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“The producer of Designing Women used storytelling to entertain television viewers and to maintain control within her production organization.”

ORGANIZATIONAL STORYTELLING
Metaphors for Relational Power and Identity Struggles

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AUTHORS’ NOTE: This article is based on a paper presented at the Research Perspectives on the Management of Cultural Industries conference at the Stern School of Business, New York University, in 1997. Each author contributed equally to this research. Please address all correspondence concerning this manuscript via e-mail to Joann Keyton at jkeyton@memphis.edu.
Storytelling is a familiar media entertainment strategy and is becoming better understood as a device for informing employees about their organizational cultures. Using narrative analysis, participant observation, and historical analysis, this case study explores how one television producer used storytelling to entertain television viewers and maintain control within her production organization. The script, especially of one episode, functioned as a communication device that reflected the producer’s view of the organization’s dynamics, expressed the organization’s belief system, and served as an internal storyteller. Superimposing the story-as-an-internal-control device over the story-as-audience-entertainment device illuminated underlying issues about organizational relationships and power distribution.

Although the use of narratives and stories is not new in organizational analyses, the rich set of information captured in this study’s story within a story provides a unique opportunity to analyze issues of relational power and identity. Previously, scholars have explored the presence of stories in organizational messages (Brown, 1985; Brown & McMillan, 1991; Browning, 1992; Helmer, 1993). They have also demonstrated that narratives can capture organizational culture and values (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993; Kelly, 1985; Kreps, 1990; Meyer, 1995; Myrsiades, 1987; Vendelo, 1998), unite organizational members (Meyer, 1997; Mumby, 1987), link members to their organizations (Kitchell, Hannan, & Kempton, 2000), and provide evidence of organizational members’ competing discourses (Boje, 1995). Functioning in these ways, organizational “stories are emotionally and symbolically charged narratives; they do not present information or facts about ‘events,’ but they enrich, enhance and infuse facts with meaning” (Gabriel, 1998, p. 136).

This study combines narrative analysis of an episode of a popular television situation comedy with participant observation of the production activities that created the episode. Both of these analyses are placed within a broader history of the television series and the relationships among the principals and actresses who were contractually bound to create and produce the Designing Women series.
Combining these research techniques in a case study (Arneson, 1993) allows us to explore how television producer and writer Linda Bloodworth-Thomason used storytelling simultaneously to entertain television viewers in an episode of *Designing Women* and to maintain control within her production organization (Mozark Productions). That is, our purpose is to illuminate how Bloodworth-Thomason, as producer, created and used a script of one episode as a communication device to reflect her view of the organization’s dynamics, express her understanding of the organization’s belief system, and assert her authority.

Viewing the story conveyed in the episode in conjunction with the story of actual organizational events suggests that the two stories are too similar to be coincidental. Indeed, our analysis suggests that the behind-the-scenes power struggle that threatened the relationships among the organization’s principal members spawned the “La Place Sans Souci” episode, which foreshadowed the demise of the television series.

The analyses are based on firsthand observations of the dynamic interactions that occurred during the filming of the script. The similarity and integration of the stories revealed during production were later triangulated with public accounts of events, including media interviews with the principals involved. The initial discovery of these data were serendipitous and emerged while one author observed the episode in production (Keyton, 1994). Researcher access to script changes, rehearsals and filming, and interviews of the administrative staff (which is not generally made available to outsiders, such as researchers) provided a unique opportunity to observe and record the dynamic process of the script as both an internal and external storytelling device. Thus, as with many qualitative studies of organizations, the design of the study emerged as the data were being collected (Van Maanen, 1998).

The primary story analyzed here, the “La Place Sans Souci” episode, is different from those studied in previous organizational research in five ways. First, it was a fictional story created for organizational members to enact. Second, the organization’s principal member had control over how the story played out. Third, the overt public story line held clues to the organizational drama unfolding
within the production company. Fourth, the organizational story was not coproduced by speakers and listeners (Boje, 1991; Boje, Luhman, & Baack, 1999) nor was it constructed or recounted in response to a request from researchers (e.g., Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993). Finally, the story was not contained within the organization but played out for millions of audience members after being enacted for and by organizational members. The use of dialogue, character identification, situation, and plot as analytical tools is not new; Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989) used these devices to analyze displays of organizational values in prime-time television programs. We argue that these devices are also legitimate and powerful tools for analyzing organizations that produce television products.

Knowing the story on which this article is based is central to understanding how concepts and theoretical issues are illuminated because the story introduces questions and issues about (a) how organizational members identify with the organization and its products; (b) how members engaged in both legal and social contractual dynamics, including dynamic shifts in the power distribution among organizational members; and (c) how the story revealed information about the subsequent decline of the organization. To facilitate this storytelling feature, we provide an extensive description and analysis of the storytelling processes, followed by theoretical background and issues raised about contractual relationships, power, and identity. Finally, we discuss of the implications for both research and practice.

STORYTELLING: PROCESS AND PRODUCT OF THE ORGANIZATION

This section describes and analyzes the organization (Mozark Productions), the producer (Bloodworth-Thomason), the actresses (Delta Burke, Dixie Carter, Annie Potts, and Jean Smart), the product (the television series Designing Women), and the processes (writing and producing the weekly episodes). We emphasize a turning point episode (Barge & Musambira, 1992; Baxter & Bullis,
1986; Bullis & Bach, 1989), “La Place Sans Souci,” and a specific scene (the mud bath) in that episode. This episode and particular scene qualify as a turning point because relationships among the principals dramatically changed even though the full ramifications of their significance were not immediately revealed to the public. Months later, events that were more visible to the public included Burke’s public interviews, Bloodworth-Thomason’s response, and media reports about the still unresolved feud. In these conjoined stories, the mud bath is the site of the struggle. Rehearsing the scene heightens the struggle. Filming the scene immortalizes the struggle.

CAPTURING THE STORY

One author in the role of complete observer gathered data on site. A request by this author to observe the rehearsals, taping, and postproduction of the last episode of the 1989 to 1990 season was approved and sanctioned by Bloodworth-Thomason. The only restriction placed on, and agreed to by, the author was to refrain from writing and publishing anything for commercial or media use. Bloodworth-Thomason was aware of the author’s scholarly and research role and knew that she was there to observe and take notes about the rehearsal and filming process.

Although expecting to observe the group interaction necessary to produce a television show, the author stumbled behind the scenes of a show business feud. The author observed the events of 2 days of rehearsals and the night of filming from the audience stands in the production facility. Accompanied to the sound stage by a Mozark Productions staff member, the author sat alone in the stands. From this vantage point, the author had visual and auditory access to the entirety of the rehearsal and filming interaction. Thus, the formal interactions among cast, directing staff, and crew during rehearsals and filming could be observed and recorded. This vantage point also made it possible to observe and record informal interactions among these individuals as they waited between scenes.

Observations were captured using extensive field notes that were later keyed to the series of working scripts. Additional notes were
audio recorded after the author left the research environment. These notes were also transcribed and used as data. After filming was complete, five informal interviews with the production company secretary and members of the postproduction staff were conducted both on location and in informal settings. The researcher also had access to each of the script revisions created during the production of this episode. Additional factual information and analysis is based on documentation provided by Mozark Productions and media reports. Thus, evidence for our arguments was derived from physical documentation, archival records, interviews, and direct observations. Such an approach allowed us to test the convergence of the stories described here.

There were noticeable and striking parallels between the organizational story unraveling behind the scenes and the surface story being produced for viewers. It would be nearly impossible for someone not present at the production of the episode to identify the parallel nature of the stories merely from watching the televised episode as it was produced in March and aired weeks later in May. Moreover, the organizational conflict that occurred in March was made public only just prior to the subsequent fall television season. Having access to the behind-the-scenes developments and following the story over a period of months contextualized the plot of the episode in a unique and dramatic way.

Because the research opportunity was unexpectedly uncovered and differed significantly from the author’s original intent, no hypotheses or research questions guided this study. Reflection on what the one author saw and heard began immediately on return from the data collection site and was facilitated by recounting the experience to the other author. The reciprocal process of asking and answering questions (from data to literature, from literature to data) helped the authors make sense of the intertwined public and private stories. Our analysis is based on our subjective valuing (Potter, 1996) of the data. That is, although the script and historical data are tangible evidence, the events that occurred during filming are reported and interpreted by us. However, media reports later substantiated our interpretations. This objective-subjective mix characterizes our interpretation of the data (for example, the script, the
history of the series) and our telling of the two stories as a hybrid of confessional and realist tales (Van Maanen, 1988).

We acknowledge that the people observed have not revealed their specific views of the episode or confirmed our interpretation. However, we present our interpretation as plausible because it was confirmed when one of the actresses, and later Bloodworth-Thomason, made their private power struggle public through various media outlets (Butler, 1993). Indeed, many years later, this feud between Bloodworth-Thomason and Burke is still being recounted in the media (Shevick, 2000), further validating our identification of this period as a turning point. Not only do the media still have an interest in the conflict but so do viewers who watch the series in syndication on Lifetime Television. Viewers have posted messages about the feud on message boards dedicated to the show on Lifetime’s Web site (www.lifetimetv.com). Although additional interpretations are always possible, our interpretation of the intertwining stories is made plausible by actions taken by both parties in regards to the conflict, which caused the conflict to become public.

ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

Bloodworth-Thomason and her husband Harry Thomason founded Mozark Productions to create the television series Designing Women for Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) beginning with the 1986 to 1987 season. By the 1989 to 1990 season, the show regularly achieved top 10 status, and the show’s four actresses, Burke in particular, had become celebrities. The situation comedy had become a part of popular culture as it reflected social issues of particular importance to women (Dow, 1992; Keyton, 1994). The show centered on four females of an Atlanta interior design firm, Sugarbaker’s. Julia (Carter) was the firm’s founder; her home housed the design studio. Her sister Suzanne (Burke) somewhat loosely handled the firm’s public relations and marketing functions. Mary Jo (Potts) was the artist or designer; Charlene (Smart) was the office manager. Using a situation comedy format, Bloodworth-Thomason wrote ensemble1 scripts in which the char-
acters solved problems, helped each other with decisions, worked through conflicts, and examined socially relevant issues. The characters were described as “women with a degree of depth, competence, wit, and texture undreamed of by their sisters in the early days of television” (Schrag, 1991, p. 112).

One essential difference between Mozark and other sitcom production companies (e.g., Murphy Brown, see Alley & Brown, 1990) was that Designing Women was primarily the creative effort of one person, Bloodworth-Thomason. As such, it reflected her southern upbringing and her view of social issues (Keyton, 1994). Bloodworth-Thomason was known for writing through each weekend to single-handedly author 22 episodes of the 1986 to 1987 season, 23 episodes of the 1987 to 1988 season, 19 episodes of the 1988 to 1989 season, and 16 episodes of the 1989 to 1990 season. This level of creative control of both script and character development gave Bloodworth-Thomason the more powerful position in her asymmetrical power relationships with the actresses.

A weekly production schedule required a tight turnaround of organizational activity. Production employees reported that they relied on the script for directions about their tasks without receiving (or expecting) direct communication from Bloodworth-Thomason. As such, the script can be viewed as a communication vehicle for organizational tasks and about organizational issues. The scripts could function this way because (a) the cast and crew were relatively stable both within and throughout seasons; (b) scripts were produced regularly, making this channel of communication easily understood and continually referenced; and (c) the scripts were central in directing the tasks of organization members.

In the television industry, producers hope to create at least 100 episodes (approximately 5 seasons) to negotiate syndication opportunities. Although close to achieving this goal (“La Place Sans Souci” was the 93rd episode), Bloodworth-Thomason was also under contract with CBS to create and produce other shows (“Sure, David Letterman,” 1993). As evidenced by her script-writing activity, Bloodworth-Thomason was working less on Designing Women during the 1989 to 1990 season than in previous seasons. Yet, as
producer, she retained the right to reclaim control of the script and the story. During the 1989 to 1990 season, several marker events occurred to which Bloodworth-Thomason responded by dealing, once again, more centrally with *Designing Women*.

In particular, Burke, who played Suzanne, a former beauty queen, gained weight, which received considerable media attention. Although the media criticized Burke’s weight gain, Bloodworth-Thomason appeared to support Burke in dealing with this issue by writing a midseason script (“They Shoot Fat Women, Don’t They?”) spotlighting Suzanne’s coming to terms with her weight gain. Although some media reported that both Bloodworth-Thomason and Burke pointed to this particular episode as evidence of a positive working relationship (Sporkin, 1991), the interaction surrounding the production of “La Place Sans Souci,” the last episode of the 1989 to 1990 season, provides clues of conflicts that had not yet surfaced to the viewing public. Had one not seen the production of this script and viewed the script in relationship to personal and professional relational conflicts, the conflict may have remained hidden because it was more than 5 months later, just before the 1990 to 1991 season was set to resume, that an *Orlando Sentinel* article appeared detailing Burke’s complaints about working with the Thomasons.

A description of the production process of “La Place Sans Souci” situates the conflict between Bloodworth-Thomason and Burke and demonstrates how the story of the episode speaks to both internal and external audiences.

The climate of the organization at the time of the production of this episode was burdened with tension over power struggles and identity issues. On being admitted to the set, the researcher was told by the production secretary that Burke refused to do a scene in a mud bath for this last episode of the season. Moreover, her refusal was resulting in contract negotiations that included the potential for her to be written out of this script and out of the series. This confrontation was so acute that the rehearsals for the show were delayed 2 days.
THE SCRIPT AS A COMMUNICATION DEVICE

We believe that the script, developed and frequently rewritten by Bloodworth-Thomason during the short production period, was used as an internal communication device and served as a metaphor for reflecting Bloodworth-Thomason’s frustration with Burke. The primary reading of the script, of course, was the story aired to television viewers; the metaphorical or parallel reading of the script that results from analyzing the plot story in relationship to organizational events suggests Bloodworth-Thomason’s displeasure with Burke and foreshadows Bloodworth-Thomason’s intentions about the life of the series. Why would she use this medium to communicate to Burke and others? Formal contracts blocked Bloodworth-Thomason’s immediate recourse. It seems likely that she symbolically told the actresses, in particular Burke, and the other employees about the future of the series via the script that she controlled.

Stories serve a rhetorical function for organizations (Boje, 1995). Brown (1990) argued that organizational stories have relevance for organizational members by representing personal, interpersonal, and corporate perspectives. As such, Brown contends that stories (a) reduce uncertainty for organizational members by providing information about the organization, (b) manage meaning by framing events within organizational values and expectations, and (c) identify why an organization and its members are special or unique. Moreover, when an organizational principal has creative control of the story being told, he or she is likely to tell the story in a way that preserves or enhances his or her position or his or her account of the events (Browning, 1991). In this case, Bloodworth-Thomason had both the creative and the position power to tell the story her way. Thus, this script served as a public telling of how Bloodworth-Thomason perceived the behind-the-scenes action. In her principal and dual role of producer and writer, Bloodworth-Thomason was spokesperson both for and of Mozark Productions.

The argument that the script functioned as a communication device for this organization is based on three pieces of evidence. First, Bloodworth-Thomason frequently used the four female leads...
to comment on her roots and, more specifically, to liberate what she perceived to be the trapped southern female stereotype (Keyton, 1994). Bloodworth-Thomason’s relationship to the characters was frequently analyzed and reported on in the popular press (Davis, 1988). She had publicly acknowledged her close association with the four characters, thus allowing the possibility that she perceived the conflictual situation as jeopardizing that relationship and, hence, her identity with the show. From this perspective, the script of “La Place Sans Souci” can be viewed as a response to this threat. Moreover, her complete creative control over the script provided access and opportunity to demonstrate the power she held over the characters and the series.

Second, the coupling of characters to continuous story lines required Bloodworth-Thomason to invest completely in the four actresses. This type of strategy, necessary for the constraints of television, presents potential harm to an organization by creating absolute dependencies. Bloodworth-Thomason gathered the human resources necessary to give life to her characters, but she became dependent on them for the enactment of the stories she wrote. Although there have been exceptions, television viewers expect actresses as characters to remain constant throughout a television season and the run of a series.

Third, the script could also be considered as a visible and central downward channel within the organization. A script could function as an internal communication device because it created and sustained the ways in which organizational members positioned themselves vis-à-vis others within the organization (Helmer, 1993). Use of a script in this way relays internal organizational messages from a managerial orientation (Martin, 1992) “because it reflects a source orientation to communication and is characterized by a virtual absence of message exchange” (Helmer, 1993, p. 38). In her role as creative force and writer, Bloodworth-Thomason had the opportunity and the apparent motive to create stories to control the interaction environment, the agenda, and the roles of the participants in the stories (Helmer, 1993).

The script, then, was both product and process for communicating about the organization. It was the output of the organization to
television viewers and also a management tool to signal organizational changes. Although the primary objective of the script was to entertain viewers, a less conspicuous objective may have been to reframe power struggles and resolve organizational issues.

The story of conflict and identity. The surface story of “La Place Sans Souci” can be summarized as follows. Suzanne offers to use her income tax refund to treat everyone to a weekend at a health spa and resort. At the spa, the women are separated into two groups: those who need to gain a few pounds, Julia and Mary Jo, and those who need to lose a few pounds, Charlene and Suzanne. Tension builds quickly in the story as feeding and pampering begins for two and exercising and dieting ensues for the other two women. By the end of the episode, resentment erupts into a fight in a mud bath, and the four women are ejected from the spa.

The script is 1 of 16 written entirely by Bloodworth-Thomason during the season. One would assume that from her organizational role, Bloodworth-Thomason perceived herself as the dominant power because she controlled the actresses’ character voices. But Burke’s contract controlled the explicit and objective nature of the professional relationship. The popularity of the series, and Burke’s character specifically, made Bloodworth-Thomason dependent on Burke’s portrayal of Suzanne. The conflict between Bloodworth-Thomason and Burke appears to be an impetus for Bloodworth-Thomason to use the script to reassert her power. Viewing the script in relation to this power struggle, the script can be read as Bloodworth-Thomason’s reframing of the power dynamics.

Bloodworth-Thomason had the position power to write the script in any fashion she chose. She could have opted to rewrite the script to minimize Burke’s concerns (e.g., remove the mud bath from the episode). But in essence, Bloodworth-Thomason reinforced her power and ownership of the story (Boje et al., 1999) by coercing Burke to perform in the manner her script dictated. Her power, exercised via the script, was further enhanced because, even though she was not present during rehearsals or filming, she continued to control the actions of the actresses.
In response to Burke’s early refusals to cooperate in the production of this episode, Bloodworth-Thomason could be viewed as retaliating at Burke by humiliating her character, Suzanne. Burke’s weight gain was frequently recounted in the media. Thus, it was a plausible storyline for Suzanne to find herself in the spa’s weight reduction program. Historically in the series, Suzanne lacked critical inquiry skills, making it plausible that she did not fully explore the meaning of weight reduction before making reservations at the spa. Bloodworth-Thomason wrote these lines for Suzanne:

I mean, I wouldn’t have come to this place if I had known they had it in for big people... I expect more than little shrimp and a sprig of dill on a cucumber, Mary Jo. I mean, who cares if it’s got some fancy French name with a little sauce on it. It’s still a little shrimp. And quite frankly, it is not enough fuel for a person who is then expected to go off and climb Mt. Kilimanjaro.

These lines could be viewed as an assertion of power in that Bloodworth-Thomason scripted Suzanne to acknowledge publicly her weight gain and the need to lose weight and also portrayed her as resenting her own solution, the trip to the health spa. These lines appear to be a metaphor through which Bloodworth-Thomason is telling Burke that she has not given full consideration to the possible consequences of resorting to contract negotiations and of making demands for star treatment in an ensemble series.

The script reveals other ways in which Bloodworth-Thomason appeared to use it as a message device to Burke and to others about Burke. From a storytelling point of view, changing the character would necessarily change the story. Thus, Burke’s withdrawal would disrupt the ensemble on which the show was built. The following lines, then, could be a covert message about Burke’s lack of concern for the ensemble. Julia delivers this telling line to Suzanne:

Just because this place is not exactly what you envisioned and only you alone know what that was—but my guess is you pictured yourself floating on some big barge while a bunch of slaves fed you grapes—anyway, just because it is less than your expectations, you now want to spoil it for the rest of us!
The filming ran long, nearly 31 minutes, resulting in the editing of this line. As part of the script, however, Burke had to repeatedly hear this line in rehearsals and filming. Given Burke’s refusal to cooperate and the subsequent contract negotiations in which Bloodworth-Thomason and Burke were engaged, it is not difficult to infer that Bloodworth-Thomason was symbolically lashing out at Burke. Such an inference is further supported considering that Burke was making what appeared to be star demands in a show that had been historically an ensemble unit. Further evidence is provided when Julia scolds Suzanne:

Oh, Suzanne, for crying out loud. Just because you’re not having a good time, you are just absolutely hell-bent on trying to start something. Well, I’ve just about had enough for one day. Now until you can stop your obnoxious disposition, I think Mary Jo and I can just take our dinner back to the room.

Even more evidence of such an inference is found later in the script when a health spa attendant cautions,

Ladies, please! Do not get into the mud tub until I have thoroughly checked out your thermal suit. If you haven’t been completely packed with mud before suitng up, you are not going to get the same benefits as the people who’ve followed the rules. And those of you who insist on doing it your way, well, I just wash my hands of the whole thing! I am not going to be responsible!

As a whole, there appear to be several warnings from Bloodworth-Thomason that (a) the success the ensemble enjoys as a group may be threatened by Burke, (b) she is tired of Burke’s grandstanding, and (c) Burke is not playing by the rules.

The mud bath as a site of the struggle. Through the history of the series, Bloodworth-Thomason seldom put her characters in humiliating positions on screen. More typically, the scripts depicted female-female interpersonal relationships in a “supportive, non-competitive environment” (Dow, 1992, p. 141). “La Place Sans Souci,” however, found all of the characters not only in a humiliating situation but also in a state of physical aggressiveness. At the
end of this episode, the characters, still split into two conflicting pairs, meet in the mud bath. Having stayed up all night playing Trivial Pursuit, the conflict between them is heightened by Suzanne’s suspiciously sudden expertise at the game. Sensing the hostility and wanting to make peace, Charlene tells Julia and Mary Jo that she and Suzanne won the game the night before because they cheated. After Charlene asks for forgiveness, Suzanne spouts a protest and then takes the confrontation to a physical level. Suzanne throws mud in Charlene’s face, and Charlene retaliates. Julia confronts Suzanne proclaiming, “You know what gets me, Suzanne, is that you thought you could get away with it.” Tempers explode, mud flies, and it becomes a free-for-all. All four characters are slinging insults and mud at one another. Never before had Bloodworth-Thomason scripted the characters to be verbally and physically aggressive toward one another. In other scripts, their anger had been directed toward external agents or social issues.

Driving the women home from the spa, Anthony (the interior design firm’s delivery person who is befriended by the women) patronizes the women by reminiscing about his wonderful time at the spa and how the staff had invited him back. He digs at the women by acknowledging their “hellacious cat fight” and reminds the women that they have been thrown out of the spa, never to come back. Is it coincidence or could these same threats reflect Bloodworth-Thomason’s possible actions toward Burke (to write her out of the script and series)? Is Bloodworth-Thomason metaphorically reminding the actresses, particularly Burke, that she is the creative owner of Designing Women and that she has the power to call the shots about how the characters interact on screen? The controversy caused by Burke’s refusal to do the mud bath scene threatened her relationship with Bloodworth-Thomason and the future of the Designing Women series. Interpreting the conflict revealed in the episode in regard to the contractual power struggles, it appears that Bloodworth-Thomason used the script as a powerful and public reminder of her ultimate control.

Rehearsing the script heightens the struggle. According to the production secretary, script rehearsals typically start on Monday
for Thursday night filming. She also indicates that the power issues between Bloodworth-Thomason and Burke, however, have delayed the 1st day of rehearsals to Wednesday, shortening significantly the time left for production preparation. The physical site of the power struggle, the mud bath, is represented in rehearsal only as a white tarp with a black box outline on the floor. Although the other actresses have been rehearsing since morning with Burke’s stand-in, Burke appears for the first time on the set late Wednesday afternoon. Reaction to her entrance is mixed. Immediately, the actresses take a half-hour break. Overtly, any problems are being ignored as the actresses return to rehearse two scenes.

At 6:00 p.m., rehearsals move to the mud bath scene; still, only the black border symbolizes its dimensions and location. Burke walks over to the mud bath and sits on the tarp. Rather than actually trying the dialogue and scripted movement, all four actresses discuss the logic of the dialogue and their movements. In the middle of the scene rehearsal, Burke cries out, “Excuse me, excuse me, I can’t work with it, I can’t do it.” The others give her suggestions, but Burke resists their help. When they finally rehearse the lines, Burke cannot remember hers and looks pleadingly to the director. In essence, the actresses have spent more time talking about what is wrong with the scene than rehearsing it. They try the scene two more times. Everyone leaves at 8:00 p.m.

Arriving back at the sound stage the next day (Thursday) around noon, the researcher is greeted by an administrative staff member and told that the format of the show is changing for next year; not all of the actresses are returning. The mood among production personnel is lighter. Crew members seem resigned or relieved, glad that there is some resolution to the obvious tension. The actresses gather to start rehearsals. Burke does not know her lines; the others make suggestions for hiding parts of the script in strategic locations.

The mud bath is physically present now; it is empty and positioned at the periphery of the filming area. The tub is 24 inches off the ground, and the tub walls are approximately 6 inches thick. Dressed in thermal suits that constrict their movement, the actresses have to step up to get in it. Burke enters the set; she is not in her mud suit, but the others are. Once in the tub, Burke props her
head on the back of the tub, face upward with eyes closed, as if attempting to block out what is going on around her. Much like the day before, there is more discussion about the interaction in the tub than rehearsal of it. They try the scene three times. An hour has gone by. Rehearsals continue until 5:45 p.m., leaving the final scene of the episode unrehearsed. The sound stage is cleared, and the entire filming area is partitioned off before the audience is welcomed into the viewing gallery.

Filming the episode immortalizes the struggle. At 7:15 p.m., the warm-up comedian who entertains the audience before the show and during breaks in filming begins talking with the audience. He introduces the actresses. One by one they walk through a break in the partitions, and the audience enthusiastically welcomes them. Burke is introduced last, not in the alphabetical order in which the actresses are featured in the show’s opening. She receives thunderous applause easily outdoing the welcome received by the others, reflecting her relative popularity with the show’s fans.

Filming takes on a methodical pace. Burke frequently misses her lines, which is uncharacteristic for a professional actress, causing some scenes to be reshot numerous times. During breaks, the crew and extras engage in informal interaction while the actresses keep to themselves. Audience members whisper to one another about the apparent tension on the set. After more than 2 hours of filming, audience members are becoming restless; some start to leave. By 10:00 p.m., half of the audience has left.

There is considerable downtime between filming scenes. Before filming begins on the mud bath scene, partitions are rolled in to hide the actresses while they climb in the mud bath. At 12:30 a.m., when filming on the mud bath scene starts, only one fifth of the audience remains. A voice from behind a partition says, “I’m nervous; can we get this going?” Behind the partitions, the actresses are trying to get into the mud. Their comments imply both difficulty and hesitation. The crew appears from behind the partitions wearing plastic aprons. The audience overhears a reference to the *I Love Lucy* episode where Lucy stomps the grapes. Finally, the partitions are pulled back, and the few remaining audience members applaud.
Ironically, it is Burke who gives the others instructions for staying upright in the mud. They film the scene twice. Although the scene works as part of the story line and is warmly received by audience members, it is less dramatic or engaging than foreshadowed by the actresses’ fussing and discussion of it during rehearsal.

At 2:00 a.m., after filming the short final scene, the assistant director announces, “It’s a wrap. Thank you very much for a very wonderful season.” Annie Potts leans out of the van used for the last scene and announces, “Thank you to all who slugged it out with us every day. We love you everyone.” Unfortunately, crew members were dismantling other sets and not paying attention to her. There was no final bow, no acknowledgment that the episode was over or that this season was concluded or that the future of the series was in jeopardy. Of course, it may not have been necessary. Now, the only people left in the audience were two of Burke’s fans, a personal friend of Carter’s, three hopeful actresses, and the author.

STORYTELLING, POWER, AND IDENTITY

Throughout the storytelling of the script and the filming of the “La Place Sans Souci” episode, issues of power distribution and identity are illuminated. In this section, the storytelling analyses are integrated with the relevant literature. Three issues are brought into focus: organizational contracts and power distributions, identity, and the role of storytelling in organizational communication.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTRACTS AND POWER DISTRIBUTIONS

Contractual relationships among organizations and employees are often characterized by social norms about the expectations and appropriateness of particular behaviors, by promissory features in the form of economic exchanges such as money for services or goods, and by factors such as loyalty (Rousseau & McLean Parks,
In addition to these legal ties, organizational contracts are negotiated, maintained, and executed as normative social contracts, and they specify behaviors that are expected in exchange for the promise of a return (McLean Parks & Smith, 1998). Thus, an organizational contract is not only the legal or written description of the relationship but also includes each member’s evolving social expectation of (a) his or her rights and responsibilities in the relationship and (b) how the other member of the relationship will behave. Thus, all employment relationships are based on “the idiosyncratic set of reciprocal expectations held by employees concerning their obligations and their entitlements” (McLean Parks, Kidder, & Gallagher, 1998, p. 698).

In the case of Designing Women, Bloodworth-Thomason symbolized her perspective of those expectations into the episode’s storyline. By crafting the dialogue as she did, she made her expectations about the culture of the organization known specifically to Burke. These messages were also available to other organizational members participating in the production of the episode. Bantz (1993) argued that using symbolic forms to communicate organizational expectations is not uncommon. Such symbolizing is part of communicating about the organization’s culture.

A theoretical perspective on organizational contracts by McLean Parks and Smith (1998) explicitly incorporates relative power distributions between parties into a transaction/relational dimension of psychological contracts (MacNeil, 1985; McLean Parks, 1992; Rousseau, 1990; Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993). The transactional/relational framework suggests that those exchanges between parties that are transactional will be governed more by explicit terms such as those found in legal contracts, where issues such as work tasks and monetary payments are formalized. Alternatively, contracts perceived from the relational end of the dimension are more likely to adapt to changing circumstances with parties adjusting their employment behaviors to maintain and enhance the ongoing relationship without resorting to formalized negotiations. Relational contracts are likely to be more valued by parties, and the parties will be less likely to exit the relationship in response to
changing circumstances because there is room for adjustment to problems encountered (McLean Parks & Smith, 1998).

However, the transactional/relational dimension may not fully explain organizational power dynamics. Juxtaposing a dimension of power symmetry to the transactional/relational dimension provides a more comprehensive view of organizational power dynamics. This framework (McLean Parks & Smith, 1998) suggests that parties with symmetric power enter into either instrumental contracts that are transactional in nature or communitarian contracts that are relational in nature. More relevant to the case analyzed here are the proposed distinctions in the transactional/relational dimension when power is asymmetrical. Asymmetric power relationships that are transactional in nature result in exploitive contracts; those asymmetric power relationships that are relational in nature result in custodial contracts. The two types of asymmetric contracts differ with respect to the perspective the parties take and protect. Both parties in an exploitive contract tend to protect their self-interests. In a custodial contract, the contract maker tends to be more concerned about the other party, and the contract taker protects self-interests. Custodial relationships offer more opportunity for abuse and misuse of power because there is a dependency created for which there may be no recourse, whereas in exploitive relationships, both parties have recourse through enforcing the well-specified terms of the transactional contract. Each type of organizational contract is nested “within a larger social contract of reciprocity norms and metrics of rationality, with different obligations and entitlements for the parties” (McLean Parks & Smith, 1998, p. 145).

As such, the framework provides a means to ask (a) when and under what conditions is power symmetric or asymmetric and (b) how can the contract maker and contract taker positions become reversed within a contractual relationship? The framework, then, provides a way for viewing the dynamic nuances and the saliency or latency of contractual relationships.

Classifying the dynamic contractual relationships between Bloodworth-Thomason and Burke as instrumental, communitarian, exploitive, or custodial creates considerable insight into the shifts in power between the two. Bloodworth-Thomason, through
Mozark Productions, had an instrumental contract with Burke defining the legal terms regarding such obligations as the number of episodes per season that the actress would deliver, the financial and working conditions that Mozark Productions would provide to the actress, and the degree to which the actress could contribute to script development (if at all). At the time of this case study, Mozark Productions was engaged in negotiations and enforcement of terms in the instrumental contract with Burke.

In the beginning of the series, the power relationships were transactional, as instrumental contracts were required to establish the legal relationships between Bloodworth-Thomason and the actresses. However, media reports suggest that these contracts for Burke and Carter were based on their previous relationships working with Bloodworth-Thomason in another series. After the 1st year, the series found an audience base, which contributed to stabilizing and transforming the relationships from transactional to relational. The process of delivering an ensemble product appeared to be based on communitarian or custodial relationships.

According to media reports of Bloodworth-Thomason’s relationships with the actresses (Davis, 1988; Sporkin, 1991), Bloodworth-Thomason developed communitarian contracts with the four actresses, especially during the early years of Designing Women. Real power imbalances may have existed but were latent, and all parties seemed to be focused on the show’s collective identity and success. Burke, like the other actresses, performed her role as a member of the ensemble and willingly acknowledged and accepted her role in the organizational contract. From a communitarian contract perspective, all members were trying to achieve success over an extended time period and did not rely on legal negotiations to resolve disputes.

However, Bloodworth-Thomason’s role as writer and producer gave her greater power than other members, in part because she was the only person who knew the whole concept for the stories told in the series’ scripts. Thus, a custodial contract may have existed simultaneously with the communitarian but remained relatively latent during the early years. Bloodworth-Thomason appeared to be concerned about the actresses and the integrity of the characters.
that represented her southern heritage (Davis, 1988). Despite this power imbalance, the contractual relationship appeared to be relational rather than transactional in nature as all parties appeared to be committed to the successful relationships necessary to deliver a hit television series.

In her role as writer, Bloodworth-Thomason’s relational contract behaviors remained in effect until power asymmetries became salient during the turning point of producing the episode “La Place Sans Souci.” The series was just a few episodes from meeting its syndication threshold, yet she signaled through the story that she would prefer that the series be sacrificed entirely than watch it be dismantled as a result of Burke’s demands that threatened the ensemble relationship among the characters and the identity of the show.

Burke’s demands caused the parties to consider renegotiation of her formal, or instrumental, contract, which further caused a significant shift in the employment contract between Bloodworth-Thomason and Burke. The contract changed from being relational in nature (communitarian or custodial) to being transactional, when Burke, who had developed considerable power through her fans, began demanding star treatment. In effect, Bloodworth-Thomason’s custodial contract with the actress shifted to an exploitive contract, with Burke attempting to move from contract taker into the position of contract maker. Evidence of the struggles between the communitarian, custodial, and exploitive relationships that initiated the organizational crisis can be seen as part of the underlying story of “La Place Sans Souci.”

These struggles were later made public when Burke used talk shows and media interviews to air her displeasure in working with the Thomasons (forums where her fans were likely to be in the audience). Her exposure in these venues also illuminated her attempts to separate herself from the rest of the ensemble. In response to these power plays, Bloodworth-Thomason and her husband responded with a 12-page publicity statement and an advertisement in Variety (to which few fans would have access) to present their perspective on Burke’s “unprofessional” actions and to rebut Burke’s claims. Through this action, Bloodworth-Thomason both
acknowledged and legitimized the instability in the organization’s power dynamics.

The relational contract had been disrupted by Burke, which had the effect of both challenging the power dynamics and changing the basis of the contract from relational to transactional. Bloodworth-Thomason and Burke used the legal transactional contract as a behind-the-scenes, but explicit, communication medium, and Bloodworth-Thomason used the script as an internal and metaphorical communication device to signal her displeasure with Burke. Prior to this episode, instrumental, communitarian, and custodial contracts had existed simultaneously and had complemented one another; during and after the episode, they conflicted. The dynamic transitions revealed in this case provide a unique insight into the nonlinear, simultaneous, and parallel systems of power relationships that characterize organizations. During the lifetime of the series, the contractual relationships among the parties ebbed between relational and transactional. Marker events (e.g., the establishment of and renegotiation of legal contracts, the building of an audience base, the growth in Burke’s popularity) caused the contracts to shift from one type to another. Eventually, the custodial contract changed from being latent to being salient. For a period, power was more or less suspended between being symmetric and asymmetric because each party derived her power from different sources. The conflict led to the contract shifting back toward being instrumental, that is, focused on legal contract renegotiations, eventually leading to the severance of any type of contract.

IDENTITY

Bloodworth-Thomason had striven to create an ensemble cast (Sporkin, 1991), but Burke wanted star privileges. Could it be that for Bloodworth-Thomason, the potential breach of the ensemble presentation threatened her close personal identity with the characters or her organizational identity of producer and writer? Destruction of either identity would endanger the organization’s product by substantially altering it or curtailing it. The conflict with Burke was
a crisis for the organization because Burke was the most popular of the four actresses and played a pivotal character. From a storytelling interpretation, “La Place Sans Souci” was both communication about and evidence of the organization’s identity being threatened. Rather than watch the show, and metaphorically, watch herself, be disrupted, it is possible that she wrote this episode to provide a closure for the series if it became necessary.

The title “La Place Sans Souci” translates into “the place of no worry,” perhaps a hopeful destination for Bloodworth-Thomason. This episode could simply be a story about four characters: two fat, two thin. Or the episode could be viewed as a reaction to being worn down by the internal conflict and power struggles. The last lines of the episode reflect a self-realization by Julia, the character most associated with Bloodworth-Thomason, that this episode marked the end or a dramatic change in her involvement in creating the organizational product.

Suzanne (referring to the passing cars): Why does everybody keep staring at us?
Julia: Because, Suzanne, we look odd. But then again, I suppose in my heart I always knew that someday we would all end up like this.
Mary Jo: What do you mean?
Julia: Oh just driving down the highway on a dark Georgia night, four aging Southern belles with war-torn hair and dirty faces, a nanny, a baby, and a crippled Black man. (Fade to Black.)

Rather than scripting characters in discussion of social issues, she had written this potentially final script with the characters slinging mud and shouting verbal insults. The four women in the mud bath were not the women she had carefully crafted and nurtured for 4 seasons. With “La Place Sans Souci,” it appears that Bloodworth-Thomason created the option to say goodbye to the four characters of Julia, Mary Jo, Charlene, and Suzanne and to divorce herself from the daily operation of Designing Women.

This episode, although not the ultimate end of Mozark Productions and Designing Women, clearly signaled the beginning of a period of organizational decline. In the subsequent 1990 to 1991 season, Bloodworth-Thomason delegated all her writing responsi-
ibilities to others, further eroding her involvement in and close personal identity with the show. She was under contract with CBS to develop other series and directed her energies to these. Although *Designing Women* continued the next season with all four actresses, the season’s premiere was upstaged by reports about the continuing feud between Burke and the Thomasons. The feud was further fueled by an interview Burke gave to the *Orlando Sentinel* claiming that the *Designing Women* set was a poor work environment. Burke’s delegitimizing boundary-spanning activities (Finet, 1993) were not appreciated, as the Thomasons quickly reported back through the trade press that “if anyone goes, it will be her, not us” (Letosky, 1990). Burke was reported as saying that the 1st day back to the set of *Designing Women* (for the 1990 to 1991 season) was businesslike with no warmth.

The 1990 to 1991 season continued with other writers, and ratings slipped. Few episodes revolved around social issues, Bloodworth-Thomason’s trademark. By Christmas, ratings sank to the low teens. The feud became public once again as Burke, interviewed on television by Barbara Walters and Arsenio Hall, claimed that working conditions were miserable. Again, the season’s final episode provided no natural conclusion to the season or series.

There was a significant actress and character change in the 6th season, 1991 to 1992. Burke’s formal, instrumental contract was not renewed after other cast members and producers voted on whether she should return to the show (Sporkin, 1991). Smart, who played Charlene, also left the show. Bloodworth-Thomason wrote only the season’s opening episode. The characters changed once again in the 1992 to 1993 season; the show’s time slot was moved, the ratings plummeted, and the series folded.

**THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION**

This storytelling analysis has explored the symbolic internal organizational communication messages embedded in the public product of Mozark Productions. The analysis suggests that
Bloodworth-Thomason used a script to communicate her interpretation of organizational events, to evaluate the major players in the conflict, and to foreshadow her future involvement in the television series. In this way, the script performed as an allegory or fictional account that symbolized and commented on other events (Clifford, 1986). In using the script as an allegorical device, Bloodworth-Thompson revealed her interpretation about the dispute with Burke and how it should be resolved. Being in a position to have the script enacted allowed her version of the events to emerge as a social performance for the actresses but also for other organizational members and later for the viewing public. The initial structure of the allegorical tale was the dialogue of the script, which was later reinforced with visual references during rehearsal and filming. In this permanent form, the story can still be viewed today. The events on which the allegory was based were publicized and recounted in the media, further validating the symbolic meaning of the script.

As such, the script was an imaginative and creative tool with which Bloodworth-Thomason could manage Mozark Productions’s organizational culture (Dandridge, 1985). Some may consider this situation atypical in that Bloodworth-Thomason had at her disposal a unique communication device, one capable of delivering internal messages while also being enacted as the organizational product. Although this specific type of narrative device may be confined to the entertainment industry, other organizational scholars have explored narratives for their abilities to express the concerns of founders (Schein, 1983), address the legitimacy of management philosophy (Wilkins, 1983), release tension (Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983), and attack or protect individuals in an organization (Feldman, 1990), all of which are evident in this narrative. As an allegorical device, the script can also be characterized as a story that portrays a conflict between organizational and individual values: a common theme documented in organizational stories despite the uniqueness organizations claim (Martin et al., 1983). Although the specifics of this case may not be generalizable, our conclusions focus attention on how stories are inherent and powerful in organizational communication and how external and internal communication devices can be intertwined.
First, this story analysis underscores the issue of symbolic control (Mumby, 1987). Clearly, our contextualized reading of the “La Place Sans Souci” script indicates that the script is politically motivated and reflects Bloodworth-Thomason’s perception of the organization and its primary members. Although there is no direct evidence that Bloodworth-Thomason was attempting to communicate directly or consciously to Burke and other employees, Bloodworth-Thomason scripted Burke’s character to receive multiple power-laden messages, forcing Suzanne (and, in turn, Burke) to abide by the organization’s power structure (in the script, symbolized by getting kicked out of the spa). Clearly, the ability to control organizational symbols—specifically, in this case, to author organizational stories—is a powerful political tool.

Second, this analysis points to the viability of an organization’s product or service being used as a narrative device to deliver messages about potential changes in an organization’s life cycle. Clearly, Bloodworth-Thomason had easy access to a venue for developing and delivering stories about the organization from her perspective. In cases where the organization is small or tightly controlled by the founder, the managing principal is largely responsible for the creation of the product or service and the direction of the organization. This level of control means that the principal shapes the product or service and is reflected in that output. Although not always intended to be a primary means of communication, organizational output does have a symbolic reading for its employees, blurring the distinction between internal and external communication devices (Cheney & Christensen, 2000).

Most narrative and interpretive analyses focus on stories about organizations: stories that are tangential to the organization or its product. In this case, however, the Designing Women story is the organization’s product. Weick (1995) argued that traditional organizational “stories transmit and reinforce third-order controls by conveying shared values and meaning” (p. 129). If stories less central to an organization’s product can have these powerful effects, then we propose that a story that is the organization’s main product is even more powerful in helping organizational members make sense of their organizational environment.
A particularly unique aspect of cultural products is the potential confluence between personal and organizational identities. Media products can be terminated at any time, even when they are at the peak of their success (e.g., Seinfeld). We suggest that when personal and organizational identities are intertwined, as Bloodworth-Thomason’s was with Designing Women’s, organizational identity will be sacrificed to protect the most powerful person’s personal identity. In the case of Designing Women, the two stories—the public televised story about weight loss and the private story about an organization in crisis—can be viewed and interpreted independently, but their combined reading presents a metastory, which has bearing on the future of the organization. The script as story also reflects the story of the ongoing organizational power dynamics. The striking parallels between the stories are evidence that organizational scholars should look for issues of power and identity in the least expected of places.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

For managers, understanding the implications of organizational contracts and power distribution may help them anticipate and resolve conflict or enhance work-life balance. As more organizations seek to offset high turnover rates among those engaged in knowledge work, such as computer programmers, the importance of relational contracts becomes more evident. Organizations are competing for a dwindling supply of people to perform organizational tasks. Building a relationship with a workforce where a fun or engaging culture is a hallmark of the employment relationship, and where there is more of a communitarian contract between employer and employees, can lead to substantial benefits for everyone, including customers.

The purpose of case studies such as this one is to chronicle events and investigate a phenomenon within its real-life and social context (Arneson, 1993). The advantage of case studies over other method-
ologies that explore organizational narratives or stories is that the narrative in a case study is viewed in its development. In most analyses of organizational stories, a story is presented as a vignette or as a brief recollection or report of events. The advantage of capturing and analyzing this narrative is that the story was created over the week of production and played out for months (and even years) after the episode was aired. Thus, the depth of contextuality is this case study’s salient feature and reveals the importance of searching for deeper meanings in the complex organizational environment from which and in which stories are told. The power and centrality of a narrative are revealed by the degree to which surface and deeply rooted stories are integrated. When integrated, stories form a narrative that controls an organization’s culture by describing and explaining organizational actions.

The type of narrative analysis used here moves beyond describing patterns to creating an explanation for the existence of the pattern, a process required to develop theoretical explanations of organizational behavior (Pentland, 1999). Narrative research is often restricted to texts that are easily retrievable but that contain no information to explain why variables are related. Our serendipitous discovery of the allegorical tale and its underlying generative mechanism allowed us to document different levels of narrative structure (Pentland, 1999) and move beyond the surface structure most often observed in narrative data.

Finding narratives and unraveling them is rewarding and seductive, so we caution researchers and practitioners about being overly ambitious. It is easy to read too much into a story and to manufacture connections that are not relevant for participants. Subjective evaluations must remain tentative until more objective data substantiate the story. We are not suggesting the dismissal of alternative interpretations that outsiders, such as researchers, can provide. Rather, interpretation of deeply contextualized narratives requires reflexively moving between the theoretical claims and data, interpreting each in light of the other. Doing so, in the analysis of this case, allowed the script to emerge as an allegory for what was occurring in the organization and as a control device communicating Bloodworth-Thomason’s view of those events.
For future research, the McLean Parks and Smith (1998) contractual framework can provide a model for understanding organizational communication issues that are not apparent on the surface. Too commonly, employment contracts are regarded as an explicit agreement between the more powerful contract maker and the less powerful contract taker about who will do what to provide boundaries for establishing an employment relationship. This case provided the opportunity to use the processual rather than the categorical characteristics of the framework to illuminate a contract’s simultaneous and multiple layers of explicit and implicit agreements. Moreover, this view of the framework allowed us to examine the communication that contributed to contract making and contract taking and to identify how assumptions about who is most powerful in a contract can change. Should an organizational contract evolve into one of coexploitation, it seems unlikely that either party’s long-term contractual interests will be served. When contracts are viewed as fluid and dynamic, rather than stable, power distribution between parties can shift. Moreover, this view positions organizational contracts between parties as dialogues that are continually managed.

NOTES

1. Ensemble scripts do not highlight one actor or character over others. For example, *Murphy Brown* highlighted its star, Candace Bergen, over other characters in the series. *Designing Women*, on the other hand, gave equal attention to all of its characters through plot focus and line distribution. One media report (Sporkin, 1991) indicated that Bloodworth-Thomason’s desire to maintain equality was so strong that staffers counted the number of lines attributed to each actress.

2. Typically, an episode of *Designing Women* was rehearsed and filmed over a 4-day period. This episode was rehearsed and filmed in 2.

3. Time standards required final editing to be cut to 21 minutes and 44 seconds.

4. This line was filmed but edited from the broadcast version.

5. To retain the sense of immediacy and unfolding drama, present tense is used in recounting the rehearsal and filming.
6. Frequently in media interviews, actress Dixie Carter acknowledged that the character of Julia was the voice of Bloodworth-Thomason (Littwin, 1990).

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“... age ideology has not been theorized by communication scholars, yet it is probably as important as gendered or racial ideologies in terms of influencing our individual and collective experiences and our identities.”

REPRODUCING AND RESISTING THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF DECLINE

Midlife Professional Women’s Experiences of Aging

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This exploratory study provides an analysis of midlife professional women’s experiences of growing older at work. The master narrative of aging as decline encourages midlife women to experience and articulate growing older in terms of loss, isolation, and diminished material resources. Yet women do not simply reproduce the decline narrative, they also offer resistant stories. Analysis of women’s narratives suggests that increasingly, midlife is represented as a feature of one’s identity to be managed effectively. Specifically, entrepreneurialism has colonized the aging process such that the individual is now positioned as the locus of her own problems and solutions in relation to the seemingly inevitable decline that begins at midlife. In contrast, this analysis attempts to make explicit the economic, organizational, and discursive bases of aging. Finally, the article brings the politics of midlife professional women’s aging to the fore, highlights implications for theory and practice, and suggests directions for future research.

Experts predict that in the coming decade, as the large cadre of baby boomers grows older, managing an aging workforce will be the biggest challenge facing organizations and their aging employees (Stuller, 2000). There has been little research to explore older employees’ experiences of work, but there is some evidence to suggest that older workers correctly perceive disproportionate numbers of their ranks represented in downsizing. Corporations routinely cut costs by reducing the older workforce (Crawshaw-Lewis, 1996). And although the privileged few receive voluntary early retirement, complete with golden parachutes, many older employees are finding themselves forced down into subemployment or out into unemployment.

The reality is particularly grim for midlife women. Women of all ages still face substantial hurdles at work including lack of promotions and mentoring opportunities, wage disparities, and lack of corporate concern for family care needs (Laabs, 1996). In addition, older women face the double blow of sexism and ageism. Older women, for instance, face age discrimination in hiring (Lewis, 1994). In addition, at 45, women’s earnings have already peaked and many are facing subemployment (Gullette, 1997).
Feminist scholars argue that as women grow older and attempt to move into senior ranks in their professions, they are simultaneously expected to conform to youth-oriented constructions of femininity. For example, as Dinnerstein and Weitz (1994) concluded, “These norms create barriers to advancement for aging women. While on men, gray hair, wrinkles, and even a widening waist signify experience, wisdom, maturity, and sometimes sexiness . . . on women they denote decline and asexuality” (p. 19). Moreover, many women were at one point ageist themselves and now “turn this prejudice inward, becoming vulnerable to all kinds of commercial efforts to keep them from ‘looking their age’ and underrating their wisdom and experience” (Davies, 1993, p. 11).

However, aging does not necessarily bring with it problematic material conditions and ideological constructions that diminish women’s identities. Although growing older poses a variety of challenges for professional women, not all women perceive aging as exclusively burdensome. For some women, growing older in the context of their professional lives also affords new opportunities. To at once critique and possibly begin to transform a patriarchal capitalist system that denigrates older working women, we need to first hear from those women and learn from their experience.

Feminist organizational scholars have begun to expand our knowledge about how women experience and sometimes transform organizations (Ashcraft, 2000; Murphy, 1998; Trethewey, 1997), but we know very little about how women fare in organizational life as they age. And although feminists have long called for research that addresses “interlocking oppressions” (Anzaldúa, 1990; Asch & Fine, 1992; Butler, 1993; Collins, 1990; Davis, 1981; Houston, 1992; Spivak, 1988), few feminists have explored the intersections between sexism and ageism.

As a feminist interested in the (political) process of aging, it is clear to me that age ideology has not been theorized by communication scholars, yet it is probably as important as gendered or racial ideologies in terms of influencing our individual and collective experiences and our identities. Although aging may seem to be the most “unabashedly bodily of all the body-based conditions, we
should look first and hardest for [its] constructedness” (Gullette, 1997, p. 3).

THEORIZING MIDLIFE EXPERIENCE:
THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF DECLINE

Dominant (White, middle-class) ideologies teach us early and well to dread aging and to be on the look out for any signs of decay and decline. Our feelings about aging are learned via the dominant culture’s master narrative of aging as decline. The plot of the narrative suggests that in our youth we live our “peak experience” (Gullette, 1997, p. 8). We then enter middle age, when for example, we (mis)recognize our aging face in the mirror, and for the rest of our lives, we deteriorate into “decline old age and death” (Gullette, 1997, p. 8). The master narrative of decline prevents us from looking to other explanations for the seemingly “natural” decline that aging implies. We mistakenly conflate drastic life changes—such as the drop in income levels that so many now experience at midlife, the socioeconomic practices that discriminate against the aging, the condescension of the young, the inability to perform meaningful paid work, and the lack of access to information and health care—with aging exclusively (Gullette, 1997). Those circumstances are often heavily linked to the politics of gender, class, race, and sexual orientation rather than age per se. Age ideology is troublesome because it prepares professional women to expect and demand little as they age, diminishes women’s individual and collective experiences, and treats rejuvenation through consumption as the only means of staving off eventual decline.

When faced with the seemingly inevitable decline associated with aging, many women search for ways to better manage the aging process. Increasingly, middle-class White women adopt an entrepreneurial attitude toward the performance of their (aged, gendered) professional identities (Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000). The “enterprising subject” (du Gay, 1996) or the “entrepreneurial self” (Miller & Rose, 1990) is a form of identity that now shapes the
available subject positions for contemporary workers at every hierarchical level. Formed by the discourses of consumerism and psychology, the entrepreneurial subject is made responsible for his or her own personal, professional, and economic success. A successful entrepreneurial identity is fashioned through the “artful assembly of a ‘life-style’ put together through the world of goods” (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 25). In organizational contexts, one is able to become a better self through the consumption of “innumerable training courses and seminars” that develop the “values of self-realization, the skills of self-presentation, self-direction, and self-management” (Miller & Rose, 1990, pp. 26-27).

Midlife professional women are increasingly being sold a vision of aging as a series of individual or entrepreneurial choices. It is up to the individual woman to age successfully, largely through consumption (of “age-defying” skin products, hair color treatments, cosmetic surgeries, and self-help literature). For example, scores of popular texts, with titles like Successful Aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1998), intimate that lifestyle and attitude, both of which are ultimately the enterprising individual’s responsibility, are more important than sociopolitical circumstances or genes in determining how well one ages. In true entrepreneurial spirit, these texts claim that women can stave off decline if they take control of their own aging process.

My goal in this project is to critique the discourses of decline and entrepreneurialism that work to “fix” the meanings of aging for midlife professional women and to offer alternative narratives of aging (Trethewey, 1999b). The current dominant narrative of aging is productive in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1979). That is, it provides us a seemingly real story to tell; it produces midlife identities. It also constrains alternative explanations or narratives. Yet, not all women accept the dictates of age ideology, nor do they simply parrot its discourse. Many women, at least partially and momentarily, resist age ideology through articulating alternative narratives and asserting more enabling identities. It is important to note here that I do not assume that aging identities represent an either-or orientation. Women do not evidence either domination by age ideology or resistance to age ideology; rather, they engage in
hegemonic struggles, out of which a (contested) identity emerges. Hegemony, argued Mumby (1997), is not a state but a process that embodies “simultaneously (and in a tension-filled and contradictory manner) the dynamic of power and resistance” (p. 346). Midlife women are neither “unwitting dupes who unreflectively reproduce the status quo,” nor do they “by virtue of their marginalized status . . . create pristine spaces of resistance that subvert the dominant order” (Mumby, 1997, p. 366).

Identities emerge in the contested spaces between domination and resistance, in hegemonic processes or “accommodating protest” (MacLoed, 1992, p. 557). The idea of accommodating protest does not imply that women will always be victims despite their struggles, but encourages us to think beyond the dichotomies of victim/actor or passive/powerful toward the more complicated ways that consciousness is structured and agency is embodied in power relations. (MacLoed, 1992, p. 557)

Hegemony suggests “that there is no simple dichotomous correspondence model that allows one to interpret communication processes as either power/domination or resistance” (Mumby, 1997, p. 346). Our charge as communication scholars is to empirically explore how professional women’s simultaneous and dialectical obedience and resistance to age ideology is practiced through communication. In so doing, we may begin the long overdue process of explaining, critiquing, and transforming the social construction of aging in ways that are more enabling. Such is the nature of this exploratory study.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How is aging organized and experienced by White middle-class professional women?
Research Question 2: How do White middle-class women reproduce the discourse of decline in their narratives and embodied identities?
Research Question 3: How do White middle-class professional women resist the discourse of decline through their narratives and embodied identities?
METHOD

As a feminist, I am interested in articulating how women are made to experience their bodies as a result of their ideological or discursive positioning (Brewis, Hampton, & Linstead, 1997; Dellinger & Williams, 1997; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000; Trethewey, 1999a). Although I am interested in women’s midlife experiences, I do not assume that women’s experiences are unmediated, unproblematic, or foundational; rather, experience, including my own, is always already structured by discourses of power (Jardine, 1993). Like Scott (1992), I contend that “it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (p. 26). Furthermore, “Experience is at once always an interpretation and is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested” (Scott, 1992, p. 37). The challenge for feminists is to analyze experience and to redefine its meaning. Doing so “entails focusing on the process of identity production, and insisting on the discursive nature of ‘experience’ and on the politics of its construction” (Scott, 1992, p. 37).

In addition, any report of experience, including the one presented here, is always a political and perspectival accounting (Kauffman, 1992). My analysis of the participants’ experiences is, in many ways, a product of precisely the discourses (ageism, entrepreneurialism, Whiteness) that I aim to critique, and other researchers would not necessarily produce a similar reading of the data texts. As a White middle-class soon-to-be (or perhaps, already?) middle-aged professional, my own identity is shaped by the same discourses that are written on my participants’ bodies and selves. As a feminist scholar, I am trained to make the familiar, taken-for-granted world (including my own) strange and unfamiliar through ideology critique. A critical perspective “involves the ability of its adherents to criticize the ideological frames that they use to make sense of the world” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 288). Therefore, I do not position myself as a documentarian; rather, I am implicated as a fellow traveler (Kvale, 1996) or
coperformers of organizational narratives (Taylor & Trujillo, 2000). I am interested (in every sense of the term) in exploring how the meanings and identities of midlife professional women are overdetermined, reproduced, and potentially transformed in and through communication.

In-depth, semistructured interviews with 15 self-described professional midlife women served as the primary method of data collection for this exploratory study. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours. The participants in this study were recruited from a variety of sources and included women who had participated in an earlier study of professionalism and women’s bodies, friends, and referrals from a local newspaper reporter who covers aging and retirement issues. All the participants are Caucasian, which is a sad commentary on either my ability to recruit women of color, the lack of women of color in leadership positions in this large metropolis in the American Southwest, or most likely both. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants’ (self-selected) pseudonyms, ages, and occupations and the number of transcribed pages from each participant’s interview.

Each interviewee was asked the following kinds of questions:

1. What does aging mean to you?,
2. What is your experience of growing older at work?,
3. What is liberating or challenging about growing older, particularly at work?,
4. What does a professional older woman look like?,
5. When are you made aware of your age?,
6. How do others respond to you as a midlife-aged woman at work?,
7. What does it feel like to inhabit an aging body?, and
8. What is your vision of the future?

Although I did employ an interview guide, the interviewees co-determined the direction and flow of the conversation (Oakley, 1981).

The interviews were conducted either in the participant’s place of business, local coffeehouses, restaurants, or the participant’s home. The participants selected when and where interviews would take place (Kauffman, 1992). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Using feminist theories of aging as sensitizing
concepts (Gullette, 1997), I analyzed the data for emergent themes that suggest how these women experience, embody, and perform their age. Specifically, shortly after each interview, I jotted copious field notes that captured my initial impressions of the interview, particular themes that emerged as salient, and any “surprises.” Those jotted notes were later developed into analytic memos about the possible meanings of emergent themes. During this iterative process, I also went back to the literature to seek out new and/or more refined theoretical tools to better explain the data. Once the transcripts were completed, I read and reread each interview text in relation to my early and more developed field notes, as well as in relation to other interview texts. This strategy enabled me to move toward theoretical saturation and to see similarities and differences among themes across interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The utility of the analysis does not lie in capturing participants’ “inner, authentic” experiences but rather in voicing participants’ articula-

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<th>Participant Summary (N = 15)</th>
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tions of their discursively constituted realities and identities (Kvale, 1996, p. 4).

THE AGONIES AND ECSTASIES OF AGING: ANALYZING MIDLIFE WOMEN’S NARRATIVES

The thematic analysis that follows is organized around the three research questions. The findings indicate that in response to the first research question, midlife professional women’s experiences are organized in and through the material consequences of aging at work such as discrimination, downsizing, and corporate flight. In response to the second research question, the analysis suggests that professional women reproduce the discourse of decline by narrating their experiences primarily in terms of loss and isolation. Finally, in response to the third research question, the analysis suggests that the participants’ narratives also resisted the discourse of decline by articulating the benefits of aging and crafting new identities at work. In the pages that follow, I explain the analysis by offering a politicized reading of those themes highlighting the participants’ voices. Following the analysis, I discuss implications of this study for both theory and practice and suggest directions for future research.

ORGANIZING AGING: THE MATERIAL CONSEQUENCES OF MIDLIFE FOR PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

In response to the first research question (How is aging organized and experienced by White middle-class professional women?), the women interviewed for this study discussed in nuanced terms the economic and material realities of aging at work and how those realities influence their own futures. When asked about what her future holds, Digger, a bank employee, pointedly stated, “I think about just making enough money.” Nancy, a vice president in a finance firm, also reminds us that
the problem that a lot of women have is that older women of today never got a chance to really have super jobs, and so what ends up happening is they didn’t build up much in the way of pension benefits.

Dawn, a federal employee, knows that she is “fortunate that [she is] going to be in a financial situation where I don’t have to work [after age 55].” She recognizes that she is among the fortunate, claiming, “I don’t have to work until I’m so tired that all I can do is go to work.”

In addition to their concerns about making enough money to survive old age, the women also articulated their very real concerns about discrimination, downsizing, and subemployment. Furthermore, they described reasons for the mass exodus of women from corporate America.

Discrimination

As a federal employee who works around issues of equal employment opportunities, Dawn knows all too well the discrimination, de-skilling, and wage deflation that often characterizes older women’s experiences of work. It saddens her that women rarely complain about the obvious discrimination they face at work. She notes, “People tend not to file age-based charges. They are difficult to prove. . . . The biggest area where we see age discrimination is in downsizing, rightsizing, making the economic adjustments so that the company is profitable.” Women, says Dawn, seem particularly unwilling to file age discrimination charges. Dawn explains their dilemma,

Do you make waves, or do you just keep your mouth shut? You look around and say, “Well, I just have x number of years left to do it; then I can retire . . . . I don’t want to become confrontational, because you know these aggressive women; there’s nothing worse.”

The cultural prescriptions for femininity may impinge on midlife women’s willingness or desire to seek what is rightfully theirs: a work life free from what Dawn terms “intersectional discrimina-
tion.” Indeed, the federal laws and courts have historically not accounted for interlocking oppressions. Rather, discrimination cases are analyzed based on a singular notion of discrimination. Dawn explains,

The court, and [our agency] is guilty of it too, historically has done an analysis of [the] discriminatory impact of the discriminatory treatment, bases by bases. For an age analysis, we have to look at it and compare this person to that person; [then] we find a violation or we don’t. Then we do the sex analysis . . . . Then we do the race analysis . . . . But we’ve never integrated the analyses successfully into one analysis. For example, an older Black female is going to have a more difficult time in [this town] than the White older female. Even though that [Black] woman may have superior qualifications.

The lack of systemic and institutional recognition of and attention to interlocking oppressions may further erode midlife women’s economic standing. The plight of poor midlife women, many of whom may be women of color, is of concern for two reasons: The number of women in this category is increasing, and the financial security of elderly women is largely determined by their financial status in their middle years (Butler & Weatherly, 1992).

**Downsizing and Subemployment**

In addition to discrimination, older women routinely face downsizing and subemployment. Digger claims not to fear anything about growing older except being “put out” again. “That’s my greatest fear,” she says, “because I’ve been downsized three times in 12 years.” Digger’s future financial security has been diminished by having to “start over” three times. CK was downsized three times in the same industry. The last time it happened, she was “really mad.” She claims, “I probably would have had a wrongful termination suit had I pursued it.” Like the women Dawn refers to who do not complain, CK does not pursue legal action. Instead, she decided, in an enterprising fashion, that “this is never gonna happen again. I don’t care what it takes. I’m going to be my own master.” CK, who now owns and manages her own eldercare company, may
now be doing what she enjoys, but she makes it clear that it has been an “uphill struggle” financially.

Sunshine, who runs her own management consulting firm, recognizes that downsizing may force many midlife women to reevaluate what they consider an acceptable job. She, too, adopts an entrepreneurial attitude when she explains,

We have become much, much more flexible in what we think are acceptable jobs. When you fire that whole middle-management area and they’re all somewhere between 40 and 55, I mean, we’ve got a lot of years left in us. So what are you gonna do? You’re gonna see a lot more variety in terms of jobs that are acceptable and professions that were never [considered] professions before . . . . Things like being a tailor or a seamstress or being a craft person is going to become something that we’re going to look at as much more of a profession than a hobby.

Although Sunshine, as her chosen pseudonym might suggest, chooses to present the “opportunity” to become more flexible in one’s chosen career path as a potentially positive and valuable choice, most of the participants did not share her enthusiasm. Dawn, for example, critiques the menial jobs that are too often offered, as “opportunities,” to older employees. She reports, “There are two jobs that, you know, any person of age [can get]: being a greeter at Walmart and the other is sweeping the floors at McDonalds.”

Due to the pervasiveness of discrimination, downsizing, and subemployment, Katie knows all too well that her own financial security may be in jeopardy as she ages. She worries about her economic future. Money was never very important to Katie, a social service agency director, “but suddenly,” she says, “I’ve realized why everybody’s after it. Because what it buys you is freedom, freedom to make those choices.” Katie yearns to be free of “poverty, ill health, and loneliness . . . . I think [the economics of aging] is really scary.”

The women interviewed for this study represent a (largely) privileged group, and yet many of them are still concerned, with good reason, about their economic futures. Although a small minority of these economically privileged White women discussed their retire-
ment in terms of “sailing with my husband” or “traveling,” others envisioned their futures in much more pedestrian styles, perhaps in anticipation of some economic “downsizing” of their own.

The economics of aging is not unrelated to a variety of strategic organizational practices. Midlife Americans, particularly women, now regularly “compete for the lessening number of good jobs, or are forced into ‘early retirement,’ or part-time ‘flexible’ work without benefits or unemployment” (Gullette, 1997, p. 16). Moreover, the once revered notion of seniority at work is coming under attack, even in the middle class (Gullette, 1997). Given these dynamics, it is not surprising that midlife women are leaving, avoiding, and critiquing corporate jobs.

**Corporate Flights**

Several participants described their own and others’ reasons for fleeing the corporate world. CK was dissatisfied with corporate life, not only because she was inappropriately fired but also because of the persistent “glass ceiling,” the petty jealousies, and the pressure to engage in unethical marketing practices. Likewise, Joyce, a management consultant, left corporate life because she was “sick and tired of all the political hassles,” as were most of her friends. Joyce claims, “Every single one of them was sick and tired of the nonsense that you have to endure in the corporate world.” Sunshine, too, opted out of the corporate world to start her company. She believes that many women who struggled to succeed in the corporate world often “get to the top and say, ‘Ok, I’ve done that; I don’t need it anymore,’ and walk away from it. It is almost as if it is a passage in our lives as opposed to a destination.” Sunshine believes women measure success differently than their male counterparts and do not need to succeed according to a masculine model (Fine & Buzzanell, 2000).

CK’s, Joyce’s, and Sunshine’s successes outside the corporate sphere can and should be celebrated, and yet it is troubling to think that well-qualified senior women are opting out of corporate life, leaving younger employees bereft of midlife mentors and other
midlife employees without a social support network. These stories are not isolated anecdotes. In one study of 300 female managers, 40% felt trapped in their current jobs, nearly one third felt depressed, and nearly 90% were seriously considering making a major change in their lives (Morris, 1998). Many corporate contexts do not provide supportive environments for their midlife female employees. What remains largely unexplored are the reasons so many midlife women retreat from or are abandoned by corporate life after struggling up the career ladder for years.

Understanding the confluence of decline discourses, entrepreneurialism, and liberal feminism begins to provide an answer. Liberal feminism assumes that women can “have it all” in the contexts of existing structures, but they must find (individual and collective) ways to create equality at work by, for example, finding mentors or performing exceptionally. Yet, these liberal feminist strategies have largely “failed to eradicate many important aspects of social and economic disadvantage faced by women” (Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992, p. 22). When equality eludes them in existing structures, many midlife women hope to find success on their own terms outside the corporate sphere by adopting an entrepreneurial attitude and approach to their careers. If entrepreneurialism does not save these women from downsizing or troubled retirements, then they have no one to blame but themselves and are likely to accept and indeed reproduce the discourse of decline that characterizes aging at work.

REPRODUCING THE DISCOURSE OF DECLINE: NORMALIZING LOSS AND ISOLATION

Given their experiences at work, it is not surprising that the participants reproduce the discourse of decline. The second research questions addresses how White middle-class women reproduce the discourse of decline in their narratives and embodied identities. The data reveal that two themes of decline permeated their narratives, namely loss and isolation.
Loss

The notion of loss permeates participants’ talk, as if vitality, beauty, fertility, agility, and sexiness are the province of youth. For these women, aging is largely about loss and losing a familiar and valued identity. Specifically, the participants discussed losing their familiar and youthful faces and bodies and their sexuality. Concurrently, the women described how they often attempted to “pass” at work as younger women to avoid the loss associated with aging.

Losing face. The participants articulated the stories that we have all come to expect about what it means to grow older. They described their struggles with weight gain, graying hair, menopause, aging faces, and fatigue. Given the cultural scripts about aging, it is not surprising that these women consistently described the process of aging in very negative terms. Nancy says of aging, “It’s no fun. I feel it in my joints. I didn’t used to have these jowls. This [pointing to her face] has started falling!” Many women described their own version of the mirror scene or the experience of shock at seeing themselves as older women. Charlie, a health care professional, says she does not typically think about her age but is often scared when she looks in the mirror and discovers a “kid in an old body.”

Mary, president of a local chamber of commerce, indicates that menopause is a particularly difficult time for midlife women, as it represents the loss of physical and emotional stability. She says, “I hate menopause. It’s the pits. Sometimes, it gets you in real trouble. [It] creates all sorts of physical as well as emotional problems. It is annoying, and it makes you irritable.” Digger indicates that her menopausal body is beyond her control. She relates,

As you go through the change of life, you put on weight. I’ve never been this heavy, and it wasn’t until I started going through the change of life that I started putting on the pounds . . . And the hormones just make you blow up more.

She goes on to say that she does not “feel very good about [her] body, and there’s nothing [she] can do about it.” Digger’s response
echoes the all-too-common view of the unattractive and unhappy menopausal woman who has lost her youthful body.

Perhaps, most interesting is the connection that some women make between aging and organizational practice. Katalina, a kindergarten teacher, explains,

You have less energy and stamina and visual and hearing acuity. They’re all important when you’re working around little kids, and you know, I want to be down on the floor and working with them, and I have a hell of a time getting back up.

Joyce says that the physical side is difficult for her. “It’s just the physical stuff. It’s just flat out exhausting.” Finally, Katie says,

The biggest issue is that while my body is beginning to fall apart, I have no time to do anything to support it. What I’d rather be doing is eating healthier, exercising regularly, getting proper sleep, not being stressed, being able to spend time with people that I enjoy. But I’m feeling stuck in a wedge between having to make a certain amount of money to survive, pay the house bills, plan for retirement, while on the other hand, having to take care of the vessel in which my soul lives and feeling unable to make that choice.

These women, however implicitly, unhinge aging from its bodily base by articulating some organizational explanations for aging. They imply that current organizational arrangements and modern conceptions of work demand from them unrelenting discipline and productivity from their bodies. And in response, these women do what they can to sustain work, sometimes at the expense of their bodies and souls. Here, work is not supposed to be for body sustenance; rather, the aging body is positive only insofar as it supports work (Deetz, 1998). What is hinted at in their remarks is that it is not the natural process of growing older that ages women: It is the process of work that does.

Yet, aging and the loss it implies remain conceived as an individual problem that might be overcome through better strategic choices. Aging, for CK, is about personal strategies. CK says, “I believe in giving myself the best odds possible.” In her line of work, she sees older people who have not made “good choices,” those “with
emphysema smoking cigarettes out there alongside the oxygen tank.” That is a “mentality” that CK does “not understand.” Maureen also constructs aging well as a personal choice. She says,

I choose to be healthy and fit. I don’t feel the pressure to appear youthful. To me, it’s a choice . . . . I religiously work out. I lift weights four or five times a week. I work with a trainer 2 days a week; I do some cardio maybe on the weekend, and then, I’m pretty active on the weekend, climbing, hiking, something. I’m not obsessive about it, but I feel pretty good.

As a successful attorney, Maureen has the financial resources to hire a personal trainer, to pay for her health club membership, to buy expensive and “age appropriate” clothes, to have her hair colored, and to engage in a variety of practices that enable her to manage her own aging process. Women in the higher income brackets may be particularly vulnerable to such practices,

where not only are the codes of perfection strict, the competition keen, the fear of failing great, the marginal advantages of “youthfulness” high, but also the money is available for expensive procedures, from workouts with massage to spas to surgery. (Gullette, 1997, p. 146)

Those, like Katie, who fear aging in poverty due to relatively low-paying career choices, may be even worse off because “with new desires for cultural goods, and age anxieties they can’t allay in any of the fashionable ways” (Gullette, 1997, p. 146), they are left lacking and feel even more deeply a sense of loss.

_Losing sexuality._ As women age, they also describe their sexuality in terms of loss. However, that loss is manifest in two interesting ways. For some, midlife entails losing the burdensome sexual harassment, sexual objectification, and sexual tension that they too often experienced as younger professionals. For others, however, aging brings with it another sort of loss, an “erasure” and pathologizing of their sexuality.

Many discussed an ease and freedom that comes from not having to worry about being viewed only as a sexual being at work. Others,
like Joyce, found it relaxing not to have to compete with other women for (sexual) attention. Similarly, Vicki, vice president of a technology firm, relates that when she was an up-and-coming professional she wanted “men’s attention, but as you grow older, you realize that’s not the kind of attention you want. You want their respect, you want their friendship, but you don’t want them crawling all over you every time you turn around.” Vicki is now free of that form of unwanted attention. Nancy, too, says plainly, “One thing age has going for it is that guys stop making passes at you. It makes working much easier.” Likewise, Success, an administrator in higher education, says,

Because of my age, I exude confidence and knowing and maturity, and I’ve gained respect from that. So with the men that I’m meeting out in the business world, there’s not a sexual element there. And it’s nice, very nice.

As they age, women, it seems, no longer make others uncomfortable because their sexuality is no longer threatening. Ruth, a professor, is quite positive when she explains the benefits of a non-threatening sexuality. She contends, “It’s freeing because I can go anywhere, and with this age, with this [gray] hair, [the response I get] is ‘Oh, she’s not a threat.’”

It is undoubtedly liberating to be able to do one’s job without being sexually harassed or reduced to a sex(ed) object. However, there is something deeply troubling about these women’s stories. Although young women may have to contend with having too much sexuality (Cockburn, 1991; Trethewey, 1999a), midlife women’s sexuality may be simply erased by popular discourses of aging. Katalina, for example, describes feeling invisible where she was once the target of the gaze. She explains that as her hair becomes gray and her fine lines emerge, she often feels as though she recedes into the background and is overlooked by wait staff, salespeople, and others in the public sphere.

What is even more troubling than erasure is that midlife women’s sexuality is also pathologized in contemporary (workplace) culture (Cole & Rothblum, 1990; Leiblum, 1990). Although midlife women may not be threatening, neither are they normal. The master narra-
tive of decline positions menopausal women as “suffering,” “hormonal,” “emotional,” “diseased,” “abnormal,” asexual, and in need of treatment (Tavris, 1992, pp. 157-158). As Katie argues, the menopausal midlife body is “othered” at work. She states,

You’re in a male-dominated world. You are probably already thought of as the other, being female, having children, potentially leaving for maternity leave. You’ve already been through all of that, and now if you’re gonna be thought of as the other for going through menopausal changes, it’s only gonna compound your glass-ceiling issues.

The menopausal body, like an excessively sexual body, is a professional liability because it cannot be controlled or disciplined. It is a “leaking body” that is a threat to a woman’s professionalism (Trethewey, 1999a). As Katie explains, “I mean, if you’re having major hot flashes and sweating all over your silk outfit, that’s a whole different level of problems than if you’re just worried about having some wrinkles.”

Although it is encouraging that some women feel relief at no longer having to negotiate their (formerly hyper or excessive) (Trethewey, 1999a) sexuality at work, it is troubling to consider sexuality as something that is “erased” in the popular imagination as women age. Either position, unfortunately, leaves women lacking. What needs to change, it seems, is not the aging and menopausal body itself but the ways in which women’s bodies are sexualized, objectified, and disciplined so that midlife women are not made to feel somehow less than normal as a result of their experiences at work (Cockburn, 1991).

Passing: Delaying loss. The master narrative of decline encourages women to associate aging with loss. In response, women are often positioned as and feel personally responsible for holding decline in abeyance through a variety of consumptive and aesthetic choices. Indeed, passing, or presenting oneself as something one is not (Kanuha, 1999), was the model of aging well for many of these midlife professional women. Historically, individuals in marginalized and subordinated groups have attempted to pass as members of
dominant groups (White, male, heterosexual) to “assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other” (Ginsberg, 1996, p. 3). For similar reasons, midlife women often attempt to pass as younger women. Mary epitomizes this approach to aging. She says,

I’m not gonna look young when I’m 75 years old, but I’m gonna continue to try. It’s a matter of pride. I do work at it. I exercise, and I take care of myself. I do all the things that I can, and I’ve always done them. In fact, it feels good. When you’re 53 years old and people say to you, “Geez, you don’t look that old,” everybody wants to have that. . . . And [passing] does help in your career. That doesn’t mean that you can’t succeed if you don’t fit the image of the successful career woman, but I think you have a better chance if you do. That may sound shallow or insignificant, but we’re not gonna change society.

Mary suggests that the image of the successful career woman is that of a younger woman or at least a woman who appears or passes for younger than she really is. The successful midlife woman works continually to avoid or delay the seemingly inevitable decline associated with age in the popular imagination. To achieve that idealized image, Mary exercises, wears professional and expensive clothing, and colors her naturally graying hair. She was also supportive of those who made the “personal choice” to undergo cosmetic surgery. She believes that if plastic surgery makes women feel better about themselves, then we should not “judge” them. In fact, she anticipates, correctly according to some reports (Gullette, 1997), that we will see more and more professionals opting for cosmetic surgery.

Although not all participants advocated surgery as a means of aging well, most participants did indicate that looking young was a point of pride and a key component of aging well. CK explains that image is particularly important for midlife career women. She says that as a midlife woman,

You probably need to compensate even more as you’re older for being appropriate . . . . I color my hair [because] I started looking
strange, tired, and old. I think we all owe ourselves that. I think we really need to make what adjustments are necessary.

Passing is a complex process for many midlife women. Finding an age-appropriate image is a process fraught with tensions: appearing too youthful is, perhaps, as troublesome as appearing too matronly. Yet, most women feel compelled to appear younger rather than older. Specifically, these women used the strategy of dissociating or separating themselves from an aging identity through behaviors that upheld the cult of youth or of distracting by using multiple, highlighted identity messages to produce confusion about their aged identities (Spradlin, 1998, pp. 600-601). As Spradlin (1998) vividly argued, by encouraging the practice of passing, organizations simultaneously and paradoxically ask the marginalized other to “be all she can be” while simultaneously enforcing a culture that devalues her difference, her aging identity.

Yet, it is not surprising that women attempt to pass. The marketing of ageism and anti-aging products is pervasive, persuasive, and unrelenting. Age is the (capitalist) system’s next big market, and there is much profit to be made in making women, and increasingly men, feel anxious about their aging bodies. Companies routinely exploit ageism as a marketing tool to sell hair products, cosmetics, hormone replacements, pharmaceuticals, clothing, living-well literature, cosmetic surgeries, and a host of other lifestyle products to aging boomers to help them in their own entrepreneurial attempts at passing.

Not all participants are interested in passing. Ruth consciously decided several years ago to stop trying to pass as a younger woman. She explains,

I decided to let my hair go gray. Then I stopped wearing makeup. Talk about freeing. To be able to say, this is the face, you know; it’s an older face, but I’m not going to hide it. And look at the time I saved? [Now] I even cut my own hair. So I save a lot of time and money.

Ruth is quite comfortable with her midlife self. Unlike those who make conscious efforts to stave off the (seeming) effects of aging,
Ruth saves time, money, and energy by resisting the urge to pass. She engages in potentially more transformative practices than many of her counterparts whose passing strategies, rather than resisting age ideology, effectively reproduce the discourse of decline and its attendant young-old binary.

The discourse of these professional women suggests that women lose something of their essential femininity as they age, namely their faces, their bodies, their sexuality, and their youthful identities. That sense of loss is, undoubtedly, compounded for many midlife career women who experience a sense of isolation at work as well.

**Isolation**

Many of the women in this study spoke of the isolation that permeated their working lives. That isolation was manifest in several different ways. First, some women felt like trailblazers in their own professions, always forging a path for and by themselves. Second, few of the participants could point to any midlife role models in their personal lives and even fewer in their professional lives. Finally, others reported feeling isolated from other female friends, associates, or family members as they grew older. It is, perhaps, not surprising that these women who entered the workforce during, and in large part because of, the second wave of the women’s movement found the workplace to be a rather solitary and lonely place. Many of the participants were tokens when they began their careers and, in many ways, still are (Kanter, 1977). They make clear that women had to and still have to work hard to achieve workplace equality and often have few female role models or social support networks to help them.

*Blazing trails and trials.* Nancy and Ruth provide telling narratives about starting out in their respective fields and having to make their own way without the support of others. Nancy reminds us that midlife women faced substantial hurdles at every step of their budding careers. When she entered the field of financial planning, Nancy was “no more than a token.” She continues,
I was interviewed by several firms. Most of them told me they were not hiring, but they were. They just weren’t hiring women. One said, “I’m only interviewing you because I need to say I’ve interviewed some women, but I can’t hire you. This is not a business for a young lady.” I walked out of there so mad I was shaking. It’s a lot different now, but there’s still a long way to go.

That older women struggled to pave the way for others seems lost on many of her younger female coworkers. Nancy explains,

You’ve been plugging so hard for so long, you fought the good fight, you’ve paved the way. So it’s irritating when young women come along and crap around. Because it isn’t okay yet for women to be mediocre, and I know it’s not . . . . What every woman does still shows up as evidence of what all women do.

Nancy makes clear that she blazed a trail for others and is concerned that younger women may not be tending the path.

Nearing the end of her long career in the academy, Ruth speaks of a different sort of isolation that comes from being a trailblazer. She says,

I find myself being in the odd position of being a role model. [And] I mean I really feel alone, and I don’t have other role models of whom I can say, “I want to be like that.” I feel as though I am doing it for other people, which isn’t actually a comforting thing.

Both Ruth and Nancy feel isolated, although for different reasons, as a result of being trailblazers.

*The lack of role models.* Given that many participants were trailblazers in their fields, they simply did not have many female mentors to model; they forged their own professional identities. When asked if she had any professional role models, Joyce responded, “No. I can’t think of any. Certainly, not in the corporate world, you know; there weren’t any women in power at all.” When Maureen was asked the same questions, she hesitated and said, “Uh, uh, huh . . . well . . . I’m taking a long time to answer that question aren’t
I?I guess if I had one, she’d pop out right away; wouldn’t she?” 
Nancy, too, claims that she never had any professional role models. 
She says, “There aren’t any even in popular culture. And at my age, 
they’re even fewer.” Ruth was clearly the exception. She beamed 
when she described her “two intellectual mothers” from whom she 
learned valuable, if not always encouraging, professional lessons 
and developed lasting personal relationships. The availability of 
role models for women is important as they are a factor that predicts 
midlife happiness and well-being (McQuaide, 1998).

When they did not find professional role models at work, many 
women turned to female mentors from their private lives. Joyce 
turned to literature to find guidance. Even as a young child, Joyce 
devoured Nancy Drew mysteries. “Here was this girl who could do 
stuff. No guys rescued her. In fact, it was often the other way 
around. And I always liked that concept.” Finally, several women 
spoke of their own mothers as role models. Katalina learned little 
about what it means to be a professional from her mother, but she 
learned other valuable lessons that infuse her work. Katalina’s 
mother “pursued music above just about everything else, family, 
work . . . [I learned from her] the idea that there are higher truths 
than the conventional sorts of goals.” When faced with a lack of 
professional role models, these women found them in their private 
lives and adapted them to their public working lives.

Longing for social support. Having a close group of women 
friends is a factor that predicts midlife well-being (McQuaide, 
1998). Yet, as indicated, many participants lack that support. Joyce 
articulated several reasons that make it difficult for her to develop 
networks with women her age. She says, plainly, that “relationships 
with other women, they aren’t the easiest to find. Not all women are 
okay with professional, independent women.” Those relationships 
become even more strained as women age. Joyce goes on to say, 
“It’s hard to find relationships with women who are not threatened 
by you, who are interesting. Some of them are so much into the ‘Oh 
well, I only have 5 more years, and then I retire’ mode.” Joyce has 
difficulty finding women her age to interact with because, she says,
Let’s face it, women in my age group weren’t expected to have careers. You got married, you were a good little wife, maybe you worked for a while as a secretary. There’s nothing wrong with that, but that just didn’t satisfy me.

Finally, Katalina discussed some of the barriers that prevent her from forming relationships with her younger peers. She finds that younger colleagues often seem to have “all the answers” and that those “answers come easily.” As one with more experience, she often finds herself looking at issues in more complex ways, from a variety of different perspectives. As a result, she sometimes disagrees with her younger colleagues’ “simple” answers. In response, they see her as “an old fuddy-duddy.”

Fortunately, not all participants bemoaned their lack of support networks. Nancy describes her group of four midlife career women friends as her lifeline. Like Nancy, these women were also “tokens” in their respective fields as they began their careers and were yearning for support. According to Nancy, they thought, “Let’s the four of us get together, and we can learn from each other. Little did we know that it would become our lifeline emotionally.” Early in their friendship, the women traded information, technical support, and tangible assistance. Today, her friends provide Nancy with much-needed sounding board and emotional support.

In keeping with liberal feminist or accommodationist approaches (Conrad, 1994), these women performed exceptionally well, looked for role models or mentors, and longed for and sometimes created social support networks as ways to negotiate their organizational lives. Such strategies of “fitting in” to the largely White masculine organizations are consistent with the advice that was often given to White middle-class women during the second wave of the women’s movement who were hoping to succeed like their male counterparts (Conrad, 1994). But these strategies did not prevent these women from experiencing and reproducing the loss and isolation that is often associated with aging. And yet, these women do more than just reproduce decline discourse in their talk and actions, as indicated in the following discussion.
RESISTING THE DISCOURSE OF DECLINE: THE BENEFITS OF AGING AND CRAFTING NEW IDENTITIES

It is troubling that these women, who appear to be quite successful, confident, and capable, all seem to reproduce the discourse of decline in their discussions. Yet, their narratives are never simply (re)productive; these women also speak and embody resistance in their everyday lives. Their voices simultaneously reinforce the master narrative of aging and offer alternative, often silenced, and powerful narratives about midlife (Corey, 1998). The subject, after all, “cannot be considered just a mystified victim; it is also a source of resistance” (Gullette, 1997, p. 191). If we pay close attention, we can hear women providing us with alternative meanings for and identities in midlife (Bell & Forbes, 1994). Because the hegemonic process is an everyday struggle, we must be mindful that resistant stories are not separate from oppressive ones in practice. Analytically, though, it is useful to highlight and emphasize these forms of resistance to better understand and learn from the participants their vision of a (potentially) more empowered aging identity.

The following section addresses the third research question: How do White middle-class women resist the discourse of decline through their narratives and embodied identities? There are two primary ways that the participants resist the master narrative of aging. First, they counter decline narratives by describing benefits that accrue along the life course. Second, the participants articulate the ways in which they are able to craft new identities as they work in and through midlife.

Benefits of Aging

Contrary to the decline narrative, there are, according to the participants, several positive features of midlife. The participants described midlife as a time of increasing freedom, prioritizing, increasing acceptance of self and others, decreasing concerns about the opinions of others, and reaping the benefits of experience.
As already mentioned, many participants felt that midlife brings with it freedom from unwanted sexual advances from men. But it is not the only sort of freedom women experience. Joyce explains the freedom that comes from not having to conform to stereotypes. She comments, “I don’t have to fit anybody’s stereotypes of what I should look like at 55 . . . It’s that business of allowing yourself the permission to choose what you feel like doing and being okay with it.” Ruth, too, says that for her, freedom comes in the ability to “do the work that I want to do because I want to, not because I have to.” Finally, CK says that there is a freedom in being able “to kind of float and just observe things” at work. “It’s nice,” she says, “at times not to be the center of attention.” CK is not noticed as a sexual(ized) woman, which enables her to adopt a unique insider-outsider perspective (Collins, 1990).

A second pervasive theme that characterized the participants’ talk was that of shifting priorities. Katalina explains,

You learn what’s really important to you, and you put more of your energy into the things that really matter to you and not so much into things that matter to the world at large, like how you look [and] how you dress.

Katie, too, relates how her own priorities have changed to reflect a broader worldview and the freedom that entails. She explains that as she has moved into her late 40s, she is thinking in terms of the bigger picture. What’s important? You know, not wanting to harm others, making a positive mark on the world, and not having that eternal concern about what other people think. [As a young woman] there was that awful feeling of constantly being judged, and at some point, you just say, “I don’t give a rat’s ass.” . . . I think everybody wants to be loved and accepted, but it gets less as you get older. You want to please yourself and the aggregate world more but not specific individuals that you don’t know. Things are far more in perspective now.

The omnipresent and oft internalized gaze of the (male) other that appears to characterize many women’s experiences of youth (Trethewey, 1999a) is less central to the lives of midlife profes-
sional women. It may be that the gaze no longer rests on them because it no longer finds them worthy, yet these midlife women do not seem to mind or care; rather, they revel in the freedom and ease that their newfound priorities bring.

The third positive aspect of aging that was commonly discussed was experience and the credibility and respect that come with it. Nancy says that with age comes experience and security. As a result, Nancy claims, “I don’t find myself being dismissed [by colleagues and coworkers] anymore. They don’t have that choice, thank you very much!” Maureen argues that one of the benefits of growing older is that “you lose some of that fear; you have a little calmer approach to everything . . . . So you enjoy it more, and you’re a much better service to your clients because of it.” Joyce articulates the credibility that is associated with age. In fact, she says that aging helps her as a management consultant and personal coach:

If you’re too young, you’re not taken seriously. They’re not gonna take me seriously if I talk about [change processes] if I don’t look like I’m old enough to have had at least one or two transitions along the way.

Hearing women talk about the credibility, experience, and respect that accrues with the passing of time is common; what was less common was to hear women speak of midlife in terms of power. Only Ruth discussed increased power as a benefit of aging. Ruth states, “The age thing gives you more power. I have been around a long time. I’m a full professor . . . . When I see something that’s unfair, I get listened to. I don’t get brushed away.” Although it may not always feel comfortable, Ruth is willing and able to use her power when she feels it is necessary. She uses her power to create contexts in which other women can succeed by mentoring junior faculty and ensuring that marginalized voices are heard.

The master narrative of decline suggests that as women age they have less to offer their organizations and their communities. These women provide powerful reminders that midlife women have much to contribute and are still a force to be reckoned with. They remind younger women that they may have much to look forward to, despite messages to the contrary.
Crafting New Identities (Th)at Work

To counter the master narrative of decline, we need to embody and craft resistant age identities (Gullette, 1997). In many ways, these midlife professional women were engaged in just such a process of reinventing themselves. Although many of these women did, at times, reproduce the master narrative of decline in their talk, they also, simultaneously, attempted to become something different, indeed, better than their younger selves as they moved into midlife. These new identities are closely related to the freedom that was described above. Vicki, for example, felt as though she spent much of her life trying to achieve success according to others’ standards. Since turning 50, however, she’s begun to become someone else. She is forging an alternative identity that is, perhaps, more enabling. She clarifies,

I’ve begun to look at the whole person, which is the career, the mind, body, spirit of that person, the whole essence of that person. I now recognize that I am this whole person, and the world may say, “Here’s my definition of success,” and I turn around, and I say, “I don’t need your definition any more.” I’m not pegging myself to someone else’s matrix that says at this point you should be you know, doing this, you should be making so much money. I just let go. I let go of all of that . . . And I think that’s the kind of freedom for me that happens once you get past 50. It’s like, wow! It’s time for me.

Vicki uses her newfound freedom (which requires economic and material resources) to perform a self that has fun, enjoys her life, and focuses on her own priorities. Although Vicki crafts her identity largely in opposition to her career, she is invigorated by and has come to define herself in relation to her (unpaid) work with a women’s business organization.

Others have found ways to more fully integrate their private and public selves as midlife women. Joyce says that her work and her life are all integrated. She says,

What I do is ignite a fire. That’s what I do in everything I do, at work or at home. I give people skills so that they can integrate what they
do. Then, you don’t have to have this painful separation between work and the rest of your life.

CK also describes the satisfaction she gets from being able to help others through her paid work. Finally, Katalina discusses how she has managed to bring more of herself into her job as a teacher. Rather than using work to define herself, Katalina attempts to integrate her passions into her teaching. She reports,

I do take a lot of my identity from my nonwork activities, you know music, gardening, travel, languages. Those are all really important to me. I think I define my work by who I am. That’s one nice thing about being a kindergarten teacher because you get to bring so much of yourself and your interests to the classroom. I love music, and so we do music in my classroom. . . . A lot of my interests define my work more than my work defines me.

Katalina has managed to incorporate her own values, interests, and desires into her work. So like Joyce and CK, Katalina is able to pursue her own growth while satisfying her organization’s goals (McGregor, 1957). Furthermore, she believes that the integration of her work and nonwork identities will make her transition to retirement easier. She will simply continue to pursue those elements of her life that are important in contexts outside the classroom. These women are beginning to carve out an age identity that counters normative constructions of midlife. That sort of important identity work, however, will fail to achieve its full potential unless a full accounting of the politics of aging is addressed by individuals, organizations, and the larger culture.

THE POLITICS OF MIDLIFE AT WORK: AGING, ENTERPRISE, AND IMPLICATIONS

This largely exploratory study suggests that how we socially construct midlife has material and ideological consequences for White middle-class professional women. Increasingly, aging is
being socially constructed as an individual(ized) problem to be best “managed” through “enterprising” choices (du Gay, 1996, 1997; Miller & Rose, 1990). When age ideology, or the process through which aging is assigned value-laden and arbitrary meanings, assumes the mantle of neutrality and truth then the politics of midlife remain unarticulated.

A politicized reading of participants’ discourses indicates that entrepreneurialism is being appropriated to combat the decline narrative. The participants in this study largely articulated their own midlife entrepreneurial spirit in terms of personal growth. Maureen suggests that her future involves “continuing to develop increased proficiency in my profession. One of the beauties of the law is it is a continual learning experience. You always learn; you’re always developing.” Joyce similarly explains her own success as a result of her willingness to grow. She claims,

I’ve done a lot of different kinds of things to continue growing even though I’m out on my own. I’m taking seminars . . . . Of course, you have to stay on top of stuff; so that’s why I feel like I’ve grown a whole lot.

Nancy exclaims that as a midlife professional, “If you’re not growing, you’re dying. I really believe that.” She, perhaps most explicitly, articulates the connection between entrepreneurialism and decline. Decline will overtake a body if individual actions are not taken to age successfully.

Aging appropriately requires the enterprising management of identity, particularly for women. The findings of this study imply that aging successfully requires that midlife professional women make careful and considered choices, including passing as younger women. Yet, this entrepreneurial discourse effectively prevents us from looking at midlife as a social and political construct. Those who do not age “successfully,” those who are downsized or left without the benefit of pensions, for example, can be explained away by their lack of “entrepreneurial” savvy or their inability to control their aging process. The social institutions—including corporations, health care organizations, the media, and others—that
support, uphold, and are maintained by decline discourse do not have to claim any responsibility for or take any actions to redress the plight of those who are most affected by it. Instead, individuals are now held personally responsible for their own successes and, more commonly, their own failures.

Katie speaks powerfully to this point as she compares herself and her choices to a more financially secure midlife friend. She laments,

I look at someone like [my friend], and she's positioned herself well financially. She’s very planned: She’s got five acres of land in Seattle, two and a half acres of land in Santa Fe, a home [locally]; she travels regularly, she bikes, exercises every morning, because she planned it. I’m thinking, maybe I didn’t make the right choices . . . . And so I’ll be flipping burgers when I’m 85, and [my friend] will be living on a mountaintop in Seattle.

Katie’s lifelong work in a social service agency is framed as a poor choice that will not enable her to age successfully, whereas her friend, apparently, made better choices to work as a lawyer and financial planner. Katie does not critique the culture that fails to support and value those (women, primarily) who work in the helping professions. She does not critique the discourse of entrepreneurialism that positions individuals, rather than institutions, communities, and organizations, as responsible for their own well-being in the present and the future. Instead, she naturalizes entrepreneurialism and decline discourse through her own talk. She will not age successfully. She can expect a declining lifestyle because she made poor choices.

Indeed, du Gay (1997) made clear the troubling implications of the entrepreneurial subject. He argued that some individuals are and will continue to be marginalized because they cannot or will not conduct themselves in an entrepreneurial manner:

Pathologies that were until recently represented and acted upon “socially”—homelessness, unemployment and so forth—have become re-individualized through their positioning within entrepreneurial discourse and hence subject to new, often, more intense forms of surveillance and control. (p. 302)
Although du Gay does not specifically address aging, it is clear that the discourse of entrepreneurialism is at work to position the midlife woman as “continuously engaged in a project to shape his or her life as an autonomous, choosing individual to optimize the worth of his or her existence” (p. 302) in the face of decline. Entrepreneurialism is at work to re-individualize the sociopolitical problems that increasing numbers of midlife women face, including poverty, deskilling, downsizing, isolation, and loss as they move along the life course (p. 302). The discourses of decline and enterprise have the potential to diminish us all and to leave us feeling responsible for and subject to our own demise. And yet, this study intimates that we, as individuals, organizations, and communities, have the potential to rewrite the master narrative, to tell a different story.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY**

The participants in this study do not only reproduce the master narrative, they also occasionally resist it. In so doing, they make clear that midlife can be a time of transformation, freedom, growth, and fashioning new identities for professional women. They articulate an oppositional narrative of aging even while supporting the discourse of decline and entrepreneurialism. These midlife women embody and narrate a both-and story, an unfolding of the process of hegemony. These women have achieved wisdom, a sense of freedom and achievement, and inner strength. Yet, those experiences may not save these women when they are downsized, when they are in the job market, or when they look in their mirrors and are horrified by their reflections. These White middle-class women embody a contradictory position “between an achieved sense of confidence and a fearful sense of danger and decline” (Gullette, 1997, p. 235), a position that is “simultaneously resistant and consensual, uniting and dividing, radical and conservative” (Mumby, 1997, p. 367).

In this study, the discursive penetration of and resistance to the dominant narrative of aging as decline is ultimately weakened by
women’s collusion with an entrepreneurial discourse that positions aging as a distinctly individualized, apolitical, and entrepreneurial process. Thus, the potential for collective action by midlife women is limited by a contradictory and simultaneous entrepreneurial identity. This entrepreneurial attitude, with its emphasis on consumption, “threatens to swallow up [midlife women’s] political resistance strategies—if not their entire identity—into the undertow” (Rubin & Numeroff, in press). The entrepreneurial ideal, in concert with liberal feminist or accommodationist strategies, fundamentally represents “a form of self-interestedness that lacks recognition of the need for collective critical consciousness” (Mumby, 1997, p. 371) that might be needed to radically transform workplaces and identities.

Both liberal feminist and entrepreneurial strategies may successfully (if only momentarily) combat the decline narrative, but they are also problematic resistance strategies for collective transformations of aging. Although such strategies may lead to success for individual (White, middle-class) women, they fail to address forms of oppression in organizations based on discourses other than gender and age. These resistance stories and strategies effectively “absolve privileged women of the responsibility for recognizing and fighting against other types of oppression that affect women, such as poverty, racism, and homophobia” (Grimes, 2000, p. 3). In addition, they allow “privileged women to be blind to their participation in the oppression of women based on areas where they do have privilege. They can also ignore how their privileged race and/or class status mitigates sexism to an extent” (Grimes, 2000, p. 4).4

In so doing, both liberal feminism and entrepreneurialism function to reproduce the social construction of Whiteness and White privilege (Frankenberg, 1993; Grimes, 2000) such that “the experiences and communication patterns of whites are taken as the norm from which Others are marked” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 293). Alternative resistance practices are necessary for “Other” midlife women to benefit. This study suggests that White midlife professional women are at once oppressed by discourses of gender and
age and, in some ways, privileged by discourses of race (Whiteness) and (middle) class that deny the necessity of looking beyond White women’s particularly situated concerns to address how aging affects marginalized others.

Empirical examinations of the hegemonic processes of identity construction allow critical organizational communication scholars to better understand “how resistance practices might transform organizational [identities] and to recognize how inextricably resistance is bound to extant power structures and relations that limit the form, scope, and possible effect resistance practices may have” (Trethewey, 1999b, p. 161). The simultaneity of midlife professional women’s oppression and privilege points to the fluid, complex, and contradictory nature of identity construction processes and the need for appropriately nuanced communication theories and research practices that will help us to better explain, understand, and transform organizational life (Martin & Nakayama, 1999; Mumby, 1997; Trethewey, 1999b).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In addition to forcing us to grapple with and refine theories and research methodologies about “messy” identities, the findings also suggest several important practical implications. Research that helps us to recognize, name, and critique middle-ageism is only the first step in combating the discourse of decline. To eradicate the disempowering (ideological and material) sense of danger and decline, collective actions, along the lines of the women’s and civil rights movements, are another necessary step in overcoming the master narrative. This study suggests several collective strategies that, if appropriately politicized, might help to combat the discourse of decline and, incidentally, entrepreneurialism.

First, this study points to a very clear need for mentors in midlife. That there are relatively few midlife women in positions of power makes it difficult for other midlife women to seek out, learn from, and envision themselves as powerful midlife women and leaders.
Therefore, midlife women who are in positions of power must actively seek and cultivate protégés who will become midlife mentors for the current generation of female working professionals. A mentoring relationship would, undoubtedly, serve both the mentor and her protégé well. It would provide a context in which both partners can begin to feel connected to other similarly positioned women, thus providing a buffer for at least one of the negative consequences of aging, namely isolation. Such mentoring efforts would need to find ways to be inclusive of a variety of aging women.

Second, the results of this study as well as existing research make clear the need for midlife social support at work (McQuaide, 1998). Informal social support groups would prevent women from experiencing isolation at work. Such networks might also provide women with a context in which they could begin to more actively politicize midlife experience. In the context of groups, women may begin to engage in discussions that make explicit and critique the discourses of age (in conjunction with gender, race, class, and sexual orientation) in the same way that consciousness raising groups revealed that the personal is political during the second wave of the women’s movement. Social support groups may also become a site where women begin to feel entitled and empowered to complain about injustices they face as midlife professionals. In the company of like-minded women, it may be easier for midlife professionals to file discrimination charges or to serve as advocates for others who are targets of downsizing.

The logical extension of social support groups may be coalition politics or social movements around aging issues. Midlife women may organize to criticize mediated representations of midlife, demand that employers engage in fair labor practices, support those organizations that routinely employ midlife workers doing meaningful work, save the seniority system, counter consumption as the only response to aging, work for better retirement benefits, and encourage the widespread telling of resistant aging tales. The concept of an age coalition has worked very effectively for post-retirement Americans (i.e., Gray Panthers, American Association of Retired Persons). Midlife mobilization around issues such as
those described above may also contribute to dismantling the discourse of decline, unHINGing aging from its (seemingly) biological base, and recognizing the socially constructed and value-laden “nature” of midlife. The politics of midlife must and will soon become a national priority. As a culture, we need to rethink our assumptions about the aging process and aging identities in ways that recognize and value the contributions of a variety of older organizational members.

Organizations and managers must also become advocates for midlife employees, if only to stay competitive in a changing and shrinking labor market (Lofgren, 1999). Organizational leaders are already facing a shortage of wise leaders. For example, “A study of nearly 6,000 managers at 77 companies found that some 75 percent of corporate officers felt their firms had ‘insufficient talent sometimes,’ or were ‘chronically talent short’ across the board” (Stuller, 2000, p. 50). Aging workers can fill that void by bringing their experience and authority to bear on organizational problems. For example, they are better “able to take a balanced view on issues before reaching a decision” (Stuller, 2000, p. 52).

Organizations can take several steps to value, recruit, and retain midlife workers, particularly midlife professional women. Obvious incentives are adequate health and retirement benefits. Again, a larger cultural conversation about our collective responsibility to and interest in an aging population will be required to ensure that such benefits are in place. Retraining, job redesign, and job flexibility are other possibilities. Additional incentives may include new career models that enable better work-life balance. For instance, retirement, “which we once thought of as an ‘on/off’ switch will have to become more gradual” (Lofgren, 1999, p. 15). Rather than simply leaving the organization to retire, more seasoned employees may ease out of their organizational lives by serving as mentors to junior employees, engaging in freelance or consulting positions, or participating in other nontraditional roles outside the corporate structure while still serving as a valued and valuable resource. Revisioning career paths, retirement, and the contributions of older
workers will only occur when and if we reassess our collective values related to aging in general and aging women in particular.

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Clearly, ageism does not affect only White middle-class professional women. Indeed, they may be among those who are least harmed by decline discourses. Women of color and women of lower socioeconomic status are even more vulnerable to decline and entrepreneurial discourses. Organizational communication scholars know little about how historically underrepresented groups experience organizational life in general and even less about how they fare as they age. Further work is sorely needed in this area. In addition, we know little of men’s experiences of aging at work. Men are being bombarded with messages that they too need help against aging. In response, men are buying hair dye and remedies to grow or replace hair. They are the fastest growing market for plastic surgeries, and they are increasingly self-conscious about being overweight. The discourse of decline, and the consumption that often undergirds it, “targets the older man afraid of downgrading or unemployment, who badly wants to look as if he’s able to make it” (Gullette, 1997, p. 146). Men, who have traditionally been protected from decline discourse, are also falling victim to its pervasive grasp. Middle-ageism is becoming a unisex problem, although at different rates with uneven consequences for women and men. Men’s stories are also necessary if we are interested in dismantling age ideology.

The social construction of aging concerns us all, although in different ways depending on our raced, gendered, classed positions. As individuals, organizational communication scholars, and communities, we cannot afford to remain blind to the effects of ageism and its power to diminish those of us who are passing or will pass through the middle years. If we are interested in enabling individuals to fully participate in organizational and civic life, then we must continue to work to counter the master narrative of decline.
NOTES

1. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that even the calls for intersectional research have been largely silent about the issue of age.

2. Midlife is not a fixed, biological, or even chronological life stage. It does not have a particular beginning or end point; rather, midlife begins when the culture says it does (Gullette, 1997). The middle years are being pushed down farther and farther so that we begin to fear and dread aging earlier, despite that (most) people are actually living longer lives.

3. Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung (1992) described the labor-intensive strategies they employed to recruit and study “subjects of different races and classes” (p. 107). To recruit Black women, they used strategies such as increased “verbal contacts, usually face-to-face, with Black women researchers or other Black women working with the research team” (p. 107). In addition, in their study, White researchers interviewed White participants, and Black researchers interviewed Black participants. Had I employed such strategies, I may have recruited a more diverse sample.

4. Of course, not all the women in this study were unreflexive about their privileged positions. Indeed, Dawn clearly saw the ways in which gender, race, age, and other factors influence women’s experiences at work. Ruth worked actively as an activist to change, indeed dismantle, institutions of oppression, and Katalina often spoke of the ways in which class and racial privilege and oppression infused her classroom and the teaching strategies she used to counteract that oppression. However, the predominant forms of resistance articulated by the participants were largely grounded in entrepreneurialism and its essentializing discourse (Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000).

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“The legitimacy of the report depended on its visible relationship to a particular nexus of organizational talk and texts, governed by particular generic conventions.”

CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE IN AN ORGANIZATION
The Role of Interview Notes

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AUTHOR’S NOTE: I would like to thank the editor, Ted Zorn, and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. The author may be contacted via e-mail: baschnei@ucalgary.ca.
In this study, the author takes a discourse-analytic approach to study the research that two managers carried out in an educational institution to produce and legitimate knowledge that would be used for decision making in the institution. The author suggests that the various steps of any research and writing process can be understood as a system of genres, some written, some spoken, that must be produced in a particular relationship to each other for the final written report of the research to be accepted as a legitimate research report. The author focuses on one aspect of the research process, the production of data through the writing and reading of notes taken by the managers during interviews conducted as part of their research. The author shows that the writing and reading of these notes was a crucial step in the construction of the knowledge on which the decision making was based.

A growing literature on organizations takes the perspective that knowledge in organizations and organizations themselves are constituted through communicative practice (e.g., G. Miller, 1997b; Sarangi & Roberts, 1999; Taylor & Lerner, 1996). Organizations, from this perspective, are regarded as ongoing social accomplishments in which “resources are produced and regulated, problems are solved, identities are played out and professional knowledge is constituted” (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999, p. 1) through social interaction. From such a perspective, knowledge in organizations cannot be regarded as a fixed, stable body of facts or information. Rather, it must be seen as situated, dynamic, constantly negotiated, and constantly shifting, as members of organizations work to have their version of the organization legitimatized as the one that counts. To study how knowledge in organizations is constructed, that is, how something comes to count as knowledge, researchers must attend to the fine-grained details of communication because it is through communicative activities, including but not limited to talking and writing, that such knowledge is produced. In this article, I apply such a perspective to study the interrelationship of talk and writing in the construction of written knowledge in a particular organizational setting.
Scholars who study how knowledge in organizations is constructed have generally focused on either spoken or written discourse (e.g., Bazerman, 1988; Holstein, 1988). Good reasons for this can be found in long disciplinary research traditions. But as Gunnarsson, Linell, and Nordberg (1997) and G. Miller (1997a) pointed out, speaking and writing are not separate domains, each operating in the absence of the other. Writing in organizations is embedded in a stream of organizational talk that occurs before, during, and after the writing of any particular document. Although scholars (e.g., Paré, 1993; Winsor, 1989) have interviewed writers in organizations about their writing processes or traced writers’ thinking processes through think-aloud protocols, they have not studied the talk that takes place between people in organizations about their texts. It is my contention that the construction of written knowledge in organizations can be seen in action through the study of the talk in which the writing process is embedded. Studying talk and text as interrelated communicative activities rather than as separate domains provides researchers with a way to examine the interpretive practices that underlie the construction of any organizational text.

The data I present in this article come from a larger project (Schneider, 1997) in which I traced all the steps of a research process undertaken by two managers in an educational institution to produce and legitimate knowledge that would be used for decision making in the institution. The knowledge they produced provided the basis for the writing of a program evaluation report that made recommendations for change in a number of their educational programs. I observed the managers as they planned and carried out their interviews, analyzed their material, and wrote their final report. I focus here on one aspect of this process: the production of data through the writing and reading of notes taken by the managers during interviews they conducted as part of their research.

My goal in this article is to explore how members of organizations construct the knowledge on which organizational decisions are based. Specifically, my objective is to analyze in detail how two managers constructed the knowledge that would allow them to write a report that recommended changes in their organization. I
show that the notes were an important step in the construction of knowledge that enabled the managers to legitimate their decisions. They used the notes to write a report that presented their version of the organization as the stable and objective reality of the organization, and in doing so, they accomplished their work as managers. A secondary goal is to demonstrate the value of closely analyzing the talk in which writing is embedded as a way of studying how knowledge is constructed in written documents. I therefore take a discourse analytic approach to study the talk that surrounded the writing and reading of the handwritten notes taken by the managers during their interviews.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a number of approaches to studying language use in organizations. These come from a variety of disciplines including sociolinguistics, anthropology, communication studies, sociology, and composition studies. In the following literature review, I present a brief introduction to the linguistic turn in the study of organizations. I then draw on studies by scholars in a number of disciplines to illustrate that although they have a common goal of understanding how knowledge is produced and legitimated in organizations, their focus is generally on either spoken or written discourse rather than on the interrelationship of talk and text. Finally, I situate my study in recent genre theory, specifically Bazerman’s (1994) notion of genre systems, as a way to integrate talk and writing in studying the construction of written knowledge.

THE LINGUISTIC TURN
IN ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

The presumption that language can be used to present factual accounts has been called into question in recent years by writers in
a number of different disciplines (e.g., Boden, 1994; Geertz, 1988; Gergen, 1994). The traditional “mirror” view of language as a neutral medium for the transmission of information has been thoroughly laid to rest by studies that focus on the ways in which language is used to accomplish particular practical purposes and to construct and maintain social realities (e.g., Holstein, 1988; G. Miller, 1997b; Schneider, 2000). These ideas have been taken up in the study of organizations in what Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) called the linguistic turn in organizational research. Studies of linguistic behavior in organizations focus on the complexities of how language use, both spoken and written, contributes to the construction of knowledge within organizations and to the production and reproduction of organizational realities.

In recent work that addresses how language is used to construct knowledge in organizational settings, scholars have typically focused solely on either spoken or written discourse, depending on their disciplinary allegiances. Sociologists Holstein (1988) and G. Miller (1991), for example, examined how institutional discourses are taken up in organizational talk and used by organization members to construct versions of organizational reality. Similarly, sociolinguists Erickson (1999) and Hall, Sarangi, and Slembrouck (1999) showed how organization members construct professional knowledge and identities through spoken interaction. On the other hand, writing scholars such as Cross (1993), Paré (1993), and Winsor (1989) examined the writing processes of organization members. Similarly, Bazerman (1988) and Smart (1993) explored the development of a particular kind of document or genre to analyze how those processes and genres are both embedded in and constitutive of the knowledge that circulates within a particular organization or community. These studies all focus on the way in which either spoken or written discourse contributes to the construction of knowledge in organizational settings; very little research, however, has studied the relationship between spoken and written discourse in this process.
GENRE THEORY

Recent developments in genre theory can help us understand the relationship of talk and text. Genre theory maintains that genres, rather than being a set of textual regularities, arise in response to the social needs of writers for the production of knowledge in recurring social situations. As C. Miller (1984/1994) said, genres embody social action. Smart (1993) defined genre as “a broad rhetorical strategy enacted, collectively, by members of a community in order to create the knowledge essential to their aims” (p. 124). Orlikowski and Yates (1994) defined genres as “socially recognized types of communicative actions . . . that are habitually enacted by members of a community to realize particular social purposes” (p. 542).

Individuals in organizations choose a particular genre to achieve particular communicative goals because of the association of that genre with recognized purposes within the organization. Genres, as Schryer (1993) suggested, are frequently traveled paths for accomplishing communicative purposes within social settings and for producing and maintaining relationships among writers and readers. Genres are flexible enough to be modified to suit a particular writer’s task while still being recognizable to readers as an instance of that genre and thus accomplishing the writer’s purpose of invoking a particular set of typifications and expectations in the reader. Thus, a document’s identity as an example of a particular genre depends less on the formal features of the document (although that is not an insignificant factor) than on who is writing it, what the writing is based on, who will read it, and how it will be used. That is, the document must be embedded in the social relations of the community in which it is constructed and used.

Much of the social relations of any community, whether in the workplace or elsewhere, take place in the realm of talk rather than writing. In fact, people talk to each other to accomplish almost every aspect of organizational life (Boden, 1994), including the writing of documents. Written documents are inextricably bound up with talk in organizations and cannot be understood without reference to that talk. Bazerman’s (1994) notion of genre systems is useful in understanding this relationship between talk and text.
Genre systems are “interrelated genres that interact with each other in specific settings” (p. 97). For example, the various steps of any research and writing process can be understood collectively as a system of genres, some written, some spoken, that must be produced in a particular relationship to each other for the final written report to be accepted as a legitimate research report.

In this article, I focus primarily on one of the genres, interview notes, that is typically an element of the genre system that makes up the process of doing qualitative research. Interview notes arise from another genre in this system, the talk of interviews, which is also regulated by generic conventions about how interviews are to be conducted. In keeping with a well-known tradition of qualitative research in which the goal is to describe a social world as it is experienced by the members of that world, the written research report, the final genre in the system, often includes direct quotations from the notes, allowing the data to speak for itself, as researchers are so often exhorted to do. This inclusion of notes in the final report is, among other things, evidence that the required interviews took place and that material in the report came from the people being interviewed rather than from the researchers. Notes are thus integral to the production and legitimation of the knowledge that forms the basis for the writing of a research report. It is in the writing and reading of notes that the textual production of knowledge in organizations can be seen in action. As Atkinson (1992) said, “Note[s] occupy the intellectual space where reading, writing, and . . . interpretation meet” (p. 6). That is, the genre of notes occupies a central place in the genre system of the research process and thus offers an ideal focal point for studying the intersection of talk and text in the construction of written knowledge.

METHOD

My study took place in an educational institution, where I observed two senior managers conducting an internal review and evaluation of a group of the institution’s educational programs for
children. One manager was the director of the department in which the programs under review were offered, and the other was a senior administrator. Although the managers had no formal training in the methods of evaluation research, in each of the two previous years they had conducted similar reviews of other programs and thus had some experience with the approach and methods they intended to use in this review. They had found the previous reviews to be very helpful in ironing out personnel conflicts and initiating changes to make those programs run more smoothly. They therefore carried out the current review in the same way as the previous two, calling on ideas about doing research that circulate widely in our research-oriented society.

In fact, the managers followed procedures that conform quite closely to recommendations for conducting qualitative program evaluations (e.g., Herman, 1987). They interviewed every program coordinator and teacher involved in the programs, asking them open-ended questions so that interviewees would be able to speak freely about any aspect of their program without being constrained by the question format. They each took notes on the interviews, compiled their notes into an amalgamated list, which served as their data set, and then analyzed their data using a quasi-grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which they looked for recurring ideas and themes. One of them, the administrator, then wrote a report detailing their findings and making recommendations for changes in the programs. This report was delivered to a more senior administrator in the educational institution, and the findings were discussed with the coordinators and teachers. The managers then made changes of various kinds to the programs.

I attended, taped, and transcribed all interviews and meetings at which the evaluation was discussed. This included 21 interviews, each about 45 minutes in length, that the managers conducted with coordinators and teachers and five meetings, each about 2 hours in length, between the two managers during which they discussed the evaluation. I also collected copies of the 27 sets of notes taken by the managers during the interviews (not all interviews were attended by both managers) and copies of all five drafts of the report.
My approach to analysis was an ethnomethodological one (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Although the linguistic turn in organization studies provides a conceptual framework for understanding that knowledge is constructed, ethnomethodology provides an analytic approach that allows researchers to examine in detail the interpretive practices that produce what we come to regard as knowledge. According to Gubrium and Holstein, interpretive practice refers to “the constellation of procedures, conditions, and resources through which reality is apprehended, understood, organized, and represented in the course of everyday life” (p. 114). This interpretive practice is available to researchers through the study of visible social interaction, primarily through the analysis of talk, but also in the analysis of other forms of social interaction (e.g., Heath, 1997). The goal of such analysis is to show how people accomplish a sense of a social reality as distinct from themselves and “confer privilege” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 44) on some versions of reality rather than on others. The focus in an ethnomethodological study is thus on explicating members’ methods of constituting their social worlds. It does not seek to critique the behavior of members, identifying the errors in members’ behaviors or interpretations, but instead seeks to understand how members actively accomplish their practical purposes and, through this, contribute to the construction of their social worlds. I therefore approached the reading of my transcripts with a view to understanding how the speakers managed the social interactions and how they understood each other. I examined the notes and drafts I had gathered to see how they corresponded with what was said in the meetings. My goal was to understand how the managers achieved their practical purpose of writing a report that would allow them to manage their organization.

RESULTS

I begin my analysis by describing the managers’ method of collecting, organizing, and analyzing their data, showing that they did indeed think they were doing objective research. I then show that
because the meanings of both questions and answers are a local matter, constituted within the context of the interview, the managers did not ask all the teachers the same questions. They therefore could not meaningfully group the answers in the analysis of their data. Finally, I show that the managers conferred meaning onto the interviews as they compressed the teachers’ words when they recorded their notes and again as they expanded the notes when they read them, trying to recapture the interview setting.

**COLLECTING, ORGANIZING, AND ANALYZING DATA**

The managers collected their data using a schedule of questions for the interviews that had been designed with a blank space below each question in which they could record the answers they received. When both the director and the administrator were present at the interviews, they each had their own copy of the schedule of questions, and each made their own notes of the interview. They tried to ask each teacher the same questions in the same order. However, if a teacher brought up something that the managers thought was an answer to a different question, they flipped through the questions and put the answer underneath what they considered to be the question answered. Thus, when it came time to organize and analyze their data, the questions and the answers were assembled into neat packages on the schedule of questions.

The managers used a method of organizing and analyzing their data very similar to one widely described in research method textbooks (e.g., Neuman, 2000). In this approach, data gathered in unstructured interviews are grouped and summarized to develop a framework to explain aspects of the social world as portrayed by the respondents. Researchers using this method claim that rather than impose an interpretation onto the data, they allow the analysis to emerge from the data. They sift through the accumulated material looking for critical terms, key events, or recurrent themes. They then look for relationships between events or themes to produce an integrated analysis that fully describes and explains what is being
researched. Following this model, the administrator began organiz-
ing the data by taking the notes each researcher had made on the
schedules of questions and making a list of all the answers to each
question. For example, Question 1 asked, “What in your view are
the particular strengths and weaknesses of your area of early child-
hood [EC] education at [community college]?” The administrator
grouped everything that appeared in the notes for Question 1 into
two lists: One called “Strengths,” and the second called “Weak-
nesses.” He identified some of the comments as coming from teach-
ers in particular programs by putting the name of the program in
parentheses next to the comments. He then realized that he would
be able to draw only some general conclusions from these amalga-
mations of comments and that he needed to further group them so
that comments from teachers in each individual program appeared
together. After doing this, he was then in a position to analyze the
data, draw conclusions, and make recommendations for each of the
programs included in the evaluation.

Evidence that the managers did indeed see themselves as engaged
in an objective process of data analysis, in which the recommenda-
tions arose out of the teachers’ comments, is provided by the fol-
lowing two excerpts from a meeting between the two managers,
during which they discussed the first complete draft of the report. In
these excerpts, the director refers to the set of notes that has been
appended to the report to confirm the conclusions the administrator
has drawn in the report.

Excerpt 1
Administrator: (reading from the draft of the report). Administrative
support and administrative structure are perceived as good. Practi-
cally no support for the idea of an overall EC coordinator. Many fac-
culty stress the desire for more communication, more sharing of
ideas and information, a stronger sense of community among EC
programs. However, there was almost unanimous consensus that we
don’t need another layer of administration/bureaucracy.
Director: It’s interesting, and I am not sure whether we wanted an EC
coordinator or not; but to me, I’m not quibbling with what you have
written. But it is just, and reading your notes, that is really clearly
supported; they don’t want a coordinator. Yet they are screaming for all these things that a coordinator should be able to provide.

Excerpt 2
Administrator: (reading from the draft of the report). Most of those interviewed felt that faculty and students are treated fairly and equally. However, there were several who felt otherwise. The most commonly cited example of preferential treatment revolved around the [collegiate] program.
Director: What I want to do is, I want to pull the data on that one.
Administrator: Equally and fairly.
Director: Which is Question 9, page 24.

In Excerpt 1, the director indicates that he checked the notes that appear at the end of the report when he read the draft before the meeting. He was apparently surprised by the statement that the teachers did not want “an overall EC coordinator” because in his view the teachers “are screaming for all these things that a coordinator should be able to provide.” He therefore looked this up and found that “reading your notes, that is really clearly supported; they don’t want a coordinator.” In Excerpt 2, he says that he wants to refer to the notes, “I want to pull the data on that one,” and then, he turns to the page on which the notes for this question appear. In the ensuing discussion, the two managers together read the notes and confirmed that a number of teachers, although certainly not all, did indeed say that they feel the collegiate program gets preferential treatment. In both these excerpts, the director confirms for himself that the conclusions that appear in the report do, in fact, arise out of the available data. To paraphrase Sacks (1964-1972/1994), the managers are “doing” being researchers; they are demonstrating to themselves and to each other that they are following what they understand to be the rules for conducting qualitative program evaluation research, drawing on the facts of their data to support their objective conclusions.
ASKING THE SAME QUESTIONS

The approach to organizing and analyzing data used by the managers assumes that the meanings of both the managers’ questions and the teachers’ answers are unproblematically available in the managers’ notes. As Mishler (1986) said, it is generally assumed that “the question is adequately represented by its formal statement in the text of an interview schedule and the answer by an interviewer’s highly selective version of what a respondent said, usually in the form of ‘on-the-spot’ notes” (p. 36). However, as I have established elsewhere (Schneider, 2000), the interview is not an unproblematic conveying of information from respondent to interviewer. Rather, the interview is a collaborative endeavor in which meanings are actively constituted as the discourse unfolds. Meanings of both questions and answers can thus only be understood in the context of the interview, which may or may not have been recalled by the managers when they read their notes.

Because questions in interviews leave room for interpretation by both interviewers and interviewees, we cannot be certain that interviewers and interviewees will understand the questions in the same way. The meaning of questions is negotiated in the interview. However, only if the meaning of the questions is the same for all respondents can they be said to be answering the same questions. And, only if respondents are answering the same questions can their answers be grouped meaningfully together in the analysis of data. The following excerpts illustrate the variety of ways in which the teachers being interviewed interpreted the meaning of Question 2, which appeared as follows on the schedule of questions: “Please comment on the quality of instruction within this program.”

Excerpt 3
Administrator: Comment on the quality of instruction.
Teacher: Quality of instruction? I think the quality of instruction is excellent. Even though I said different instructors offer different things, I think all the instructors in the program are very good and they are all doing a fine job.
In this excerpt, the administrator asks Question 2 using only the first part of the question as it is printed on the schedule of questions. The teacher immediately understands the question to be about the teaching abilities of the other teachers in her program; no negotiation over the meaning of the question takes place. She answers directly and concisely, and because the administrator goes on to the next question in his next utterance (not shown in the excerpt), it seems that he accepts her interpretation of the question as the correct one in this context.

In the following excerpt from another interview, the director changes the wording slightly as he asks Question 2.

Excerpt 4
Director: How do you feel about the general quality of instruction within the program?
Teacher: Like each teacher, what they do?
Director: Yeah, not asking to break down each teacher individually, but are you generally comfortable that there is a good standard of instruction, good teachers doing good work, or do you have concerns about it?
Teacher: I would think they do good work, but I have never heard anybody. I heard a few of Mary’s and Crystal’s students, so that is what I can say I heard. So, this is it; I don’t know exactly how many we have in the program, who is in the program. I heard Mary and Crystal’s students because we had a few recitals together; so what I heard I liked, but I am not sure. Is that it, or is there more to it, or did everybody play?

The slight change in the way the director phrases the question, from “comment on the quality of instruction” to “how do you feel about the quality of instruction,” has changed the question. We cannot say for sure whether the change of wording is significant, but certainly the response of the second teacher is very different from the response of the first. The first teacher answered quickly and easily, apparently understanding the question in a way that made sense to her in the context of the interview. The second teacher appeared to be unsure of what she was being asked and needed to negotiate the meaning of the question for the context of the interview. She asks for clarification, “Like each teacher, what they do?” and gets
much more explicit direction about how to answer: Talk about whether the other teachers are “good teachers doing good work.” She is also much more unsure of her answer than the first teacher; she does not really want to commit herself to having feelings about the quality of the instruction provided by other teachers in the program.

The two teachers quoted above both teach in the same program. The teacher in the next excerpt teaches in a different program. In this excerpt, Question 2 appears in yet another form.

Excerpt 5
Administrator: Comment on the quality of instruction. This is going to be a two-pronged question like the last one was. First of all in your program, which is a small number of faculty, but if you can comment on that, and then if you have a feel for [all the programs] in general.

Teacher: What I want to say is that the quality, as Zelda and I teach it, is very good and very sound. Zelda’s training was as a kindergarten teacher; my training was as a student in [this discipline] from early childhood, but I had the opportunity to work closely with a professor in the education department and learn a lot about educational techniques. . . . But, we did have once a form to fill out and an assessment of some kind, if you recall just a few years ago, and our coordinator at the time was quite delighted because the comments were very favorable about the course. . . . I had a really wonderful experience. . . . I was talking to Joseph’s Montessori teacher, and I invited her to come to the 8th-week session when the parents are coming in and watch what I was doing. And she was very, very enthusiastic because she knew the techniques that I was using were very sound and the results were very good. . . . What a treat that was for me to have another teacher who recognized what I was doing, what my techniques were, and really was enthusiastic about it. I really felt good. . . . We have had good feedback about the course.

This teacher’s answer indicates that she has heard the manager’s question not only as a request to comment on the teaching abilities of individual teachers in her program but also as a question about the quality of the course being taught. She mentions one formal assessment that was conducted, saying the “comments were favor-
able about the course,” and she finishes her answer by saying, “We have had good feedback about the course.” Unlike the teachers in the previous two excerpts who teach early childhood students both privately and in groups, the teacher in this excerpt teaches this age group only in groups of about eight children. The format of her teaching activities provides a context for her understanding of this question and, therefore, for the way she answered it. It seems that regardless of whether she was asked exactly the same question as the other two teachers, she heard the question differently because of her specific teaching context. She also seemed to hear this as a question about her own teaching abilities rather than about the teaching abilities of other instructors in the program. She talks not only about the course but also about herself as a teacher, which neither of the other two teachers did. After a brief mention of another teacher at the beginning of her answer, she talks about her own training and tells a story about how a Montessori teacher responded to her teaching techniques.

Although it was certainly the intention of the managers to ask the same question of each teacher, they clearly have not done so. Even if they had used exactly the same wording for all the interviews, we cannot assume that the meanings of the questions would be the same for all teachers, even teachers in the same program; and we therefore cannot assume that the answers are answers to the same questions. Certainly, the teachers brought their own understandings of their programs to the answering of the questions. There may be, for example, factors other than the quality of teaching that cause the second teacher to be unwilling to commit to an answer. As the conversation unfolded, it became clear that she has very strong negative feelings about the program as a whole. It is possible that these negative feelings about the program made her unwilling to say anything positive at all, even though she might think that some of the teachers are in fact doing a good job.

Because the meanings of both questions and answers are a local matter, constituted within the interactional context of the interview, the answers cannot be grouped together unproblematically. The administrator himself realized that he could not group the third teacher’s answer with those of the first two teachers because they were talking about different programs. He therefore put the third
teacher’s answer with the answer from the other teacher in the same program. He presumably intended to put the answers from the other two teachers, who both teach in the same program, with the answers from the interviews of other teachers in their program, but he apparently overlooked the notes of the first teacher’s comments when putting his list of notes together. This teacher’s answer was not recorded at all on the list of notes from which the administrator worked when he wrote his report. This teacher was effectively, if unintentionally, silenced, at least on this question.

**WRITING THE NOTES**

Whether or not the answers can be legitimately regarded as answers to the same question, the managers transformed the answers that the teachers gave by selectively recording only certain aspects of the answers in their notes. These notes may or may not reflect the meaning that was available in the context of the interview. The managers’ notes for the excerpts above illustrate both this selectivity and the variability in the relationship of the notes to the interviews. Only the administrator attended the interview of the teacher in Excerpt 3. The handwritten notes for this excerpt read, “Excellent. Although there are differences of approach, all instructors are good, doing a fine job.” These notes use many of the same words used by the teacher and reflect fairly accurately what was said.

The handwritten notes for Excerpt 4, however, tell quite a different story. There are two sets of notes for this interview because both the administrator and the director attended. The administrator’s notes read, “Think they do good work,” and the director’s read, “Think they do good work. Hear some of the other teachers’ students on recitals. What she has heard she likes. Not sure she knows from the outside.” Both sets of notes have omitted all the hedges in this teacher’s answer and, in doing so, have stripped away all of her uncertainty and reluctance to commit herself on this topic. For example, the teacher’s first two words, *I would*, do not appear before the word *think* in the notes. Without the context of the interview, the word *think* in both sets of notes can be read to mean that she has made a definite statement that the other teachers are doing a
good job. In the context of the interview, however, it is clear that the words *I would think* mean that she supposes but does not really know if the other teachers are doing a good job.

The director’s notes capture some of her uncertainty with the words: “not sure she knows from the outside.” But, this is not the language the teacher used. She said, “I have never heard anybody,” meaning that she had never actually heard any other teachers teach and so had no direct personal knowledge of their teaching abilities. This is presumably what the director was trying to record with the word *outside* in his notes, but without the context of the interview for reference, *outside* does not convey this meaning with any certainty. It could, for example, mean that she has not heard any comments from people outside the program.

In any case, because of the way the handwritten notes were recorded in the amalgamated list of notes from which the administrator worked when writing his report, the point is moot. The notes that he worked from and that are appended to the final copy of the report read as follows: “Think they do good work. Teachers have different approach, some [by] rote, some [by] reading. Hears other teachers’ students in recitals, what she hears she likes.” (The remark about the different approaches comes from a later section of the interview.) The director’s phrase “not sure she knows from the outside” has disappeared and with it any indication of the teacher’s reluctance and uncertainty. The notes now convey the sense that she thinks the other teachers are doing good work because she likes what she hears in recitals.

The answer of the teacher in Excerpt 5 takes the form of a narrative. She describes the feedback she has received about her teaching by telling a story about an occasion on which a Montessori teacher came to her classroom. According to Paget (1983), people use narratives to arrive at a meaningful understanding of events in their lives. In this case, the context of the interview question provides the occasion for telling about an event that happened in the past, and as she tells her story, the teacher constructs the meaning of the event. The narrative emerges in the context of the interview and is given its meaning by that context. The telling of the story is thus integral to the meaning of this teacher’s answer.
The handwritten notes for Excerpt 5, however, give no hint of the narrative. They read, “As ZL and DR [pseudonyms] teach it, very good and strong. One evaluation very positive. ZL comes from kindergarten training, DR from [this discipline]. Good feedback.” The narrative, if it is represented here at all, has been reduced to “good feedback,” the words that the teacher herself used at the end of the excerpt to summarize the story she had told. At most, the administrator has recorded an extremely condensed version of her narrative. He has ignored the concrete details of the story and selectively kept only the summary. The meaning that the teacher constructed in telling her narrative has been completely eliminated from the notes and replaced with an abstraction that could be related to any number of narratives or other kinds of answers.

The notes that the managers took in the interviews condensed and transformed the teachers’ answers. The answers that appear in the notes therefore cannot be taken to represent the answers the teachers gave. They can, however, be taken to represent what the managers regarded as relevant to their administrative concerns. They selected from what each teacher said on the basis of what would be important and relevant for the construction of their report, in which they would assess and make recommendations for the various programs. When it came time to write the report, the administrator had access to only these transformed versions of the teachers’ answers, not to the words the teachers said. He may also have had memories of the interviews, but because 6 months passed between the beginning of the interviews and the beginning of the writing of the report, these were likely not vivid. Whether he could actually remember what was said in the interviews, however, the notes now stood for the interviews. The notes at that point were the interviews.

READING THE NOTES

To understand the answers on their pages of notes, the managers had to do the reverse of what they had done when they condensed the teachers’ answers; they had to somehow expand the notes to arrive at a meaning for them. As Mishler (1986) said,
The analyst uses her or his “best understanding,” makes explicit
pronomial or elliptical references to other material as well as to pre-
sumably shared knowledge between the participants, and intro-
duces factual material from other parts of the interview or from gen-
eral knowledge of the world. (p. 95)

However, without the context of the interview, the meaning that
was constructed in the interview, which the notes are presumed to
represent, can never be recovered. In the following excerpt, taken
from a meeting during which they discussed a fairly complete draft
of the final report, the two managers puzzle over the meaning of a
teacher’s comment quoted in the report. The comment under dis-
cussion occurred in an interview conducted by the administrator
alone. (X is a pseudonym for the name of the program.)

Excerpt 6
Administrator: (reading from the draft of the report). Our niche is per-
ceived as leader in the field. (Speaking.) Everybody thinks so.
(Reading from the draft of the report.) Our Program [X] faculty also
see the program as a good fit with the overall [department] program.
We have good links with the university. On the down side, although
we are known in the [X] community and the music community, we
are not known in the general EC community; we need a higher
profile.

Director: Now, where did that come from? ‘Cause that one surprises
me. Program [X], in the EC community that I am aware of, the [X]
program has a very high profile.

Administrator: I should say that “the faculty feels that,” make sure peo-
ple know where that is coming from.

Director: I am wondering who this community is. If I talk to the people
at the university, they know about it. It’s the one program where if I
walk up and down the hallways, I am always bumping in to my
neighbors. It seems to have very broad recognition and support.... I
don’t want to omit the comment.

Administrator: Do you want to answer it in comments on our own?
Director: I think we should put something in there. Now, I agree that we
need a higher profile. But to me, we might want a higher profile
because it is a terrific strength. . . . (Reading from the draft of the
report.) High level of instruction quality. Our niche is perceived as
leader in the field. We are emulated; we are seen nationally as an
excellent program and leader. We have good links to the university. We are well-known in the [X] community and music community. We are not known in the general EC community. *(Speaking.)* Are they talking about, when they say EC, are they talking about day cares? Are they talking about, I am thinking of EC community as EC arts community, and maybe that’s where I am missing the point. Maybe what they are referring to is the same thing I am talking about, you know with the marketing issue. Maybe we are not well enough known in the general EC community of preschools, and playschools and day cares, and

Administrator: The larger community of
Director: Of early childhood activities.
Administrator: That’s how I interpreted it.
Director: You are sure about that?
Administrator: I can go look it up.
Director: Why don’t you look it up, and if it is the case, let’s clarify that so that somebody doesn’t misinterpret it the way I did.

In this excerpt, the director is surprised by the teacher’s comment, quoted in the report, that “we are not well-known in the general EC community; we need a higher profile.” This comment is a combined and slightly edited version of two handwritten notes that appeared on separate but consecutive lines on the administrator’s schedule of questions: “We need to raise profile (was done before, needs to be looked at again)” and “known within the music community and music education community but not the general EC community.” The director’s perception is that Program X is one of the few department programs that is really well-known in the EC music community. The director seems to have read “the general EC community” to mean the EC music community. The administrator appears to accept the director’s understanding of the words in his next utterance, when he suggests that he could revise his text slightly to clarify the source of the comment, “I should say that ‘the faculty feels that,’ make sure people know where that is coming from,” and again when he asks the director if he wants to answer the comment in the text of the report.

At this point in the conversation, the managers have constructed a meaning of the words *general EC community* that is puzzling to the director. He therefore continues to search for a meaning that
will fit better with the other comments from teachers that appear in the report and that will make sense to him. He finally finds it when he sees the word general as referring not to the EC music community but to a larger EC community that includes day cares and play-schools. Now, the comment makes sense to both managers, although the director would like to have confirmation that this is what the teacher who made the comment intended. The administrator offers to “go look it up,” but there is no place to look up the intended meaning because the notes appear in the report almost as they were recorded by the administrator in his original handwritten notes. The original notes will not illuminate the teacher’s meaning any more than the quoted notes the director has available to him in the report. The notes have come to stand for the interviews, and the meaning intended by the teacher is not recoverable by the managers. The meaning of the notes, for their purposes, is the one that they construct as they read them.

**DISCUSSION**

My analysis of the managers’ research process points to several important conclusions about how knowledge in organizations is constructed, each with implications for studying and theorizing about genres and genre systems. First, the managers used a familiar genre, the evaluation report, to construct knowledge and accomplish their communicative purposes within their organization. As Schryer (1993) suggested, they followed a frequently traveled path. They chose the genre of the evaluation report because of its association with their managerial goals of assessing and making changes in their educational programs. The legitimacy of the report, however, depended on its embeddedness in the genre system of the research process. The choice of the evaluation report genre by the managers committed them to a whole series of both spoken and written genres, including interviews and interview notes, that would enable the report to be seen as objective research. The report had to be visible as the final product of the evaluation process undertaken by the managers, that is, as the last genre in the genre
system that made up the evaluation process. The managers made the link to other genres visible by including quotations from their notes in the report. My contribution to theorizing about genre systems is in showing not only that knowledge does travel through a genre system but also that it must do so to be regarded as legitimate knowledge. If the process were seen within the organization as flawed, the report and the decisions it recommended would not be seen as legitimate. The legitimacy of the evaluation report thus depended on its visible relationship to a particular nexus of organizational talk and texts, all governed by particular generic conventions.

Just as the managers knew that the legitimacy of their decisions depended on all the activities that were necessary to produce the report, the teachers likely understood that if they wanted their perspectives to gain legitimacy, they had to participate in the evaluation process. The teachers probably complained to each other over coffee about the same things they told the managers in the interviews. But until the teachers’ talk became part of the genre system of the research process, it did not achieve the status of knowledge in the organization. Entering the genre system of the research process, however, also made the teachers’ talk available for transformation and for use by the managers in the service of their practical purposes. Organization members often have an intuitive sense of this danger. My study confirms that they are right to be wary of what others in their organization might do with their words.

Second, through their writing and reading of interview notes, the managers in my study transformed the experiences that the teachers described in the interviews and the experiences of the interviews themselves into the facts on which the report was based. This transformation occurred as the managers condensed the teachers’ answers, when they recorded only certain aspects of the answers in their notes, and again as they expanded the answers while reading the notes, when they may or may not have recovered the teachers’ meanings. The notes did not just record in some neutral way “what really happened.” Nor did they simply jog the researchers’ memories about events and situations. Whatever the experiences of the researchers or the research participants might have been, the notes, for all practical purposes, became those experiences. Latour and
Woolgar (1986) referred to this process of fact production as inscription, in which the interpretive activity that goes into the production of an organizational document becomes invisible in the report itself, leaving the document to stand as a factual account of the organization. My research thus contributes to genre theory by showing in detail how knowledge is transformed at the intersections of the genres that make up a genre system. It is likely that as knowledge moves through a genre system, it encounters many opportunities for transformation. Close examination of other parts of this genre system, for example, the selection of notes to appear in the final report, would likely reveal further transformations.

I have also demonstrated the value of close examination of spoken discourse as a way to study genre systems. Bazerman’s (1994) notion of genre systems, particularly of identifying written texts as elements in a series of spoken and written genres, provides a conceptual framework for linking written texts to the talk in which they are embedded. Bazerman did not, however, present a program for the study of genre systems. Attending to talk that takes place naturally within settings allows researchers to study the stories that the setting members tell each other and, thereby, how talk within the organization contributes to imparting facticity and legitimacy to knowledge in written texts. Combining the methods of those who attend closely to spoken discourse with the methods of those who attend to written texts, as I have done in this study, can provide an approach for getting at the details of how both talk and text are implicated in the construction of knowledge in organizations. Such an approach provides insights beyond those available to researchers who study how texts are embedded in social contexts using think-aloud protocols, in which writers are asked to speak their thoughts as they write, or after-the-fact interviews, in which writers are asked to reconstruct their thinking and writing processes. The talk that results from both of these methods is produced for the benefit of the researcher. That is, it is a story created by the research participants for someone outside the setting. By studying the naturally occurring talk that surrounds documents in organizations, we can see how the writing practices of individual members of organi-
izations are embedded in the social web of their organizations and contribute to the process of knowledge construction.

In this research, I have examined in detail some of the elements of the genre system that made up the writing of an evaluation report. Ideally, however, I would have liked to follow the reading of the report as it was sent to the vice president—aademic of the institution and to the teachers who participated in the interviews. The writing of the report, although the apparent end to the research process, is, in another sense, only the beginning of the story. The report will produce more talk as it circulates in the organization and may or may not lead to change in the organization. Future research that examines the reading of organizational documents will add further to our understanding of how knowledge is constructed and embedded in the social relations of organizations.

My study has two limitations. First, I selected only a few short excerpts from the large amount of data collected. My selections may or may not be representative of the larger body of data. Certainly, I have selected from my data to accomplish my practical purpose of presenting a coherent analysis and having it published in this journal, just as the managers in my study selected from theirs to accomplish their practical purposes. As I have attempted to show, this sort of selectivity, transformation, and inscription, is an inherent part of all research. Second, I was present during the interviews and meetings. Although this was an obvious advantage in producing intimate and immediate access to the phenomena under study, it is possible that my presence affected what happened in the meetings.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RESEARCH**

Many readers will want to criticize the research conducted by the managers in this study. Some will contend that what the managers did was not really research. As members of the social setting in
which they were conducting their research, they could hardly be regarded as neutral observers of the situation. They were managers who produced a report that presented the rest of the organization with their managerial viewpoint. Others will say that if the managers had been better trained in the methods of qualitative research they would have been less likely to fall into what might be regarded as the traps of interpretation.

However, although it might have been possible for the managers to do better research, they could not have avoided being implicated in the construction of knowledge within their organization. They were engaged in the unavoidable interpretive activity that takes place in every social encounter that involves making meaning from another’s words. All research, whether conducted by practitioners in organizations or by academics—and this includes my own study—is interpretive practice. There is no escape from this, however much we may dress up our academic research activities as knowledge advancement or problem solving. But, acknowledging this fact does not mean that research must stop. Rather, as academic researchers, we must relinquish any thought that our choices of topics, methods, and analytic strategies provide a path to truth about the social world. Instead, we must regard any research strategy as one among many ways to construct a view of the social world. Ideally, in our research we construct an interesting and useful perspective that can help people to better understand and improve their own and others’ lives. In addition, we must acknowledge that our research has a legitimating role for ourselves as academics just as it does for the managers in my study: it gets us degrees and advances our careers.

Making recommendations to practitioners in organizations is more difficult. As Sarangi and Roberts (1999) so rightly pointed out, people in “most workplaces will find a constructivist, ethnographic, interactional approach either irrelevant, trivial, or threatening” (p. 42). Practitioners have good reason to be concerned about the questions raised by this analysis. Nevertheless, I believe that the value for practitioners of a study such as this one is that it can lead to what Alvesson (1996) called an “opening up” (p. 174) of the social reality of organizations, in which organization members
can become more aware of and reflective about social relations within the organization. This in turn may lead to a “questioning of the prevailing dominance relations” (p. 174), something that has the potential to benefit all members of organizations.

NOTES

1. The name of the institution has been changed to preserve anonymity, as have the names of teachers and programs in the institution.

REFERENCES


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FORUM INTRODUCTION

In a recent volume of the journal Communication Theory, David Carlone and I (1998) argued that communication scholars might benefit from the “tactical” integration of resources provided by the field of organizational communication and cultural studies. Our argument began by recognizing that the “de-differentiation,” or collapsing of boundaries, characterizing the post-industrial, information-age society has created new spheres and phenomena of communication. Increasingly, these phenomena blend “dialects” (i.e., particular, local ways of speaking) of identity, production, and consumption that were previously associated with the (relatively distinct) spheres of culture and organization. In this process, work has become curiously stylized. It is funded by both financial and cultural forms of capital, and it is increasingly dispersed across formerly private spaces and moments. In this process, culture—and its associated interests of family, education, and leisure—is increasingly harnessed to the imperatives of corporate and commercial interests. Our goal was to conceptualize a genre of scholarship that would foreground the simultaneity and interdependence of these phenomena. We subsequently reviewed a series of innovative volumes that exemplified this genre and elaborated their central themes: the historical and cultural contingency of discourses surrounding work and management, the organizational contexts of “cultural work,” and the role of popular culture in reproducing and transforming mediated images of organization.

In November 2000, a group of organizational communication and cultural studies scholars convened to discuss these themes at a roundtable held at the National Communication Association Con-
ference in Seattle. Some of these speakers had also participated in a pre-convention conference devoted to engaged organizational communication in the new economy. Out of these two events emerged the idea for this “Forum,” whose essays combine the resources of organizational communication and cultural studies to engage the phenomena of the *new economy*. We have used this term broadly to designate a variety of recent trends that converge to produce the integration of organizational and cultural processes: the rise of shareholder value and short-term strategy, downsizing, outsourcing, mergers, innovations in computing and telecommunications technology, market differentiation, flexible production, globalization, and hegemonic discourses that prioritize knowledge, enterprise, and the customer (Deal & Kennedy, 1999; du Gay, 1997).

The four essays that follow both respond to our original argument and test its viability. Majia Holmer Nadesan begins by distinguishing a variety of theoretical positions on the phenomenon of “post-Fordism.” Her discussion shows how these positions “offer interesting and provocative ways for linking the micro-practices of organizational life and cultural consumption with broader economic and social trends.” Next, Dana Cloud asserts the enduring priority of class (and specifically labor) against the “inaccuracy, pessimism, and conservatism” generated by hyperbolic and mystifying rhetoric surrounding the new economy. In this process, she calls for communication scholars to focus more deeply on class in their studies of power and social change. Following, Kay Weaver focuses on public relations practitioners and scholars as “discourse technologists” concerned with creating preferred alignments between subjectivities, commodities, and capitalist interests. She challenges these professionals to examine their complicity in reproducing the structures and cultures of the new economy. Finally, David Carlone and I extend our original argument by performing a brief case study of the (in)famous Silicon Valley. In this case study, we emphasize alternative conceptualizations of organizational environments, organizations as registers of cultural discourse, and the role of class and globalization in social struggle within organizations.
What unites these essays is not a specific, prescriptive view either on the new economy or on the relationship between organizational communication and cultural studies. Instead, it is an understanding that posing this relationship creates new opportunities for conceptualizing both urgent social phenomena and the role of communication scholars in responding to them. We hope, then, that this conversation will continue.

—Bryan C. Taylor

Guest Forum Editor

REFERENCES


POST-FORDISM, POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND CRITICAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION STUDIES

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Critical organizational communication studies and cultural studies are two subdisciplines that are dedicated to exploring and giving voice to those “others” who are marginalized or exploited. However, although these subdisciplines excel at identifying localized systems of control and resistance, they typically fail to explore how more macro-economic relations function to “other” entire groups of people or nations. The process of economic marginalization at issue here extends beyond cultural practices (e.g., via the media) that dehumanize or exoticize people. Rather, I am referring to the ways in which global systems of capital function to produce and reproduce relatively entrenched hierarchies of labor, economic privilege, and exclusion, which occur both between and within nations.

Given this limitation, I suggest that one potential point of dialogue for cultural studies and critical organizational communication studies—one that engages political economy and transcends fragmentation and/or dualisms (Carlone & Taylor, 1998)—is in the arena of post-Fordism and its relation to, and dependence on, a particular form of globalization. In what follows, I shall introduce readers to the literature on post-Fordism by first describing the social and economic phenomena that it seeks to explain and then by

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introducing the divergent research approaches that contest the scope and effects of post-Fordist phenomena.

*Post-Fordism* is a term that is hotly contested, and like the phenomenon it seeks to understand, it lacks a fixed and uniform interpretation (see Amin, 1994; Hirst & Zeitlin, 1991; Vallas, 1999). Debates about the nature and extent of post-Fordist relations are fraught with competing signifiers used to mark differences in interpretation regarding the extent of economic, social, and political changes that are said to have occurred since the early 1970s in industrialized nations. Included in these debates are questions about the relationship between automation and new patterns of economic globalization, including the expansion of Western capital and the role of transnational corporations (TNCs) in altering global economic and social relations (e.g., see Garrett, 2000; Iversen & Cusack, 2000; Kiely, 1998).

Because post-Fordism is defined by its purported break with pre-1970s Fordism, it is there that I shall begin. *Fordism* is a term (i.e., typification) that is used loosely to refer to the system of production that marked the emergence of the second industrial revolution in the late 1800s. Scientific management and Henry Ford’s assembly line technique exemplify this system; however, Fordism also encompassed the growth of corporations during this period, the proletarianization of work, and the expansion of consumer culture. At an abstract level, Fordism is typically defined in terms of the standardization and mechanization of production; scale economies; oligopolistic competition; protected national markets; vertical integration; coordination of the institutions of banking, industry, and the state; mass consumption; and rising rates of capital concentration (Amin, 1994).

American Fordism, as a form of Western capitalism, can only be understood fully in the context of global economic and political relations (see Wallerstein, 1979). Even so, although acknowledging the always/already global dimension of capitalist relations, one must also recognize that global economic integration was partially, albeit temporarily, thwarted under Fordism by union efforts and protectionist state policies. However, economic recession in the 1970s and the growth of TNCs, among other factors, encouraged a
new phase of globalization that has subsequently been fueled by the post-1970s advances in communication and transportation technologies, the gradual decline of union power, and the ascendancy of neo-liberal trade and political policies.

In describing post-Fordism and its relation to globalization, commentators often address socioeconomic conditions that include the following:

1. There are historically unprecedented liquidity of global capital (i.e., financial) flows enabled by (a) global deregulation of financial markets; (b) contemporary information and communication technologies that make financial transactions simple, fast, and inexpensive (see Garrett, 2000; Sassen, 1991; Tobin, 2000); and (c) the growth of off-shore (outside exchange controls) financial markets. The United Nations Development Report (United Nations Development Program, 1999) estimates that $1.5 trillion a day (in U.S. dollars) were exchanged in world currency markets in 1998 and 1999.

2. There are historically unparalleled levels of market integration, fueled by deregulation of foreign trade restrictions and enabled by technological innovations in communication and transportation (Charles, 1998; Sassen, 1991). However, global trade and foreign direct investment are highly concentrated in exchanges among Western Europe, the United States, and the Asian Pacific (Patterson & Wilson, 2000; United Nations Development Program, 1999).

3. There is globalization of production processes through, in large part, the growth of multinationals, which now account for approximately one third of world output and two thirds of world trade. In addition, at least one quarter of world trade occurs within multinationals (Stark, 2000). The efforts of developing nations to participate in global trade typically result in export-led industrialization and liberalization of trade policies (Standing, 1999). Failure to participate has led to growing economic marginalization and economic stagnation (e.g., see United Nations Development Program, 1999).

4. There are new challenges for the role of the nation-state in controlling its monetary supply and mediating public and corporate interests due to the growth of multinationals and to the increasing liquidity of capital (see Castells, 1997; Sassen, 1996; Tobin, 2000).

5. The development of specialized, flexible modes of production in industrialized nations has led to new opportunities for workplace participation by elite workers (Piore & Sabel, 1984).
6. There is a trend of threats to and/or decline of (unionized) manufacturing jobs in the developed nations (due to automation and globalization). Accompanying this trend within the United States is the growth of relatively low-skilled service occupations (see Clinton, 1997) with an attendant decline in work benefits for the lowest skilled group of service providers (Brooks, 1999).

7. There is high unemployment in Europe and flexibilization of labor in North America. Flexibilization is defined as the willingness of labor to accept nonpermanent (insecure) positions at lower wages, with the separation of labor into a core sector with higher job security and benefits and a periphery sector that lacks security and often benefits (Ong, 1991; Zeytinoglu & Muteshi, 1999). Accompanying these trends is a decline in welfare state benefits (Standing, 1999).

8. There is an informalization of employment globally through growth of contract labor, casual labor, part-time labor, home work (e.g., telecommuting), and other forms of labor not protected by labor regulations (see Menzies, 1997).

9. There is worldwide feminization of labor (Sassen, 1998; Standing, 1999; Stark, 2000; Zeytinoglu & Muteshi, 1999). Export-led industrialization and trade liberalization often “feminize” labor in developing nations as TNCs hire women in the hopes of avoiding union organizing and/or as women globally are recruited into the growing ranks of “casual,” flexible, and/or part-time laborers.

Representatives of the various approaches to the analysis of post-Fordist conditions hotly debate degrees of transformation; mechanisms of integration and disintegration; and the social, political and economic ramifications for people across the globe. To assist interested researchers, I have sketched what I find to be the main positions within the post-Fordist debates: 1

1. Regulation approach (e.g., Amin, 1994; Jessop, 1991; Lipietz, 1987, 1997). A regulation approach explains the structural characteristics and contradictions associated with late capitalism and speculates about its future conditions. Researchers address (a) regime of accumulation, which explores regularities across the whole economy that enable a coherent process of capital accumulation, including among other factors norms relating to the organization of production and work; (b) mode of regulation, or the laws, state policies, industrial codes, and consumption habits—the “institutional ensemble” and cultural practices—that regulate and reproduce a given accumulation regime; and (c) dominant industrial paradigm or labor process, which refers to patterns of industrial and
work organization including technological forms, industrial relations, and so forth. This approach is the most systematic in bridging theory and empirical data but may be regarded as overly economically deterministic (Amin, 1994).

2. **Neo-Schumpeterian approach** (e.g., Freeman, Clarke, & Soete, 1982; Perez, 1985). This approach is similar to the regulation approach but attaches more significance to “technology and technical standards in initiating, sustaining and separating individual long waves” (Amin, 1994, p. 11) of capital development and accumulation. It explores technological innovations that affect forms of work and work organization and that stimulate high-growth sectors. Economic, political, and (to a lesser extent) social changes are extrapolated from technological innovations, leading to charges of technological determinism (Amin, 1994).

3. **Flexible specialization approach** (e.g., Piore & Sabel, 1984). The flexible specialization approach more narrowly addresses production and work in arguing that two industrial paradigms have coexisted since the 19th century: mass production (using special-purpose machinery and unskilled labor) and flexible specialization (general-purpose machinery and skilled labor). It claims that the early 20th century’s reliance on mass production led to a crisis in the 1970s due to changes in the market and due to the rise of specialized, skilled, and flexible work practices favoring small scale firms and/or smaller batch production without loss of industrial efficiency or economies of scale. This approach has generated considerable management literature on purportedly new, nonhierarchical, team-based work cultures but has been criticized for creating a false dichotomy between mass and craft production (Vallas, 1999).

4. **Disorganized capitalism approach** (Lash & Urry, 1987, 1994). This approach uses Marxist theory to compare and contrast two typifications of historically and culturally embedded modes of production: organized and disorganized capitalism. Empirical support is generated from case analyses of the United Kingdom, the United States, and other industrialized nations. The approach contends that changes in technology, consumption practices, and globalized competition have contributed to the rise of flexible specialization in manufacturing and to changes in the spatial organization of production, altering cultural politics and class identifications. It has been criticized for overemphasizing macro-economic relations and excluding regional economic forms of development and failing to adequately link its Marxist theoretical model with empirical generalizations (Hirst & Zeitlin, 1991).

5. **Flexible accumulation approach** (Harvey, 1989, 1996). The flexible accumulation approach addresses how corporations’ efforts to
control environmental uncertainty have led to new regimes of economic accumulation, beginning with the “spatial fix” of transnationalizing production and proceeding to efforts to externalize production through outsourcing, subcontracting, and interorganizational alliances. These trends result in the differentiation of core from peripheral employees and the emergence of new patterns of consumption. The strength of this approach is that it emphasizes the social, symbolic role of cultural practices and politics in affecting organizational practices and strategies as well as broader scale economic outcomes. Yet, it has been criticized for producing an overly coherent, economically deterministic narrative of the relationship between contemporary culture and capitalism (Frow, 1991; Gartman, 1998).

6. **New times approach** (Hall & Jacques, 1990). This approach takes a neo-Gramscian orientation to exploring the social, cultural, and political—as opposed to economic—characteristics and effects of post-Fordism. It contrasts the social and political context of Fordism, based in male full-time working-class urban culture, with the cultural and political characteristics of the post-Fordist context, which it describes in terms of “greater fragmentation and pluralization, the weakening of older collective solidarities and block identities and the emergence of new identities associated with greater work flexibility, the maximization of individual choices through personal consumption” (Hall, 1991, p. 58). The approach is often criticized for its lack of systematic, empirical economic analysis (Amin, 1994; Hirst & Zeitlin, 1991).


Taken together, these approaches are theoretically informed frameworks for integrating empirical research on phenomena such as global industry trends, employment and work practices, income trends, capital flows, and consumption habits to address the future of economics, politics, and culture in the 21st century. As illustrated here, the more economically grounded approaches are often accused of economic or technological determinism, whereas the ones that afford precedence to cultural and political phenomena are...
accused of ignoring the economic or of reading cultural practices from economic structures. Still, these approaches are heuristic in that they offer interesting and provocative ways for linking the micro-practices of organizational life and cultural consumption with broader economic and social trends.

In conclusion, critical organizational communication studies has much to gain, analytically and empirically, from further exploration of the post-Fordist literature. Efforts to transcend academic fragmentation and dualism and, concomitantly, the potential for more productive dialogue with cultural studies require that our structures of relevance be more global in orientation and less restrictive in our constitutions of organizational.

NOTE

1. Amin (1994) provided a useful summary of major research approaches found in the post-Fordism debates. I have adopted the first three positions from his typology and created subsequent ones from additional literatures.

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LABORING UNDER
THE SIGN OF THE NEW
Cultural Studies, Organizational Communication,
and the Fallacy of the New Economy

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Postmodernist academics and contemporary business gurus are agreed on one thing: Capitalism has entered “new times” (Hall & Jacques, 1989), a “new economy” (Kelly, 1999), or the “information age” (Melucci, 1996). Therefore, we need “new social movements” (Laraña, Johnston, & Gusfield, 1994) that focus on “questions of cultural identity” (Hall & du Gay, 1996). These labels suggest that we live in a new social world, marked by an end to traditional class antagonisms and the irrelevance of mass labor organizing to win material gains for laborers in an era of global, flexible capitalism. Sometimes, it seems that in the world of contemporary social theory, there are no more sweatshops. No matter that Disney workers sewing t-shirts and other merchandise in Haiti earn 28 cents an hour, whereas Disney CEO Michael Eisner made nearly 6 hundred million dollars in 1998, 451,000 times the wage of the workers under his employ (Roesch, 1999).

But in academic descriptions of the new economy, there are hardly any industrial workers at all. Apparently, the assembly line is a thing of the past; these days everyone telecommutes, conjuring material goods such as computers and athletic shoes out of virtual space. Capitalism has taken on new shape, and the old models of struggle in the workplace, such as organizing a union and striking, are no longer relevant. However, workers may take heart in some
pro forma voice in the workplace and find consolation in the rituals of everyday life, shopping, television—all of the avenues of consumption that allow us to negotiate the production of our subjectivities.

Is this picture of scholarship about globalization, labor, and culture exaggerated? Perhaps. Even so, our field of communication studies is substantially marked by a nearly exclusive emphasis on culture that risks ignoring what is still the most fundamental feature of workplace social relations and communication: a powerful class antagonism between workers and employers. To be sure, there is a growing literature in critical organizational studies that attends to the voices of workers (for reviews, see Cheney, 1995, 1999; Cheney et al., 1998; Conrad & Poole, 1997; Deetz & Mumby, 1990; Mumby, 1993). A few cultural studies scholars have attended to issues of class and labor (see Aronowitz, 1989, 1992; Munt, 2000). And yes, there are a few rhetorical studies that mention class or the labor movement (Aune, 1994; Burke, 1984; Carter, 1980; Cloud, 1994, 1999; Darsey, 1988; Jensen, 1977; Jensen & Jensen, 1977; Knapp & McCroskey, 1968; Tonn, 1996). On the whole, however, emphasis in this literature remains on voice, identity, and cultural microstrategies in the workplace rather than on labor’s agency in winning material improvements in the lives of workers. Class becomes one identity among others (rather than being formulated as a fundamental shared interest that enables solidarity across difference). Further scholarly attention is focused not on how classes take material power but on how class as an identity is expressed in culture.

Therefore, although I agree with David Carlone and Bryan Taylor (1998) that organizational communication studies needs to expand its already-growing critical literature on power and context in the workplace, I am not so sure cultural studies is the place to nourish that concern. And although I agree, too, that cultural studies could use some production-oriented ballast to balance its emphasis on the pleasures, texts, and subject formations of consumption, I wonder whether critical organizational communication studies is the right place to find this counterweight. My doubts arise from my perception that cultural studies and critical organizational communication possess a common shortcoming, namely, misplaced faith
in the idea that we are living in new times that require new politics: a politics of the self (and deconstruction of the self), a politics of discourse, and a politics of small, symbolic raids on the meaning system, as opposed to the collective, instrumental, material, and occasionally revolutionary politics of labor. I believe a more traditional rhetorical occupation with the study of social movements, particularly labor, should inform scholars interested in understanding and transforming relations of power, both material and symbolic, in the workplace.

At the core of the issue is a debate across the humanities and social sciences with regard to whether we live in a new economy, an allegedly postmodern, information-driven historical moment in which, it is argued, organized mass movements are no longer effective in making material demands of system and structure (Melucci, 1996). In suggesting that global capitalism has so innovated its strategies that there is no alternative to its discipline, arguments proclaiming a new economy risk inaccuracy, pessimism, and conservatism (Cloud, in press). Although a thorough summary is beyond the scope of this article, there is a great deal of evidence against claims that capitalism has necessarily entered a new phase of extraordinary innovation, reach, and scope (Hirst & Thompson, 1999). Both class polarization (Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 2001) and the ideological and management strategies that contain class antagonism (Cloud, 1998; Parker & Slaughter, 1994) still resemble their prepostmodern counterparts.

Skeptical about new economy claims, economist Gordon Marshall (1997) pointed out, “In much of the industrialized world, the pattern of unequal social mobility chances has remained basically the same throughout most of the 20th century” (p. 5). He pulled together mountains of data to demonstrate that “social class remains an axial principle for the organization of social inequality” (p. 5). As I have noted in my recent book (Cloud, 1998), workplace therapeutics were invented at the turn of the 20th century and accelerated in application in response to the threat of labor unrest and the increasing pressures of industrial life on ordinary workers. The 1939 Hawthorne experiments (Mayo, 1960) were perhaps the pinnacle of such innovations, setting the precedent for today’s “kinder,
gentler” managerial strategies. Furthermore, across most of the globe, Fordist models of production, including sweatshops and assembly lines, remain the norm in the production of commodities. Meanwhile, there has been a resurgence of the American labor movement since the mid-1990s (Greenwald, 1995), with the pilots’ strike at ComAir being only the most current example.

In addition, a number of scholars have noted that the “new times” hypothesis (Clarke, 1991; Nadesan, 2001 [this issue]) has resulted in a “retreat from class” (Wood, 1999) and a “descent into discourse” (Palmer, 1990). The cultural politics of survival and identity politics have replaced more instrumental hopes of social transformation. By cultural politics of survival, I refer to work describing and celebrating the defense of cultural identity in rituals and other cultural practices that “seize spaces for leisure, pleasure and recuperation” rather than “control over political and economic institutions” (Kelley, 1994, p. 181; see also Scott, 1992). In this light, it is interesting that the list of common topics to organizational and cultural studies compiled by Carlone and Taylor (1998) includes “identity, race and ethnicity, the body, ethics, narrative, technology, textuality, representation, gender, professional sports, globalization, hegemony, resistance, performance, space and place, and discourse genres” (p. 338) but not labor or class.

Perhaps this absence reflects an implicit consensus among communication scholars that “classes are dissolving” and “the most advanced societies are no longer class societies” (Pakulski & Waters, 1996, pp. 3-4). Many prominent scholars of social movements have argued for a focus on “new” identity and meaning-based social movements without regard to class, economic interests, or economic motivations or outcomes of movement activity (Maheu, 1995; Melucci, 1996). A corollary to such arguments is that class, like race, gender, and sexuality, is a social construction rather than an objective fact. For example, Aronowitz (1989; cited in Carlone & Taylor, 1998, p. 348) argued that class is a culturally produced performative category. From this viewpoint, the moment of political agency for ordinary people is not the moment of collective institutional transformation (which has been theorized out of the realm of possibility) but the moment of self-constitution and
interrogation of identities as they are produced and performed in discourse.

Alongside such popular arguments, a classical materialist approach to issues of labor may seem somewhat archaic. But as Lindsey German (1996) argued, we can understand class to be an objective relationship, having to do with whether one must work for a wage within the system in which goods are produced and distributed. My approach to the labor movement is fundamentally Gramscian. As Mumby (1997) noted, Gramsci’s (1971/1934-1936) theory of hegemony describes not only the ways in which ruling interests in the state and economy organize an absorptive common sense; he also described the ways in which the working class (including all women, people of color, sexual minorities, and so forth who are not members of political and economic elites) can engage in political and cultural work to craft an oppositional bloc, which then can be mobilized against employers or (as demonstrated by the spring 2001 protest and strike wave in Serbia that brought down Slobodan Milosevic) the state itself. On this model, one can see hope for organizing ordinary people across cultural differences in terms of their shared interests. Yet academicians isolated from the resurgence of antiglobalization, labor, and prodemocracy social movements over the past several years may be tempted to settle for what seem to me to be meager cultural freedoms.

In cultural studies, a project that had its roots in working-class education on a Gramscian model, the turn away from class was warranted by significant attention to race and ethnicity as identities constituted in culture that could not be reduced to class, necessitating a new emphasis on culture in the work of Stuart Hall (e.g., 1996), for example. Robert McChesney (1996) aptly summarized the problem:

The socialist political project of cultural studies has receded in importance over the past two decades. . . . Two necessary measures to reassert the radical political project in cultural studies are that it develop a more systematic critique of capitalism and the market, and that it pay closer attention to actual movements for social change. (p. 2)
I concede the importance of attention to race and culture (see Cloud, 1999) and agree with anthropologist Ann Kingsolver (1996) that class is always articulated with race, gender, sexuality, nation, and other axes of self-definition. But too often, as Medhurst (2000) noted, class ends up as a casualty in the race for newer and more complex theories of power and culture in the workplace. I worry about how it is that a revolutionary project rooted in the working class has become a “cultural politics of difference, of the struggles around difference, of the production of new identities, of the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage” (Hall, 1996, p. 24).

Examples of a cultural politics of difference can be found among the instances of cultural studies of workplace communication cited by Carlone and Taylor (1998). Here, the emphasis is on how workers, facing increasingly absorptive regimes of concertive control (Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1997), adopt what Kelley (1994) and Scott (1992) labeled infrapolitical microstrategies. Infrapolitics refers to strategies for cultural survival rather than instrumental macro-level social change. Examples might include drug use on the job or theft by employees at Disney, means of coping with their situation without fundamentally transforming it. I certainly would not fault someone who has to wear a Goofy costume day in and day out for getting high, nor would I condemn anyone who is overworked and underpaid for workplace theft. But, neither would I argue that such actions constitute resistance when increasingly we can see examples of collective, more materially effective forms of resistance (for example, the 1997 United Parcel Service strike and the 1999 World Trade Organization protests) that actually give some workers greater control over their compensation for and conditions of work.

Likewise, in organizational communication, research on voice and participation in the workplace (for reviews, see Cheney et al., 1998; Seibold & Shea, 2001) does not always ask whether managerial strategies stressing employee participation substitute an illusion of voice and participation for real workers’ control over wages, benefits, work hours, profits, and work conditions. As Deetz and
Kersten (1983) noted, such forms of employee participation are often “a tool for handling dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and alienation” (p. 169). Often, for example, employers introduce new participation programs even as the company is enacting layoffs, speed-ups, and “management by stress” (Parker & Slaughter, 1994). Although employee voice is important in this context, the economic clout of workers organized as a fighting union might be more so. This possibility, of increasing both voice and more tangible forms of workplace agency in and through union participation, is rarely mentioned in organizational communication literature.

For the three reasons I have sketched—the overwhelmingly and enduringly modern organization of production in our society, the objective reality of class interests and class-based instrumental agency, and the limits of cultural resistance as survival strategy—I am arguing that the concepts of materiality and class are still crucial for our critical, theoretical, and activist work, whether we align with cultural studies, critical organizational communication studies, both, or neither.

Lorell Patterson (1995) is a union member, a Black woman, and a veteran of a defeated labor struggle at Staley Manufacturing in Decatur, Illinois in 1994. In remarks delivered during that struggle, she made clear the continuing relevance of class and of the material nature of worker demands:

We’ve got to let them know we’re not going to take this anymore. We want education. We want livable wages. We want decent housing. And we want health care for the rest of our lives, not the life of a contract. It’s very simple—it shouldn’t be hard to understand. Every human being has a right to those basic essentials. The only way I can see that we’re going to get that is to start organizing and educating. We’ve got to start standing up and telling them no. I have a right to be treated as a human being. It’s time to start believing that we have the power. (p. 6)

To Patterson, a cultural politics of identity might assume secondary importance next to wages, health care, housing, and education. The voices of workers organizing for material improvements in their lives offer us this caution: Without attention to class interests, class
power, and class movement in a capitalist system that is ongoing, any attempt to understand power in the workplace will be, at best, incomplete and, at worst, irrelevant to the project of social change.

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Paul du Gay (1997) argued that “globalisation is about the organization of economic production and the exploitation of markets on a world scale” (p. 23). Mainstream public relations scholarship has not explored what the role of public relations should be within this new economy and what its ethical obligations are to different cultures, social groups, and identities that engage with it. In this article, I argue that public relations theorists need to acknowledge their generally unspoken support for, and allegiance to, corporate capitalist power and to reconsider that allegiance in the context of the new economy. In my view, such a move would encourage more open consideration of whether public relations scholarship should be contributing uncritically to the development of a globalized capitalist economy and of where public relations theory should be positioned in relation to the development of that economy. If mainstream public relations theory were more open to theorizing structures of power, it would also be more open to consideration of how public relations practice could be appropriated...
by, and work to serve the interests of, those groups who perceive themselves as disempowered by globalization or who oppose the philosophies and/or economic effects of that globalization.

Certainly, critical public relations scholars—so defined by a central concern with theorizing issues of power—have already made some inroads into marking out new possibilities for public relations theorizing in the context of the new economy. To date, however, mainstream public relations scholarship has proved reluctant to acknowledge that such critical theory may have any functional value for public relations practice. Therefore, a second purpose of this article is to encourage a more expansive view of public relations scholarship, particularly one that embraces the insights of critical cultural studies.

In public relations theory, excellent public relations practitioners have been described as “boundary spanners” (White & Dozier, 1992). That is, public relations practitioners are theorized as benefiting an organization most when they know, and act on, the cultural meaning ascribed to the organization by its environments. White and Dozier stated, “Organizations have cultures with implicit, unstated, and often invisible assumptions about the organization and its relation to its environment. Only when one leaves one’s native land does one confront the somewhat arbitrary constructions of one’s own culture” (p. 99).

Given this understanding of excellent public relations practice, it is both extraordinary and ironic that public relations scholarship has largely failed to consider the meanings that other academic disciplines ascribe to public relations and to acknowledge what those disciplines might offer in the development and reconfiguration of public relations theory. It is precisely this failing that has resulted in public relations theory being criticized for its “debilitating insularity” (McKie, 2001, p. 91) and its being described as “frozen in a modernist paradigm that excludes competing, marginalized, critical, or oppressed voices” (Duffy, 2000, p. 312).

Critical scholars, who aim to “provide more self-conscious frameworks for examining public relations research and practice in
its broader ethical and societal context” (Trujillo & Toth, 1987, p. 221), have attempted to move public relations theory out of its 1950s pluralist philosophy and its functionalist and positivist methodologies. They have decried as fallacies the dominant two-way symmetrical model of excellent public relations and the idealist textbook mantra that public relations builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Duffy, 2000; Holtzhausen, 2000; Leitch & Neilson, 1997; McKie, 2001; Motion & Leitch, 1996). Drawing on cultural studies perspectives, these writers have called for the development of new paradigms for public relations scholarship through consideration of the concepts of power, discourse, and identity. In the context of globalization and the new global economy, the theoretical investigation of these concepts by public relations scholars has become an ethical necessity.

As Giroux (1992) stated, “Critical cultural studies views the production of knowledge in the context of power” (p. 202). From that viewpoint, public relations may be conceptualized as promoting knowledge that privileges the interests of capitalist corporate power (Carey, 1995; Holtzhausen, 2000; Miller & Dinan, 2000). Consequently, the development of the new economy suggests the need to critique a number of issues: (a) the possible colonization of global public relations practice by Western capitalist models of public relations (Munshi, 1999), (b) the ways in which public relations supports new forms of global governance and media fragmentation controlled by and favoring corporate needs (Carey, 1995; Ryan, 1991; Turow, 1997), and (c) the potential that global Internet communications and its promotion ultimately serve the interests of the already powerful commercial sector (Mickey, 1998) despite its celebration as a means of stakeholder challenge to dominant public relations discourses (Klein, 2000). These issues are of considerable importance to an understanding of the relationship between the new economy and public relations practices. By promoting the discussion and theorizing of these concerns, critical public relations scholarship is also able to work toward promoting new opportunities for critique and intervention in the new economy.
PUBLIC RELATIONS,
PROMOTIONAL CULTURE, AND DISCOURSE

One difficulty of staking out a particular ground for future public relations theorizing in the context of the new economy is the increasing inability to distinguish public relations practice from the promotional communication practices of advertising and marketing. Advertising, marketing, and public relations efforts are now very commonly combined in integrated marketing communications programs (Harris, 1998). Public relations is especially valuable to this communication mix because it builds relationships with a wide variety of organizational stakeholders, not only consumers. Furthermore, some scholars argue that in gaining unpaid media coverage and third-party endorsement for products, brands, and corporations, public relations is able to secure types of publicity that audiences view as more credible than paid-for commercial advertising and marketing messages (e.g., Harris, 1998). Through these means, and in conjunction with advertising and marketing, public relations works to promote the symbolic interests of organizations in capitalist culture (Carey, 1995; Goldman & Papson, 1998). It is surprising, therefore, how little public relations practitioners’ roles in the production of culture have been explicitly explored in cultural analyses of promotional culture. Consequently, little is known about how public relations is used in attempts to “structure the way people think, feel and act in organizations” (du Gay, 1997, p. 6) and outside of those organizations. This paucity of critical theoretical analysis might, however, be explained by some cultural theorists’ reluctance to think beyond simplistic assertions such as “audiences are coerced through publicity and public relations” (Nightingale, 1996, p. 123) and their frequent failure to differentiate public relations from propaganda (L’Etang, 1997, p. 34).

Public relations, as distinct from advertising and marketing practice, is involved in promoting far more than products and services. From a poststructuralist perspective, Motion and Leitch (1996) defined public relations practitioners as
discourse technologists... involved in the maintenance and transformation of discourse primarily through the production and distribution of texts. They participate in discursive struggles by shaping texts and by strategically deploying texts which facilitate certain socio-cultural practices and not others. (p. 299)

Different forms of public relations practice use different tactics in the construction and dissemination of discourses. For example, corporate issues management, and even government issues management in the context of capitalist economies, discursively promotes the agendas of neo-liberal public choice theory, which deny the need for state regulation of corporate activities (Weaver & Motion, in press). These tactics also function to diminish or silence oppositional voices. Simply due to the corporate sector being able to afford to exploit public relations campaign communication extensively, this sector has been at a considerable advantage in managing discourses in its sociocultural hegemonic interests (Holtzhausen, 2000). In the context of the new global information economy, the dominant discourses of corporate public relations are now, however, experiencing challenges from activists who demonstrate a detailed understanding of the practice of discourse management themselves.

IDENTITY, ACTIVISM, AND DEMOCRATIC POWER

Activist groups, which “are or begin as, for the most part, marginal or powerless groups” (Coombs, 1998, p. 290), came to be seen as a threat to the effectiveness of public relations communication in the 1990s “largely as a result of the environmental, consumer and feminist movements” (L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 506). However, whereas these movements have succeeded in promoting cultural awareness of the politics, economies, and discourses of power, in the 1990s, activists were primarily responding to the corporate-
branding phenomenon, where “brands are . . . intimately entangled with our culture and our identities” (Klein, 2000, p. 335). As a communication strategy, branding can provide organizations with promotional strength. However, by infusing products with cultural meanings based on particular attitudes, lifestyles, politics, identities, and even, life philosophies (Goldman & Papson, 1998), branded organizations and commodities are very vulnerable to consumer expectations because consumers are encouraged to invest their own identities in the brand. Research into post-Fordist consumer practices has found that audiences are well aware of how promotional culture attempts to symbolically align consumption practices with the construction of individual and cultural identities (Kennedy, 1996; Schröder, 1997). For their part, consumer activists evidence complex understandings of how multinational business and promotional strategies, consumption practices, and human and environmental rights are intertwined in the global capitalist economic system (Klein, 2000). The demands of such activists appear to be primarily that business operates in a socially responsible manner. Such demands are exemplified in the Free Burma Coalition campaign for PepsiCo’s withdrawal from Myanmar (Burma) on the grounds that the company’s investment in that country was supportive of a highly oppressive dictatorship (Coombs, 1998) and in the ongoing campaign by labor movement and college campus activists against Nike’s use of sweatshop labor in the production of sports apparel (Goldman & Papson, 1998; Klein, 2000). The ability of these campaigns to bring corporations to account is attributable to activists’ exploitation of the Internet to publicize their concerns (Coombs, 1998; Klein 2000). But from this, some scholars have concluded, perhaps prematurely, that the Internet is “increas[ing] public participation in democratic societies” (Guth & Marsh, 2000, p. 361). This may be true to the extent that the Internet provides an avenue for the expression of oppositional identities and disquiet about corporate behavior. However, as Klein (2000) argued, consumer activism is little more than a shopper’s privatized corporate democracy, which must not be confused with a citizen-centered
democratic practice of open, public, representative government. By promoting the view that consumer activism on the Internet is a form of democratic participation, public relations theorists simply, if naively, lend discursive support to the public choice theory of neo-liberal capitalism, which itself seeks to advance the corporate management of democracy (Carey, 1995; Simpson, 1994).

It was concern about the takeover of the management of democracy by business interests and the globalization of neo-liberal capitalism that motivated recent political activist demonstrations such as the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization and the 2000 protests against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne. This political activism, as opposed to consumer activism, does directly challenge corporate hegemonic power and corporate public relations discourse. The mobilization of these protests was also considerably assisted by Internet communications. This technology partly enabled protesters to communicate and control the discursive construction of their actions as well as the political legitimacy of their identities (Perkins, 2000). Such self-depiction differed significantly from their portrayal in the corporate-owned television and newspaper media, which “othered” the protesters by (mis)representing them as a guerrilla army and as professional agitators and by denying the legitimacy of their political concerns and protest tactics (Perkins, 2000). These events highlight the difficulties that activist, oppositional, and marginalized groups face in their own public relations campaigns. They also point to the need for the development of a theory of how groups seeking to challenge or resist the power of dominant hegemonic interests can do so effectively. Although there has been a very recent, if brief, attempt at exploring this issue (J. Grunig, 2001), the problems faced by those challenging the very structures of hegemonic power in the global economy have not been addressed in any depth in the context of public relations theory. Indeed, as long as mainstream public relations theory fails to include a theory of power and fails to interrogate its own connections to capitalist corporate power, it will only continue to avoid such questions.
CONCLUSION

If public relations theory adopts a commitment to examining how public relations practice is implicated in relations of power, it will be able to articulate its project as being of equal relevance to the disempowered as it is to those already empowered in, and by, the new economy. This reorientation of public relations theory requires that theorists analyze and articulate their own subjective identities and relationships to notions of profit, efficiency, and progress in the new economy. By following this approach, public relations theorists will be equipped to evaluate their own complicity in the production of culture, whether in support of corporate capitalists, or alternative subjectivities. By moving outside the boundaries of what have been unspoken assumptions within public relations scholarship, the possibility of critique and intervention will be made more readily available to both public relations theorists and practitioners alike.

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In their contributions to this forum, Nadesan, Cloud, and Weaver have critiqued and extended our argument for the benefits of collaboration between organizational communication and cultural studies. Originally (Carlone & Taylor, 1998), we argued that communication scholars should integrate the resources of these fields to fashion new ways of engaging the convergence of organization and culture in the post-industrial, hyper-capitalist new economy. In response, Nadesan has distinguished a variety of arguments concerning the nature and consequences of “post-Fordism,” Cloud has asserted the enduring relevance of materiality and class, and Weaver has called for public relations practitioners and scholars to reflect on the “worldly” affiliations of their work with the hegemonic interests of profit, efficiency, and progress. In this short article, we address these responses and advance our project through a case study of a particular object.

Specifically, we engage Silicon Valley as both a real site of high-technology organizations and as a contested, symbolic site of cultural discourse. On this first plane, analysis foregrounds the 300-square-mile, eight-county region located between the northern California cities of San Francisco and San Jose that forms the location of a network of defense, aerospace, electronics, and computing industries. Here, traditionally, analysis has emphasized the unique features of this organizational/cultural context: its regional values of independence and experimentation; a robust support system of
higher educational researchers, venture capitalists, consultants, suppliers, and clients; a self-selected labor pool of young, irreverent, driven, risk-tolerant “players” obsessed with innovation and entrepreneurship; frequent job switching by technically skilled “knowledge workers;” and a climate of urgency mandating rapid development and exploitation of competitive advantage (Delbecq & Weiss, 2000; Rogers & Larsen, 1984). On the second, cultural plane, analysis foregrounds Silicon Valley as a site of intensive exchange between high-technology organizational cultures and their local “host” environment and as a symbolic resource for cultural audiences engaged in sense making around changes associated with the new economy. Examples of these often-traumatic changes include globalization, the development of virtual reality systems, the colonization of public space, the laboring/consuming psyche created by commercial-corporate interests, and the transformation of traditional meanings for wealth, employment, and careers (Solnit, 1995; Winner, 1992). Here, Silicon Valley becomes a text read by journalists and cultural critics. Their representations establish Silicon Valley as a cultural matter because it sensitively registers capitalist trends and satisfies a popular desire to identify the origin of technologies and personae that increasingly affect contemporary forms of work and leisure (e.g., robots, office automation, and hackers). In this cultural circulation, Silicon Valley becomes an object of ambivalent expressions of hope, envy, and anxiety (Cass, 2000). Below, we develop five themes that indicate how communication scholars might engage Silicon Valley as a “noisy” site swarming with the interrelated dialects of organization and culture.

REGION, CULTURE, AND (NON)FUNCTIONALIST VIEWS OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The relationship between Silicon Valley organizations and their local, host environment has been an enduring topic of study. This is partly because Silicon Valley is characterized by a dense and partly
contended network of organizations practicing both competition and cooperation with each other and with a common pool of infrastructural elements. Of interest here are the various ways that environment can be conceptualized. Frequently, organizational communication scholars adopt a functionalist orientation to environments, viewing them as external objects, events, figures, and processes that organizations need to, but cannot fully, control. In this view, individual Silicon Valley organizations attempt to manage elements and processes that affect the viability of both new ventures (e.g., barriers to entry such as access to venture capital) and established firms (e.g., the development of favorable relationships with suppliers).

An alternate perspective on the Silicon Valley environment, however, emphasizes the tendency among regional high-technology organizations to collaborate in developing distinctive business cultures whose competencies influence their adaptability to changing conditions. In her well-known comparison of the Silicon Valley and Route 128 (eastern Massachusetts) regions, Saxenian (1994) argued that Silicon Valley displays a superior system of openness, cooperation, and horizontal networks in which organizational members have historically shared ideas, innovations, patents, financial capital, and even labor. Kaplan (1999) provided an example in describing the Silicon Valley venture capital firm of Kleiner Perkins, which established a Japanese-style *keiretsu* of companies linked by mutual interests. During the 1990s, Kleiner Perkins’ resources were organized to develop and fund, among other companies, the multibillion-dollar Netscape. In this process, organizational learning and experimentation became public processes that sit at the nexus of culture, society, economics, and politics. Significantly, however, Saxenian’s analysis does not elaborate on the processes through which local, regional, and organizational cultures influence each other, nor does it resolve ambiguity surrounding the origins and “true” identities of these cultural phenomena (“Roundtable,” 1995). Because of their inherent orientation to the symbolic performance of cultures, it would appear that communication scholars could uniquely address this question of interrelationship (see Taylor, 1999). Paulina Borsook (2000) provided one model in arguing
that due to the rising influence of a “techno-libertarian” discourse favoring competitive individualism, Silicon Valley elites temporarily abandoned this cooperative tradition during the recessionary 1980s and suffered as a result.

In addition, scholars might problematize the way in which environments are arbitrarily conceptualized and punctuated for the purposes of analysis. Cultural critics argue, for example, that the development of high-tech organizations creates profound consequences for the unique cultures of their host communities (e.g., in displacing indigenous groups and appropriating their folkways as entertainment; Mugerauer, 1996) and for the material, built environment. Solnit (1995), for example, noted that Silicon Valley hosts the greatest concentration of Superfund cleanup sites in the nation (created by industrial pollution) and that it has a sprawling placelessness that creates a passive mode of inhabitation: “The decentralization of postmodern control in which power is transnational, virtual, in a gated community, not available at this time, in a holding company, incomprehensible, incognito—in a word, nowhere” (p. 228). Because numerous other regions are attempting to develop analogous “Silicon” entities (Rogers & Larsen, 1984), it seems increasingly important to understand the dynamic relationships between these phenomena of organization and culture.

ORGANIZATIONS AS REGISTERS OF CULTURAL DISCOURSE

This theme extends our original argument that the spaces and moments of organization may be usefully read as sites in which speakers appropriate, reproduce, and transform various cultural discourses (e.g., of gender, race, and class) to accomplish goals and reproduce identities. In this way, the ontological boundaries between production and consumption collapse to reveal multifunctional utterances and dialogues that configure the relationship between organizations and larger cultural politics.

One rich topic for this analysis is the performance by Silicon Valley employees—who are notorious for collapsing boundaries
between work and nonwork spheres—of various lifestyles. Rogers and Larsen’s (1984) somewhat dated inventory reveals numerous Silicon Valley subcultures characterized by distinctive artifacts, rituals, ideologies, and identities: residual Midwestern Puritanism, cohabitation outside of marriage, high divorce rates, high-achieving and stressed-out children, physical fitness buffs, and a cache of hobbies, “goodies,” and “toys” (e.g., sports cars) that temporarily alleviate work stress and help competitive spirits to “keep score.”

This competitive lifestyle has, of course, evolved in recent years to an extraordinary level of baroque excess. Silicon Valley increasingly mirrors the surreal, hyper-mediated life world of Hollywood in which power and celebrity swirl around a few very wealthy (and often ruthless) business leaders (Bronson, 1999; Kaplan, 1999). Materialism has spiked accordingly: Yachts, homes, vacations, news coverage, and spouses are all strategically deployed and assessed by these elites (and by Silicon Valley’s publicity apparatus) as indicators of conflated personal and professional status. Strangely, in this process, technology and organization are minimized as the mundane, taken-for-granted means of accumulating spectacular wealth. Even charity events such as the annual Sand Hill Challenge soapbox derby become scenes for the displacement of ego-driven, corporate competition (Kaplan, 1999).

In addition, we are much taken by two recent analyses of a dominant techno-libertarian discourse that circulates in and as Silicon Valley organizational culture. Ellen Ullman’s (1997) poignant autobiography of a middle-aged, White, female, bisexual (and former radical) computer programmer reveals that potentially, knowledge workers are continuously engaged in reflection about the disorienting conditions of the new economy and the official discourses that mediate their relationship to those conditions. Ullman is uniquely concerned with the existential ruptures created by these changes (e.g., that lead her to model the programmer’s ideal relationship to rapidly evolving technology as-if serial monogamy: “Don’t get comfortable, don’t get too attached, don’t get married. Fidelity to technology is not even desirable,” [p. 102]). Her narrative indicates that the subjectivity of knowledge workers in the new
economy is potentially configured in the relationships they construct between the logic, order, rule, and clarity of their computing devices and the ambiguity, discontinuity, and transience of their virtual work lives. In this process, the former may serve as consolation for the ontological dis-ease created by the latter, for “what is a corporation these days but an elaborate verisimilitude spun round with the gauzy skin of electrics” (p. 131).

Relatedly, Borsook (2000) provided a provocative discussion of techno-libertarianism as a heteroglossic discourse blending a variety of neo-conservative, antiregulation, social-Darwinist, philanthrophobic, and “bionomic” dialects. Despite this internal diversity, she argued, these discourses converge to produce a number of outcomes: a competitive and narcissistic individualism, a disregard for the traditional ethics of democratic citizenship, the normalization of marketplace mechanisms as the arbiter of all cultural production, and a historical amnesia for the role of federal assistance in developing Silicon Valley’s infrastructure. Most relevant here, Borsook documented the role of extra-organizational forums such as professional conferences, industry trade shows, and popular magazines (e.g., Wired) in circulating this discourse. Audiences of these forums, subsequently, are encouraged to appropriate this discourse as the vernacular of their organizational cultures. Additional studies might be conducted to examine how this discourse is articulated with the unique registers of particular organizational cultures and how it is accommodated by the members of their subcultures.

GLOBALIZATION AS ORGANIZATIONAL/CULTURAL PHENOMENA

We agree with Nadesan (2001) that analyses of organizational/cultural phenomena should be situated in the context of globalization. In regards to Silicon Valley, we may note that most of its computing and electronics firms have long owned offshore assembly plants and generally sought to relocate work internationally and intranationally to exploit cheaper labor costs (Rogers & Larsen, 1984). In addition, scholars might examine the recent controversy
surrounding congressional lobbying by Silicon Valley elites seeking to raise the number of HB-1 visas available to their foreign high-tech workers. Labor leaders oppose increased importation of these guest workers as an attempt by capitalists to erode the wages of American labor. This decomposition/recomposition of the high-tech workforce produces a number of relevant consequences, including the diversification of host communities (including the development of niche ethnic markets) and organizational cultures (although the predominant configuration of Indian, East Asian, and White workers in these cultures potentially minimizes the relevance of historical conflict between White, Latino, and African American interests over access to high-technology related capital; Fallows, 2000).

CLASS

Inevitably, an organizational/cultural analysis of Silicon Valley must consider the larger, material—and thoroughly unequal—structures in which wealth, technology, and knowledge are distributed in contemporary capitalist society. Cloud (2001) rightly cautions communication scholars not to lose sight of “old” capitalist structures amid the mystifying rhetoric of the new economy. In this light, Silicon Valley presents a compelling text of class division and struggle. Entry-level positions in the computing industry (e.g., “board-stuffing”) are staffed disproportionately by women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants. This work is intensive, monotonous, and potentially dangerous as a result of exposure to hazardous chemicals (Rogers & Larsen, 1984). Employers increasingly exploit two-tiered structures in which a small number of core knowledge workers are surrounded by a large contingent of temporary and contract laborers whose possibilities for meaningful participation and upward mobility are systematically distorted and minimized (Smith, 1998). The cultural geography of Silicon Valley is sharply divided between the wealthy communities of knowledge workers in the northern counties and the decaying and abandoned communities of working-class minorities in the southern counties (e.g.,
An urgent shortage of affordable housing in the 
(sur)real estate market has driven desperate workers to assume two 
or more jobs to make ends meet. Arguably, this condition is perpet- 
uated by an inherent callousness among instrumentally oriented 
technologists toward the enduring plight of the poor (Cooper, 
1996): “Most Silicon Valley tycoons are not concerned with social 
inequality or injustice; to the entrepreneur, the poor and weak in 
society are poor and weak because they are inferior” (Rogers & 

As a resource for analyzing Silicon Valley class relations, we are 
drawn to Dyer-Witherford’s (1999) recent argument concerning 
the enduring relevance of Marxist critique for high-technology cul-
ture. Briefly, Dyer-Witherford revived an “autonomist” thread of 
Marxist analysis that foregrounds the moments, spaces, and integ-
rit of labor’s struggle as the dynamic engine that propels capitalist 
development. He argued that capital is driven in this process to 
extend and deepen its control over all of culture as a “social factory” 
in which the institutions of family, education, and consumption are 
colonized as elements of an infrastructure supporting the reproduc-
tion of labor power. Inevitably, however, this extension of control 
creates a cascade of unintended effects and disperses vulnerabili-
ties that are potentially exploited by labor to enlarge its tactical 
“margin of maneuver” (Feenberg, 1991). As evidence, Dyer-
Witherford is much taken with labor’s current appropriation of 
computer-mediated communication and cites the recent Justice for 
Janitors movement in Silicon Valley. In this movement, low-skilled 
workers organized for better pay and working conditions, partly by 
threatening to publicize their demands in the schools and universi-
ties that form a major market for computer manufacturers and by 
using sympathetic insiders to communicate more directly with 
knowledge workers through corporate e-mail systems. These work-
ers exploited possibilities created by the unique linkages estab-
lished between production and consumption in the new economy. 
Subsequent studies might apply Dyer-Witherford’s autonomist 
thesis to other Silicon Valley sites to analyze the ongoing struggle 
between capital’s strategies and labor’s tactics.
THE WORLD OF MARKETING
AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Weaver (2001) argued in her essay that public relations professionals should be conceptualized as “discourse technologists” engaged in constructing preferred alignments between commodities, subjectivities, and ideologies. What may be most notable about these performances in Silicon Valley are their informality, pervasiveness, and intensity, such that attempts to distinguish between marketing speakers, discourse, and functions and their nonmarketing equivalents may be missing the point. Instead, shameless hyperbole and overvaluation appear to be thoroughly insinuated in the cultural vernacular: Gossip is relentlessly exchanged in hopes of acquiring competitive advantage; strategic attempts to develop personal networks and build product “buzz” (e.g., in restaurants, on cell phones, at parties) are continuous and normalized (Bronson, 1999). This performance of hype—which reaches its apotheosis in the infamous “vaporware” of products promoted but never released—may be tracked at the linguistic level of syntax, in which speakers strategically manipulate temporal referents in utterances such as “promises of product availability” to create ambiguity (Kaplan, 1999). Postmodern critics may, in addition, note the disintegration of objective reference as a condition for the validity of utterances in this milieu. Instead, as speakers conspire through speculation to achieve mutual profitability, the concerns of effective strategy (e.g., the acquisition of venture capital funding) preclude careful consideration of pragmatic (can it actually be done?) and ethical (should it be done?) concerns.

This discourse is of course subject to correction. The recent, dramatic decline of high-technology stock values is interactionally manifest as more rigorous, sober, and realistic criteria for the evaluation of Silicon Valley hype, particularly in discourse surrounding the Internet commerce industry. In addition, the compulsive discourse of (self) promotion in Silicon Valley is dialectically constrained by the industrial imperative of secrecy. In some organizations, this dialectic produces a culture of near paranoia (e.g., institutionalized in nondisclosure agreements) in which public
relations workers actively discipline employee representations of organizational culture and products (Cass, 2000).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have demonstrated how the resources of organizational communication and cultural studies might be combined to analyze a significant site and symbol of the new economy. In simultaneously considering interrelated organizational and cultural phenomena, this analysis is intended to vex and invite communication scholars. Ideally, those scholars might reflect on how their preferences for theories, methods, and topics of research have been constrained by disciplinary affiliations. We believe that the integration of organizational communication and cultural studies provides needed innovation for adequate critical engagement with the urgent phenomena of post-Fordist society. Instead of conceptualizing communication discretely as either organizational or cultural, we advocate its analysis as simultaneously both organizational and cultural.

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Book Review

EMOTIONS IN THE WORKPLACE: RESEARCH, THEORY, AND PRACTICE, Neal M. Ashkanasy, Charmaine E. J. Härtel, and Wilfred J. Zerbe (Eds.), Westport, CT: Quorum, 2000, 328 pp., $75.00 (hardcover).

Since the publication of Hochschild’s (1983) The Managed Heart, interest in emotion in the workplace has grown substantially. In bringing together their uniquely interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary volume of the “best papers” (p. 4) from the First Conference on Emotions in Organizational Life (San Diego, August 1998), Ashkanasy, Härtel, and Zerbe showcase the rich diversity of quantitative and qualitative research currently going on in this field and consequently make an important contribution to the literatures on both organizational behavior and organizational communication.


The chapters presented subscribe to a number of premises, namely that (a) “emotions lie at the core of much of our understanding of organizational behavior” (p. 273), (b) the workplace is “unavoidably saturated with emotion” (p. xi), (c) “emotion often has marked effects on thought and action” (p. xi) within organizations, and (d) emotions are not something that can be “walled off from rationalized work” (p. xi). Many of the contributors suggest that a previous disinclination to recognize such ideas has led to a limited understanding of what is actually going on in the workplace. They contend that emotions lie at the heart of interpersonal and intrapersonal communication and that “we come to understand
ourselves, others, and our world partly by decoding the ongoing welter of such signals” (p. xii).

A number of the chapters in this collection should prove of particular interest to communication scholars because they deal with issues such as emotional intelligence in a more academically rigorous way than popular writers such as Cooper and Sawaf (1997) and Goleman (1996, 1998) have done. In addition, the book poses major questions about what actually constitutes emotional standards in the workplace context and what skills are needed to meet them. Mastenbroek, for example, provides a fascinating exploration of changing historical attitudes toward permissible public expressions of emotion, and he notes that today’s standards of both “increasing discipline and informalization” (p. 27) require a curious combination of “increased control and increased ease in conduct” (p. 28).

Although he never uses currently fashionable terms such as emotional competence, emotional literacy, or emotional intelligence, Mastenbroek does write of a need for a delicate balance between assertiveness and friendliness, tenacity and flexibility, and self-assurance and empathy in the modern workplace. He also reminds us that “do’s and don’ts” are too simplistic, that standards vary across cultures and times, and that power balances are at stake. In a similar vein, Anderson and Jones explore how levels of emotional maturity influence affective reactions to feedback in the workplace, and Kruml and Geddes write of how emotional maturity on the job tends to make older workers better able to handle emotional dissonance and generate useful strategies for dealing with workplace challenges. The concept of emotional intelligence is also the specific focus of Ashkanasy and Tse’s speculations on transformational leadership as management of emotion, and it should prove interesting to see if future research can establish a relationship between such things as linguistic skill, empathy, intuitiveness, and transformational leadership, as they suggest.

The link between social power and emotional expression is another of the book’s themes that should interest communication scholars. Tieden’s analysis of anger in “The Vicious Cycle of Social Status Positions and Emotions” reveals that people in high-
status positions are expected (by themselves and others) to feel more anger, that angry people are considered higher status, and that anger can result in gaining more status. However, although anger may serve the individual well, the obvious implication is that anger, as a stepping-stone to status, does not serve organizations well.

In her chapter, Ollainen notes how disenfranchising feelings often serves to disenfranchise women who are stereotyped as the “emotional sex,” and Poulson examines the power dynamics of shaming interactions and the basic shame of powerlessness (e.g., “Not only did we treat our employees as children, we treated them as bad children,” p. 261).

In spite of the theoretical tone of the book, most of the authors address implications for organizational practice in ways that are very helpful, recognizing the appropriate caveats. For example, Kruml and Geddes’ work on managing burnout gives us some useful advice about when and how to intervene through training in helping employees manage their inappropriate emotional expressions and when just to leave them alone to use their own already very effective discretion (pp. 185-186). Poulson suggests that staff can (and presumably should) be taught about shame the same way they are taught about stress, so that shame’s invisible and insidious effects can be monitored and managed before they erupt into anger or get entrenched in depression.

The book as a whole has the feel of a collection of conference papers, which is always a mixed blessing. The disadvantages are some fragmentation, tentativeness, and lack of polish; the advantages are up-to-date and challenging thoughts on a wide array of forward-looking topics that do not make the whole enterprise seem all neat and tidy. Original data, when they are presented, are sometimes thick and sometimes thin, often described in models and graphs that are almost uselessly complex. But, the issues are intriguing, and this is one of the few truly scholarly books on the topic.

Ashkanasy et al. succeed admirably in their aim "to orient readers who are new to the field of emotions in the workplace and to extend understanding of the conceptual framework surrounding workplace emotions for those who are more familiar [with the
field” (p. 13). They achieve this aim, for example, in their introduction because here they provide a comprehensive overview of the history of research into emotions in organizational settings, define emotion, describe the major traditions in the study of emotions, and outline the main processes for communicating emotion in social contexts.

We recommend *Emotions in the Workplace: Research, Theory, and Practice* to scholars who are interested in exploring the complex interplay of emotionality and rationality in present day organizations, secure in the belief that it will both stimulate readers and expand their knowledge and understanding of this still-emerging field of study. If nothing else, we know the wonderfully comprehensive reference list at the end of this volume will prove a godsend to many a hard-pressed student of emotions in the workplace. We doubt if you will pick this one up and read it cover to cover, but we know you will want it in your library as a valuable resource.

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—Gillian O’Neill

*University of Waikato*

—Sally Planalp

*University of Montana and University of Waikato*
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