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Research Article

Toward a Theory of Fixative Accommodation: Explaining How Bounded Change Preserves the Conditions of Recurring Difficulty

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ABSTRACT

Change is often assessed in terms of adjustment by an individual, group, organization or institution. There is less worry about those cases where the adjustment is real and directly useful, but shallow, so that something associated with the original difficulty remains largely the same. This conceptual integrative review builds fixative accommodation as an explanatory construct for this pattern. By conducting a comparative conceptual analysis, we examined and synthesized literature on accommodation and assimilation, psychological flexibility and rigidity, selective information processing, resistance and ambivalence, transformative learning, and institutional decoupling. Fixative accommodation, as defined by the synthesis, is a bounded form of adjustment that restores functioning, reduces tension, answers external pressure, or preserves legitimacy while protecting deeper beliefs, identities, habits, interests, power arrangements, or structures. Based on this synthesis, the study introduces the Fixative Accommodation Cycle: Change Pressure, Response Boundary Formation, Limited Accommodation, Immediate Stabilization, Core Preservation, and Residual Difficulty and Recurrence. The proposed theory explains how immediate stabilization can be used to reinforce the boundaries of an adjustment, thus leaving the underlying difficulty intact, or allowing it to become so. It provides a relational and temporal account of change by examining what changed, what was protected, what immediate benefit ensued, and what difficulty remained. The theory is presented as a testable process explanation whose constructs, propositions, boundary conditions, and cross-context applicability can be examined through subsequent empirical research.

Keywords: *Bounded change, Core preservation, Fixative accommodation, Immediate stabilization, Institutional change, Process theory*

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Introduction

Change is often gaged by visible signs. Someone begins to speak in a different way, an organization adopts a new policy, or a community alters a long-standing practice. Such developments may be real progress, but they do not always indicate whether the underlying beliefs, assumptions, habits or structures have changed. The literature on transformative learning mainly links deeper transformation with critical reflection and changes in meaning perspectives but also refers to the role of experience, social learning, and conditions of the change process. However, Rodríguez Aboytes and Barth's (2020) systematic review found that transformative learning theory is sometimes applied superficially without critically exploring how transformation actually occurs. This makes an important distinction between manifest adjustment and change that reaches to the roots of how a person or institution perceives and responds to experience.

The concept of accommodation offers a useful starting point for analyzing this distinction. In psychological theory accommodation is usually defined as the modification of an existing internal structure or schema as a consequence of receiving information and/or experiences which are not adequately accounted for by what is already known. Hanfstingl et al. (2022) reviewed 473 publications on assimilation and accommodation in fields like development, coping, personality, identity, learning and social adaptation. They found a widely held conception of accommodation as a modification of internal structures to cope with environmental demands. However, they found considerable variability in the application of the concept. Accommodation therefore involves some adjustment, but not necessarily the extent of that adjustment or whether it extends to the underlying structure responsible for the original difficulty.

People don't always accept or reject change in an all-or-nothing way to challenge. They can learn new information, they can change some of their behavior, they can adopt an alternative perspective just enough to reduce the discomfort, but still maintain the deeper interpretation of the situation. Sommer et al. (2024) distinguish belief updating from the process through which people search for, evaluate, and integrate evidence. In their review, they propose that current goals and motivations may influence these surrounding processes, which in turn influence what information is persuasive enough to lead to change. Research into attitude resistance even suggests that positions may be underpinned by underlying identities, values, worldviews, interests and fears, making the motives underlying an attitude important to understanding why corrective information may not produce deeper change (Hornsey & Fielding, 2017). Likewise, research on psychological flexibility suggests the ability to adaptively change thoughts and behaviors to meet changing demands while maintaining a focus on personally relevant goals (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). These perspectives do not constitute the phenomenon itself, but they do help to explain why some reactions are open to amendment, whereas others cluster around familiar beliefs and patterns.

A similar trend can be noted at the collective and the institutional levels. Research on change in organizations show that reactions to change are affected by individual beliefs, expected consequences, social setting, timing and how change is introduced. These responses can be ambivalent as well, with support and resistance co-existing (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2026). In institutional research, decoupling is the term for when formal policies are disconnected from practice or are being implemented without the expected effect (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Basic institutional research similarly shows that organizations may formalize structures to signal legitimacy but keep them loosely coupled to routine activities if tight coupling may lead to conflict, uncertainty, or disruption (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). And so an institution can take on the language and visible demands of reform, and still leave its established routines, its authority relations, its incentives, or its decision-making patterns largely untouched. That does not mean it is a cheat, though. It may also be a product of scarcity, uncertainty, competing demands or efforts to maintain stability under external pressure.

The barriers involved in this process may be difficult to observe, for they are not always in the form of direct opposition. Mathias et al. (2024) define social-psychological barriers as processes that can take place at the individual

and collective level, and that reduce a system's capacity to adapt or transform. Some of these processes may include denial, intolerance of uncertainty, psychological reactance, or motives that favor the status quo. Important parts of this problem are explained by established concepts. Resistance to change is opposition or reluctance. Confirmation bias is selective treatment of information. Institutional decoupling is gaps among policies, practices and outcomes. But these notions do not fully describe a situation where some change is welcomed and enacted, and yet the change that is accepted is constrained so as to protect the deeper pattern from revision. Because movement is visible, the ongoing stagnation may be less visible than outright resistance.

This article uses the term fixative accommodation to describe this proposed phenomenon. Fixative accommodation is a limited form of adjustment in which a person, group, or institution changes enough to restore functioning, reduce tension, answer external pressure, or preserve legitimacy while leaving deeper beliefs, identities, habits, power arrangements, or structures largely unchanged. It is accommodation because a real adjustment occurs. It is fixative because the adjustment becomes organized around the preservation of an established core. The immediate benefit may also be genuine. A conflict may subside, performance may improve, or a reform requirement may appear to have been met. The concern is that this limited success can reduce the urgency for deeper examination and become a stable substitute for transformation.

This means that the fixative accommodation can be sustained because it is useful in the short term. We are likely to repeat a response that restores comfort or stability, especially when deeper change involves uncertainty, loss, conflict or a revision of identity. System justification theory also assumes that people may rationalize existing arrangements because they fulfilll epistemic, existential and relational needs, in particular when uncertainty or threat make alternatives difficult to accept (Jost, 2019). The same person or institution may suggest small adjustments time after time regarding the same center. It falls short of an outright refusal, because enough improvement takes place to sound responsive. Nor is it the same thing as selection bias. Selective bias limits the information that can be recognized. Fixative accommodation limits the mutable information that can change the person or system. Selective treatment of evidence may assist the process, but fixative accommodation is about the eventual depth and direction of change.

Not every partial or slow change needs to be a fixative. An incremental adjustment may be appropriate where resources are limited, risk is high or where people may take time and need support to absorb a difficult change. The construct is less applicable when an observable adjustment repeatedly protects a central pattern that continues to produce or sustain the original problem. Authentic transformation, as used in this article, means neither moral perfection nor a complete renunciation of the past. This means an ongoing revision of the underlying frames, practices, relationships or structures which shape the way an individual or an institution understands and responds to the situation. A fixative is not provided as a clinical diagnosis or as a pointer to dishonest intent, either. It can be intentional, defensive, habitual, or produced unintentionally by social and institutional conditions.

Fixative accommodation has been discussed in the literature of cognitive development, belief formation, psychological flexibility, transformative learning, organizational change and institutional theory. Research in these areas uncovers the ways that individuals adapt existing schemas, selectively process information, react to change with ambivalence, or differentiate formal reform from actual practices and results (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Hanfstingl et al., 2022; Oreg & Sverdlik, 2026; Sommer et al., 2024). But of course, those explanations are usually given in their own fields. They typically do not cross-level explain how a limited but real adjustment could restore functioning or legitimacy and yet leave the deeper pattern intact. This gap makes it difficult to recognize and distinguish the phenomenon from adaptive incremental change, direct resistance, selective information processing biases and incomplete implementation.

The problem addressed by this article is the absence of a coherent conceptual explanation for situations in which visible adjustment occurs without sufficient change in the beliefs,

identities, habits, relationships, or structures sustaining the original problem. When adjustment is treated as evidence of transformation by itself, individuals and institutions may appear to have changed more deeply than they actually have. At the same time, describing every partial change as inadequate would overlook the practical value and necessity of gradual adaptation. A clearer construct is therefore needed to identify when limited accommodation supports continuing development and when it becomes a stabilizing response that restricts deeper transformation. This study addresses the problem through a theory-building conceptual integrative review that defines the proposed construct, identifies its causal and reinforcing mechanisms, specifies its boundary conditions, and develops explicit propositions for a process theory applicable across individual, collective, and institutional contexts.

The review is structured around the following questions: (1) How is fixative accommodation different from adaptive accommodation, resistance to change, selective information-processing biases, and institutional decoupling? (2) What cognitive, emotional, social, cultural and institutional conditions are conducive to the emergence and persistence of fixative accommodation? (3) What mechanisms of limited adjustment can preserve deeper beliefs, identities, habits, relationships or structures and thus limit genuine transformation? (4) How can these characteristics, contributing conditions and mechanisms be integrated into a proposed process theory with testable propositions that can be applied across individual, collective and institutional contexts? Together, these questions steer the review from conceptual clarification toward the elaboration of a proposed process theory for explaining the emergence, reinforcement, and recurrence of fixative accommodation over time.

Materials and Methods

Review Design and Conceptual Scope

In this paper, a theory-building, concept-driven integrative literature review approach was employed to explore and categorize ideas associated with fixative accommodation. Integrative reviews are useful when a phenomenon is described across different bodies of literature and the aim is to develop a conceptual interpretation rather than to calculate a pooled effect or to evaluate one intervention (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Conceptual research can also be helpful for theory development in terms of defining constructs, integrating disparate explanations and specifying relationships that can subsequently be examined empirically (Jaakkola, 2020). This approach was appropriate as the proposed fixative accommodation is a new conceptual term and the processes that might explain it are distributed across psychology, education, organizational studies, institutional theory and related fields.

The review looked at situations where some adjustment is made but where deeper beliefs, identities, habits, relationships or structures are substantially protected from change. Its conceptual scope included accommodation and schema modification, belief updating and selective information processing, psychological flexibility and rigidity, defensive responses, transformative learning, resistance and ambivalence to change, organizational inertia and institutional decoupling. The goal was to operationalize the proposed construct, to distinguish it from related constructs, to identify its antecedent conditions, mechanisms, reinforcing processes, outcomes and boundary conditions and to synthesize these elements into a proposed process theory that could be empirically tested at a later stage.

Literature Identification and Source Types

The literature was identified through an iterative, concept-based search. This approach was necessary because the exact term “fixative accommodation” is not commonly used in the relevant scholarly literature. Searching only for the proposed term would therefore have excluded established theories and findings that could explain different parts of the phenomenon. Relevant publications were located through academic databases, scholarly search engines, publisher platforms, citation-linked records, and the reference lists of sources identified during the review.

Search terms were organized around several concept clusters. Terms related to cognitive adaptation included “accommodation and assimilation,” “schema change,” “conceptual change,” and “belief updating.” Searches

addressing psychological barriers used combinations of "psychological flexibility," "cognitive rigidity," "experiential avoidance," "defensive responses," "confirmation bias," "motivated reasoning," and "identity protection." Organizational and institutional searches included "resistance to change," "change ambivalence," "organizational inertia," "symbolic compliance," "policy-practice decoupling," "means-ends decoupling," and "status quo preservation." Literature concerning deeper change was identified through terms such as "transformative learning," "critical reflection," "perspective transformation," "first-order and second-order change," and "individual and institutional transformation." Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used where appropriate to connect related concepts and narrow the searches.

We included peer-reviewed journal articles that presented empirical findings, theoretical explanations, or scholarly reviews of the proposed construct. Foundational papers were retained if they were needed to explain well-established concepts such as accommodation, transformative learning, resistance to change, and institutional decoupling. More recent reviews and empirical studies were used to help clarify the development of these ideas and their current use. Scholarly books and chapters were included where journal articles did not fully cover important theoretical explanations of the phenomenon described. Institutional material was used only where it was clear that it provided relevant contextual information with attribution. They were not on the same evidentiary footing as empirical peer-reviewed research.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included when they provided empirical evidence, theoretical explanation, or a well-developed conceptual discussion relevant to at least one element of fixative accommodation. These elements included the presence of pressure or a recognized need for change; modification of beliefs, behavior, practices, or policies; preservation of a deeper schema, identity, routine, relationship, or structure; short-term restoration of functioning or legitimacy; and longer-term restriction of more substantial transformation. Literature was also included when it helped distinguish adaptive adjustment from rigidity, resistance, defensive adaptation, selective information processing, symbolic compliance, or institutional decoupling.

Because the proposed construct crosses levels of analysis, the review considered studies involving individuals, groups, communities, organizations, and institutions. Sources from psychology, education, management, organizational studies, institutional theory, and social-ecological research were included when their concepts could reasonably clarify the phenomenon. English-language materials with sufficient accessible content were used so that their relevance, methodology, and evidentiary basis could be evaluated.

Sources were excluded when accommodation referred only to housing, disability provisions, or physiological processes without a meaningful connection to cognitive, behavioral, social, or institutional change. Publications were also excluded when they mentioned change, resistance, or transformation only in passing; lacked identifiable authorship or institutional responsibility; relied mainly on unsupported opinion; or used psychological terminology to make claims without an adequate scholarly basis. When several sources repeated the same explanation, preference was given to the original theoretical work, a stronger empirical study, or a more comprehensive and recent review. Duplicate and secondary versions were excluded when the original publication was available.

Source Evaluation and Selection Process

Potential sources were initially examined through their titles, abstracts, introductions, or executive summaries. Sources that appeared to address one or more parts of the proposed phenomenon were then examined more closely. Full-text assessment considered whether a publication contributed evidence or explanation concerning limited adjustment, preservation of existing patterns, responses to pressure, the depth of change, or the difference between immediate adaptation and longer-term transformation.

The sources were evaluated based on their conceptual relevance, academic credibility, methodological clarity, and their contribution

to the guiding questions. Empirical studies were reviewed based on their research design, population, context, and strength of conclusions supported by their findings. The theoretical and review papers were evaluated on the basis of the clarity of their concepts, the quality of their supporting literature, and their utility in distinguishing fixative accommodation from established constructs. Evidence developed in one context was not assumed to apply to other contexts or levels.

Sources were excluded during closer assessment when their connection to the proposed construct remained weak, their claims could not be traced to reliable evidence, or their content was already represented more clearly by a stronger publication. Because this was a concept-driven integrative review rather than a systematic review, the search did not aim to retrieve every publication within each contributing field or maintain PRISMA-style counts of initial results, duplicate records, and screening exclusions.

Conceptual Synthesis Procedure

The selected literature was analyzed through concept-driven thematic synthesis. Integrative reviews require more than the description of individual publications; they compare and connect ideas in ways that can produce new conceptual understanding or theoretical development (Torraco, 2005). Relevant findings and arguments were therefore examined for what they revealed about the initiation, depth, function, and consequences of adjustment.

To guide the transition from conceptual synthesis to theory development, the analysis considered which constructs were essential to the proposed explanation, how those constructs were related, why the relationships were expected to occur, and the conditions under which the explanation would or would not apply. These concerns reflect established theory-building criteria requiring theories to identify their central constructs, specify their relationships, explain the logic connecting them, and define their boundaries and testability (Bacharach, 1989; Whetten, 1989).

Initial coding used descriptive labels such as change pressure, recognized discrepancy, schema modification, selective incorporation, behavioral adjustment, emotional relief, identity preservation, defensive response, symbolic compliance, policy-practice separation, restoration of stability, recurring patterns, and restricted transformation. These codes were compared across sources and levels of analysis. Related codes were then organized into five provisional areas: pressures that activate adjustment; forms of limited accommodation; mechanisms that preserve an established core; immediate and longer-term consequences; and conditions associated with the emergence, persistence, and recurrence of fixative accommodation.

Concepts were also compared according to whether they operated mainly at the individual, collective, organizational, or institutional level. This comparison was used to identify relationships that could reasonably be carried across levels while preserving differences among contexts. For example, selective processing of evidence at the individual level was not treated as identical to policy-practice decoupling at the institutional level. Instead, the synthesis examined whether both could contribute to a broader pattern in which adjustment is permitted within limits that protect an established belief, identity, practice, or structure.

The boundaries of fixative accommodation were refined by comparing it with adaptive accommodation, resistance to change, psychological inflexibility, confirmation bias, change ambivalence, and institutional decoupling. Particular attention was given to the feature that makes the proposed construct distinct: an observable and potentially useful adjustment occurs, but that adjustment also reduces pressure for deeper revision. The emerging relationships were then organized into a proposed process theory explaining how fixative accommodation may arise, provide short-term stabilization, preserve an implicated core, and contribute to recurring or prolonged difficulty. This was an interpretive theory-development process rather than an empirical test of the proposed relationships; consequently, the resulting theory remains provisional and open to revision or rejection.

Limitations of the Review

Several limitations should be considered. The literature search was concept based and not exhaustive and relevant publications may have been missed. The review was also limited to English language and sufficiently accessible sources. Since the synthesis included concepts developed across different disciplines, populations and settings, similarities across sources may not always represent the action of the same process. Thus, individual psychological adaptation, collective behavior, and institutional change should continue to be analytically distinguished even when they seem to share a larger pattern.

The exact term fixative accommodation was proposed by the author, and the interpretation of adjacent concepts was necessarily influenced by the intended meaning of that construct. All source evaluation, coding, comparison, and framework development were completed by the author without independent coding or inter-rater assessment. These features should be considered when interpreting the resulting conceptual synthesis. The proposed process theory remains to be empirically examined. Future qualitative, quantitative, longitudinal, and comparative research can assess its propositions, temporal relationships, boundary conditions, conceptual distinctiveness, and applicability across levels.

Conceptual Foundations of Fixative Accommodation

Accommodation, Assimilation, and the Depth of Change.

Assimilation and accommodation are responses to situations that don't fit perfectly into our existing understanding. Assimilation is just trying to fit new information into an existing framework. Accommodation is when there is some change in the framework. Accommodation thus involves a higher degree of adjustment. However, the occurrence of such an adjustment does not necessarily reflect its magnitude or importance (Hanfstingl et al., 2022). One might alter one part of the response by a person or institution, but the assumptions ordering the larger pattern are largely the same.

The change is not evenly distributed and so the fixation accommodation is noticeable. This occurs when the adjustment is genuine but confined to areas which can be changed without seriously disturbing a protected core. The observable reaction could be linguistic, procedural, practical and involve a limited number of concessions. Such modifications may improve short-term functioning, reduce conflict, or demonstrate responsiveness. But the underlying belief, identity, habit, relationship, authority structure, or institutional arrangement of the recurring problem is fairly protected.

The concept is therefore concerned not only with whether change has occurred but also with what has changed, what has remained fixed, and what function the adjustment performs. A minor adjustment is not automatically fixative. Incremental change may be appropriate when circumstances require caution, experimentation, or continuity. Conversely, a large or highly visible reform can remain fixative if it leaves the central source of the difficulty undisturbed. The depth of change cannot be judged solely by its size or visibility; it must be considered in relation to the condition that generated the need for change.

A closely related distinction within organizational learning theory is between adjustments that maintain the current governing assumptions and changes that revise those assumptions. Argyris (1976) describes single-loop learning as the correction of error without altering the governing values which direct action, and double-loop learning as the questioning and changing of those governing values. This differentiation forms the basis for exploring whether an adjustment reaches the assumptions structuring a recurrent problem. Fixative accommodation extends this logic to explain how a bounded correction may be sufficient to yield enough immediate benefit to reinforce the protection of an implicated core, allowing the difficulty to persist or return across repeated change-response episodes.

Most forms of adaptation are necessarily partial because individuals and institutions cannot reconsider every part of themselves whenever a difficulty appears. Accommodation becomes fixative when the protected element is materially connected to the recurring problem and limited adjustment repeatedly substitutes for its examination. The defining issue is therefore not incompleteness alone but the repeated

stabilization of an arrangement around an insufficiently examined center.

Psychological Flexibility, Rigidity, and Contextual Adaptation

Another theoretical orientation that can be used to understand the phenomenon is that of psychological flexibility. It usually refers to the capacity to notice the changing needs of the situation and adjust one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior in a way that is responsive to the context and meaningful personal goals (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Being flexible doesn't mean being changeable. It can maintain a response if it's still appropriate, and alter it when changing circumstances necessitate a different response.

Likewise, Bonanno and Burton (2013) suggest a flexible approach to regulation, which is contingent on the availability of alternative responses, sensitivity to contextual demands and the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of a chosen response. In this context, rigidity is not simply an extension of what is already being done. Stable situation, stable response still may be appropriate. Rigidity is demonstrated when an individual or group continues to employ a limited response even when evidence suggests that the context, consequences, or underlying demands have changed.

Fixative accommodation exists in a subtle middle ground between absolute rigidity and complete flexibility. It is not entirely rigid. There is some room for adjustment. But unlike the fuller flexibility of context it restricts adjustment within limits that safeguard chosen beliefs, identities, habits or arrangements. The answer is flexible enough to handle immediate pressure, but not open enough to reconsider the element that continues to reproduce the difficulty. This limited flexibility helps explain why fixative accommodation may seem constructive in the first place. Something has changed. Tension may have subsided. Normal functioning may have resumed.

In threatening or uncertain situations, a bounded response may be protective, and allow a person or institution to continue to function. Temporary protection is habitual and then fixative when it persists in the face of evidence of recurrent insufficiency or when it blocks a more accurate assessment of the underlying situation. While an accommodation can be reasonable in the short term, if the same protected boundary continues to define what can and can't be changed, it can become a recurring limitation.

Selective Information Processing and Belief Preservation

Information is selected and filtered. This allows old beliefs to persist, even in the face of information that contradicts them. People don't passively receive and evaluate evidence. Existing commitments and identities, expectations and emotional concerns may influence what is seen, understood and how much importance is attached to information (Sommer et al, 2024). Evidence confirming a well-established position is eagerly accepted, while evidence against it is dismissed either by reinterpretation or as an exception.

Selective bias and fixative accommodation are related but not identical. Information is filtered via selective bias. It determines what is seen, what is believed, what is remembered or accepted as fact. This kind of adjustment is called fixation accommodation This restricts what is actually changed. The fixative accommodation process may comprise selective processing, whereby hard evidence does not penetrate into the protected core. But it may also be that the diagnosis is correct, and the fixative is accommodated. The evidence may be understood by groups or persons, but not acted upon. A more fundamental change threatens their identity, their relationships, their authority, their stability or their legitimacy.

Continuity of identity can facilitate change by helping individuals and groups to link new practices to an existing sense of who they are. For example, Venus et al. (2019) argue that perceived identity continuity could be a determinant of openness to organizational change. The trouble is that the protected identity or belief is itself part of the recurring problem. Under these conditions continuity can become a frontier which defines the permitted changes. A school may adopt inclusive language and create a new program, but continue to maintain everyday practices that exclude some learners. A religious institution can change its communications or administration, but it cannot examine the assumptions or authority structures that led to its stagnation. Both examples have a non-

imaginary adjustment, but its limits protect the element most relevant to the deeper concern.

And this difference is an example of the subtlety of fixative accommodation. But that doesn't mean they are necessarily denying evidence outright or simply refusing to change. The person or institution can see the problem, can use some of the language of reform and can do something visible. The limitation is only when the changed elements are compared with the still protected elements, and when the same basic difficulty recurs.

Resistance, Ambivalence, and Partial Acceptance

Resistance to change is sometimes referred to as resistance to the proposed change. However, change responses may have cognitive, affective and behavioral components that are not always congruent. You may be intellectually convinced by a proposal, be nervous about the consequences of it, and partially comply in practice. This ambivalence, Piderit (2000) argues, explains many responses better than the idea of people being supportive or resistant. The recent change literature also recognizes that responses are a function of the meaning of the change, its context, and its perceived consequences (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2026).

Fixative accommodation is distinct from direct resistance in that it requires turning away from change. Perhaps it is a real agreement in need of improvement and a real willingness to change selected practices. The boundary is where acceptability is limited to those aspects of change which can be accepted without serious disturbance of a valued or protected center. That's how people and institutions can want to get better and keep creating the conditions that prevent it.

The concept also differs from simple compliance. Compliance may involve outward conformity without personal acceptance, whereas fixative accommodation can include internal and behavioral change. The person may genuinely revise some beliefs, and the institution may properly implement some reforms. What makes the response fixative is not insincerity but the relationship between the accepted change and the protected source of the continuing problem. It is the pattern of accommodation by fixative, when it over and over again restores comfort or legitimacy about an unchanged center, despite the return of the same difficulty.

A temporal perspective is therefore necessary. A single limited response may not provide enough evidence to identify the phenomenon. Fixative accommodation becomes more visible across repeated encounters with pressure, particularly when each encounter produces a new adjustment at the periphery while the same protected element remains beyond reconsideration. This recurring pattern distinguishes fixative accommodation from temporary caution, gradual implementation, or ordinary ambivalence.

Institutional Decoupling and Bounded Reform

Institutional theory provides a similar account at the organizational level. Institutions often put in place policies, structures and programs to satisfy social expectations, professional standards or regulatory or legitimacy requirements. However, these formal commitments are not necessarily reflected in day-to-day practice or in the desired results. Types of decoupling are described by Bromley and Powell (2012) where formal policies are decoupled or disconnected from implementation, or where organizational activities are loosely coupled to stated outcomes.

Fixative accommodation overlaps institutional decoupling in that both can be described by visible responsiveness without associated shifts in underlying practice. Research on organizational responsibility also shows that there can be a difference between expressed commitments and substantive implementation (Roszkowska-Menkes et al., 2024). But the two concepts denote different features. Decoupling is mainly concerned with a disjuncture between policy, practice and outcomes. The idea of fixative accommodation introduces the containment and the stabilizing role of accommodation, including the beliefs, identities, relationships and power arrangements that are served by that containment.

Thus, an institution can demonstrate fixative accommodation even with the new policy as written. The policy may have some benefits, but may not challenge underlying assumptions, arrangements for decision making, or

distribution of authority. In that case, the problem is not simply one of a gap between policy and practice. The problem is the possibility that the reform itself has been limited in a way that responds to immediate pressure but does not reach the institutional condition that continues to create the problem.

Leaders and members may be genuinely committed to reform and may work hard to achieve it. Such protected boundaries may be based on fear of division, concern for the institution's survival, attachment to tradition, limited resources or uncertainty about the consequences of deeper change. They are fixative, continually drawing the boundaries of reform and preventing the institution from responding to a condition that is part of its ongoing stagnation.

This dynamic may be particularly relevant for mission-driven institutions like educational, religious, civic and community organizations. Institutions like these often have a cherished identity but need to change to meet the needs of the future. Continuity and reform are not mutually exclusive. Preservation constraints are so tight that reform exists only on the margins, making the institution look active even while its fundamental problems persist.

Conceptual Boundary: Fixative Accommodation and Transformative Change

The concept of transformative learning provides a useful conceptual boundary for understanding fixative accommodation. Transformative change usually reaches the assumptions, frames of reference and meaning structures thru which individuals or groups interpret their experiences (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020; Singer-Brodowski, 2025). Narsico (2026a) similarly describes transformative outcomes as changes that may extend beyond immediate action to deeper shifts in agency, collective relationships, institutional practices, and sustained capacity. Fixative accommodation, however, is adjustment while these deeper organizing premises are largely shielded. This distinction provides a criterion for the depth and functional direction of change. A small, gradual, or incomplete adjustment is an adjustment none the less. It turns into a fixative when the element that remains unchanged is a major contributor to the recurring problem and the adjustment repeatedly restores stability without adequately reexamining that element.

The contrast between the two concepts is therefore relational. It depends on whether the depth of adjustment corresponds with the depth of the difficulty being addressed. Fixative accommodation occurs when this correspondence remains insufficient: the response reaches what can be safely modified but does not adequately reach what continues to sustain the problem. The present review uses transformative change only to clarify this conceptual boundary. It does not prescribe the stages, practices, or interventions through which individuals and communities may move beyond fixative accommodation.

Theory of Fixative Accommodation

Theory Development and Core Assumptions

The proposed theory treats fixative accommodation as a process occurring within a change-response episode rather than as a fixed characteristic of a person, group, or institution. A change-response episode begins when an internal or external discrepancy creates pressure for adjustment and continues through the response and its subsequent consequences. The responding actor may be an individual, collective, organization, or institution, but the unit of analysis is the pattern of response over time. This distinction prevents the theory from labeling an actor as inherently fixative and makes it possible to compare different episodes involving the same actor.

The theory rests on four core assumptions. First, some genuine adjustment occurs; complete refusal is not fixative accommodation. Second, a belief, identity, habit, relationship, authority arrangement, routine, or structure protected by the response remains materially implicated in the difficulty. Third, the adjustment provides a real immediate benefit capable of making the response appear sufficient. Fourth, the continuing involvement of the protected core permits residual difficulty or recurrence. The pattern becomes theoretically relevant when bounded adjustment, stabilization, and core preservation can be traced across time and distinguished from reasonable gradual change.

From the literatures reviewed, we can conceive of fixative accommodation as a cross-level pattern in which pressure for change leads to a genuine but circumscribed adjustment. This pressure may be internal discomfort, inconsistent information, relational strain, declining performance, social criticism, demands of regulation, or perceived loss of legitimacy. The responding person, group, or institution takes an action that is enough to ease the immediate pressure or restore function. Boundaries around cherished beliefs, identities, habits, relationships or institutional arrangements also limit how far that change can go.

This change can have practical advantages in the short run. It can be used to reduce conflict, maintain cohesion, maintain continuity, demonstrate responsiveness or allow normal activity to continue. These benefits may help explain the durability of the pattern. The immediate problem is removed by the change, and it may seem to corroborate the feeling that an adequate response has already been made. Less studied is the protected core, which however remains tied to the condition which initially created the pressure.

Individuals and institutions may respond sincerely and achieve meaningful immediate improvements. The pattern becomes fixative when the protected core contributes to recurring difficulties, when accumulating experience does not sufficiently influence its reconsideration, and when bounded adjustment becomes the repeated means of restoring stability.

At the individual level the protected core might be a belief, a self-concept, an emotional defense, a habitual interpretation, a familiar behavioral pattern. At the collective level it may involve common norms, group identity, relational expectations, or accepted ways of distributing responsibility. At the institutional level, it may involve organizational culture, authority arrangements, established procedures, resource priorities, or interpretations of mission and tradition. These levels differ, but the same logic is at work: something shifts in response to pressure, but the limits of that shift maintain an element related to the continuing difficulty.

Some of the conditions that can support the pattern are also shown in the literature. Such deeper consideration can feel threatening, either personally or collectively, if identity is challenged. Discomfort prompts quick action to get back to safety. Institutions' pressure for visible reform may help to maintain legitimacy. Conformity to the status quo is rewarded by strong social expectations. Asymmetric power may constrain the space for concern to influence choice. Weak or fragmentary feedbacks may obscure the relation between the protected core and the recurrent problem. Together these conditions may explain the increased likelihood of bounded adjustment as opposed to deep revision.

The process can be described as follows: Pressure or disruption creates a need for change; the responding actor makes a limited adjustment; the adjustment produces immediate functional, emotional, relational, or legitimating benefits; deeper organizing elements are protected; and the unresolved condition leads to renewed pressure. Each successful restoration of short-term stability makes the boundary around the protected core more robust and the pattern is reinforced by repetition.

Several factors may be present simultaneously, with different levels potentially affecting one another. One may protect a belief because it is held by a group; a group may protect its norms because they uphold institutional authority. But an institution may introduce a bounded reform, which gives members the illusion of having overcome the difficulty. This means that accommodation for fixatives can be found on a personal, relational, cultural and structural level and not just in one place.

Taken together, the theoretical synthesis supports the central claim that fixative accommodation occurs when pressure produces an adjustment sufficient to manage an immediate demand but insufficient to reconsider a protected core that remains implicated in the underlying difficulty. The immediate benefit of the adjustment increases its perceived sufficiency and reinforces the boundaries within which change occurred, allowing the deeper condition to persist and making renewed cycles of bounded adjustment more likely. This explanatory logic provides the foundation for the six theoretical constructs, their proposed process relationships, and the testable propositions developed in the following sections.

Theoretical Constructs and Process Relationships

The theory presented proposes six interrelated constructs: Change Pressure, Response Boundary Formation, Limited Accommodation, Immediate Stabilization, Core Preservation, and Residual Difficulty and Recurrence. Change Pressure means the discrepancy or the demand that calls for some response. Response Boundary Formation is the setting for the limits of allowable change and Limited Accommodation is the actual change that is made within those limits. Immediate stabilization is the short-term functional, emotional, relational or legitimating benefit of the adjustment. Core Preservation is the ongoing protection of an element that is part of the difficulty. Residual Difficulty and Recurrence is the longer-term outcome where unresolved conditions create renewed pressure. These constructs are analytical and temporal distinctions rather than stages that must always occur together or in the same order. The proposed process relationships are shown in Fig. 1.

The central explanatory mechanism of the theory lies in the reinforcing effect of immediate stabilization. When bounded adjustment reduces immediate pressure or restores functioning, the resulting benefit may make the response appear sufficient and reduce the urgency to reconsider the protected core. When the protected core remains materially implicated in the difficulty, this reinforcement helps to perpetuate it, allowing residual difficulty to persist or return. Then further difficulty creates further pressure, and if the same protective conditions continue, another bounded response is more likely. The theory does not presuppose bad faith and does not view every partial change as insufficient. It provides a process account of how genuine responsiveness and persistent stagnation can co-exist and become self-reinforcing over time.

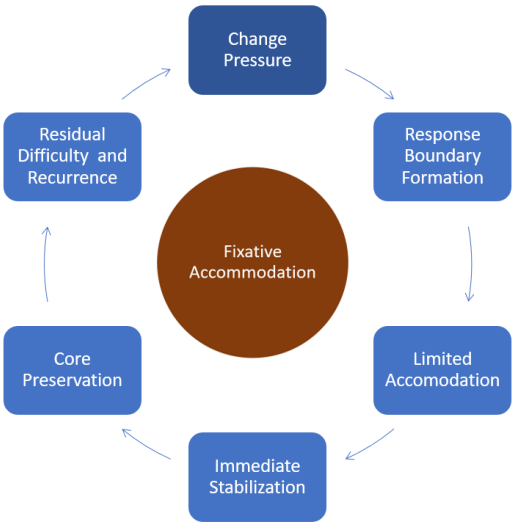


Figure 1. The Fixative Accommodation Cycle

Note: The model presents six connected components through which a genuine but bounded adjustment may preserve a core element implicated in a recurring difficulty. The arrows represent a recurring analytical pattern rather than a fixed or universally ordered sequence. The central circle emphasizes that change occurs around a protected core. The model may operate at individual, collective, organizational, and institutional levels. The relative sizes of the components are not quantitative. The return from Residual Difficulty and Recurrence to Change Pressure indicates that an unresolved underlying condition may generate renewed pressure for adjustment.

Change Pressure

Change Pressure – A new experience or changing circumstances that challenge an established belief, behavior, relationship, practice or institutional arrangement. The pressure

might be internal, in the form of discomfort or doubt, conflicting values or the recognition that an existing response no longer serves. It can also be from the outside – thru criticism, declining performance, relational conflict, new evidence, regulatory requirements or demands from the affected stakeholders. Research on belief updating and organizational change indicates that difficult information does not predict the magnitude of its adoption wholesale or the reaction it will generate (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2026; Sommer et al., 2024) Pressure thus makes a felt need for adjustment but does not guarantee that the immediate element most relevant to the difficulty will be re-examined. Change Pressure is the activator of the Fixative Accommodation Cycle. It makes the discrepancy visible enough that some response is in order, but not so visible that it dictates the depth and direction of that response.

Response Boundary Formation

Response Boundary Formation is the process of determining the limits of what can be changed and what must be defended. Such boundaries may be created consciously or they may be the result of habit, emotional self-protection, identity issues, group expectations, established authority or institutional routine. At the individual level the boundary may serve to protect a belief, a self-concept or a familiar interpretation. At the collective level, it can defend collective norms, relations or group identity. At the institutional level it may maintain a structure of authority or a procedure or an understanding of tradition or allocation of resources. Continuity itself is not constraining and can even foster change by linking a reform proposal to a valued sense of identity (Venus et al., 2019). The boundary is fixative if the protected element is still materially linked to the difficulty which created the pressure. Selective information processing can help to maintain this boundary, but it is not necessary. One may accept the evidence and yet constrain the permissible response because deeper revision seems threatening or disruptive (Sommer et al., 2024). This creates a space for maneuver in which some changes can be made and others are, in effect, safe from being re-opened.

Identity-threat theory provides one explanation for why a response boundary may form at the individual level. Petriglieri (2011) defines identity threat as an experience perceived as potentially harming the value, meaning, or enactment of an identity and develops a theoretical model of how individuals respond to such threats. Applied to fixative accommodation, this suggests that change pressure may be evaluated not only according to the evidence it presents but also according to what accepting it could endanger in a valued self-concept. Some adjustment may therefore be permitted while identity-relevant elements remain protected. Identity threat is not required in every episode and should not be assumed to operate identically at collective or institutional levels; it is one possible mechanism through which response boundaries develop.

Limited Accommodation

Limited accommodation is the observable adjustment within the defined response boundary. It could mean accepting part of another point of view, changing behavior, learning new language, revising a procedure, establishing a program, or changing a formal policy. The adjustment is real because something has changed in the previous understanding or practice. However, accommodation does not itself specify the extent to which the existing pattern was revised (Hanfstingl et al., 2022). A person can modify a behavior without re-examining the belief or interpretation that reliably generates it. A group may identify a problem, but will only change practices that do not conflict with its dominant norms. An institution may introduce a new policy but the authority arrangements, incentives or assumptions associated with the original problem may be retained. Partial or gradual adjustment should not be automatically designated as fixative, as incremental change may be appropriate where evidence is incomplete, resources are constrained or consequences are uncertain. For example, an educational response may appropriately involve recalibrating instruction to students' existing proficiency, tailoring strategies to different learning needs, and using peer support to address immediate learning difficulties without implying that such adaptation is inherently fixative (Narsico, 2024). Accommodation in limited supply becomes fixative when the protected element is still implicated in the

difficulty, and the adjustment observed is repeatedly used rather than re-evaluated. The defining issue, therefore, is not the size of the change, but whether its depth and direction are sufficiently commensurate with the condition being addressed.

In organizational change theory there is a similar distinction between first-order and second-order change. First-order change is defined by Bartunek and Moch (1987) as incremental change within an existing shared schema, whereas second-order change is the modification of the schema itself. Such a distinction helps account for why a visible or useful adjustment does not automatically revise the interpretive framework that guides action. But fixative accommodation is not just another word for first-order change. More precisely, it refers to an episode of change-response in which adjustment remains bounded, produces immediate stabilization, and safeguards a core involved in the difficulty, thereby allowing the difficulty to persist or recur.

Immediate Stabilization

Hence, stabilization is a limited adjustment, offering an immediate short-term gain. The response may ease emotional distress, settle conflict, return people to function, enhance performance, contribute to group cohesion, meet an external requirement, or lend legitimacy to an institution. The benefits may be real benefits and should not be construed as indicating that deception or failure is occurring. A comparable pattern appears in community development, where interventions that address only selected dimensions may produce partial or short-term gains without developing the broader capacities required for sustainable progress (Narsico, 2026b). Similarly, technical-vocational training has been shown to produce genuine improvements in employment, family relationships, and community outcomes even when the resulting financial gains were insufficient to move participants fully beyond poverty, illustrating how meaningful improvement may coexist with continuing underlying difficulty (Narsico et al., 2024). Individuals or organizations that need to persist in difficult or uncertain environments may need bounded responses. In a similar vein, research on regulatory flexibility is focused on the suitability of a response to the immediate context, rather than on whether the response is universally adaptive or maladaptive (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). The stabilization is key to the fixative accommodation, and the visible improvements might make it seem that the underlying problem has been addressed adequately. However, formal policies or activities (even if tenuously linked to practices or desired outcomes) can fulfill expectations at the institutional level (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Roszkowska-Menkes et al., 2024). It can also take off the immediate pressure and there is no need for further investigation. And the adjustment is thus strengthened not because it has got rid of the whole difficulty, but because it has got rid of the most immediate expression of it.

At the individual level, research on experiential avoidance offers a parallel illustration of how responding that is helpful in the short term can be maintained despite having negative long-term consequences. Avoidance is a useful strategy for regulating distress in the short term, but the repeated use of avoidance can be implicated in the perpetuation of avoidance and ongoing psychological problems (Wang et al. 2024). There is no empirical evidence in the literature for the same psychological process at the collective or institutional level. It does, however, support the more limited theoretical proposition that a prompt reduction of discomfort can strengthen a response, although its longer-term adequacy is limited.

Core Preservation

Core Preservation is the state whereby the element protected by the response boundary is substantially unaltered following immediate stabilization. Response Boundary Formation sets the parameters of the adjustment, but Core Preservation describes the continuity of the protected belief, identity, habit, relationship, norm, authority arrangement, routine or structure that is created. This continuity may serve to provide emotional security, group affiliation, organizational stability, or a sense of fidelity to an established mission or tradition. It shouldn't automatically be taken as dishonesty or unwillingness to improve. Research on organizational identity indicates that continuity can facilitate acceptance of change by mitigating uncertainty

about whether the group will continue to be recognizably itself (Venus et al., 2019). The pattern is fixative only if the preserved core is materially involved in the production or sustenance of the difficulty that generated the pressure. Under this condition, the actor might believe that the adjustment is enough, because something concrete has been changed and immediate functioning has been improved. However, the deeper connection between the protected core and the recurrent problem is not sufficiently explored. Thus, the outcome is not the absence of accommodation but accommodation organized around the continued protection of an implicated center.

Organizational identity research provides an empirical example of how collective understandings shape responses to threat. In a longitudinal study, Ravasi and Schultz (2006) found that organizational culture supplied cues for leaders' sensemaking and sense-giving as they reconsidered the organization's identity in response to environmental change. Their findings suggest that identity revision is shaped by shared cultural meanings that also provide continuity with the organization's past. Within fixative accommodation, such meanings may help define the boundary of acceptable change. The process becomes fixative only when the continuity being protected remains materially connected to the recurring difficulty, not merely because members seek to preserve a recognizable organizational identity.

Residual Difficulty and Recurrence

Recurrence and Residual Difficulty arise from the fact that the protected core is still connected to the condition that induced the pressure in the first place. The limited adjustment may restrict the apparent expression of the problem, but some of the underlying difficulty remains unsolved. It may return later thru the same conflict, failure, complaint or demand for reform, or it may show up in a different form. This is followed by renewed pressure and another round of bounded adjustment. There is repetition. That makes fixative accommodation cyclical. The nature of each adjustment will be different but the basic relationship is similar, a peripheral element changes, the implicated center is essentially protected. But the cycle can become self-reinforcing once begun, as the temporary success of each adjustment confirms the usefulness of bounded change. The similar response is likely to be when there is pressure back, immediate relief, restored functioning or renewed legitimacy. Fixative accommodation alone is not proof of recurrence, as problems can recur for many reasons. The pattern becomes more evident when repeated adjustments keep the same essential piece and repeatedly give stability without adequately confronting its ongoing connection to the problem.

Relatedly, organizational path-dependence theory explains how repeated responses can limit future options. Self-reinforcing mechanisms may gradually restrict an organization's scope of action and lead to organizational lock-in (Sydow et al. 2009). This view is consistent with the argument that the temporary success of bounded adjustments may increase the likelihood of similar responses when pressure returns. Fixative accommodation is not equivalent to path dependence: it does not entail full organizational lock-in and can also occur beyond organizational contexts. Rather path dependence points to one organizational mechanism by which repeated stabilization and core maintenance may cumulate into a persistent cycle.

The six elements, taken together, explain how pressure for change can lead to visible adjustment without sufficiently revising the condition that continues to sustain the problem. Change Pressure is hard to ignore an inconsistency. Response Boundary Formation determines what is changeable and what is protected. Limited Accommodation provides a real but limited adjustment, and Immediate Stabilization provides the short-term benefit that can make the response appear sufficient. Core Preservation preserves the implicated center mostly intact, allowing Residual Difficulty and Recurrence to build new pressure. The components should not be viewed as a rigid sequence. They can overlap, unfold at different speeds or operate on different levels of the individual, the collective, the organization and the institution simultaneously. Therefore, a single partial adjustment is not enough to prove that fixative accommodation has taken place. The model shows the repeated pattern of pressure, the element that changes, the benefit gained, the core defended, and the difficulty left. The aim is a

greater clarity about how real responsiveness and long-term stagnation may coexist in the same pattern of change.

Theoretical Propositions

The relationships developed through the preceding synthesis can be expressed through six theoretical propositions. These propositions describe the conditions and mechanisms through which fixative accommodation is expected to emerge, become reinforced, and recur.

Proposition 1. Under conditions of change pressure, greater perceived threat to a valued belief, identity, relationship, authority arrangement, routine, or structure will be associated with stronger response boundary formation.

Proposition 2. Stronger response boundaries will direct adjustment toward peripheral elements and away from an implicated core, increasing the likelihood of limited accommodation.

Proposition 3. Limited accommodation will produce immediate stabilization when the adjustment reduces the visible expression of the difficulty or satisfies an immediate functional, emotional, relational, or legitimating demand.

Proposition 4. Greater immediate stabilization will increase the perceived sufficiency of the bounded adjustment, reinforce the existing response boundary, and reduce the likelihood of continued core-directed change.

Proposition 5. When the preserved core remains materially involved in producing or sustaining the original difficulty, greater core preservation will be associated with greater residual difficulty or recurrence over time.

Proposition 6. Following residual difficulty or recurrence, another bounded adjustment will be more likely when the threats, authority arrangements, feedback conditions, or institutional pressures that sustained the previous response boundary remain substantially unchanged.

Together, these propositions describe a recurring process rather than an irreversible or universally ordered sequence. The constructs may overlap, and their relationships may differ according to the actor, context, and level of analysis. The propositions are therefore offered for empirical examination and may be supported, modified, reorganized, or rejected in response to evidence.

Boundary Conditions and Alternative Explanations

The theory proposed is designed to explain change-response episodes in which four conditions hold: a recognized pressure leads to some real adjustment; the adjustment leads to a meaningful short-term gain; an element protected from deeper revision remains materially implicated in the difficulty; and some part of that difficulty subsequently persists or returns. The theory does not cover total refusal, purely symbolic action without real adjustment, or every cautious and partial response. Nor does it apply where partial change is a reasonable phase of continuing development or where recurrence is due principally to conditions unrelated to the preserved core.

Fixative accommodation is likely to be more likely when rethinking the implicated core threatens identity, belonging, valued relationships, authority, access to resources, institutional continuity, or legitimacy. The pattern can also be reinforced when uncertainty is high, feedback is weak or delayed, affected stakeholders have little influence, or when those who benefit from the established arrangement control how the adequacy of change is judged. By contrast, fixative accommodation should be less likely to occur when credible feedback links outcomes to the implicated core, affected stakeholders are meaningfully involved in evaluation, and the adjustment is open to continued revision. These conditions affect the probability and the duration of the process, but do not make it inevitable.

Research on employe voice and silence provides the organizational support for this boundary condition. Morrison (2023) synthesizes evidence suggesting that employes' decisions about whether to raise or hold back concerns are partly determined by whether they think it is safe and likely to matter if they speak up. Thus, organizations may receive insufficient corrective information to link recurring outcomes with an implicated core, especially when affected members lack power or expect their concerns to be ignored. Silence is not, in itself, a fixative accommodation, and it may

arise for many reasons. In the theory we propose it is a contextual condition that can dampen feedback, protect existing arrangements from scrutiny and increase the likelihood of repeated bounded responses.

Before a response can be labeled fixative accommodation, other explanations must be considered. The direct resistance may better explain cases where there is no meaningful adjustment. Psychological inflexibility may explain a general inability to adapt, while institutional decoupling may better explain a specific separation of policies, practices, and outcomes. An incomplete change without preservation of an implicated core can occur because of resource scarcity, administrative limitations or external disruption. The proposed explanation would be disconfirmed by evidence of continued adjustment toward the core, of the protected element being unrelated to the recurring difficulty, or of the difficulty disappearing despite the core remaining unchanged. These possibilities make the theory comparable, falsifiable and revisable.

Theoretical Contributions

The Theory of Fixative Accommodation presented here provides a better account of change as a bounded and potentially self-reinforcing process than as a simple choice of acceptance or rejection. Different important elements of this process have already been explained in the literature, such as accommodation, belief updating, psychological flexibility, identity continuity, ambivalence toward change, and institutional decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Hanfstingl et al., 2022; Oreg & Sverdlik, 2026; Sommer et al., 2024). The theory links these perspectives by showing how pressure produces bounded adjustment, adjustment produces immediate stabilization, that stabilization reinforces the limits of the response, and an implicated core can be protected as difficulty persists or reasserts itself. Its main contribution is therefore not only the recognition of partial change taking place but the reason why the short-term success of a real adjustment can inadvertently help to perpetuate the condition requiring change in the long run.

Change Beyond the Resistance–Acceptance Divide

One of the core contributions of the framework is that it recognizes that responses to change are not necessarily binary, that is, accept or reject. People and organizations may therefore agree that something needs changing, agree with part of a proposed change, and make observable changes, but be unwilling or unable to reconsider another element. Studies of ambivalence in the midst of change also suggest that cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses are not always congruent (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2026; Piderit, 2000). This discovery underlies the Fixative Accommodation Cycle, which investigates the aftermath of partial acceptance. It asks whether the accepted change is amenable to further development or if it is structured around the defense of some implicated core. This sets fixative accommodation apart from direct resistance, passive noncompliance, or outright refusal. That, too, means that the response can be understood without assuming that the actor is dishonest or deliberately obstructive.

Depth of Change as a Relational Criterion

A second contribution is the model's treatment of depth as a relationship between the adjustment made and the difficulty being addressed. Accommodation indicates that some modification has occurred, but it does not by itself show whether the modification has reached the element most relevant to the problem (Hanfstingl et al., 2022). The Fixative Accommodation Cycle therefore does not classify a response according to its size, speed, or visibility alone. A small adjustment may be appropriate if it reaches the relevant source of the difficulty, while a large and highly visible reform may remain fixative if it leaves that source substantially protected. The central question is whether the depth and direction of the adjustment correspond with the depth and location of the problem. This relational criterion prevents the concept from being applied indiscriminately to every gradual, partial, or incomplete change.

Stabilization as a Reinforcing Mechanism

Third, and at the center of the paper, it identifies immediate stabilization as the reinforcing

mechanism thru which bounded adjustment may be sustained. There are real benefits of limiting accommodation: restoring functioning, reducing conflict, easing emotional discomfort, preserving cohesion or satisfying institutional expectations. Research on regulatory flexibility supports the assessment of responses based on their fit with the immediate contextual demands, rather than labeling specific strategies as either beneficial or harmful (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). The proposed theory builds on this insight by providing an explanation that short-term success of an adjustment can increase its perceived sufficiency and reduce urgency for continued examination. Immediate stabilization thus strengthens the response boundary and increases the likelihood of a similarly bounded response when pressure returns. Stabilization is not just the outcome of a limited accommodation, but the intervening mechanism between short term usefulness and continued core preservation and recurring difficulty.

A related explanation for how initially successful responses become self-reinforcing is found in organizational learning research. Organizations learn by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behavior. (Levitt and March, 1988) Competency traps occur when organizations continue to use procedures that they know how to use, even when potentially better alternatives might exist. This is because proficiency is gained thru repetition. This literature is consistent with the proposed reinforcing mechanism of fixative accommodation. If the bounded response yields satisfactory immediate results, continued reliance on that response may reduce experimentation and lessen pressure to reconsider the assumptions or arrangements implicated in recurring difficulty.

Distinguishing Fixative Accommodation from Related Concepts

A fourth contribution is the clarifying of boundaries between fixative accommodation and existing explanations of limited change. Selective information-processing biases are biases in how evidence is sought, evaluated, or incorporated. Resistance is defined as negative or mixed reactions to change. Institutional decoupling refers to gaps between formal policies, practices and intended outcomes. Psychological inflexibility is the inability to adapt responses to contextual demands. All may contribute to fixative accommodation, but none is equivalent to it. A person may see relevant evidence but fail to act on it in depth, while an institution may have a formal policy in writing and yet retain the assumptions or authority arrangements involved in the recurring problem. Fixative accommodation is more generally a pattern where a real adjustment provides enough immediate benefit to protect an implicated core. This distinction endows the proposed construct with a particular explanatory role, without superseding the established concepts from which it draws.

Cross-Level Explanatory Scope

A fifth contribution is the development of a level-general process explanation that can be examined across individual, collective, organizational, and institutional settings. The responding system may be a person, group, organization, or institution, while the unit of analysis remains the change-response episode unfolding over time. The same theoretical logic is proposed across these settings: pressure produces a bounded adjustment, the adjustment generates stabilization, and an implicated core remains protected as difficulty persists or returns. The specific form of each construct, however, differs by level. Individuals may protect beliefs, self-concepts, or habitual interpretations; groups may preserve shared norms, identities, or relational expectations; and institutions may protect authority structures, routines, resource priorities, or interpretations of mission and tradition. The theory therefore proposes comparable process relationships without treating the psychological, relational, and institutional mechanisms as identical.

The transferability of these process relationships is a theoretical proposition, which has not been empirically established yet. What is regarded as change pressure, acceptable adjustment, immediate benefit or implicated core will depend on culture, history, institutional purpose, resources available and power relations. Therefore, research should examine the theory at each level before assuming indicators or findings can be transferred directly to an-

other level. Later cross-level studies may investigate how individual beliefs, group norms, and institutional arrangements reinforce each other, but these processes should be kept analytically distinct. The theory is useful because it offers a common relational explanation, but permits variation in its observable manifestations and boundary conditions across settings.

Potential Applications Across Contexts

The Fixative Accommodation Cycle may provide a common language for examining situations in which visible change coexists with the preservation of a condition connected to recurring difficulty. Its possible value across settings lies in a shared set of diagnostic questions: What pressure created the need for change? What was actually adjusted? What remained protected? What immediate benefit did the adjustment provide? Does the protected element remain connected to the difficulty that continues or returns? The following applications are conceptual examples rather than evidence that the model has already been validated in these settings. The framework should not be used to label people, judge intentions, or classify every gradual change as inadequate. Its usefulness depends on careful interpretation of the history, context, power relations, and consequences surrounding the adjustment.

Personal and Relational Settings

At the personal level, the cycle may help explain why an individual can recognize a problem, make a sincere behavioral adjustment, and experience temporary improvement while retaining a belief, self-concept, or familiar interpretation associated with the recurring difficulty. A person may change how a concern is expressed without revisiting the assumption that repeatedly gives rise to it. Within relationships, people may establish a new rule or reach a temporary compromise while preserving an expectation or pattern of interaction that continues to generate tension.

The framework does not treat these responses as evidence of a psychological disorder. Psychological flexibility depends on context and cannot be determined from one isolated decision or behavior (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Personal application would therefore require attention to repeated patterns rather than a single incomplete adjustment. The cycle may be useful for reflection by directing attention to the relationship among the difficulty recognized, the adjustment made, the relief obtained, and the belief or relational pattern that remains protected. It is not a diagnostic instrument or a substitute for professional psychological or relational support.

Education

The Fixative Accommodation Cycle may be of use in education to examine reforms that generate visible activity without adequately addressing the condition affecting teaching, learning or inclusion. A school can introduce new terminology, implement a support program, change a policy, or incorporate technology without significantly changing classroom expectations, assessment practices, decision-making arrangements, or unequal access. The reforms may still be beneficial but the model asks if the element saved by the reform is still linked to the problem it was supposed to fix.

The framework may also apply to individual learning when students incorporate new information only within limits that protect an existing interpretation. Accommodation research shows that changing internal structures in response to experience can take different forms across learning and developmental contexts (Hanfstingl et al., 2022). The model adds a question concerning depth: whether the adjustment reaches the assumption relevant to the continuing misunderstanding. In educational research and evaluation, the cycle could therefore help distinguish the presence of an innovation from the depth of change associated with it. Such use would require evidence from students, educators, and affected groups rather than judgments based only on formal policies or visible activities.

Leadership and Organizational Change

The model could be also used within the framework of leadership and of organizational change. When performance starts to slip, employes raise issues, stakeholders complain, or external pressures shift, leaders may react with new programs, revised procedures, reorganized duties, or a new vision. Some employes will embrace some aspects of the change, and be unsure or resistant to others. Research

acknowledges responses to organizational change can involve diverse combinations of support, resistance, ambivalence and disengagement (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2026; Piderit, 2000).

The Fixative Accommodation Cycle may help examine whether an organizational response changes the routines and arrangements most closely connected to the difficulty or concentrates reform in areas that preserve an established center. Identity continuity can make organizational change more acceptable by assuring members that the organization will remain recognizably itself (Venus et al., 2019). The model does not treat this continuity as inherently restrictive. It becomes relevant when what is being protected remains implicated in the recurring problem. Organizational application would therefore focus on the relationship among reform pressure, the limits placed around change, the benefits achieved, and the conditions that continue after implementation.

Religious and Mission-Driven Institutions

Religious and other mission-driven institutions often face the tension of remaining faithful to a cherished identity but also responding to social change, member concerns, and institutional challenges. Reform is not necessarily discontinuity. An institution may have beliefs and traditions that are essential to its mission and outdated practices which are no longer effective. The Fixative Accommodation Cycle comes into play when the edges of reform are exploited to safeguard an interpretation, an arrangement of authority, a relational pattern, or an institutional practice that remains rooted in continuing stagnation or conflict.

For example, a program might change its language, communication systems, programs or administrative procedures, but not fundamentally alter decision-making structures or assumptions about difficulty. These changes could actually increase participation, efficiency or public legitimacy. But the model asks: has the improvement relieved the pressure for examining a protected core? Special care would be needed in religious settings, because disagreement with a belief or tradition is not in itself an indicator of fixative accommodation. The idea is about the repeated relation between adjustment and an implicated protected element, not about a judgment about the truth or moral value of religious commitments.

Community and Public Institutions

At the community or public-institutional level, the model may be useful in examining policies and programs adopted in response to public concern, social exclusion, service failures, or demands for participation. An agency may develop a consultation process, publish an inclusion policy or introduce a new service but keep procedures, priority of resources or relationships of authority which still restrict meaningful access. Institutional theory refers to such cases as the decoupling of formal policies from practice, or the poor coupling of organizational activities with intended outcomes (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Likewise, studies on selective sustainability disclosure reveal how visible pledges can become detached from the less favorable aspects of organizational performance (Roszkowska-Menkes et al., 2024).

These kinds of de-coupling are not about fixative accommodation. A policy can be implemented, and yet bounded around an implicated structure. The model may be applied in community and policy analysis, to examine not only whether a formal commitment was enacted, but what did the implementation change, what did it preserve, what immediate benefit did it produce, and did the original condition persist? The voice of affected communities would be essential; institutions shouldn't be the ones deciding whether their response was to the problem faced by those affected.

This possible application may be subjected to the same broad analytical pattern, but its meaning depends on the context. You cannot know how much change is required without knowing the problem and the evidence and the risks and the views of those involved. Thus, the Fixative Accommodation Cycle provides a common paradigm for inquiry, not a pre-formed judgment or intervention. Research is needed to compare and contextualize the model to establish its place, how the components may be observed and whether it adds explanatory value over existing concepts.

Summary of the Proposed Theory

The proposed Theory of Fixative Accommodation rests on four central theoretical

conclusions. First, fixative accommodation is not the absence of change. It involves a genuine adjustment made in response to internal or external pressure. A person, group, or institution may revise language, behavior, procedures, programs, or policies and may obtain a meaningful immediate benefit. The pattern becomes fixative when the adjustment remains organized around the protection of a belief, identity, habit, relationship, authority arrangement, or structure that continues to be implicated in the original difficulty. This distinguishes fixative accommodation from direct resistance, complete refusal, and purely symbolic action.

Second, the depth of change cannot be determined from the size, speed, or visibility of an adjustment alone. A small or gradual change may be appropriate when it reaches the element relevant to the problem, while an extensive and highly visible reform may remain fixative when it leaves that element protected. The central criterion is the relationship between what changed and what continues to sustain the difficulty. This means that not every partial adjustment should be classified as inadequate. Fixative accommodation becomes more evident when bounded change repeatedly substitutes for reconsideration of an implicated core.

Third, the immediate usefulness of limited adjustment helps explain the persistence of the pattern. An adjustment may reduce discomfort, restore functioning, settle conflict, preserve cohesion, meet an external requirement, or strengthen legitimacy. Because these outcomes are beneficial in the short term, they can make the response appear sufficient and reduce pressure for further examination. If the protected core remains involved in the unresolved condition, the difficulty may later return and activate another round of bounded adjustment. The cycle is therefore sustained not only by resistance or fear of change but also by the real stabilizing benefits produced by the limited response.

Fourth, fixative accommodation may be examined across individual, collective, organizational, and institutional contexts, although its specific form will differ across levels. Individuals may protect beliefs or self-concepts, groups may preserve norms or relational expectations, and institutions may protect authority structures, routines, policies, or interpretations of mission and tradition. These processes should not be treated as identical, but they may share a broad relationship in which pressure produces bounded adjustment, stabilization protects an implicated core, and residual difficulty generates renewed pressure. The six constructs and their proposed relationships form the process architecture of the Theory of Fixative Accommodation. Their empirical validity, temporal ordering, cross-level transferability, boundary conditions, and distinction from established constructs remain to be tested.

Implications and Future Directions

The proposed Theory of Fixative Accommodation offers several implications for practice, policy, and research, although these implications remain theory-derived rather than empirically established. The theory may guide examination of the relationship among pressure for change, the boundaries placed around the response, the adjustment made, the immediate benefit obtained, the core preserved, and the difficulty that remains or returns. The present review has not established the prevalence of fixative accommodation, confirmed the proposed relationships among its constructs, or demonstrated that the theory can reliably explain or predict outcomes in particular populations and settings. It should therefore be used as a guide for inquiry and discussion rather than as a clinical diagnosis, evaluative label, or prescribed intervention. The discussion that follows considers responsible applications of the theory and the empirical work needed to assess its clarity, validity, boundary conditions, and explanatory value. Specific pathways and interventions for moving beyond fixative accommodation remain outside the scope of the present study.

Implications for Practice

The Fixative Accommodation Cycle can serve as a guide for reflection and discussion rather than as a fixed assessment or intervention for professionals in education, counseling, leadership, organizational development, and community work. The model may guide the participants to explore what had created the pressure for change? What adjustment was made? What immediate benefit was derived? What was kept safe? Did the original problem persist or reappear? The presence of fixative

accommodation is not implied by a single cautious, gradual or incomplete response; one should look for patterns over time. If groups or institutions are involved, inquiry should include the perspectives of those affected, not just the interpretation of leaders or program implementers. The framework should not be used to label people as resistant, dishonest or psychologically deficient. It should also not pass the buck for institutional or structural problems to those with less authority or resources. This model is not intended as a clinical diagnosis in personal or counseling situations and is not a substitute for appropriate professional assessment or care. its possible practical value lies in assisting people to separate visible activity from the depth and direction of change, while paying attention to context, legitimate needs for continuity, and the short-term usefulness of bounded responses.

Implications for Policy

The Fixative Accommodation Cycle points to the importance of distinguishing between formal adoption, practical implementation, immediate results and deeper institutional change for policy. A new policy may show responsiveness and bring useful improvements while largely leaving intact the decision-making arrangements, resource priorities, incentives or practices that relate to the original problem. Bromley & Powell (2012) also point to institutional research showing how formal policies can be disconnected from practice or how organizational activities can be loosely coupled to their intended outcomes. Thus the framework implies that policy evaluation should not only consider whether a reform was approved or implemented, but also what changed, what was left untouched, whose interests were affected, and whether the initial difficulty remained over time. We need feedback from those affected because formal compliance doesn't necessarily reflect how a policy is working on the ground. But incomplete implementation should not automatically be read as fixative accommodation. Reform may go forward at a reasonable pace, given the constraints of resources, administrative complexity, competing responsibilities, and the need for gradual implementation. The model can assist policy makers in formulating questions about the boundaries and implications of change, but it does not itself determine which policy response is appropriate nor establish that institutional actors intentionally protected the existing arrangement.

Implications for Research

Prior to attempting to construct a single measurement scale, research should investigate the proposed process relationships of fixative accommodation and its conceptual distinctiveness. Longitudinal qualitative interviews, comparative case studies, document analysis, and observation might trace complete change-response episodes from the emergence of pressure thru adjustment, stabilization, core preservation, and possible recurrence. Studies should compare episodes that show the proposed pattern with negative or contrasting cases of direct resistance, reasonable gradual change, adaptive accommodation, psychological inflexibility, or institutional decoupling. Evidence should be sought from both those responsible for the adjustment and those who are affected by the consequences of that adjustment, as the depth and adequacy of the change may be interpreted differently by these two groups. Preliminary studies must test the theory in a clearly defined level and context, before testing its transferability across personal, educational, organizational, religious and public-institutional settings. This work would test whether the six constructs and their hypothesized relationships can be found in actual experience, and whether alternative explanations provide a better account.

If the construct is found to be coherent after qualitative investigation, researchers could then begin to develop observable indicators for Change Pressure, Response Boundary Formation, Limited Accommodation, Immediate Stabilization, Core Preservation, and Residual Difficulty and Recurrence. Guidance for scale development generally follows a process that includes construct definition and item generation, expert review, pretesting, dimensionality analysis, and finally, reliability and validity assessment (Boateng et al., 2018). Any measure should not reduce fixative accommodation to a label given to individuals on the basis of one score. To explore the relation among the components and distinguish between temporary

bounded adjustment and a recurrent pattern, multiple sources of evidence, repeated observations, would be necessary. Longitudinal research might examine whether greater boundaries of responding predict restricted accommodation, whether stabilization following the response strengthens perceived adequacy of the bounded response, and whether ongoing preservation of the core predicts residual difficulty and renewed pressure. Once validated within levels, multilevel studies may explore the relationship between individual beliefs, group norms, and institutional arrangements, and comparative studies may evaluate whether the theory proposed adds explanatory power to existing constructs. Above all, the theory must be changed, reorganized, broken up or abandoned if the empirical data do not support its suggested relationships.

Conclusion

This theory-building conceptual integrative review developed the proposed Theory of Fixative Accommodation to explain how genuine but bounded adjustment can coexist with continuing difficulty. The theory defines fixative accommodation as a change-response process in which pressure produces boundaries around what may be revised, limited accommodation occurs within those boundaries, and the resulting stabilization contributes to the preservation of an implicated core. Its six constructs—Change Pressure, Response Boundary Formation, Limited Accommodation, Immediate Stabilization, Core Preservation, and Residual Difficulty and Recurrence—organize this process, while six propositions specify the relationships through which it is expected to emerge, become reinforced, and recur. The theory distinguishes this pattern from direct resistance, psychological inflexibility, selective information processing, ambivalence, and institutional decoupling while drawing on these perspectives to explain different parts of the process.

The central theoretical contribution lies in explaining that the immediate usefulness of an adjustment may also reinforce its limitation. By reducing tension, restoring functioning, preserving cohesion, or satisfying demands for legitimacy, a bounded response can appear sufficient, weaken the urgency for deeper examination, and become more likely to recur when difficulty returns. This explanation extends the understanding of change beyond a simple distinction between acceptance and resistance and directs attention to what changed, what remained protected, what immediate benefit followed, and why the difficulty persisted. Because the theory was developed through conceptual synthesis rather than direct empirical testing, it remains a proposed process explanation rather than a diagnosis or validated causal account. Its constructs, propositions, temporal relationships, boundary conditions, and cross-level applicability require empirical examination and remain open to revision or rejection. The present study establishes the theoretical foundation for recognizing and investigating fixative accommodation, while the separate question of how individuals, groups, and institutions may move beyond the pattern toward deeper transformation remains the concern of subsequent research.

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