillar paradigm defenders—against the backdrop of which more moderate multi-pillarization ideas could be tested and introduced (*interview Storm*).

The 1997 convention proves instructive in illustrating this point. Two reform proposals were put up for a vote, one developed by Blüm and one by Biedenkopf. At the beginning of his speech Blüm made it clear how different these were: "Ladies and gentlemen, the alternatives about which you decide today are: progression of our pension system or system change. You are not deciding about varieties today (CDU, 1997, p. 15). After Blüm and Biedenkopf presented their radically different alternatives, Andreas Storm was the first speaker of the debate. He recommended voting against Biedenkopf's proposal but highlighted that he shares Biedenkopf's concerns about the challenges posed by demographic changes. To meet those challenges, Storm proposed to modify Blüm's proposal by including a capital stock based on reserves built from pension contributions. This capital stock will then generate returns on investment that will help offset some of the pressures exerted by an aging society. To underscore the viability of this approach Storm stated: "Already in the late 1980s, the pension reform commission of the Mittelstandsvereinigung, chaired by Dr. Christian Schwarz-Schilling, has shown in an excellent way that only by building such reserves can a relief of the young generation be achieved"

(CDU, 1997, p. 28). This instance serves to illustrate how debates within political parties, in this case crucially during conventions, means testing and working with ideas. Whereas public discourse more broadly can be the space to float ideas, the more detailed nature of debates at party conventions and actual voting on ideas provide much more immediate and intense testing grounds.

4.4 | Limitations and alternative explanations

The analysis above suggests that each bricoleur under consideration performed cognitive, normative and strategic tests—crucially facilitated by party venues—that helped build a repertoire of discursive practices that later served as key resources in the paradigm shifting toward partial privatization of the pension system. As such, it does not explain the timing of the eventual reform processes or which external pressures were crucial in bringing about change in the first place. Instead of pitting ideational explanations of political change against structural or institutional determinants, our argument about working with ideas through collective bricolage aims at an enhanced understanding of why which policy ideas in particular end up reigning supreme.

To make sense of the German pension policy shift, many works reconsidered the role of ideas and discourse (e.g.; Bönker, 2005; Brettschneider, 2009; Leifeld, 2013; Hinrichs, 2005; Marschallek, 2004). Very much in line with the wider ideational literature, these works tend to focus on how broad ideas of pension privatization and marketization gained support among political actors to the extent that one can eventually observe a paradigm shift. How bricoleurs have actually worked with these ideas, how they have tested and reworked them in different iterations to make pension privatization politically viable, has drawn limited attention.

Let us consider two examples from the literature that consider German pension privatization through the lenses of dominant ideational frameworks. Hinrichs (2005) applies Hall's (1993) policy paradigms to analyze the changes of different orders in German pension policies preceding the paradigm shift in the early 2000s. Leifeld (2013) demonstrates the emergence of a new dominant advocacy coalition in favor of multi-pillarization during the 1990s and early 2000s. These two works point toward the complementary relationship between our conception of bricolage and the wider ideational literature. In many ways, bricolage focuses on the plumbing of paradigmatic (coalitional) changes. Whereas the learning processes in the policy paradigm is underspecified (what specific policy solution is chosen to remedy the perceived crisis occurs in a black box), bricolage zeroes in on the practice of how actors actually test what ideas might actually work in the context of a political space that opens up for alternative policy solutions. Our case studies of individual bricoleurs demonstrate that it took a lot of tinkering with different iterations of broader policy ideas. In this sense, the work of these bricoleurs can be considered the core of the overall paradigm shift.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper argues that combining the concepts of *collective bricolage* and *political tests* may provide scholars with tool to strike a balance between the Scylla of institutional voluntarism—where actors are so reflective and critical of interpretive structures that it becomes hard to see

why institutions would ever have an independent impact on actors' interaction—and the Charybdis of structuralism that dominated early institutionalist theory of a sociological and historical bend (Emmenegger, 2021; Hall, 2016). We leverage insights—gathered through ventures into practice theory—that ideas and institutions need work by agents to be applied in specific situations of decision making (cf. Streeck & Thelen, 2005). We do so to argue that the institutional structures that form the background for interaction between agents also offer an important source of institutional innovation as tools that actors may apply and reapply under shifting settings. The concept of political tests in turn gives flesh to the work that it requires to bring an idea or institutional element into the repertoire that actors apply in everyday decision-making. In emphasizing that testing typically unfolds over long stretches of time, and is riddled with failures, it takes seriously that changing or stabilizing institutions is rarely a straightforward job. Rather, it requires a significant amount of collective work to make new ideas stick or to adjust existing ones to changing circumstances.

The argument has a number of broader implications for ideational and institutional scholarship. First, highlighting the collective nature of much bricolage, it suggests that it may in fact be more prevalent than recognized in approaches that consider bricolage a strategy of individual entrepreneurs. It serves to highlight that a key source of occasional—and potentially very important—innovation through bricolage at one point happens against the background of previous tests performed by other actors; in some cases having been performed many years ago, with often very different aims and preferences. The paper thus echoes recent advances in the study of policy entrepreneurship as a pattern of action typically performed in groups, where together actors are able to harness a diverse set of resources aimed at promoting innovation, rather than as one entrepreneur mobilizing a coalition of policy actors (Mintrom et al., 2014; Petridou & Olausson, 2017). Whether this implication holds up to empirical scrutiny is an important task for future research. It will require greater focus on tracing the specific history of ideas and institutions than normally is the case. Instead, studies often spend the greatest amount of energy studying the interactions taking place around a choice point. But if much of the work that shapes the path of a successful idea takes place before this final stretch of the policy process, more care should be taken in avoiding reified accounts of their history, giving due attention to the collective actors that carried and developed the idea to political fruition (see also Jacobs, 2015).

Second, the paper offers a view of the micro-level dynamics that shape macro-level shifts in the paradigms that structure policymaking. We here follow the path of scholars, who have promoted a view of paradigms as more historical and structured through continuous work on part of its supporters. This strand of scholarship differentiates itself from interpretations of the paradigm concept that requires paradigms to be tightly structured by a coherent academic theory (Baumgartner, 2014; Daiegnault 2014). Here the glue that holds together the paradigm is not coherence or logic in an objective sense, but rather the political work performed by its supporters to convince key constituents and fend off attacks from contending coalitions (Carstensen & Matthijs, 2018; Hannah, 2020). The paper offers an important theoretical piece by specifying the different kinds of tests policy actors perform to achieve this goal, and indicates that maturing ideas to the point of being politically viable requires developing their capacity to multiple audiences, including the public, experts, politicians, etc. To advance this agenda, future research may usefully probe the relative importance of the different tests under different circumstances. Given insights from extant literatures about the importance of who actors have to convince to advance their policy—for example, whether the public or elites is the primary focus of discourse (Schmidt, 2008), or the policy area is characterized by quiet or noisy politics

(Culpepper, 2010)—it seems likely that the centrality of each kind of test will vary depending on institutional settings.

Third, the theoretical argument also offers a different take on the emergence of new ideas. Existing research on policy paradigms has suggested that paradigms may change gradually, as new elements are included (Clift, 2018). Thinking of bricolage as a collective endeavor taking place through political tests suggests that the development of the ideas that may over time become part of a policy paradigm is also an important part of the change process. Extant scholarship tends to understand new ideas as “weapons” applied by actors to delegitimize existing institutions and subsequently institutionalized to stabilize interaction (Blyth, 2002), as if they are ready to take off the shelf once their time has come. Here the work of the actors is directed at the audience that it is trying to persuade (Blyth, 2007) rather than the development of ideas. In the view of this paper, in contrast, the ideas that vie for attention are not ready for promotion, biding their time until a window of opportunity arrives (Kingdon, 1984) and already enjoying intellectual authority based on its position in academia (Hall, 1993). Instead, to become politically viable, ideational elements must be actively developed, often through numerous instances of failure. The analytical upshot is that if we want to understand why certain ideas gain impact on policy, we must broaden our view of the policy process to capture the specific trajectories of the ideational elements that eventually develop into politically viable policy ideas. Preparing for ideational change, then, is not just a matter of existing ideas losing authority, but also about preparing emerging ideas through tests to take their place. Future research should thus take care to make the authority of the ideas a focus of scrutiny. Authority should be probed within a specific policy context rather than assumed based on the more general standing of the idea in academia, international policy communities or media debates.

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